Measuring Service-Learning Success

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Progress monitoring requires practitioners to consider various types of progress: achieving learning outcomes, meeting service goals, and assessing the quality of the project and program implementation. The standard instructs practitioners to look at multiple sources of evidence (such as measures of academic progress, feedback from the students who participate, reports from service recipients and community partners) throughout the service-learning experience, and to use the results to improve and sustain service-learning.

Research Supports Evaluation

Monitoring all of these measures of progress can sound daunting, but it is important to remember that classroom teachers typically do these kinds of activities whether they are engaging in service-learning or any other type of instruction. They look at how well their instructional methods fit their students’ needs and make adjustments if intended outcomes aren’t being achieved. They reflect on their syllabus and look at different ways of achieving their goals. A wealth of research supports this type of progress monitoring in specific academic subjects, but a small body of research that addresses service-learning also exists (RMC Research & NYLC, 2008).

In a 2005 study of the Essential Elements of Service-Learning, Billig, Root, and Jesse found positive correlations between “assessment used to enhance student learning and evaluate how well students have met content and skill standards” and school attachment and civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (p. 112). Calhoun and Allen found that student evaluation often leaves students “in a somewhat passive role in the attainment of goals designed to change their behavior” (p. 23). Clearly, there is room for greater student involvement in improvement of evaluation practices. In fact, Schensul, Berg, and Brase note that “student driven research ... is appealing to students and can be integrated readily into existing curriculum” (p.138).

Tools of Progress Monitoring

A number of research-based evaluation guides are readily available to practitioners who want to address the progress monitoring standard more directly.

The Educators’ Guide to Service-Learning Program Evaluation emphasizes selecting the appropriate evaluation techniques for a specific service-learning program. It also provides worksheets for designing an evaluation, offers assistance in data collection and analysis for a variety of research methods (such as focus groups, interviews, and surveys), and explains how to use data collected to improve future programs (RMC Research).

Youth-Led Evaluation: A Guidebook is a youth-friendly tool to help introduce young people to research techniques and the use of evaluation in service-learning. It offers instruction on a variety of research methods and provides tools that help include young people in active roles during evaluation (Shumer 2007).

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse has cataloged a number of other evaluation tools and research, many of which are available online at www.servicelearning.org.

Next Steps

Just as the service-learning standards were refined through a national vetting process, so too should the tools of progress monitoring be vetted in the classroom. Day-to-day applications of the standards by teachers and students who can experiment with different evaluation models are as important as rigorous experiment-based research. As Schensul, Berg, and Brase advocate, students, teachers, and other stakeholders play key roles in strengthening quality practice through action research.
PROGRESS MONITORING: Evidence from the Research

Shelley H. Billig, RMC Research Corporation, 2008

What Is Progress Monitoring?
Progress monitoring refers to a process for gathering information to determine whether there has been movement toward goal attainment. Progress monitoring requires attention to reaching benchmarks to show both advancement toward outcomes and the effectiveness of procedures. Typically, goals are set, along with ideas about expected rates of progress needed to meet goals by a specified time frame. Effective monitoring is “low stakes” and used for improvement purposes only, not for making major decisions about a student, teacher, or program. Sample measurement tools used frequently for monitoring student progress include observations or anecdotal records, analysis of work products, criterion-referenced measures that examine mastery of specific knowledge or skills, and performance assessments. Progress monitoring often includes the use of rubrics or ratings that measure how well the service-learning is aligned with effective practices. Results should be shared with all stakeholders and used for continuous improvement.

Application to Service-Learning
• Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that service-learning assessment and program evaluation, including progress and process monitoring, were related to students’ enjoyment of subject matters, civic knowledge, and efficacy.
• Greene and Diehm (1995) demonstrated that students who received more frequent written feedback on their written reflections were more likely than those who received checkmarks to say that the population being served contributed to their education and that they were more personally invested in the service.
• Shumer (1997) conducted a synthesis of the service-learning qualitative research and concluded, “Efforts to plan and control student learning are not always successful. The process of learning from experience is dynamic; it requires methods of reflection and feedback to continually monitor its flow and direction” (p. 36).

Educational Research Supporting This Concept
• Safer and Fleischman (2005), in their review of the research of progress monitoring in educational settings, reported that when teachers implement student progress monitoring, “students learn more, teacher decision making improves, and students become more aware of their own performance.” (p. 82)
• Shannon and Bylsma (2003) noted, “In a supportive school environment focused on continual improvement, feedback allows teachers to make procedural corrections, reteach, and encourage students’ efforts, as well as to change their practices” (p. 27).
• Good and Brophy (2000) noted that in progress monitoring, “Errors are treated as learning opportunities, not test failures, and should lead to additional instruction and practice opportunities” (p. 229).
• Schunk and Pajares (2002) reported that students developed a sense of efficacy based in part on feedback and whether they are given enough opportunity to improve enough to meet standards.
• One form of progress monitoring that has a scientific research base is curriculum-based measurement (CBM). Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) identified more than 200 empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals that attested to the effectiveness of this type of progress monitoring for helping students improve reading, mathematics, and spelling skills. CBM approaches assess all of the skills covered in an annual curriculum such that each weekly test is different, with different items, but measures a sample of the skills to be mastered by the end of the year. CBM uses standardized measures, and all tests, administration and scoring procedures, and interpretation protocols are specified. Research on CBM shows its utility for identifying students in need of additional or different forms of instruction, its effectiveness in helping teachers plan more successful instructional approaches and programs, and raising achievement scores.
• Specific conditions that can be influenced as a result of the progress monitoring include instructional time and location, organization of instructional components, specific teaching and learning strategies, assessments, classroom management, school climate, and personal relationships (Bernhardt, 1998).

• Studies of “turn-around” low-performing schools show that many used quality management approaches that featured continuous process and progress monitoring and improvement. Goldberg and Cole (2002), for example, documented the Brazosport, Texas, process that led to greater equity and higher student performance for the entire school district. The focus was on instructional processes and their effects on student learning. The instructional team monitored instructional processes to ensure that quality practices, including high expectations, safe and orderly climate, and ongoing measurement for decision making, were in place. “Process data were then generated to align resources and to continuously improve support process” (p. 10).

• Quenemoen, Thurlow, Moen, Thompson, and Blount Morse (2004) pointed out that the essence of progress monitoring is that data should inform educators when students are not progressing as they should so action can be taken to improve progress. Actions to accelerate progress could include changing instructional approaches, providing more learning supports, and adding reflection activities. These researchers also argued for using multiple forms of progress monitoring to ensure accuracy.
References


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