

Is it Service-Learning or Community Service? Teachers' Knowledge and Implementation

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Introduction

Building communities through acts of service is an identifying characteristic of chapters of the National FFA Organization. It is emphasized in the Program of Activities (POA) and the National Chapter Award. When developing the POA area of Building Communities, FFA chapters plan activities that address any of the following quality standards: Environment, Human Resources, Citizenship, Stakeholder Engagement and Economic Development (National FFA, 2018).

Since FFA is an intra-curricular rather than an extra-curricular program, it is encouraged that agriculture educators incorporate FFA activities into classroom instruction. Service-learning, when done effectively, is beneficial to students. This study serves to evaluate the service projects done by Kansas agricultural education programs and identify which components of authentic service-learning are present in chapter activities.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Thousands of educators across the state of Kansas daily utilize various educational pedagogies founded on the thoughts, feelings and beliefs of many different educational practitioners and philosophers. One such pedagogy, known as experiential learning, can be identified by four distinct pillars derived from the philosophies of Dewey, Knapp, Stimson and Lancelot (Knobloch, 2003). These identifying pillars include: learning in real-life contexts, learning by doing, learning through projects and learning by solving problems. By analyzing these four pillars and the philosophies that comprise experiential learning, Knobloch concluded that experiential learning is authentic learning because it involves the construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry and a value beyond school. Deci and Ryan's (2008) Self-Determination Theory adds to the foundation of service learning. The theory purports that humans internally hold three desire; autonomy, competence and relatedness. Meeting students' internal desires through experience builds the person and their knowledge.

Service-learning is a collaborative teaching and learning strategy designed to promote academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement (Ash & Clayton, 2004). Students render meaningful service in community settings that provide experiences related to academic material. There are three qualifications for an experience to be termed as service-learning: it is collaborative; it relates to academic material; and it involves reflection on the experience as demonstrated (Zhang et al., 2011, Knapp & Benton, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to evaluate teachers' understanding of authentic service-learning activities.

Research Questions: How do Kansas agriculture teachers associate service activities conducted through FFA with classroom instruction to engage students in learning opportunities that include all components of service-learning? What service-learning activities are being implemented by agricultural educators in Kansas? What resources do Kansas agricultural educators need in order to fully implement service-learning in the classroom?

Methodology

This study collected information through a quantitative, online survey. Of the 203 agricultural education programs with a good standing FFA chapter in Kansas, one teacher from 136 programs was asked to respond. A sample of 136 is representative of all Kansas agricultural education programs (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). A usable sample of 76 was obtain for a response rate of 57.4%.

Participating teachers were selected using a stratified random sample by FFA district. The number of teachers polled in that district was identified based on the number of good standing FFA chapters within that district, represented as a percentage of the entire state.

Respondents were asked to provide a personal definition of service-learning and up to 10 service-learning experiences provided to their students. Once the experiences were provided, participants watched a short, educational video about the components of an authentic service-learning experience. Upon the video's conclusion, respondents selected which of the three components (collaboration, relation to content and reflection) were present in each of the activities they listed previously. A pilot test was conducted on the appropriate sections and changes were made to increase reliability, a second pilot test estimated reliability as .76.

Findings

When asked how important it is that a service-learning project be led by students, 75% of the respondents said it was either very important or extremely important. It was noted by 83.4% of the respondents as either very important or extremely important that a service-learning project require students and teachers to identify a specific need in the community. It was identified as either very important or extremely important that students set measurable goals in a service-learning project by 65.2% of respondents. Relating service-learning projects to a course objective or course standard identified by the Kansas State Department of Education was identified as either very important or extremely important by 18% of respondents. When asked how important it is that a service-learning project require student reflection on their experiences, 70.8% of respondents said it was either very important or extremely important.

Respondents were asked to report up to 10 service-learning activities completed in their program. A total of 267 service-learning experiences were identified. Of these experiences, 28 (10.5%) had the collaboration component only, 7 (2.6%) had the relation to content component only and 12 (4.5%) had the reflection component only. There are 105 (39.3%) experiences that contain two of the three components of a service-learning project. Respondents identified that 77 (28.8%) of the experiences contain all three of the components of a service-learning project and 38 (10.5%) experiences contain none.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Only 29% of the service-learning activities identified having collaboration, relation to content and reflection. This could be a result of a lack of teacher knowledge of service-learning or because of the teachers' personal philosophies regarding service-learning. The low number of experiences that were shown to have all three components might be an indication that teachers provided community service events instead of service-learning events because they were confused or did not understand they are different.

First and foremost, teachers should be encouraged to serve their communities in any form, but they should understand that shifting from community service to service-learning will have a greater impact on student development. Since the majority of perceived service-learning projects did not contain all three of the components of authentic service-learning, it is recommended that teacher educators and/or state leaders assist agriculture teachers in developing deeper knowledge of service-learning experience. Future research could focus on students' knowledge of service learning and their perceptions of the benefits over community service.

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