



Cathryn Berger Kaye

The Purpose and Promise of Service Learning: Ideas to Address Poverty



Several years ago I was asked to speak to a group of 18 high school students in Minnesota about to spend spring break working with Habitat for Humanity in Georgia. Just before I arrived, the topic was further refined: ***Explain poverty, you have twenty minutes.***

This was the first of six meetings for these students. It was lunch. They were distracted, first by where to put their backpacks, plus they didn't know me. With fifteen minutes to go, I took the leap. Just to complete the scene, all students were sitting back, arms crossed

in front of them, looking bored.

An initial interaction to create a bit of trust—*who I am, any questions?*

I wrote **POVERTY** on a piece of easel paper. *What does this mean to you?*

Comments: *Poor, Lack of Wealth, No Money*

These responses are expected. The first online definition that pops up for poverty is “the state of being extremely poor” followed by synonyms: penury, destitution, beggary, indigence, impoverishment, hardship, and more.

Service Learning (cont.)

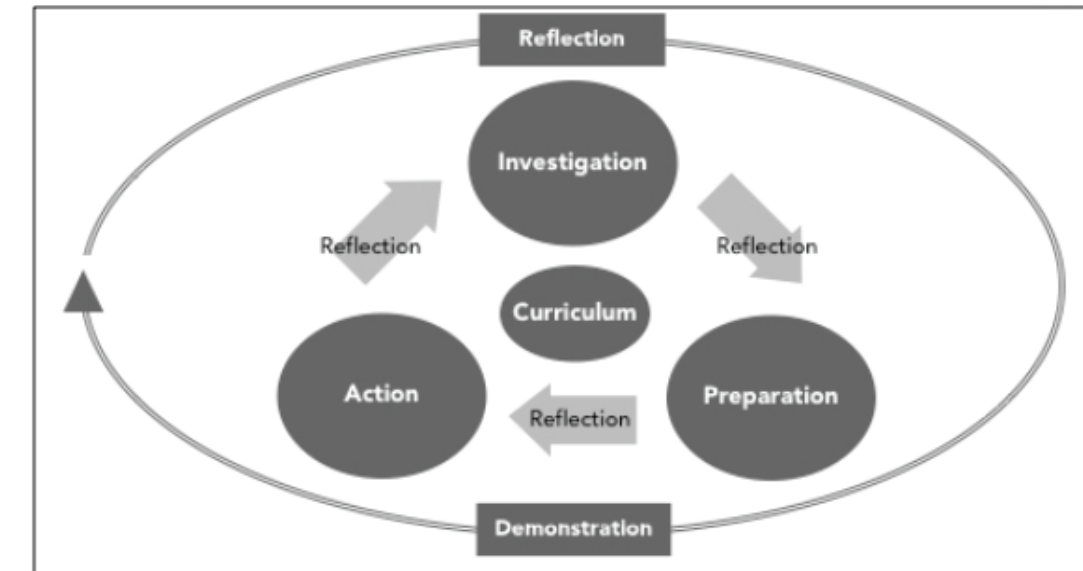
What was not expected was my next question: *In what other ways can a person be impoverished?*

they work with Habitat for Humanity they build along with the family who will reside in this home, and they have much

to learn from this family. Service is reciprocal, always an exchange on diverse levels. And remember, the idea is service learning.

Understanding Service Learning

Service learning continues to develop as a viable, effective



This caused a sudden change. Each student shifted their body, dropped the crossed arms, looked pensive, leaned forward. Suddenly the words came: *friends, family, love, health, wisdom.*

I had minutes left. I concluded by reminding these students that when

teaching pedagogy at all levels, from elementary through higher education. Classically the term refers to students applying their knowledge, skills and talents toward authentic community needs to improve the common good while continuing to meet and exceed academic expectations. The process

The students heading to Habitat for Humanity may have been going to “help those in need.” That is important, however if we are stepping into the role of providing service with this attitude we may be contributing to the problem: exacerbating the “us and them” dilemma. Were the students also going with the expectation to learn and garner from the people they would meet?

is further clarified with the five stages of service learning—investigation, preparation, action, reflection (ongoing), and demonstration—a transferable sequence that students can put into practice in a myriad of situations to solve problems and contribute to society. And alleviating and interrupting poverty is one of the categories of action that is critical for our collective well-being.

