

Service Learning and Community Collaboration: Designing Cross-Generational Intervention Projects for Pre-Adolescent Girls

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Introduction

“So we think, so shall we be. So think of yourself as a unique and rare tree in the garden of the world—strong, productive, powerful, and incredibly beautiful. Remember your roots. Don’t be afraid to branch out and aim high. Be proud of your harvest. Share your shade. Don’t be afraid of change. Without change, we would never grow. Without high visions, we couldn’t reach our greatest dreams.”

Erika Stevens, Keynote Address, HighVisions/GreatDreams, 2003

Erika Stevens is currently a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University focusing on educational psychology and the needs of at-risk children. In May 2003 she delivered the keynote address for the HighVisions/GreatDreams program, a communication-based intervention project for sixth grade girls in rural New Mexico. In this talk for 150 sixth grade girls from her hometown of Portales, NM, Stevens (2003) remembered being a sixth grader herself:

Some are memories I love to think about! I remember meeting my friends at “our” tree and catching up on all the gossip, of going to my first science fair and spelling bee, of getting first chair in flute, and going to my first school dance. I also remember having glasses and braces at the same time and being called names by kids at school-- “brace-face,” “four-eyes,” and “band-geek.” Like some of you, I was scared to go to junior high.

Don’t let those fears slow you down! I can’t imagine where I would be if I had listened to my fears and not to my dreams. I urge you to do the same. Don’t wait until later. Start now! Try new things! Talk to new people! Go to new places! Take advantage of and display your talents. Listen to your dreams, whatever they may be. And follow your dreams, wherever they may take you!

The article that follows describes the HighVisions/GreatDreams initiative, an ongoing educational project for sixth grade girls in Roosevelt County, New Mexico. HighVisions/GreatDreams is a day-long workshop designed to encourage sixth grade girls to think about personal agency and choice-making, especially in terms of health, relationships, and careers. This service learning project has also been structured as a communication training that combines elements of self-disclosure, small group

discussion, and public speaking. Leadership for the program has consistently been provided by women involved in higher education, either as students, college administrators, or professors. In addition, the local chapter of the American Association for University Women has been a mainstay of financial support.

This analysis of the HighVisions/GreatDreams project is offered as a case study for other educators and community groups seeking ideas for similar service learning projects rooted in the public schools. Not only is this an example of collaborative effort among educators, students, and local women in the care of a community's children, but HighVisions/GreatDreams also illustrates how academic objectives can intersect successfully with service to a community. Of particular interest is the use of the HighVisions experience in advancing the personal and educational goals of mature college students.

This article has a two-fold purpose: to offer a theoretically-informed description of a successful cross-generational community service project for pre-adolescent girls and to analyze its service learning components for advanced students. The article includes a discussion of locus of control and how this construct has been instrumental in the development of the HighVisions program. I also describe the basic format of the HighVisions/GreatDreams project, focusing on design and content elements of the program. The article closes with a discussion of the project's service learning goals and the ways in which the program has been useful in advancing the academic interests and life choices of older students at the University of New Mexico.

Service Learning Pedagogy

Service learning is an educational strategy that combines community service with academic learning objectives. It is seen as a way to meet the needs of a community with educational opportunities that enable students to draw personal and academic lessons from their community service experience. A number of scholars have written about the benefits of service learning for students, citing enhanced communication skills, stronger critical thinking abilities, and development of civic responsibility (Martinez, 2004; Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003; Sapp & Crabtree, 2002). Recognizing a tendency by some to conflate service learning, community service, fieldwork, and

internships, Sigmon (1994) and Furco (1996) have differentiated among various types of service. Both maintain that service learning is defined importantly by an equal balance of benefit to the community and enhanced learning by participants.

Although different models exist, including the urban arts projects sponsored separately by the University of New Mexico and Columbia College, most service learning projects are attached to a course. (For more information about these arts projects, see “place.unm.edu/service_relational_art.html” and “www.colum.edu/ocap/pages/community.html”). Clearly, service learning is defined by academic objectives, specific learning goals, and its integration into curriculum by connecting academic content and course objectives with issues in the community (Kaye, 2004). This mode of learning is designed to not only enrich a curriculum but also to make coursework relevant to solving real-world problems. As Brown (1998) has observed, service learning taps higher order problem-solving skills, helping students use their knowledge in new ways, and involves the "whole student" in the learning process. Studies also confirm that service learning advances the content goals of the courses in which it is embedded (Sax & Astin, 1997; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard & King, 1993; Steffes, 2004).

