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Community Service Versus Service-Learning: Which Is Best for 4-H?

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Community Service Versus Service-Learning: Which Is Best for 4-H?

Abstract

In 1999, the National 4-H Council (2000) reported that some 271,146 4-H members participated in service activities to their communities. These activities were categorized as volunteerism, community service, and service-learning--three distinctly different activities. To examine which activity is best in teaching leadership life skills, a randomized post-test only control group experiment utilizing a control group and two treatment groups was conducted to determine the effects of service-learning. This article distinguishes service service-learning from the other two activities, presents the results of the study, and discusses the implications of service learning for Extension.

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Introduction

4-H members contribute thousands of hours of service to their communities each year, resulting in both benefits to others and growth in the 4-H members. In 1999, the National 4-H Council (2000) reported that some 271,146 4-H members participated in service activities to their communities. Activities ranged from mentoring other young people to helping shelters improve their services to the homeless. Participants categorized their activities as volunteerism, service-learning, and community service.

The questions arise, what are the differences among these methods of contributing service, and what are the effects of each? Participants reported learning lessons in teamwork, positive interaction with adults, and how satisfying their communities could be, yet is one method of service more effective than another?

As we move into the 21st century, leadership life skills are becoming a more prominent issue among youth educators. We value youth today and realize that they are our future leaders. Therefore, it is critical that we prepare youth with the leadership skills they will require to be successful members of society.

For young people, the best approach to developing leadership is in real situations, rather than in the classroom. Young people can make real connections between needs and resources, learning

and service, and people and leadership. Planned, thoughtful experiences, coupled with reflection, create a rich opportunity for youth to learn leadership skills. Des Marais, Yang, and Farzanehkia (2000) noted that "service-learning is the most powerful approach in youth leadership development."

Service-learning is a method under which students learn through active participation in meaningful, organized community service. Students provide a purposeful service to the community and to society, while engaging in reflection activities that pertain to their learning curricula (Giles, Honnet, & Migliore, 1991). Three elements are necessary to make service-learning effective:

1. Adequate preparation that includes the setting of objectives for knowledge to be gained or skills to be learned by the participants,
2. Performance of meaningful community service; service that improves the community or makes a difference in someone's life, and
3. Analyzing the service experience through guided discussion or reflective writing. Thinking about the service creates a greater understanding of the experience. The reflection component of service-learning separates it from traditional community service.

Traditional volunteerism and community service are differentiated from service-learning by the reciprocal learned amount that occurs between those being served and those serving. This exchange avoids the traditionally paternalistic, one-way approach to service in which one group or person has resources that they share voluntarily with another group or person who is lacking those resources (Kendall & Associates, 1990). The most prominent benefit of service-learning is that students have the opportunity to connect their experiences with real-life situations through the reflective process. Students learn to be knowledgeable citizens who can actively contribute to a community.

Service-learning links experiential learning and service activities to provide a unique learning experience for students. When students have opportunities to learn by preparing, leading, and reflecting upon their service experiences, they ultimately create a reciprocal learning experience between them and the community.

Students are given the opportunities to address social issues in their community and take action to solve them. Students develop problem-solving and communication skills (Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999), but also learn about themselves and others--strengths and weaknesses and qualities of leadership (Schine, 1999). Studies show that there has been a rapid growth of using this model in the past 10 years (Ikeda, 1999). Organizations like 4-H are a perfect fit for service-learning because their programming can be adapted in many ways to fit community and members' needs.

The following are learning outcomes developed by the University of Kentucky 4-H Extension (2000) to which 4-H members are exposed as they participate in thoughtfully organized service experiences:

1. Meet community needs.
2. Coordinated in a collaborative effort between 4-H and other individuals or groups.
3. Provide structured reflection time for young people to think, talk, and write about what they experience.
4. Provide opportunities for young people to apply 4-H project skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities.
5. Enhance what is taught by 4-H by extending learning into the community.
6. Help foster a sense of caring for others.

These objectives can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the service-learning as well as to provide some direction for those developing the service programs.

