The study of social justice by its very nature elicits a call to action. This imperative belongs within our school systems, and can be achieved through the educational pedagogy called service learning.

Service learning moves the acquisition of skills and knowledge from the singular benefit of the student, most often noted with a grade of accomplishment, to engaging students in applying their abilities and knowledge toward a public purpose. The process necessitates a deliberate academic and service connection and includes students taking initiative, authenticating needs, developing reciprocal collaborations with community partners, and participating in meaningful reflection. Service learning is not glorified community service. Service learning is much more: an effective teaching methodology that, when done well, improves student engagement and the classroom experience for students and teachers.

Participation in the social well-being is part of most if not all societies. One lesser known example is the donation of money by the Native American Choctaw Nation to assist with Irish potato famine relief in 1847. With little money among them, the Choctaw had empathy from their own struggles known as The Trail of Tears, a forced removal from their sacred homelands to march and resettle in Oklahoma, a time of hardship many did not survive. Long before the Internet created opportunities for response to crises, we have evidence of contributions all through time, stimulated by knowing the needs of others and an internal drive to assist.

Perhaps as we integrate and elevate an understanding of social justice issues today and engage students in this collective response, we are not introducing a new concept at all. Perhaps we are being reminded of how we behave with the best of ourselves. Through service learning, we can engage generations of youth in such actions that resonate with value—the value that comes from working to improve the lives of others and safeguarding our planet. As we move in this direction, we can also note that this stems from cultural and ancestral roots.

Defining Social Justice
The term social justice has different meanings for different people. For some, it may elicit thoughts of Martin Luther King Jr., Ghandi, or, more recently, Watari Matthai. For others, the term may spark discussion of economic structures. Young children may think about their use of the phrase, “no fair” when playing with friends. Teenagers and young adults may focus on a connection between social justice and social media, noting instances of cyberbullying and how the technology meant to improve society can sometimes set us back or noting the use of social media to call for governmental change.

Because the term social justice can be interpreted in many ways, it is important for teachers and students to discuss and define the term for themselves. By examining news articles to weigh in on the current struggles in all societies for greater equity, or by reading of historical circumstances that garnered response, students can identify common and disparate elements of social justice. Students can consider whether consensus must be reached between disagreeing factions if we are to move toward a more just society, or can we move together in spite of our differences? Can a singular definition be developed? Would we all agree? We have even asked students to draw social justice to see what images are evoked and then discussed.
Since the definition of this phrase is so fluid, we recommend asking students to reflect upon their developing thoughts and feelings regarding social justice as they participate in the service learning process. This reflective practice reminds students and teachers alike that taking action to promote change not only influences the situation we wish to address, we are also transformed by these actions. Our perspectives shift. Our knowledge base grows. Our skills become refined. And, ideally, we continue to deepen the questions we are raising.

**Social Justice: A Call for Action**

What we develop with service learning are students who self-identify as change agents. Of course change is a constant. However, we are referencing the intentional change implied in the quote by artist Andy Warhol: “They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.” Instigated change occurs with awareness, collaboration, problem-solving, momentum, perseverance, and resilience. The need for social change is frequently rooted in intolerance. This intolerance can be focused on issues of race or ethnicity, religion, sex, poverty, sexual orientation, physical ability, or immigration status among others. It can be rooted in simple ignorance or stereotypes and bloom into prejudice, discrimination, or hate crimes. In all of its many facets intolerance is something to recognize, discuss, and finally, address. Sometimes classroom discussion can work wonders at opening minds and eyes alike, but that can be just the beginning.

Social and political action is often the direct result of the need for change. The action can take many forms: raising community awareness through letters to the editor, making public service announcements that air in media, and participating in the actual democratic process by speaking at city council meetings, writing letters to government officials, or influencing policy. Students have been involved in establishing a much-needed community youth center to keep youth out of gangs, gaining inclusion in government advisory committees, and working against unjust actions such as slavery in the Sudan. Social change can be local and global in its scope and ambition. Whenever global intentions are developing, it is important to ensure that students also have a local application of these ideas since in most cases, similar (to some degree) social justice issues can be found in every backyard.