Service learning is characterized by a cycle of action and reflection. In the service learning setting, students work with others through a process of practice and reflection to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. Regular and systematic reflection activities are viewed as basic to the service learning process due to their relevance to curriculum and because they provide students with opportunities to think, write, and talk about their experiences. Reflection is the framework within which students process and synthesize the information and ideas they have gained through their service experience. Thoughtful reflection throughout the process encourages students to deliberately think about their participation in the project and their role in the larger community. Scholars suggest that reflection about their service learning experiences allows students to critically analyze the assumptions they may have made about people who are economically and socially different from themselves; to examine their own values and life purposes; and to make long-term commitments to social justice and social change (Koth, 2005; Martin &

Wheeler, 2000). Through action and reflection, notes Leonard (2004), service learning “situates students in a reality where they are forced to confront their own attitudes, values, beliefs, or in a word, themselves.”

Finally, service learning is frequently cast as a vehicle for teaching students the core of citizenship. A number of scholars have noted declining levels of civic participation by young people in the United States (Keiser, 2000; Hart 2002; Camras, 2003). Like Wilkinson (1996), they report that many youth feel disconnected from society, their communities, and the political process. Service learning is seen as a powerful way to break this cycle of alienation by making the principles and process of democracy meaningful to students. Not only do service learning projects foster inclusive participation for youth by introducing them to community issues, but they also provide opportunities for students to be involved in creative problem-solving. Importantly, students are able to learn firsthand the meaning of teamwork, empathy, tolerance, and civic responsibility, all touchstones of democratic philosophy and practice.

Locus of Control

With its emphasis on agency, personal creativity, and individual responsibility, the HighVisions project seems to be primarily addressing issues of locus of control. Based on Rotter’s (1966) social learning theory, the construct of locus of control is seen as that set of beliefs that places the catalyst of events and consequences either internally or externally. Internal locus of control indicates that an individual perceives herself to play a large role in the events of her life, while an external locus of control sites that power outside the self. It is our goal to introduce ideas of internality and personal control to our participants and to provide a conversation about how to make positive choices.

Rotter (1966) defined internal versus external locus of control as the “degree to which persons expect that an... outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristic versus the degree to which persons expect the outcome is a function of chance, luck, fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable.” This conception of locus of control typically suggests that individuals with higher levels of internality will be more likely to change their behavior following positive or negative reinforcement than are people with a belief in external

locus of control. Studies have also shown that individuals having internal locus of control are generally more likely to achieve better relationships and higher levels of academic and vocational performance than those having external beliefs.

Although Rotter cautioned against assuming that internal expectancies were always better than external ones, the idea of internal locus of control seems to correspond with HighVision's emphasis on personal agency and self-belief. The project's goals seem consistent, for example, with work by Steptoe and Wardle (2001), who found that internal locus of control was positively associated with healthy behaviors. Investigating male and female youth in 18 countries, these researchers determined that students with high internal ratings were more likely to exercise, eat breakfast regularly, brush their teeth daily, eat fibre, limit salt, and avoid fat. Similarly, Burke and Gottesfeld (1986) found that the perception that power comes from within the self is related to achievement, aspirations, ability to change the attitude of others, awareness of the environment, insight, resistance to advertising and propaganda, political activism, and a positive attitude toward learning. Other theorists have linked internal locus of control to higher scores in memory recall, greater capacity for intimacy, and more persistence with difficult tasks. Woodward and Kalyan-Masih (1990) reported that internals were more self-reliant, autonomous, and likely to look to their own resources in handling personal problems and dealing with loneliness; and Young (1992) wrote that a belief in human propensity for violence decreased as internal feelings of mastery and control increased. Further, research with eighth graders conducted by Daly, Kreiser, and Roghaar (1994) not only substantiated that students' academic performance is linked to their willingness to ask questions in class, but also found that this question-asking comfort is positively correlated with internal locus of control.

