Understanding the Perceptions of Service Learning with Teen Leaders

Nicole S. Webster
Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural and Extension Education
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
814-863-2695
nsw10@psu.edu

Jacklyn A. Bruce
Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural and Extension Education
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
814-863-1789
jab743@psu.edu

Tracy S. Hoover
Associate Professor
Department of Agricultural and Extension Education
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
814-865-1688
tsh102@psu.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study was conducted to answer two questions concerning service learning in youth populations: Do teens understand their roles in the process of service learning? How do teens perceive service opportunities within their communities or organizations? The intent was to investigate these issues in order to provide depth to the research on youth voice and perceptions in service learning activities. Focus groups were conducted with teens involved in various organizations. Findings included that teens were able to articulate a strong definition of service learning as well as identify service activities. Most felt they had a voice in planning and implementation and saw adults as key to the evaluation of projects. Some teens felt, however, that adults often have too great a voice in the planning stages. Recommendations include professional development for adults on working with teens and evaluating current programs to make certain that youth voice is present.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Over the past decade, many individuals who work with youth have seen an increase in the importance of engagement among young people. The cornerstone of this engagement has been the implementation of service learning. The experiential nature of service learning is centered on the meaningful action and reflection of participants. According to Eyler and Giles (1989), "service-learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves" (p.18). Participants are engaged in service activities which integrate curriculum or content and are performed in the community. After the experience, the participants engage in a structured reflection exercise that allows the participants to examine their role within the activity and explore their feelings, attitudes, and perceptions. Reflection is not just critical to the participants, but to the entire service learning experience and is the piece that distinguishes it from other types of service experiences. According to Kolb's (1976) model, this is a continuous cycle of thinking, acting, and reflecting is the basis for experiential learning within service learning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Kolb's experiential model
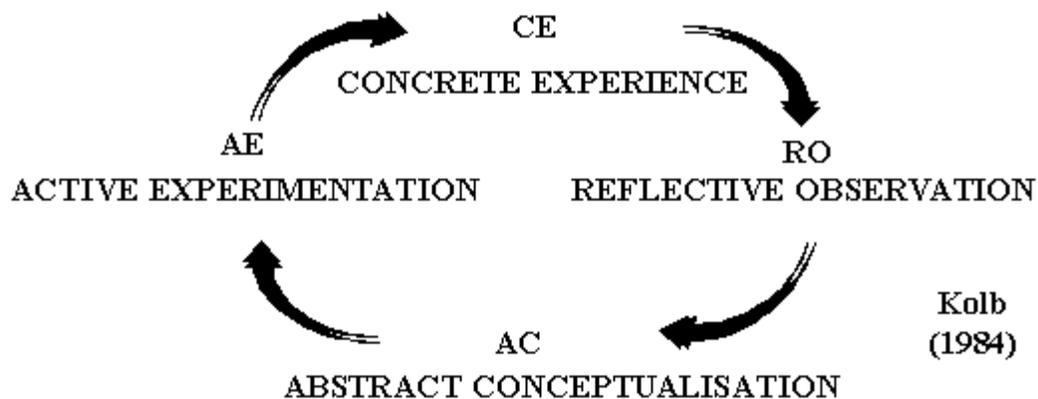
The emphasis of service learning is on both the learner and the recipient of the activity. Service learning experiences build upon existing knowledge of community members and the young person. The service learning pedagogy develops linkages between theory and service and connects the participant with the community in a structured and direct manner (Hoover & Webster, 2004). Through these experiences participants develop an understanding of how to specifically help communities and enhance their own theoretical learning. Service learning experiences connect youth with greater issues in contemporary society and help develop the social and technical skills needed to succeed as a

citizen. This engagement of youth creates a mutual benefit for the participant, the community, and the organization (Petkus, 2000).

Students who engage in service learning activities have been reported to have significant gains in academic, social, and personal growth. Service learning purports that participants gain social skills, participate in less risky behaviors, show an increase in academic achievement, have a greater sense of civic engagement and political affiliation, gain greater respect for peers and teachers, and develop a deeper understanding of self (Billig, 2000; Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Melchoir 1999; Yates & Youniss, 1996). In addition to these attributes, service learning has also been known to impact community development. Community members work with youth which help to shed a more positive light on the youth participant. Other positive impacts of service learning include greater empathy for others, increased cognitive complexity, a realistic perception of careers, and a more developed sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Furco, 2002; Shaffer, 1993). The value of service learning is multi-faceted with learning and development impacting both the learner and the beneficiary.