Social change can also be the key to achieving real depth in service learning by driving students to investigate public policy, question the world around them, extend their practice into new areas, and encourage their peers to become active in the civic process. However, there can be some challenges that come with this particular kind of service learning. Results can take time to achieve, and curriculum requirements may insist we move to the next lesson or activity, leaving opportunities behind. For service learning that aims for social justice, we may need a new paradigm with a fresh approach. At San José State University, in San José, California, a community engagement partnership grew from a fresh perspective. Rather than having service learning grow from a professor’s preset syllabus, students met within a nearby community and collaborated to uncover the critical social issues and dilemmas, priorities that stemmed from within community, not from a university textbook. This CommUniverCity model (www.cucsj.org) started in 2005 and is expanding. CommUniverCity is well-tuned with the community needs or reassesses and updates through community gatherings. Based on these needs, the university faculty member proposes a relevant course of study that addresses a verifiable need with a viable solution, and implements this need within the community. All ideas are vetted by the community. A business professor may, for example, want his students to teach about where our taxes go in a public forum. The community

> “Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other’s welfare, social justice can never be attained.”
> Helen Keller, author
reviews this idea and may say, “No. This is not our priority. We need a clinic on how to do our tax forms.” Real needs met with real solutions through real collaborations.

In the movie, Hotel Rwanda, there is a powerful moment after the brutality and devastation of the Rwandan genocide is captured by a cameraman. Paul Rusesabagina is grateful for this footage because he believes that when people see it on the news, they will take action. However, Rusesabagina is told that people will see this awful footage and say that what is happening is terrible, and then they will turn back to their dinners and forget about it. Students do not want to be the people who learn about terrible things in their world and turn back to their dinners. They want to take action.

Students will find themselves questioning a variety of assumptions as they learn about social change issues. Do people have equal access to vote? Is life in a new country always better for immigrants than the one they left behind? How does economic status impact recreational, educational, and employment opportunities? How is literacy in developing countries related to issues of clean water and environmental sustainability? These questions are a sign that your students are beginning to at look familiar issues in new ways.

**Why Service Learning Matters**

Connecting academic curriculum to social justice issues has likely been going on as long as formal education itself. There have always been teachers who recognize this imperative of civic participation. When studying about any past war, a teacher can develop lessons that guide students to consider the impact of that war on the lives of veterans and whether history shows that our societies have treated them with respect and fairness. This could lead to students interacting with veterans today and working toward more just social policies.

At times teachable moments are not scripted, yet an educator can capture the opportunity for student engagement. For Cathryn, such a moment happened in her early teaching years when a group of fourth graders arrived in class in tears. They relayed an incident that had occurred moments before when a school visitor had spoken to them in an offensive tone. They felt belittled and devalued. “It’s because we are kids,” one girl said. “They don’t take us seriously.” This led to an entire class suddenly erupting into conversation describing all the times these children felt wounded by words and treatment from their elders. A lesson grew out of this discussion concerning tolerance and the ways people are treated based on race, gender, class, and age. Ageism! They found their cause. A prior writing assignment was replaced with a new one: Essays on Ageism, Our Stories. Everyone dove in, even the most reluctant of writers. They worked on these essays, edited them furiously, and decided to read through all of the essays and select the ones most representative to submit for publication. They found a teacher journal on education and contacted the editor. Three essays were published, and all the students had found a voice for their cause.

Maureen’s high school students read Allan Stratton’s novel, Chanda’s Secrets which portrays a young girl living in sub-Saharan Africa and highlights how important her education is to bettering her life. They deepened their knowledge about the inequity of access to education by inviting Mark Grashow, founder of US-Africa Children’s Fellowship (thechildrensfellowship.org/) to speak to their class and by reading through information online. Based on their findings, they developed a presentation with photos and facts about schools in Zimbabwe that needed support to teach third graders about the importance of education everywhere in the world. They explained the cost of tuition, lack of resources, and value of donations. The ninth graders explained that when these schools receive pencils, the teachers break them in half to provide for double the number of students. Together the ninth and third graders created coin containers used to
fundraise for desks, school supplies, and sporting equipment. These coin containers included images of the Zimbabwean flag, school supplies, and soccer balls (the love of the sport was a common connection between the children). The containers were designed as pencil holders to be shipped along with the collected supplies.

What is notable is how engaging in a cause inspires initiative. Based on what she learned from the ninth graders, a third grader educated her Girl Scout troop to participate in a coin collection. The father of a third grader involved a local athletic league in collecting used soccer balls. After a month, students had gathered over 60 boxes of supplies and sporting goods. Then a third grade teacher signed up to travel to Africa with Mark Grashow’s organization. She now incorporates her experience and contacts when teaching her classes each year.