Phares' (1976) contention that internal individuals tend to adapt better and experience less anxiety than externals was affirmed by research conducted by Kurdek, Blisk, and Siesky (1981), which reported that internal control was a predictor of positive adjustment to the divorce of parents. Externals, on the other hand, seeing less possibility for personal intervention in their own lives, have been shown as more prone to depression and consideration of suicide than internals (Eckersley, 1997) and have tended to report higher scores on measures of body dissatisfaction (Griffiths & McCabe, 2000). Results

from a study conducted by Booth-Butterfield, Anderson, and Booth-Butterfield (2000) also showed that adolescents who use tobacco feel less in control of their lives than nonusers and believe that chance plays a larger role in their health.

Scholars conducting locus of control research have reported a range of findings about differences between males and females. In one of the earliest studies considering gender difference and internality, Lefcourt (1976) concluded that internal locus of control was stronger for males than for females, a finding confirmed by Linder's (1986) research into locus of control and value orientations. Similarly, research by Martin and Crowles (1983) investigated locus of control for girls and boys attending traditional and "open" schools and concluded that boys of average to above average economic levels enrolled in traditional school settings demonstrated significantly greater internal locus of control.

On the other hand, Karnes and D'Ilio (1991) studied a sample of 68 rural, southern gifted students aged 8-14 and concluded that, for this population at least, girls tended to be more internal; and Chiu (1987) reported that American and Chinese females were more internally oriented than the males in their countries. Finally, Trice and Gilbert (1990), researching career aspirations with a group of 86 fourth grade boys and girls, found no difference according to gender. (Interestingly, of the three students who chose careers strongly associated with the other sex, all were highly internal females.) Similar findings showing little or no difference due to gender were reported by Amster and Lazarus (1982) in their research with disadvantaged high school dropouts, and by Chubb, Fertman, and Ross (1997) in their study of adolescent development.

A few theorists have written positively about external locus of control. Chiu (1987), for example, has suggested that Chinese students experience more externality than Americans because Chinese culture tends to be situation-centered, rather than individualistic, and emphasizes the interdependence of the individual within larger groups, such as the family. Also, Cook and Sloane (1985) found children with an external orientation to be generally more cooperative than internals in group behavior and, when working in dyads with other externals, to be more successful in completing tasks and solving problems. (The study reported far less success for dyads comprised of an internal and an external.) Despite these reports of collective and cooperative social behavior by people having external locus of control, most locus of control research has

focused on the benefits of internality. Certainly, assumptions of some control over events in one's life have been seen as useful in our program to encourage self-reliance and creative "life-design" in pre-adolescent females.

Project Description

The state of New Mexico ranks forty-sixth in per capita income, and faces some of the highest rates in the United States for child poverty, teen pregnancy, and school drop out rate. The state is ranked fiftieth for percent of children in poverty, forty-eighth for teen birth rate, and fiftieth for percent of children in families where no parent has full-time employment. New Mexico is also tied with Louisiana for the highest rate of families with children headed by a single parent. The HighVisions/GreatDreams project is conducted every other year in Roosevelt County, an eastside New Mexico county that has been among the most severely affected by these social and economic problems. The median income for Roosevelt County is \$26,586; a quarter of all children live in poverty; and almost forty percent of all births are to single mothers (Kids Count Data Book 2004).

Typically held in early May on the campus of Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, HighVisions/GreatDreams includes all sixth grade girls in Roosevelt County. The project also involves approximately twenty-five women from throughout the county and receives financial and in-kind support from both the University and the larger community. The teen and adult facilitators, who spend the day meeting and talking with the sixth graders, are chosen from a range of cultural, ethnic, and professional backgrounds. Over the years, facilitators have ranged in age from fourteen to seventy-five; and their occupations have included, among others, writer, professor, university dean, student, rancher, coach, singer/dancer, business owner, university administrator, project director, nonprofit fundraiser, lawyer, banker, school counselor, accountant, minister, state legislator, and television producer. In each case, teen and adult leaders have been females with diverse and satisfying lives who have faced adversity and seen success in a range of personal and professional endeavors.

