



Sustaining Service-Learning in K-12 Schools

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Teachers in many schools have adopted service-learning as a practice for teaching something of value—be it content knowledge and skills, personal responsibility and efficacy, civic responsibility and citizenship, and/or information about potential career pathways. Research and experience have shown that teachers who use service-learning as a strategy tend to embrace it passionately, believing that it is a powerful teaching methodology that motivates students to become engaged in activities and school work and provides an experiential base upon which learning can readily occur.

How can service-learning be sustained in an educational environment that stresses accountability and evidence-based practice? The research suggests some answers.

Definition

Sustainability is defined as the ability to maintain or increase program efforts by building constituencies; creating strong, enduring partnerships; generating and leveraging resources; and identifying and securing funding sources that are available over time.

Road to Innovation

Miles (1983) explored institutionalization of educational practices contrasting sites that had sustained or had dropped innovative practices. He concluded, "Whether or not a program becomes a durable part of the curriculum depends on teacher mastery and commitment and administrative action, as well as other factors" (p. 14). Miles identified 20 variables that allowed organizations to foster the innovation. In early stages, adoption of an innovative process started with administrative pressure, support, and assistance to new practitioners. Increased user effort led to greater commitment and technical mastery, both of which were associated with sustainability.

The model also specified an alternative path to sustainability where the administration mandated use of the innovation. This also led to increased adoption of the innovation and greater sustainability. Finally, administrators could take direct action to bring about a change in policy, altering the environment to allow for the innovation, encourage it, or require it. However, as Schneider, Brief, and Guzzo (1996) demonstrated, there is no sustained change unless there is an altered culture, psychology, or "feel" of the organization to its member (p. 7). The many changes in policy and practice accumulate to change the psychology of the organization.

Necessary Factors

Elmore (1996) suggested four factors necessary for sustainability to occur:

- strong norms for practice, such as those reflected in content and performance standards created by professional associations;
- cultures or policies that focus intrinsic motivation to engage in challenging practice;
- intentional strategies that allow reproduction of successes;



- and professional development processes that foster learning of new practices and promote incentive systems that support the learning (pp. 18–24).

Challenges

Senge (1999) showed that efforts to sustain an innovative practice must address three challenges:

- fear and anxiety of those in the environment,
- the gap between the innovation's intended outcomes and the organization's typical ways of measuring results, and
- the tendency for change to escalate into a perceived threat.

Candor and openness on the part of the innovators, evidence of success, especially if the evidence is collected and disseminated by credible individuals who are not the innovators, and welcoming new practitioners help to alleviate the challenges in the initial phases. Schein (1999) also discussed the need to create a psychological "safety net" so that individuals can discuss their concerns openly. Senge (1999) pointed out that innovators often feel unappreciated and misunderstood and create a sense of "enemies" sometimes even if none exist. He showed that strategies such as mentoring, dialogue groups, communication without jargon, and connecting people through a common sense of mission help mitigate these challenges.

If the challenges are overcome, then the innovation leads to other challenges, such as leadership, large-scale diffusion, and reinvention of the organization itself. Meeting the challenges of this next phase involves either finding a way to have the innovation support the current system or forming alliances with key leaders who have the authority to redesign current structures or policies. Strategies suggested by Senge (1999, pp. 372-374) include:

- making the leader's priorities part of the innovation,
- articulating the case for change in terms of observable results, or
- engaging in cross training and partnering with others who have not adopted the innovation.

Diffusion

At the stage when the innovation starts to yield tangible results, diffusing the practice becomes the challenge. The school or district readiness and capacity for change are critical factors at this stage. Communication is particularly important for this final stage: dialogue must occur at all levels, not just between administrators and innovators. Best practice and lessons learned must be captured and professional development and support systems must be easily accessed. The final stage, if successful, results in a change in organizational climate, strong leadership, and an infrastructure for support.

Finally, no literature review would be complete without mentioning the seminal work of Rogers (1995). Rogers articulated the stages of change, and pointed out that an innovation is most likely to be sustained when there is awareness of the innovation and its positive consequences, when there are sufficient resources to sustain the change, and when the organization is able to reach a new equilibrium in which the change becomes normative.

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/sustaining/expanded.php

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