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Where “I” Ends and “We” Begins: Collaboration Within Service-Learning

In a society where personal success and individual contribution is viewed as the road to happiness, we are taught to be independent and driven citizens. We are empowered with words like “be the change *you* want to see in the world” and “*you* can make a difference in someone’s life”. There is nothing inherently negative about this; it has the potential to create motivated and ambitious individuals. In fact, until my three days of AmeriCorps training, I was convinced that it was my personal responsibility to (gulp!) save the world one canned food drive at a time. I had originally heard about this AmeriCorps funded, service-learning program called “Growing Together” from a professor I had at Otterbein University. The goal was to teach us about service-learning and for us to utilize this knowledge to help a school enhance their own service-learning goals and efforts.

Day one of training was entitled: “Focus on common vision, community-building, and initial skill-building”. From the start, it was evident that community and collaboration were major themes. Instead of jumping right into service-learning activity ideas, accomplishments, and personal goals, we brainstormed the overarching vision. What do we want for our students? What can we accomplish this year? How can our personal strengths work together? When we filled out a multiple intelligence survey, it wasn’t new to me. Gathering together with the other fellows, mentors, and school administrators to see how our unique personalities can work together--that was new. Suddenly, my idea of service began to shift for *me* to *we*.

A few hours into the first day of AmeriCorps training, I stepped away from the group of mentors and fellows working together and observed. I watched a few people sketching out their “dream town” and discussing the best handicap accommodations. There was a table of teachers from public, urban, and charter schools sharing and working through their daily struggles and accomplishments. Another teacher was describing a service project her school had done while the fellow at her table was frantically jotting down ideas of how to elaborate on it. As I stood there I could actually feel the excitement escalating and the passion for service-learning radiating off each person. That’s when I realized if we truly want to change the world, those phrases I grew

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up with aren't quite right. Surrounded by a group of people from diverse backgrounds and varying everyday experiences, connected by the determination to give back--this is where the most could be done.

As my attitude toward service shifted, so did my understanding of service-learning. I had always thought the symbiotic relationship between service and school curriculum was common sense. Learning through relevant experiences while developing empathy for others has appealed to me my entire life. As training progressed I began to realize there is more to it than just "common sense". The documented research, theory based instruction, and amazing outcomes of service-learning were highlighted. We had elementary students come in and present their projects and experiences, videos depicting various needs in the community, and even a hands-on table building project we did to learn about The Furniture Bank of Ohio! The whole time we built on our ideas and brainstormed curricular connections. We were collectively envisioning the "future classroom" and it was full of conversation, investigation, reflection, relevant data gathering, student led projects, and collaboration with the local and global community! We were stepping into the 21st century.

My goal was evolving from a daunting responsibility to personally impact the world with individual acts, to devoting myself to instilling others with the same passion I felt in that room. The experienced, compassionate role models that were with us at the training made this seem like a true possibility. When I had the chance to bounce ideas off them, in fifteen minutes I would have five project topics sprout from the little seed of an idea I began with.

The mentor I was paired with has become an incredible addition to my life. She has helped me think of service and service-learning as a relevant and necessary part of my future teaching career rather than the vague, idealistic thought it was at the beginning. Even if I didn't get anything else out of my experience, having her in my life is already invaluable in itself. Part of the philosophy behind this program is the interdependent relationship of experienced service-learning advocates and eager beginners. The diverse backgrounds, personalities, and skills of the training participants were vital to its success.

The famous phrase: "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime" comes to mind when I think about this program and the legacy we leave behind. I had thought of service and service-learning as a collection of various projects I would implement with a classroom of students. This training could have lasted one day with a book full of activity ideas and graphic

organizers. Instead, the AmeriCorps-Growing Together training taught me how to “fish”. They showed me the amazing benefits of collaboration. I learned about the philosophy behind service learning. I realized the importance of reflection, presentation, and student driven work. Those three days left their legacy on me: I am not alone and can’t be if I truly want to make a difference. Now it leaves me wondering-what legacy can *we* leave behind?