Developed as a vehicle for helping young girls think about and realize their individual potential as growing selves, HighVisions/GreatDreams gives girls the opportunity to meet and get to know accomplished women in the interpersonal setting of

small groups. Meeting with eight to ten girls at a time, each woman speaks disclosively about her own life, discussing ways in which she has learned to set goals and make effective choices. The girls are encouraged to be equally disclosive about their ideas and dreams for the future. In all cases, the discussion focuses on individual acceptance of responsibility; one's right to make choices that are appropriate in her own life; and the potential each has to compose happy, enriched, and meaningful lives as teens and adults.

The sessions are not tightly structured for specific content. Each woman is encouraged to tell her life story within the frame of personal agency and effective decision-making. The continuing theme of this day-long event is individual choice and volition, the promise of a fulfilling, accomplished life through creative decision-making, and acceptance of individual responsibility. Working in the small group sessions, each adult leader describes strategies she has learned to employ in calling upon inner resources for constructing the life she seeks for herself.

None of the women has presented her life as picture-perfect. In 2003, for example, one mother of three, afflicted in early life with polio, spoke of her husband's recent heart attack and the ways her life seemed to change daily in efforts to juggle roles of wife, mother, and accountant. If anything constant characterized her life, she said, it was her own lack of control over its unexpected events. Even so, she met each day head-on with courage and the knowledge – gained through experience over time – that she can do what is necessary to protect her family. Another mother – this one still a teenager – discussed the choices that brought her an unplanned child, an abusive marriage, and divorce before she was twenty. And yet another woman – single, fifty, a self-employed rancher – discussed learning as a sixth grader the discipline required to raise a calf and take it to market. For the women presenting at HighVisions, life has been experienced as a work in progress, as an “improvisational art form, made wiser through the interruptions, conflicted priorities, and exigencies that have been a part of their lives” (Bateson, 1990).

These themes of choice, career options, individual potential, and self-reliance are discussed within a larger model of community, which is symbolized by the large number of individuals and organizations involved each year. In addition to the women who participate as session leaders, another twenty to thirty individuals and groups donate money, services, or facilities for the project. All are acknowledged at the HighVisions

luncheon, which features a keynote address and music by teen females from the community. Just as the girls are encouraged to perceive of themselves as autonomous, creative selves, they are also invited to become a part of a wider community, a network of teenaged and adult women who recognize the girls' potential and support their growing visions of selfhood.

Although urged to take individual responsibility for their decisions and plans for the future, these sixth graders also become members of a HighVisions collective. Over the course of the day, the qualities the girls share become more important than their individual differences, a goal facilitated by the project's design. At 8:30 a.m., on entering the large ballroom set aside for small group sessions, the girls find fifteen circles of ten chairs, equally spaced and each presided over by an adult female holding a sign with an abstract symbol lettered on it. These symbols match those on the girls' nametags, and they are encouraged to find the adult leader whose symbol corresponds with their own. The groups and their individual symbols become a unifying factor for the day's activities. Each adult leader, moving from one group to another, makes four presentations before the end of the day. The girls, however, remain with the same groups throughout the workshop, becoming increasingly open and disclosive with one another as the day progresses. Group composition is by random selection, and the hierarchies that normally define sixth grade social life are not present in the small groups. Peers—despite race, class, family income, or academic standing—are leveled to become social equals. In the HighVisions program, in a physical space set apart with rules of its own, in a spirit of mutuality and trust, 150 sixth grade girls sit together in a large room with parquet floors and chandeliers and share their thoughts with one another.

On the day of the workshop, these girls board a bus and travel across town to participate in a ceremony established solely for them. In so doing they leave behind their sixth grade school, the social relations that govern peer behavior, their male friends, and the day to day activities of class work. They enter a world none of them have experienced before, held in a place few have visited, to work with adults they do not know. The activities, expectations, and behaviors are new. They are encouraged to discuss their deepest feelings, and they listen as others do too. The framework of identification by which they define themselves and others is absent. Terms such as

cheerleader, cowgirl, gifted student, musician, and nerd have little currency. All the girls, despite their backgrounds and experiences, are viewed as part of the aggregate. Meanings and ways of being shift, and the perceptions that define each as “other” on the school ground disappear. Within the liminal frame of HighVisions, a new structure emerges, and girls are offered a network of social support and solid advice for building successful lives.