For the most part youth organizations were formed to provide young people with opportunities for leadership and personal growth, career exploration, affiliation with others who share similar interests and beliefs, have a place to belong, and to receive recognition for individual and group accomplishments. Whether youth organizations were formed for vocational, avocational, academic, athletic, or faith based reasons, most have a strong connection and reliance on committed individuals, organizations, and communities. One of the most common, traditional and historical components or norms found in youth organizations is service to others. Many youth organizations engage their members in some aspect of service. For example, the National 4-H organization has always supported and encouraged service to others and the community. Hairston (2004) noted that the emphasis on community service has expanded to include a service learning component. Safrit and Auck (2003) found a high level of service to community in Ohio 4-H members. They noted that 98% of the 4-H members (4th – 12th grade) in their 1999 study reported helping individuals other than family (without pay) or their neighborhood or community in the last 12 months (Safrit & Auck, 2004). These responses were based on types of service the youth engaged in through school, out of school group(s), as an individual, or through 4-H.

To date, various youth organizations and schools have placed a commitment on service activities within the scope of their teaching and learning agendas. Research has shown that these have been successful in the development of young people's academic, social, and character skills (Eyler & Giles, 1996; Billig, 2000). Other research highlights that service learning has been beneficial to the community and stakeholders involved in the service activities (Berkas, 1997; Melchior, 1999). Students have also expressed the importance of participation within service activities to their personal and social development (Leming, 1998; Scales & Blyth, 1997; Stephens 1995). While the literature points to the success

and benefits of service learning, there are some concerns within the field as it relates to leadership and service learning activities.

Teen Leadership and Service Learning

The engagement of youth leaders is critical to the effectiveness of service learning activities. Teen leaders are an essential voice because they provide the "input ..in developing and implementing projects, plans and policies to guide service-learning efforts" (Justinianno, Scherer, Johnson, & Lewis, 2001, p.13). However, in many service learning activities, youth leadership is stifled due to misconceptions adults have about youth voice and input. Without the voice of youth, service learning projects fail in their efforts to be a truly engaging and effective programs. Youth leaders who are involved in service learning experiences are able to gain valuable leadership skills such as how to work in diverse teams and groups, public speaking, expression of ideas, critical thinking, and understanding the process of being a vested member in the decision making process. Their leadership in a service learning program not only impacts their individual development, but also connects them to the organization and the community. Youth leadership within service learning programs creates an environment for developing effective decision making skills, negotiation, networking, greater communication, and a format to develop and use leadership skills (Connell, 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Building youth leaders and their voice through service learning programs creates a learning situation that enhances the development of young people and encourages a true partnership of work and engagement between all individuals.

Statement of the Problem

Given the rising number of youth organizations that are requiring young people to complete community service or service learning activities, it is imperative that educators begin to know if these programs are facilitating the process of learning and development. Many youth organizations report that youth are becoming youth leaders and developing skills and character necessary for good citizenship and leadership. While this may be true in some instances, is it consistent in most youth organizations? Literature supports the notion that there are various states of service learning being conducted. Because a template does not exist for the implementation of service learning activities, it is difficult to measure how individuals (youth and adults) perceive service learning within youth organizations. This calls two points to question: (a) Do youth understand their role in the process of service learning? and (b) How do youth perceive service opportunities within their communities and organizations? This qualitative study was conducted to collect preliminary information on these questions. The intent was to investigate these issues in order to provide depth to the research on youth voice and perceptions in service learning activities in youth organizations.

Procedures

The researchers used purposive sampling, a technique intentionally seeking out participants because of certain qualities, to find participants who were willing to discuss their experiences participating in service learning projects while members of youth organizations. This study focused on seven teens who served as state officers in a youth organization. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 20, had all been involved in the organization for at least eight years, and had participated in service learning or community service activities in the organization as well as in their respective high schools. The targeted individuals were identified because of their participation and leadership positions in an organization that engages in service learning activities throughout the academic year. Within naturalistic inquiry there is no concrete rule for sample size. Patton (1990) suggests that sampling size adequacy is subject to peer review.

When a group of people is purposely brought together and asked the same questions at the same time in order to collect data and observe the groups' interactions it is called a focus group. Focus groups are used to acquaint a researcher with a particular concept, to help group members remember events by group conversation, or to triangulate other findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In the case of this study, two focus groups were scheduled and conducted and participation in these groups was voluntary. The focus groups took approximately one hour to complete. During this time participants were asked questions on their demographic background and their understanding of service learning activities using a semi-structured research protocol. The focus group was audiotaped and transcribed in order to serve as the primary data source. Secondary data consisted of field notes and supportive materials from the service learning literature.