Methodology

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine if the reflection component of service-learning made it more effective than traditional volunteerism or community service, which do not include reflection, in teaching teens leadership life skills. The study examined the effect of service-learning on the development of leadership life skills in youth, using a service-learning model used by the Louisiana Extension Service (1997). A secondary objective was to describe whether differences existed among youths' service experience, their self-perceived leadership life skills, and selected demographics.

The study was conducted in conjunction with 4-H members at Texas 4-H Roundup in June 2001. 4-H Roundup is an annual week-long activity where members, who have previously qualified at the county and district levels, compete at the state level in 38 individual and team contests. Of the

approximately 1,000 participants available for the study, approximately 200 were randomly selected for participation in the study to avoid systematic pretreatment differences (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002).

The researchers had only sufficient resources and facilities to accommodate approximately 90 research participants, or 30 participants in each measurement group. Hopkins, Hopkins and Glass (1996) state that except in cases of unusually bizarre distributions, samples and sub-samples of $n=25$ will yield a normal sampling distribution. Sixty-seven out of 200 (34%) randomly selected students participated in the study ($N=67$). Based on their level of participation in 4-H, the participants were assumed to have had past community service experiences.

The study used a posttest-only experimental design with two treatment groups and one control group. A student questionnaire was developed to reflect youths' perceived leadership life skills upon completion of the service-learning model. Questions used in the instrument were taken from both the Leadership Skills Inventory, developed at Iowa State University by Townsend and Carter (1983), and Dorman (1997). Additional questions were developed by the investigator based on the literature (Isaksen, Dorval & Treffinger, 1994; Juntune, 1999; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Demographics were also collected from each participant on the student questionnaire: gender, age, residence, past service experience, and type of previous service experience, direct or indirect.

The student questionnaire contained 33 items, which were further divided into five subscales. Each subscale contained between five and eight items. The following subscales, adapted from Stratford Public Schools exit outcomes, were used to measure leadership life skills:

- Effective Team Skills,
- Being a Self-Directed Learner,
- Being a Contributor to the Community,
- Being a Creative Problem Solver, and
- Personal Leadership Development (National Service-Learning and Assessment Study Group, 1999).

4-H members were randomly assigned to three groups. Randomization assists in achieving comparability in the experimental and control groups (Babbie, 1992). One group served as the control group ($n^1=23$) that had completed a community service activity within the past 6 months. All participants were asked to verify the type of community service completed and its frequency. This group only completed the student questionnaire.

A second group ($n^2=22$) was asked to recall a service experience they had previously completed and reflect, both written and orally, on that experience. Trained facilitators guided the reflection activity. This was the treatment group that received delayed reflection on their service activity. This group then completed the student questionnaire.

The final group ($n^3=22$) did reflection activities immediately after completing a service project. This group participated in a literacy service project with the local Boys and Girls Club. 4-H members were paired with a child from the Boys and Girls Club. After completing a get-acquainted activity, the members read books with the kids. After completing the service experience, the 4-H members participated in written and oral reflection activities on the service experience. Once again, the reflection was guided by trained facilitators. Following the reflection, the members completed the student questionnaire.

Findings and Conclusions

The objective of the study was to determine if the reflection component of the service-learning model made service-learning more effective than traditional community service in the development of Effective Team Skills, being a Self-Directed Learner, being a Contributor to Community, possessing Creative Problem Solving skills, and Personal Leadership Development. These comparisons are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Analysis of Variance of Summated Leadership Life Skills Scores of 4-H Roundup Participants by Treatment Group, 2001

Group	f	M	SD	F
Effective Team Skills				
Control ^c	23	44.8	5.5	0.15
Reflection After Elapsed Time	22	45.1	4.3	

Immediate Reflection	22	45.5	4.2	
Self-Directed Learner				
Control ^c	23	25.2	3.4	1.30
Reflection After Elapsed Time	22	26.1	2.2	
Immediate Reflection	22	26.3	1.7	
Contributor to Community				
Control ^c	23	39.7	6.0	4.10*
Reflection After Elapsed Time	22	42.1	3.8	
Immediate Reflection	22	43.5	3.3	
Creative Problem Solver				
Control ^c	23	20.9	3.9	1.8
Reflection After Elapsed Time	22	23.0	3.8	
Immediate Reflection	22	22.2	3.8	
Personal Leadership Development				
Control ^c	23	31.2	3.6	3.10*
Reflection After Elapsed Time	22	32.7	2.4	
Immediate Reflection	22	33.2	2.1	
Note: M=Summated leadership life skills scores; * $p < .05$				

The data showed that service-learning with immediate reflection was more effective than traditional community service without the reflection components, if activities were planned that targeted certain leadership skill areas.

