

# A Baker's Dozen

## Guideposts to a Meaningful Service Learning Program

by Cathryn Berger Kaye

What markers lead toward a meaningful approach to service learning? A national expert offers a dozen helpful guideposts.

### 1. The Will to Start

When visiting the American International School of Johannesburg, these words from the school head Andy Page-Smith resonated deeply about what provides the impetus to start a sustainable school-wide service learning program: "You don't have to have all the answers. We listened to those who had passion and let this generate into something practical and worth being built upon. Administrators help clarify and make connections. We were willing to dream and follow our mission statement." When educators wait until all is known before taking the first step, the first step may never happen. Model risk taking to initiate service learning.

### 2. Find Administrative Buy-In

Leadership matters with any meaningful initiative. When an administrator allows time and resources for faculty to explore and learn about service learning methodologies, this provides a clear message. When the academic deans or curriculum coordinators understand their vital role to ensure service learning is integrated into the curriculum and not an "add-on," again, this adds credibility to service learning as a valued pedagogy. When service learning is considered along with advancing other school priorities, this elevates its importance. For example, if a school priority is to improve inquiry, or writing, or school climate, take the time to recognize the role service learning can play in advancing other relevant aspects of



school improvement. And when appropriate professional development is provided by the administration over the several years it will likely take for school-wide integration, then a path is set for this worthwhile journey.

### 3. A Keen Ear

Listen to all the stakeholders. This can be the students, teachers, parents, administrators, support staff, community partners, and higher education partners. Bringing collaborators to the table establishes collective ownership. Central to this approach is ensuring that all stakeholders have a clear understanding of what service learning is and how this teaching pedagogy transforms education.

### 4. Know the Terms

Language is the greatest communicator of culture. For a school to grow a culture of service learning, clarification of the words used is essential. Key words to explore include: volunteer, community service, service, community-based learning, project-based learning, inquiry-based learning, design thinking, and, of course, service learning. Find the similarities and differences.

### 5. Let Go

Consider how much classroom effort may go into control and management of students. Consider: Did you want to be controlled or managed when you were in school? Do you imagine today's students want to be "controlled and managed"? Admitting that many

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(if not most) educators are "control freaks" allows the beginning of recovery! By changing *control and manage to engage and inspire*, students have the wherewithal to discover their voice and their choice in the *learning* process. When service is added to learning, students discover a way to apply their learning to meet authentic community needs.

### 6. Appreciate Creative Chaos

George Dennison, author of one of the earliest books on progressive education, *The Lives of Children*, would walk in a classroom and ask, "Where's the chaos?" To many teachers this is daunting until they realize that learning requires elements of discovery. This may then require an understanding of how some element of "creative chaos" is necessary. When I was a very new teacher at a school founded by George and his wife Mabel Dennison, they provided guidance that allowed planned lessons to be less confined to strict outcomes

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## The Five Stages of Service Learning: An Abbreviated Guide

- **INVESTIGATION**

Includes the inventory of student interests, skills, and talents, and social analysis. Verifies an identified need through action research that often includes use of media, interviews of experts, surveys of varied populations, and direct observation/personal experiences.

- **PREPARATION**

Students continue to acquire content knowledge as they deepen understanding, identify partners, organize a plan of action, clarify roles, build time lines, and continue developing skills.

- **ACTION**

Students implement their plan in the form of direct service, indirect service, advocacy, or research. Action is planned with partners based on mutual understandings and perspectives.

- **REFLECTION**

Reflection is ongoing and occurs as a considered summation of thoughts and feelings regarding essential questions and varied experiences. It informs content knowledge, increases self-awareness, and assists in ongoing planning.

- **DEMONSTRATION**

Students capture the total experience including what has been learned, the process of the learning, and the service or contribution accomplished. They then share it with an audience. Telling their story often integrates technology and further educates and informs others.

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and more genuinely attentive to the needs of the learner. In order for service learning to be authentic, it is impossible to know exactly what will occur at every moment. Again, *letting go* provides a bit of creative and productive chaos to emerge along with student voice and choice.

### 7. Acknowledge “How We Learn”

In her article “How We Learn,” psychologist Alison Gopnick says learning means “two quite different things, the process of discovery and of mastering what one discovers.” She continues to describe this as “guided discovery,” adding that “children seem to learn best when they can explore the world and interact with expert adults.” Having a collective agreement and understanding that while children must have role models—the teachers—they also need ample opportunity to have discoveries that allow them to come to know their world. Service learning, when done well, provides ample opportunities to come to know oneself, including one’s personal abilities and areas for growth, while viewing diverse populations both near and distant. Service learners learn about society in a multitude of contexts. Learners develop a sense of expertise as they apply their knowledge and skills and monitor how change occurs. They come to see themselves as people of influence for the common good, already able to put their stamp on the world.