Content analysis was used to interpret the data. Typed transcripts were compared with the audiotapes for accuracy. NUDIST Nvivo 2.0 was used to analyze the data. Initial coding of the transcripts was done by the principal investigator and a colleague. The two met to discuss coding and to delimit categories. Following the development of the categories, data reduction occurred resulting in themes and sub-themes. The analysis was reviewed by a third colleague in the same department.

In this study, the researchers established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. The researchers used thick description in the reporting of respondents' thoughts and ideas relative to the research questions and purposive sampling to establish transferability. Peer debriefing meetings occurred throughout the study. An audit trail and journaling were used to establish dependability and confirmability. Using the above mentioned techniques as a part of the methodology of the study establishes trustworthiness of the data.

Results

Youth organizations across the United States of America have implemented the concept of service learning to enhance the learning and development of young people. As adults and youth participate in these activities, they learn a wealth of knowledge about themselves and others. While is it well documented what they learn, there is scant information on how young people perceive their role and voice within service learning projects within their communities. The following discussion highlights the perceptions of respondents regarding their role within service activities, the involvement of adults in relation to young people in service activities, and their perception of service learning.

Defining Service Learning

In order to gain a greater understanding of young adults' perceptions of their roles within service learning activities, it was essential to understand the concept of what service learning was and how it was defined by teens. The respondents were able to articulate some of the key points essential to effective service learning programs such as working with participants or community members, educating everyone involved, and learning outside the classroom. Service learning was defined as "a project in which you plan to help others and makes you feel better as a person because you help others" and "a project with an objective – [a] project with the intention of helping other people glean some sort of understanding-something you didn't learn before." All the respondents were able to articulate that service learning is something that you do for the greater good. It is not a self-gratifying act like community service activities which tend to solely focus on the recipient. Participants regarded service learning as a method of learning and teaching with the greatest intent to help, educate, and support other people.

Current Involvement in Service Learning Activities

Participants responded to the question, "What types of service learning activities have you helped to coordinate/plan in your organization(s)?

Respondents were able to identify their idea of several types of service learning activities they were currently involved in or had been a part of in the past years. They identified these activities as annual events that were incorporated into the standard mode of "service" activities done within their organizations. Examples of the service activities identified are found in Table 1. All respondents identified these as annual events that were done throughout the year either in conjunction with school clubs or within afterschool programs such as 4-H. A few of the young adults described activities which focused on collaborating with other community partners or organizations. For example, a local church was the site for an after school club service learning program. Students worked with the clergy and church members to decide on the specific needs and the timeline for the service event. Other projects were conducted with local hospitals, community organizations, and

other school clubs. Although the projects were conducted in various settings, they all involved youth and community members.

Leadership Roles in Service Learning Activities Teen Driven Versus Adult Driven

Participants responded to the question, "Are roles assigned by the leaders or do you volunteer for assignments?

All of the respondents felt that their roles in the planning of service learning activities within their organizations were voluntary. They described their involvement as student leaders who organize, plan, and implement the service learning activities or programs. One clear example of this was a respondent who described her experience in a school based program, stating, "At the college level, advisors don't do a whole lot of work for the club. Students step forward and organize events and make sure that all the ducks are in a row. Advisors come out for support and attend, but don't do much of the work."

The concept of teen driven versus adult driven involvement began to emerge as a theme. Their comments supported the idea that young adults have the responsibility to be leaders "who step forward and volunteer." Respondents began to understand that their role as responsible young adults was not only to volunteer, but to be the voice to drive activities. One respondent discussed her involvement in the planning of a program where teens drove the content and theme of the program, stating, "Teen camp [leadership is equal] – teens have the choice (teens decide theme) decide what event will be and advisors tell us if that will work-senior counselors decide pretty much everything."

Youth Voice

Although some teens felt they had a voice to make decisions, there were those who did not agree that they had a voice in their organization. One respondent gave an account of her experience in working with adults on planning a service program, stating, "Our adults take over a lot. It is disgusting. At the teen leader planning retreat last year, people wrote letters at how involved our adults are and how they didn't like it."

This respondent expressed that adults had been involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of practically all parts of the service programs in their organization. There was the perception that the adults as taking over the ideas of youth and not allowing the young adults to have a voice in any major decisions. It was believed that the adults gave them limited amounts of power and limited access to information in order to make decisions. A feeling existed that youth and young adults do not have a voice. This was supported by a comment from one respondent who described a personal understanding of youth voice within the planning and implementation of service programs, stating, "In one

county the adults let us run everything until they realize that there is a problem. Counselors pretty much run everything. Advisors or adults in charge will step forward if they see we need it or if we need help they help us, give input if we need it, help if we need it, if there is something wrong they help us."

