

# Creating an Engaging and Relevant 'Classroom' that Ignites a Love of Learning: Inspiring, Practical Social Education through Service Learning

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Destination Dreaming is a social enterprise that works with schools to create sustainable community partnerships that teach young people about global citizenship, self-awareness and social justice. Destination Dreaming is passionate about using service learning to engage young people and prepare them to thrive in a global world. As educators, we strive to prepare students not just for their academic lives, but to deliver real experiences that are about life itself. In today's results-driven, global world, it is important that we provide experiences that empower students as leaders who can display empathy, resilience and imagination. We need to engage students through different means, with *more* than simply words on a page, and inspire them beyond 'liking' a social action group on Facebook. To develop inspiration and deep understanding, we need students to *feel* the joy of meaningful

contribution, to develop skills and understanding through human connection and the realisation of our common humanity.

## Service Learning: an Introduction

Service learning is grounded in the concept of experiential learning, offering students the opportunity to apply classroom learning through service and engagement with others. Service learning programs extend community service through integration in curriculum and the recognition of defined learning achievements. It is an approach that challenges students both personally and academically, leading to life-changing personal growth and deeper learning experiences.

Students today are looking to be challenged, inspired and taught in a relevant, practical way. Facilitating their learning through practical experiences recognises this – in place of a concept of education in which 'students are treated like empty jars that need to be filled with knowledge' (McCarthy, 2002). Social education curriculum provides the foundation for theory and reflection, in that the experience and service is grounded in *understanding*. The process begins in the classroom, where theoretical concepts are laid down and the clear links between subject content and assessment are defined. Student engagement and understanding is then enhanced through a link between the classroom and the *outside* world. Students build upon their classroom knowledge



in a service-based placement that leads to a new range of experiences, which are then brought back into the classroom for reflection.

## Lifting Social Education off the Page

Using an experiential framework, the learning environment is transformed from existing simply as a page from a textbook into a truly practical, authentic arena, enabling students to apply and enhance their learning in the wider community. Ideally, service learning is implemented as an integrated approach to achieving academic outcomes, in subjects such as Global Politics, Sociology or Civics and Citizenship. For each of these subjects, the drawing on direct experience outside the classroom is an inspiring and effective model for teaching. In order to develop student understanding of the global community in which we live, there is nothing like getting out of the classroom and actually experiencing it.

A community partnership provides a fantastic foundation for teaching sociology, for example. Student engagement with a developing community provides students with first-hand inquiry into issues, such as access to resources, the social consequences of child labour and corporate citizenship. Connecting with a community in Timor Leste, for example, can provide a foundation to analyse the comparative experience of being a young person in Timor. It could allow students to consider the effects on young people of the urban drift, increasing influence of social media, demographic shift as a result of the Indonesian occupation and the economic implications of a change in national language.

The exploration of different family forms can be brought to life through a cross-cultural community partnership. By spending time in a diverse community, students can explore first-hand the traditional gender roles, compared to their experiences of life and the changing roles of family members in Australia. For example, connecting with a community in Fiji allows students to experience the deep role of the extended family and the defined behaviour and responsibilities of family members in a cross-cultural context. Students in this program discuss with Fijian peers their experience of family life, the roles of family members and the influence of economics. They reflect upon why Fijian men hunt pigs while Fijian women care for the children and harvest cassava; or explore the engagement in traditional crafts of women in rural areas and compare these experiences with people's lives in urban areas. Upon return to traditional class, students prepare a report that identifies the differences and similarities between their experiences of family life in Australia and the experiences of their new friends in Fiji. They reflect upon the implications of family life without electricity, the concept of Western materialism and how a subsistence lifestyle affects the roles of family members in Fiji as compared to Australia.

A service learning program leads to valuable experiences with which to discuss ethical issues in Australian and Global Politics. Does charity start at home or do we have a responsibility to foreign communities? By connecting with a community partner that tackles homelessness, students could develop a real awareness and empathy for the concept of the right to housing. They could gain a practical understanding

of active citizenship and the positive change they can make through involvement in social movements. Such a program would ground considerations of the economic implications of homelessness and the complexity and range of solutions being rolled out to alleviate poverty. Grounded by this experience, students could then consider arguments about our assistance to international communities over the investment in local solutions.