A Deficit Model or an Asset Model?

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By replacing a “deficit” lens with an “asset” lens, we change the story and create an avenue for exchange. Imagine visiting a community that appears deeply impoverished. What might you readily identify as an asset? The people you meet working daily to help others, a program that provides education, an elder with a perspective on the history of this community’s development over thirty years, a cohesive neighborhood where people look out for and assist each other without provocation, a value of family

and culture. By commencing the service learning cycle with investigating the assets of a community before identifying the deficits brings dignity into the equation.

Asking Questions

Five years ago I was leading a three-day service learning institute in Jakarta. On day one the 75 participants boarded buses to go into the community to investigate assets and needs present in seven different settings. The purpose was to model how we can apply this within any community: to go see and talk to people who have knowledge prior to considering what action may be needed. One group spent an hour at the urban-refuse waste picker community, where the life and economy centers on garbage. They sat in a circle with the man who had been running this community for 18 years and, with a translator, asked questions to find out about the history, the progress, the current status, what was needed, and what could be offered for student learning. One statement made as they reported back to the larger group had curricular impact. The gentleman who had been in charge of this community stated in all his years running this garbage pickers enclave, this was the first time anyone had taken the time to sit with him and ask him questions. The school revised a grade 9 social studies unit of study to investigate deeply and record and make available the stories of people doing some

Service Learning (cont.)

of the hardest and most complex work in the community, the stories that would otherwise be lost forever.

For purposeful and meaningful service learning in all areas, and perhaps most importantly when working with poverty, we must identify assets prior to deficits.

Four Kinds of Actions, Four Kinds of Attitudes

When considering action with service learning to address poverty, there are four categories of action. In all service, students apply their learning (knowledge, skills, talents, attributes) toward the identified and authenticated need, most often in partnership with others.

Direct Service When students interact person to person: for example, assisting with a tutorial for job skills, interacting with the environment to create and help to maintain a community garden, or interacting with animals by arranging for free or low cost veterinary care at a community health event.

Indirect Service When students provide a needed service or resource without being present for its use: for example, students can assist an agency like a food bank with their website design or with content.

Advocacy Service When students become the “voice” for this need: for

example creating a video or PSA needed by the organization or assisting with a social media campaign to replace stereotypes with accurate information.

Research Service When students delve into a topic to provide additional substantive information to advance the work of an organization: for example, a high school sociology class conducting a survey on behalf of a job training center to look at entry level job availability within a neighborhood.



We can also examine what we do with a consideration of our attitude. Each of these considerations are important and of value, and often several are occurring simultaneously. However as we examine each we can become more conscious and intentional in our actions. Are we intending our actions to be:

Kind – extending thoughtfulness to others. When students at Loveland High School, Cincinnati, did a coat collection

for the winter, they took quote cards (these are 50 quotes taken from the back of my business cards, **email me** for a set), transferred them to fabric and sewed them into the quotes. This added a layer of personalization for the students and was thoughtful for the recipient. Kind.



Helpful – providing needed assistance. When students conduct collections of food for a food bank to replenish their stock this is helpful and meets an authentic need. However, about 25% of all donations have to be discarded because they are not appropriate or are too old, taking time from the staff and volunteers. By partnering with organizations we can be more purposeful in our actions and educate others along the way. When we connect the idea of a food drive with the underlying issue of

hunger and poverty and then connect this with any or every academic class – potato famine in history, chemical imbalance in science, **What the World Eats** (a photo essay book) in English or art, interviewing a director of an local food collection agency in journalism – then we elevate the act of a food collection through having a context combined with an imperative to assist real people in our community.

Compassionate – responding to an urgent need. With a disaster like an earthquake or flood, and immediate outpouring of goodwill and assistance is required. This stems from our sense of compassion, the universal caring. The challenge is sustaining a response. Often the impact on already existing poverty worsened by a crises cannot be met in episodic response; fortunately we can also support well-vetted organizations that are in the social change business for the long haul.

Disruptive – making a change. Originating in the tech world, the concept of “disruptive” is to make a shift in the social order that moves us forward. While some of these “disruptors” are controversial (Airbnb, Uber), our society has always had “disruptors” that move us, ideally, forward to a more just world. We are more connected through technology,

Service Learning (cont.)