4-H members who completed the service-learning activity with immediate reflection perceived their leadership life skills to be significantly higher in two of the five scales. The service activity with the Boys and Girls Club focused on personal leadership development and being a contributor to the community. The 4-H members helped community youth practice their literacy skills while using leadership skills to communicate and work with these youth. 4-H members who had completed the service-learning activity with immediate reflection after the service had significantly higher self-perceived Personal Leadership and Contributor to Community skills than teens in the control group and the group who reflected on a previous service experience.

It may be concluded that reflection immediately following a service activity has the most significant impact on leadership life skill development, especially in the areas of personal leadership and community contribution.

An implication exists, then, that the reflection component of the service-learning model is crucial in the development of certain leadership life skills. The service activity completed by the participants

with the Boys and Girls Club and the reflection discussions that followed were designed to focus on personal leadership and community development. Students shared their thoughts and, in turn, had higher self-perceived scores in the Personal Leadership Development and Contributor to Community categories.

A secondary objective in the study was to describe whether differences existed among youths' service experience, their self-perceived leadership life skills, and selected demographics. Demographics collected from participants were:

- Gender,
- Age,
- residence,
- Past service experience, and
- Type of previous service experience, direct or indirect.

T-tests revealed that gender had a significant influence on the Effective Team Skills subscale. Females perceived themselves as possessing more Effective Team Skills than males ($t = -2.31$). However, there was no significant difference between gender and the remainder of the leadership life skill subscales.

Types of previous community service experiences were identified as direct help or indirect help. Direct help was described as visiting a nursing home or reading to children. Indirect help was described as collecting canned goods or picking up trash. The data showed that a significant difference was found between the Contributor to Community subscale and type of service completed. This suggests that working directly with other people on a service project gives students a greater sense of community. The value of working with others in a service project is definitely substantial.

Participants living in cities with a population greater than 10,000 had completed significantly more service than those in rural/farm areas and in towns with less than 10,000. The reasons for this finding are unclear, suggesting a new line of research. Is it possible that community service opportunities are easier to access in cities than in rural/farm areas and towns with less than 10,000? Do 4-H leaders in smaller communities receive less training in developing service programs?

Implications for Extension

Service-learning has tremendous implications for Extension agents working with youth, especially at-risk youth. Boyd (2001) found that service-learning was effective in helping at-risk youth learn leadership skills.

Service-learning activities in 4-H and other youth organizations can be designed to teach youth leadership skills. As we develop youth programs, we can design service activities and reflection discussions around certain leadership skills, such as working with others, problem solving, and decision-making, and expect teens' perceptions of those skills to increase. This part of planning educational programs can be difficult. But this research suggests how we, as youth development professionals, target important leadership and life skills with service-learning activities and expect students to increase their knowledge and use of those particular skills.

4-H and other youth development professionals can adopt service-learning as a meaningful learning experience in which youth can learn and enhance leadership skills as well as learn about social and community issues. By adding written and oral reflection to the service experience, youth gain reciprocal learning. They can richly articulate what they have learned, as well as become more aware of issues in the community. Service-learning can help youth see the big picture of why service and civic engagement is important. Written and oral reflection of service activities provides essential documentation for youth development professionals about the impact that well-planned service activities have on both the providers and the recipients of the service.

Service-learning links experiential learning and service activities to provide a unique learning experience for students. By providing students opportunities to learn by preparing, leading, and reflecting upon their service experiences, they ultimately create a reciprocal learning experience between them and the community. Applying this service-learning model to youth activities and curriculum can improve the development of leadership life skills and provide a foundation for life-long learning.

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