While some of the respondents felt they had a voice, there was a strong feeling that they did not have the ability to carry out their plans because service activities were "planned before we got there" or the adults "didn't listen to anybody." Although the respondents identified the presence and voice of adults as a limiting factor, they still felt they had an influence on the actions within the organization. For example two participants commented on how their voices are carried out through actions, stating, "I would say that, advisors sit down and listen, don't say this is my idea and we have to go with this one, everyone is all equal- and we discuss what will work best and go from there." and "We plan all of our activities at the beginning of the year, but it is with limited help from our advisor. She makes suggestions, but we do all the work- we make phone calls, plan, and do the service on the day of the activity. We like it like that because we feel like we are the ones who are actually making the difference."

They even expressed that after the service learning project is over they had the ability to act as evaluators of their service learning programs. Respondents emphasized their role as individuals who evaluate how the program went and to see what the participants thought of it and to make improvements for the following year. They played an active role in summarizing the data and discussing how to make changes. Although they had expressed the role of adults as a hindrance in other parts of the service learning program, they positively acknowledged the role of adults during this process. "They give a lot of input at that point about improvements that can be made. We are all equal and everyone listens." The young adults realized the importance of the adult voice during this process despite their interpretation of adult involvement in other parts of the service learning process.

Table 1.
Service Activities Identified by Respondents

Service Activity	Description
Relay for Life	
Tales for Tots	Collect books for youth throughout the state or county
Camps	Plan overnight weekend at a campground for youth ages 8 to 13
Teen Retreat	Plan the activities for the overnight weekend
Santa's Workshop	Teens make toys/decorations and wrap gifts with disadvantaged kids in neighborhood
Learning Days	Assist with fun learning activities at the county fair
Food Drives	Volunteer time to collect food for various holidays/events throughout the year
Special Olympics	Assist as volunteers for the sports activity for disabled individuals
Nursing Home Visit	Organize activities and games with elderly patients at nursing homes (make crafts for nursing home patients)
Bingo	Play games with elderly at the Veterans hospital

Summary and Conclusions

Several key issues arose from this study as it relates to youth leadership, role identification within an organization, and level of involvement in decision making in service learning projects. Teens should be valuable members of the planning, implementation, and evaluation of projects. They should be encouraged by adults to provide a valuable voice throughout the entire process. The role of the adult should be balanced to complement the input given by teen participants in order to ensure a reciprocal process and exchange of ideas and dialogue. The findings of this study mirror and underscore the value of involving youth in the decision making process. Zeldin, McDaniel, Topitzes, and Calvert (2000) reported positive and synergistic outcomes of youth and adult contributions when involved in organizational decision making. Recommendations for youth governance and positive youth-adult partnerships include a high level of commitment and practice at the institutional level (Zeldin, et al., 2000). Additionally, adult leaders of youth organizations may need information on adolescent development and how this impacts the ability, skills, and perspective of youth in decision making (van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Zeldin, et al., 2000).

With the relatively recent emphasis on service learning versus community service, professional development opportunities could be offered to adult leaders of youth

organizations from a process and product perspective in service learning. Several studies provide evidence that those youth organizations successfully retaining older adolescents offer increased chances to participate in leadership, decision making, and relevant service activities (Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2005; Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2005;Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). As adult leaders and organizations continue to engage in service based programming with youth "program designers need to make sure programs are developmentally appropriate by providing the opportunity for increased autonomy, participation in program decision making, leadership, and exposure to intellectually challenging material as participating youth mature" (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 65).

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Biography

Nicole S. Webster is an assistant professor at Penn State University in the Department of Agricultural Education and Extension Education. Her responsibilities include conducting research in the area of service learning and outreach with children, youth, and families. Nicole's focus includes understanding the impact of service learning on minority communities and youth and the relationship the young person develops with community, peers, and self as a result of the service learning experience. Through her extension appointment she provides state support and training on service learning and outreach.

Dr. Jacklyn A. Bruce is an assistant professor in Agricultural and Extension Education at Penn State University. Her areas of research include ways to enhance of the formal education of future educators using subject targeted youth development programming experiences. In addition, her research includes the effectiveness of various methodologies of leadership training and programming in formal and informal settings on the training transfer process. She also provides statewide leadership development programming for youth and adults in communities through extension and outreach

Tracy S. Hoover joined the faculty in the department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida in 1993 teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in leadership development, pre-service teacher education, and teaching and learning. Hoover returned to the department Agricultural and Extension Education at Pennsylvania State University as an associate professor with responsibilities in youth leadership development as well as pre-service and in-service teacher education. Hoover recently assumed the role of department head in Agricultural and Extension Education.