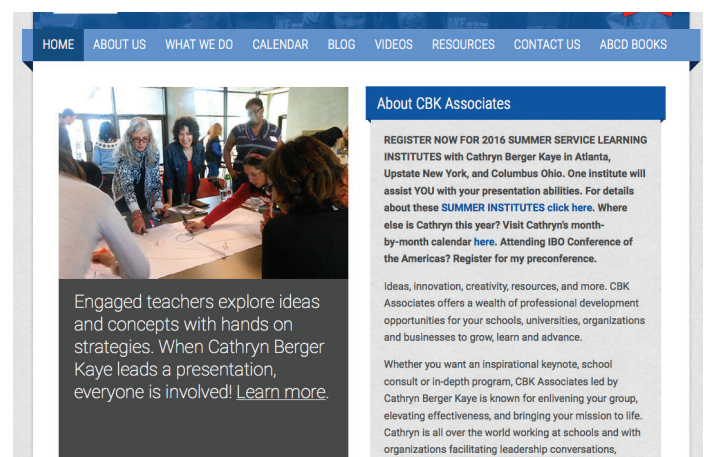
and even in poor parts of the world, smart phones are used to connect farmers with markets. For service learning, my question is are we trying to just get service “done” to meet a requirement or to complete this part of our classroom curriculum or are we aiming for significant and lasting change? Decades ago I heard about kindergarten students in western Massachusetts, so upset by the idea that children have to sleep in a car insisted upon meeting with a local city council person to voice their opinion and advocate for change: a warm and safe bed for every child. Disruptive. Katie Stagliano grew an enormous cabbage in grade 3 for a school assignment and once she saw how many people that could feed began Katie’s Krops to give grants for community gardens so people can feed themselves. High school students at NIST International School in Bangkok are collaborating with farmers of the Maeromit hill tribe village in Omgoi, Chiang Mai to manufacture and distribute fair trade coffee as a long term solution to financial stability. Disruptive, disruptive.

What Next?

That’s the question. What do we all do next to promote service learning within our classrooms, schools and communities to be integrated into academics and seen as a way to move our curriculum forward?

As I travel the world there is a true call for service and to implement high quality service learning within our schools because that’s where youth spend most of their time. They are a captive audience, eager to learn and to engage in the world now! And once we harness the power of youth—their ideas, energy, enthusiasm, and enormous capacity and desire to engage in the world—so they can impact their communities and beyond, then we are truly educators.

Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A., *president of CBK Associates, providing professional development around the world to advance education through diverse topics including service learning. Cathryn is the author of eight books including *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action.* Find more including articles, blogs and Institutes at www.cbkassociates.com, or email cathy@cbkassociates.com.*



The screenshot shows the top navigation menu of the CBK Associates website with links for HOME, ABOUT US, WHAT WE DO, CALENDAR, BLOG, VIDEOS, RESOURCES, CONTACT US, and ABCD BOOKS. Below the menu is a featured article titled "About CBK Associates" with a sub-header "REGISTER NOW FOR 2016 SUMMER SERVICE LEARNING INSTITUTES with Cathryn Berger Kaye in Atlanta, Upstate New York, and Columbus Ohio." The article text includes: "One institute will assist YOU with your presentation abilities. For details about these SUMMER INSTITUTES click here. Where else is Cathryn this year? Visit Cathryn's month-by-month calendar here. Attending IBO Conference of the Americas? Register for my preconference." Below this is a paragraph: "Ideas, innovation, creativity, resources, and more. CBK Associates offers a wealth of professional development opportunities for your schools, universities, organizations and businesses to grow, learn and advance." At the bottom of the featured article is another paragraph: "Whether you want an inspirational keynote, school consult or in-depth program, CBK Associates led by Cathryn Berger Kaye is known for enlivening your group, elevating effectiveness, and bringing your mission to life. Cathryn is all over the world working at schools and with organizations facilitating leadership conversations, education conferences through service learning, and more." To the left of the article is a photograph of a group of people in a meeting, with a caption: "Engaged teachers explore ideas and concepts with hands on strategies. When Cathryn Berger Kaye leads a presentation, everyone is involved! Learn more."