For every social justice issue in a distant part of the globe, addressing social justice issues in our own backyards remains essential. A professor at Miami Dade College, in Miami, Florida, interweaves the topic of homelessness and food insecurity into several of his courses. He integrates reflection at all stages of the process, which enlivens students’ discussion and inquiry as their perspectives evolve through the sequence of experiences. Through his lectures and guest speakers, students delve into the topic appreciating its relevance as they grow to understand this issue affects some of their peers and employees of the college. All students chose to assist within one of ten well-selected agencies that offer a range of times and options for participation to meet even the busiest student’s schedule. They immerse in the topic, write essays, post reflections, and continue to discuss their insights. One class led a Hunger Banquet to conduct outreach to educate additional students on campus. Other students created a video of discussion among peers on the topic of homelessness. The conversations included student’s account of time spent at their agencies, personal encounters with the issue of homelessness, and identifying and clarifying misconceptions that have now transformed. Many students continue to volunteer with their host agency well beyond the semester.

At all levels of education, engaging in issues of importance makes sense. If there is any question that young children can participate, consider a story from western Massachusetts. When kindergarten children heard that some children their age sleep in cars with their families or in shelters, they insisted on speaking with people with authority---local officials. They presented information and a plea for resources to provide safe housing for every family. This is a topic they could relate to, and they took action.

Now we are experiencing a global groundswell of service and civic engagement. The issues we face as a planet have risen to a level that calls us all to action. We can all be engaged in learning about and addressing critical interrelated issues—hunger, potable water, climate change, population migration, loss of habitat, illiteracy, gun violence, war—while contributing to the betterment of ourselves and others. Students who become cognizant of the issues and have problem-solving abilities to address them find an advanced imperative for learning that extends well beyond grades. When students lack the skills to address these relevant issues and topics then all educators need to take notice and provide what is needed to transform youth into advocates for the social well-being of our environment, our communities, and indeed this planet we share. Providing the requisite skills and knowledge to do this vital work in local communities and the larger world adds purpose to the process of education and prepares students for the 21st century.

We must shift the focus of our instruction to developing transferable life-long skills and knowledge rather than training students to perform well on an exam. A psychology teacher helped his students develop their communication skills by visiting with residents in the local nursing home. While most students came to class after their first visit with great self-satisfaction, one student said that she was not eager to return. When the teacher asked why, she stated that she could not stand to see so much knowledge locked away from the rest
of the world. This student’s reaction reminds us of the importance of reciprocity in service. Rather than working from a structure of have and have-not, we must recognize the gifts of those we are helping. The trip to the nursing home was not just about students communicating their experiences; it was about listening to and learning from the words of their elders.

Words fill classrooms and books and computer screens. We can dialogue, write papers, and make suppositions about possibilities. Yet, when we take words and transform them into ideas, and these ideas then transform into action, what are we capable of? Bringing learning to life through using what we study in class to assist struggling students gain skills and confidence, writing informative brochures about preventing heart disease, alerting communities to environmental toxicities, growing fresh vegetables in areas designated as “food deserts,” or guiding students to plant Moringa trees because their seeds make dirty water potable—can this be what education is really about?

In *Now You See It*, Cathy N. Davidson writes, “The world is full of problems to solve that cost little except imagination, relevant learning, and careful guidance by a teacher with the wisdom to *not control* every outcome or to think that the best way to measure is by keeping each kid on the same page of the same book at the same time.”

An emphasis in schools today is, understandably, literacy. When asked to define literacy, the most common response is *the ability to read, write, and comprehend*. Add fluency, another essential element that makes these skills second nature and still, this only provides the *form* of literacy. When we neglect the *function*, students often wonder why they need to work so hard to acquire these skills. The *function* of literacy requires the ability to apply *form* with purpose and intent toward successful participation in and contribution to society. By including the acquisition of civic literacy—the ability to participate and contribute to dynamics of a class, neighborhood, or community that may lead to interaction with government, organizations, or businesses to improve quality of life—generates a civic mindedness in the transition from adolescent to adult. Cultural literacy draws attention to interacting with tolerance and understanding of those similar and different behaviors and attitudes drawn from a variety of backgrounds and lifestyles. We can add environmental literacy to ensure students have awareness that their everyday choices can protect or harm our planet for current and future generations.

Applying prior and acquired knowledge and skills through service learning creates an explicit and deliberate arena for students to experience the relationship between what is often perceived as strictly academics with “real life.” The relevance of school and the connection between subjects becomes apparent. “Why am I learning this?” is replaced with, “I get it!”

With service learning, ideas become a reality; excitement becomes palpable. Contributions are significant. Students discover who they are as personal interests, talents, and skills connect with the academic content and skills. Service creates purpose for learning. Students and exceptional educators who engage them prove to be valued contributors for our collective well-being, now and in the future.
The Five Stages of Service Learning

Service learning most importantly is a teaching approach, a method to infuse in academics, to strengthen learning, create interdisciplinary thinking, develop civic dispositions, and effect palpable change. With any content and age level, the Five Stages of Service Learning offer the frame to ensure competencies develop, academic imperatives are met or exceeded, and students have a role in shaping their learning and the service.