To prepare young people for adulthood, we need to provide challenging opportunities for students to negotiate their own learning through authentic world experiences. Through a service learning program with a partner in a developing community, students can be exposed to poverty and the experience of living without electricity or running water. They can engage with diverse concepts of community and family and see the work of an international non-governmental organisation on the ground. Such experiences not only transform pedagogy from being only 'words on a page', but also challenge students to think more reflectively about a topic. By building in experiential and service learning, students gain experience in decision-making and the process of accepting responsibility for one's decisions. It is one thing to critique the effectiveness of a global actor on paper. . . it becomes a whole other ball game when students have lived in the community the actor is working to develop, built friendships with and listened to the stories of their peers and developed an awareness of the cultural and sustainability challenges to development and the universality of human rights.

By engaging with a developing community on a collaborative project, students can gain an appreciation of the local people's desire for economic development, in contrast to an environmental group's concern about resulting environmental degradation. Supported by this perspective, students can discuss and evaluate the response of global environment groups and the economic and developmental challenges to the community's attainment of basic human rights. By engaging with a community experiencing poverty, students learn to see beyond the perspective presented by one actor – students consider concepts of both social and environmental sustainability and *how they* may make an informed contribution to social movements.

## Engaging Students Through Service Learning

By incorporating service learning into the curriculum, teachers are adopting an approach that can achieve significant outcomes for all students in their class, as well as their community. Service learning is extremely valuable for students for whom traditional classroom learning is a challenge, or for motivating students who have become disengaged. It provides an opportunity for all students to experience success and provides a relevant context in which students can transfer academic concepts to authentic 'outside world' environments. Through thoughtfully facilitated activities, students are likely to experience a less complicated relationship between reward and effort – if they work hard to cart rocks to the building site, or spend a series of sessions conversing patiently in English with a newly settled refugee – their objective will eventually be realised. They are rewarded for their hard work and



participation, and this often leads to a blossoming awareness that is transferable upon their return to the classroom.

Service learning enhances opportunities for engagement by delivering practical, relevant skills. To give our classes purpose and meaning, we can utilise programs of experiential and service learning. Students may appear unmotivated by a learning area, but it is often a lack of motivation to learn in the manner the traditional education system wants, rather than student disinterest in the topic. A simple but revealing example is offered by 'Peter', a Year 11 student, who was disinterested in mathematics class until he laboured beside local carpenters on a development project in Timor and experienced the relevance of *mathematics skills in practice*.

## Improving Academic Achievement

Research shows that improved academic achievement results from carefully designed service learning that is *integrated* within the curriculum. An example of this integration is provided by the collaborative delivery of a community project in partnership with a local asylum seeker resource centre. Students are involved in providing language tutoring, in the context of exploring the experience of diverse communities, the meanings of culture and experiences of ethnicity. Often the student-tutor will learn as much as, if not more than, the person being tutored. Experiential learning of this kind often leads to greater student achievement in the content area, as the knowledge and skill areas are integrated into the experience. The academic achievement is a result of enhanced opportunities for practical exploration, discussion and engagement in the process of striving for understanding. (RMC Research Corporation, 2007).

## Service Learning and VELs Physical, Personal & Social Strand

Service learning need not only be linked to discipline-based learning, but also to interdisciplinary areas in the VELs Physical, Personal and Social Strand such as Civics and Citizenship, Health and Personal Learning. Through a strong foundation of community engagement, service learning allows a deep exploration of Civics and Citizenship. For example, Destination Dreaming recently partnered a Tasmanian school with a remote school in Timor Leste. Students were introduced to the concepts of ethical partnerships and community in the classroom, before visiting their partner community and engaging in a tutoring project. Here, students gained an experiential understanding of the varying dynamic between the Australian and Timor Leste governments by exploring the CRAV museum. They further developed their understanding of contemporary issues by hearing from local young people who have lost entire families in their struggle for independence.

