Duration and Intensity Enrich Service-Learning Experiences

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Duration and intensity can boost the quality of service-learning experiences. To achieve sufficient intensity a service-learning experience should include investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration, and occur during concentrated blocks of time. A project fulfills the duration requirement if it lasts long enough to meet the stated community needs and learning goals.

Achieving Intensity

Service-learning projects that have sufficient intensity incorporate other important service-learning standards. Intense service-learning experiences provide more opportunities to make important decisions (youth voice); more challenging and varied tasks, a greater sense of ownership, and greater contributions to the community (meaningful service); more opportunities to apply content from the classroom to the community (link to curriculum); and typically involve a rigorous evaluation of the project (progress monitoring).

How Many Hours?

Schools and teachers often wonder what the ideal number of service hours is. Required service hours vary vastly across the country, and can be as low as 15 and as high as 200 hours — at Robert F. Kennedy Community High School, N.Y. The push for more service from high school students has been described as a form of forced altruism. Lauren Swierczal, Director of Community Service at Riverdale Country School in the Bronx, said, “I was finding [a] fixation more on hours than acts of service.” (NY Times, 11/26/08). It should be noted that, overall, young people are not in favor of required community service. In 2002, 55 percent were against. Interestingly, however, support grows with age, and in the 23-25 age group a majority favored mandatory service (Lopez, 2002).

An analysis by Neal, Leeper, and Root (2009) shows that among school-based service projects rated as excellent by students, well over two-thirds lasted over a month. In a national study of high school service-learning programs, Billig, Root, and Jesse (2006) found that the duration of service-learning projects had significant positive effects on students’ enjoyment of reading/language arts and social studies, self-reported civic knowledge, and civic responsibility. Students who participated in service-learning for at least a semester had higher scores than others on all outcomes.

“When considering the duration of service-learning experiences, we must take into account all phases, including planning, research, reflection, and celebration. Impacts can occur in all these phases,” said NYLC’s Research Director, Sue Root.

The Learning Dimension

The Obama Administration has a goal that all middle school and high school students engage in 50 hours of community service a year. While this policy is laudable, it is critical to emphasize the content of that service.

“Duration in itself is not enough to improve the quality of a project. It must be accompanied by other features of high-quality service-learning,” according to Root. Also, the definition of what constitutes “service” must be rigorous enough to ensure that students can create meaning and reach new understanding from their service experiences. Acknowledging this, the Seattle Public Schools differentiate between community service and service-learning in their high school graduation requirements.

In the words of Blyth and colleagues (1997), “[t]he field should be very cautious in implementing service programs that require or mandate so many hours of
In lieu of stressing the number of hours, service-learning — through its focus on meaningful service, community partnerships, and link to curriculum — naturally encourages and favors quality over quantity.

DURATION AND INTENSITY: Evidence from the Research

Shelley H. Billig and Judith Northup, RMC Research Corporation, 2008

What Is Intensity and Duration?

Sufficient intensity and duration means that service-learning experiences include investigation, planning, action, reflection, demonstration, and celebration, and occur during concentrated blocks of time (intensity) and are long enough (duration) to meet community needs and learning goals.

Application to Service-Learning

- Eyler and Giles (1997) found that more intense service-learning programs provide more challenging and varied tasks, more opportunities to make important decisions, a greater sense of ownership, stronger collegial relations with professionals in the field, more opportunities to apply content from the classroom to the community, and greater contributions to the community than those service-learning experiences that are less intense.

- Researchers caution that hours alone are not sufficient to determine quality; rather, “the field should be very cautious in implementing service programs that require or mandate so many hours of service in the absence of teaching methods that allow students to interpret and learn from the experiences they encounter” (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997, p. 52).

- Melchior and Orr (1995), in their study of the national Learn and Serve program, found that program duration was associated with multiple positive outcomes for students.

- Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that duration of at least one semester was significantly related to all civic outcomes and enjoyment of subject matters.

- Spring, Dietz, and Grimm (2006) constructed a quality index comprised of three elements: reflection, student participation in project planning, and duration of a semester or more. The study sample was comprised of 3,178 Americans between the ages of 12 and 18 who were surveyed by telephone about their civic engagement attitudes and behaviors, volunteering habits, and experiences with service-learning. The number and type of quality experiences were correlated to outcomes in the areas of civic engagement. Students who participated in programs that featured the most quality components were “three times as likely to believe they can make a great deal of difference in their community than youth who participated in school-based service without any of the quality elements of service-learning” (p. 3), were more likely to say they would volunteer in the coming year, were more interested in world events, and were more likely to talk with their friends and family about politics. In general, the more quality elements in a service-learning experience, the higher the outcomes, no matter what the socioeconomic background or grade level of the participant.

- In their study of the Generator School Project, Blyth and colleagues (1997) reported that the number of service hours provided by students had a positive effect on reducing risky behaviors, increasing social responsibility, and reducing disengagement from school.
Conrad and Hedin (1980) showed that duration of high school service-learning programs was significantly related to multiple academic and civic outcomes, especially when the program was one semester or longer.

Kraft and Krug (1994) found that 6 to 8 weeks of experience in service-learning with field work once a week was not long enough to produce desired outcomes for students.

Eyler and Giles (1997) demonstrated that students who participated in longer and more intense service-learning were more likely to see value in the program and commit to further service activities.

Moore (1981) found that students’ understandings of tasks became increasingly complex and contextualized as they engaged in longer duration of service.

In a CampFire USA study on a community preparedness initiative, those teams who participated in programs of longer duration had higher ratings of teamwork, leadership, and problem solving (RMC Research, 2007).

The duration of service-learning activities was positively related to valuing school, civic engagement, social responsibility, and locus of control (Billig & Brodersen, 2007).

A study that focused on the relations between students’ community service and service-learning experiences, academic success, and socioeconomic status found that the duration or longer exposure to service-learning programs had a positive effect on students’ on a scale of commitment to learning. In addition, there was a smaller achievement level gap between high and low socioeconomic status students who had longer exposure to service-learning (Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier, & Benson, 2006).

Educational Research Supporting This Concept

An evaluation of YouthBuild, a program to reconnect young people to school and community, revealed that programs serving this population need to be both multidisciplinary and last at least 9 months with excellent follow-up services (American Youth Policy Forum, 2002).

A meta-analysis of research that addresses the outcomes from participating in outdoor education programs showed that longer programs and programs with adults tended to have larger impacts (Neill, 1999).
References


All Lift materials are based in the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice, available at www.nylc.org/standards.