This framework constitutes a process that is key to students’ effectiveness and critical to their learning transferable skills and content. Even though each stage is referenced separately, keep in mind that they are linked together and often experienced simultaneously. Visualize how overlays are used in an anatomy book to reveal what is occurring in the human body system by system. Each stage of service learning is like one of these overlays, revealing one part of a dynamic interdependent whole. All stages must be approached with mutual respect for all involved.

- **Investigation:** Includes both the inventory of student interest, skills, and talents, and the social analysis of the issue being addressed. This analysis requires gathering information about the identified need through action research that includes use of varied approaches: media, interviews of experts, survey of varied populations, and direct observation/personal experience. This is a most critical stage. As students authenticate the need, they also take ownership of the issue with the intent of improving the situation. Always this is done with the community rather than to the community. The voice of the people who may be most impacted must be part of the entire process, beginning with investigation.

- **Preparation:** Includes the continued acquisition of knowledge that addresses any resultant questions from investigation along with academic content, identification of groups already working towards solutions, organization of a plan with clarification of roles, responsibilities and time lines, and ongoing development of skills needed to successfully carry the plan to fruition. As educators we must ensure this stage occurs. Often students prefer to quickly dive into the action. However, the issues have complexities, layers of questions to consider, and actual knowledge to be acquired to be able to contribute through meaningful action. There is a situation that was reported by a teacher regarding an experience with Habitat for Humanity. As students were busily working on the construction of the home, the future residents approached the organizers and pleaded for the students to stop. When asked why, the response was, “They don’t know how to hammer nails; they are destroying our home.”

- **Action:** Includes the implementation of the plan that usually takes the form of direct service, indirect service, advocacy, or research. Action is always planned with mutual agreement and respect with partners so this builds understanding and perspective of issues and how other people live. Each manner of service learning affords opportunities to work in an area of social justice. For example,
  - Direct service with teaching language or distributing health care information in a clinic
  - Indirect service with improving the website of an environmental organization
Advocacy by creating or promoting legislation or by providing a voice for those unable to speak for themselves at town hall meetings or in online or print forums

Research by engaging students in conducting research on topics that support nonprofit organizations or causes that informs the populace and assists in critical issues having more substantive current data. This elevates typical assignments, whereby students aim for a top grade to students recognizing their work can have a significant contribution in their community.

- **Reflection:** Reflection occurs as the connector between each stage of service and also as summative. Through reflection students consider their thoughts and feelings (cognition and affect) regarding any overarching essential question or inquiry that is a driving force of the total experience. Reflection informs how the process develops, increases self-awareness, assists in developing future plans, and employs varied multiple intelligences. In many cases students accept the need for reflection as an obligatory assignment. This indicates that we as educators have failed. One key intent of reflection is to stimulate reflective behaviors as a choice rather than obligation. Reflection can also take the form that most suits the student, a direct reference back to their identified interests, skills and talents that occurs during the investigation stage. Reflection can take place with photos, art, music, movement, or written narratives or poetry. The possible forms are broad; what matters is the students discovering a meaningful process.

- **Demonstration:** Student demonstration contains the totality of the experience including what has been learned (metacognition) and the service or contribution. Beginning with investigation, students document all parts of the process, resulting in a complete and comprehensive ability to tell the story of what took place during each stage that includes key informative reflection. Students draw upon their skills and talents in the manner of demonstration, often integrating technology. This narrative can also include the collective voices of all involved, creating a portrait of participation and collective impact.

Education is of course intended to create an informed and intelligent populace. However this may not be enough for the world our children are inheriting. The key to the learning process is integration so the learner can render fresh or new applications with knowledge. Psychologist Robert Sternberg, in his article, “The Expert Student,” describes three components to achieving “successful intelligence”: analytical thinking, creative thinking, and practical thinking. Sternberg continues that we can elevate the intent of education by teaching children “not only to think well, but also wisely.” Can we move students toward the wisdom needed to respond to our most critical global concerns? As defined by Sternberg, “Wisdom, the opposite of foolishness, is the use of successful intelligence and experience toward the attainment of a common good.” We face significant challenges. Our education systems will benefit from heeding this call to move students toward acting with wisdom. The time to begin is now.

As students learn about their world—the issues, problems, people and programs helping to create social change—they begin to find their own place as social advocates and activists. This is as true for reluctant students as for enthusiastic ones. Young people of all ages want their beliefs and actions to have value and relevance, and they will respond when offered a challenge, even with the necessity for hard work and struggle. Often they are surprised at what they can accomplish when they direct their minds and hearts to a cause they care about. While there are many reasons to pursue this avenue for education, one may be to transform the

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