Through regular reflection on their experiences in a community of diverse family contexts, historical experience and access to human rights, students generate questions and explore perspectives. They engage with one another as they process complex information and challenging experiences, acknowledge one another's perspectives and discuss concepts of development and our responsibilities as global citizens. Students are given responsibility for the outcomes of the program, from designing lesson plans and fundraising for additional resources to facilitating the tutoring sessions. Each day, as students engage with their peers in the delivery of the program, they inquire into and reflect upon the experiences of their new friends in Timor, the response of global actors and the potential for social action.



Timor-Leste. Photo courtesy of Destination Dreaming



Character development occurs as a result of the practical need to take responsibility, care for one another, think creatively, identify the most effective games and constructively communicate in a cross-cultural context.

Through their service learning experiences, many students discover career paths of which they would otherwise be unaware. Often this translates into more varied or ambitious job aspirations and enhanced motivation for academic achievement. On an international community program, for example, students may meet nurses working in rural health, aid workers and teachers working in an international school. On a local placement, students may be exposed to careers in community agencies, environmental science or medicine, such as working in the field of indigenous healthcare.

## Organising Service Learning and Important Principles for Application

Service learning is built upon the foundation of a community or organisational partnership. The creation of constructive, sustainable partnerships takes both time and resources to ensure positive outcomes for both parties. It is critical that a partnership is founded upon mutual respect and two-way learning. Both the school and the community partner should clearly identify their objectives for the partnership and have two-way learning at the front of their minds.

While it may seem overly formal, a *written agreement* is important to ensure a strong foundation for your partnership through establishing a shared vision and goals. Both communities should agree on the target educational goals, the course of action in a given scenario (what will happen if staff retire or move on, for example) and their respective responsibilities. This should also be the basis for developing a framework for evaluating whether the partnership is working for both communities.

In global partnerships, it is common for the two parties to have very different levels of financial resources. It is important to consider a



Fiji: Photo courtesy of Destination Dreaming

relationship beyond that of 'funder/donor' and 'recipient' – with one school simply fundraising and sending donations to their partner community. Your partnership should be based on mutual respect, equality and detail opportunities for both partners to make an equal contribution. This provides a fantastic opportunity for teachers to help students see beyond narrow views about 'rich and poor'; to recognise that 'rich in dollars' doesn't necessarily equate to 'rich in life', and that a partner that may lack financial resources has equally valuable lessons to offer. The value in a partnership is in the human contact, the discussions between peers and the cultural exchange, rather than the provision of monetary gifts.

The service project itself should be collaborative, sustainable and build capacity in both communities. If your partnership involves the delivery of a community development project, you must always ensure it is based on the needs of the local community – not the wishes or capacity of the visiting student group. Together with your partner community, develop a clear project plan that includes: the need the project is addressing, project objectives, the contributions to be made by both communities, management and operational roles, budget, timetable, associated involvement of local government and non-government organisations and a method for evaluation.

Although integrating service learning in your curriculum may sound like a huge job, the benefits greatly outweigh time and resource investment. Research from the United States, where service learning is practiced in about one third of all public K-12 schools, showed that service learning at many schools revived teachers, inspired dialogue amongst the staff and developed more caring school environments. Another key benefit was the reduction in behavioural incidents in classrooms where students are engaged in service learning (RMC Research Corporation, 2007).

The service learning environment is unique. It's about education of the heart as well as the mind. It provides an opportunity to challenge one's self-centredness and materialism, to work together to arrive 'as one' at a 'destination', to cooperate to lighten the load and discover that one's personal best is so much more than perhaps was previously believed. Destination Dreaming hopes to meet many of you out there exploring our global community, leading your students to discover, be challenged, celebrate their similarities and their differences, growing amidst experiences that transform education into a journey about life itself.

For further information about service learning or to discuss a program for your school, contact Kate Miller at the Destination Dreaming on (03) 9077 2207, or visit [www.destinationdreaming.com.au](http://www.destinationdreaming.com.au).

## References

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