HighVisions/GreatDreams was begun in 1992 as a community-based intervention project in a region that has historically reported high levels of teen pregnancy and school drop out. In-home surveys of adolescent mothers and their parents had revealed that many of these young mothers felt they lacked choices in determining whether the parameters of their dating relationships should include sex (1989 Teenage Pregnancy Project Final Report). “Many of these girls also have very low self esteem and virtually no life goals. They say to themselves, ‘I can’t finish high school, but I can have a baby. I can be a mother,’” reported Jim Lyon (1992), administrator of the project. In a world of unanticipated teen pregnancies and narrow perceptions of selfhood, one communications event emphasizing self-reliance, self-awareness, and community attachment is undoubtedly insufficient. Even so, the conversations of the HighVisions project, facilitated by a structure that weaves personal narratives within an interactive small group setting, have consistently been seen as a useful catalyst for helping girls consider new ideas of selfhood.

Conclusion

Although some professional fields, such as nursing and law, have produced service learning projects for graduate students, most of the service learning scholarship has focused on pre-college and undergraduate students. Clearly, the creative pedagogy developed to enhance citizenship training among younger students has been immensely important to universities, students, and communities. Other projects designed to help youth build civic commitments and identities based on service are equally beneficial. It seems possible, however, that some community-based service learning projects, such as the one described in this article, are most appropriate for more mature students.

In 2003, five advanced students—four graduate students and an upper division undergraduate—participated as discussion facilitators, planners, and project evaluators for the HighVisions/GreatDreams program. Ranging in age from twenty-five to forty-five, these students brought a wealth of lived experience, insight, compassion, problem solving, and self-reflexivity to the project. All but one had left successful professional careers to return to school; one student was a single mom. Their maturity allowed them to interact effectively with community leaders, teachers, school administrators, and other HighVisions facilitators. Importantly, their experiences in workplace and community environments had introduced them to adolescents and the problems young girls face in our culture. Following the instructions that other facilitators received to produce a personal story dealing with their own sense of agency, these five women proved to be skilled discussants and sensitive listeners.

Although these students were not members of a formal course, their work with the HighVisions initiative was clearly a structured academic enterprise. The project included required readings, service learning and research goals, reflection activities, and public presentations of research findings. The theoretical framework of locus of control also proved important to the academic component of the program. Not only did this construct contribute usefully to the social empowerment program itself, but it also provided a mechanism for students to explore the psychological foundations of individual agency. This in-depth investigation of Rotter's concept of social learning proved beneficial to each of the graduate students "enrolled" in the HighVisions service learning course, enabling them to make sense of a complicated theoretical idea through hands-on application in a community setting.

Although these students initially brought different research interests to the HighVisions experience, each has included some form of the project in her ongoing research agenda. Interestingly, three of the five students have made plans to design similar social empowerment projects for middle school girls in their own communities, while the other two have expanded their public speaking course plans to also include self narratives and group discussion. All have made conference presentations about the HighVisions/GreatDreams workshop, and one student used her HighVisions research in a

prestigious, university-wide honors project she developed about adolescent girls. Finally, two students integrated insights from the HighVisions project into their graduate theses.

Clearly, the HighVisions/GreatDreams program has had useful and wide-ranging impacts on these students' academic endeavors. Equally important, however, are the character education and community attachments that each experienced through her participation in the workshop. In post-event reflection sessions, these women said they gained personally from participating in the HighVisions project, using such words as "personal validation," "self-exploration," and "self-awareness." One student reported special enjoyment of the peripheral conversation that developed on the sidelines among teen and adult facilitators, as they repeated their personal narratives among one another. "There was a real feeling of closeness for those of us who were helping. It was rewarding to talk about our own experiences among one another. I know this was a day for sixth graders, but we walked away feeling empowered too" (Reflection, 2003).

As academic professionals continue to develop service learning initiatives in pre-college and undergraduate education, it seems important to also remember the value such programs may have for older, returning students. Not only do service learning projects have broad implications for graduate training, they also pose exciting possibilities for lifelong learners as well.

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