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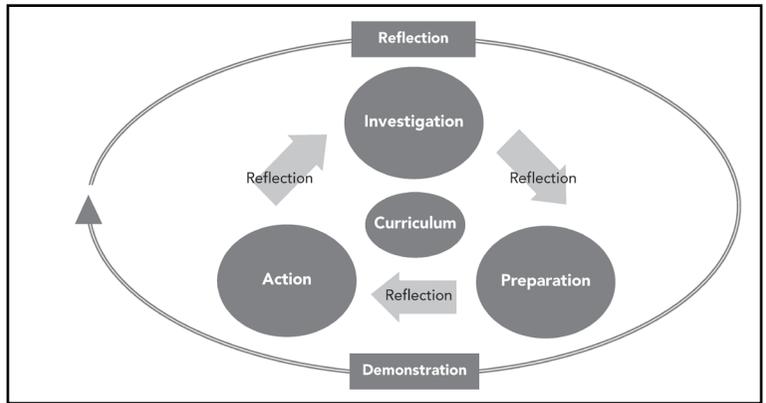
## 8. Recognize that Kids Already Make a Difference

A phrase students often hear in support of service learning is some form of “You can make a difference.” According to environmental advocate Philippe Cousteau, “Kids already make a difference with every choice they make.” All day long they are making a difference by whether they discard litter on the way home from school or purchase a single-use water bottle instead of using a refillable bottle. Consider the consumer power of youth and what their harnessed efforts could accomplish just in helping protect and preserve our environment. Of course through service learning students can make significant contributions as they harness their interests, skills, talents, and knowledge and apply them to identified and confirmed needs. They contribute to social well-being. They self-identify as changemakers.

## 9. Aim for Reciprocity

Service learning always aims for reciprocity, a mutual exchange with benefits for all involved. This becomes a centerpiece for service learning and is achieved through

ongoing dialogue with all partners. With an understanding of the term “reciprocity” and awareness that service learning is done with others, it removes the onus that service learning further delineates the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Instead, reciprocity establishes the recognition that all participants have value and all contribute to the learning and



The Five Stages of Service Learning.

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the service. For example, when high school students visited a shelter—a residential facility for unemployed men—the residents were all out for the day seeking employment. The students noticed an extensive library and asked why there were so many books. The program director explained that the men tire of watching television and instead spend many nights reading. A student asked if they could start a book club with residents who would be willing to participate. The young male students scheduled monthly discussions about

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mutually agreed upon books with eager self-selected participants living at the shelter. With this example, it is difficult to say who benefited the most. Keep reciprocity in mind. Discuss the term, and be on the lookout for those significant moments when reciprocity becomes tangible. The educator's role is to be more attentive to this relationship; he or she may find that when following the five stages of service learning, reciprocity is more likely.

### 10. Be Transparent Regarding the Five Stages of Service Learning

Many educators are familiar with the five stages of service learning: investigation, preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration. When students understand and can

identify the five stages, and this can begin in primary grades, a common transferable language of learning has been established. Metacognition calls for this transparency and increases and provokes learning about learning. Students also then learn a process they can apply to many aspects of their life, well beyond their academic years, as they continue to participate in social change.

### 11. Raise Questions

One key purpose for service learning is to engender questions. This goes well beyond the first question that comes to mind. The intention is for students to discover the question beneath the original question, and the question below that one. The purpose is for depth of understanding. For example, if the original question is regarding, "How much food is needed by the local food bank?" the question below this one may be, "What circumstances cause poverty in our community?" Questions can continue to take the inquiry deeper and deeper to include systemic considerations and ethical dilemmas. The point is to refuse to be satisfied by the obvious. This may disturb the status quo. Questions can also cause a purposeful disturbance as the vantage point can move from local to global issues, since what occurs in one place is irrevocably connected to what occurs somewhere else. This then can provoke another critical question: "Do students need to travel to distant places when they can find relevant and essential and often



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similar issues in their own backyard?” What creates the greatest opportunity for meaningful service and significant ongoing relationships?

## 12. Reexamine Reflection

The purpose of reflection is not to reflect; it is to become reflective. This means that rote prompts and counting how many “reflections” are turned in will not be effective in developing this natural instinctive habit of mind. Consider all the ways a person can enter reflection, including your preferred ways. How can students experience a range of entry points to experience reflection by choice? This is fertile ground for exploration and discovery, and it’s essential in the service learning process. When students are guided to be on the lookout for significant moments in the learning and in the service they will likely be responsive with what matters most. When students have an array of ways to be expressive they will select the way they find most meaningful to express themselves. Educators can facilitate reflection as a purposeful self-determined act of heart and mind.

Since a “baker’s dozen” always has thirteen, here is one more guidepost.

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## • Make Room for a New Wall.

It has been said that service learning is the fourth wall of the classroom that opens up to the world. What a vibrant image and one educators can achieve. To meet the needs of 21st century learning, it requires 21st century strategies. Service learning brings learning to life with meaning and purpose. ●

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*Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., is an internationally known education consultant and the author of The Complete Guide to Service Learning, plus two books with environmental advocate Philippe Cousteau, Going Blue, and Make a Splash! For additional articles visit [www.cbkassociates.com](http://www.cbkassociates.com). To reach Cathryn, email [cathy@cbkassociates.com](mailto:cathy@cbkassociates.com).*