From “Program” to “Policy:” Institutionalization of Urban Service-Learning from an Administrator’s Perspective

“…there is nothing so practical as a good theory.” Kurt Lewin

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Introduction

Service-learning is a teaching strategy that affirms our commitment to service and prepares children for the tests of life, and not just a life of academic examinations. It links learning to students’ lives and well-being, and integrates achievement across subject areas. Students who participate in service-learning demonstrate improved achievement and development of pro-social attitudes and behaviors. Service-learning can also strengthen students’ career-related skills and aspirations and increase their self efficacy, confidence, collaborative skills and avoidance of risk behaviors (Pickeral, T., Lennon, T., and Piscatelli, J., 2008).

Even though the benefits are impressive, promoting service-learning in urban districts is a daunting challenge. Urban service-learning administrators are wedged between the overwhelming forces of learner and community needs on one side and government and district mandates on the other. The obstacles they face can be difficult and maneuvering them demands a complicated repertoire of personal and professional skills. In order to be successful, urban service-learning administrators need to be talented problem solvers, savvy politicians, and sophisticated educational theorists.

There are many reasons for the unique challenges faced by service-learning administrators in urban districts. Urban districts have high numbers of students with social and health-related problems and persistent concerns about academics. In addition, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brought unprecedented pressure on schools for results and accountability. NCLB not only requires schools to raise performance, but also calls on school leaders to critically assess positive impacts on student achievement prior to adopting any educational strategy. All the while, funding for innovative approaches is flat or, in many cases, declining.

Despite the demands with which urban service-learning administrators have to deal, many have successfully promoted district wide adoption of service-learning programs. What strategies did they use to encourage service-learning implementation, and what factors elicited successful institutionalization? To answer these questions, we selected
several urban service-learning directors and administrators from around the United States based on the relative success of their programs and the longevity of their leadership. We asked participants to describe the unique challenges faced in developing an urban service-learning program, to tell us their stories, and to provide examples of what works, in order to discover the key elements contributing to program success. The interviews were conducted via telephone during the fall of 2008. We employed the Frames of Analysis model of organizational leadership (Bolman & Deal, 1991) to analyze the interviews and to draw out various factors that lead to successful service-learning institutionalization in urban settings.

Frames of Analysis Bolman and Deal (1991, 1997) have found that individuals have specific frames or views of how organizations work and how people within them relate to one another. According to their model, each person has the tendency to look at situations through a particular lens, restricting their ability to be successful and creative leaders. They encourage leaders to deliberately re-examine the operation of their organization through the use of alternative frames or windows. Viewing the workplace through multiple frames can bring organizational life into clearer focus, enhancing leaders’ ability to make judgments, gather information and get things done. As they argue,

The ability to reframe experience enriches and broadens a leader’s repertoire and serves as a powerful antidote to self-entrapment. Expanded choice enables managers to generate creative responses to the broad range of problems that they encounter. …It can be enormously liberating for managers to realize that there is always more than one way to respond to any organizational problem or dilemma. Managers are imprisoned only to the degree that their palette of ideas is impoverished (Bolman & Deal, 1991, p. 4).

The authors’ four frames/windows are:

- Structural
- Human Resource
- Political
- Symbolic

The Structural Frame conceives of organizations as social systems, rather than simply as collections of individual human beings. Key concepts of the structural frame include formal roles, responsibilities, and relationships. According to the Structural Frame:

1. Organizations exist to achieve established goals and objectives.
2. Organizations work best when rational decisions prevail over personal preferences and external pressures.
3. Structures must be designed to fit organizational circumstances.
4. Organizations increase efficiency and enhance performance through specialization and division of labor.
5. Appropriate forms of coordination and control are essential to ensuring that individuals and units work together in the service of organizational goals.
6. Problems and performance gaps arise from structural deficiencies and can be remedied through restructuring (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 40).

The Human Resource Frame views organizations as occupied by human beings with unique talents, dispositions and skills. Rather than molding people to fit a specific role, the Human Resource Frame assumes that organizations should be adapted to individuals’ needs. When an optimal match exists between individuals and the systems in which they are embedded, both benefit. Human beings are given opportunities for meaningful work, and organizations gain the efforts of satisfied, motivated workers. Bolman and Deal (1991, 1997) suggest that the key to effective leadership within the Human Resource Frame is an understanding of people and their relationships.

The Political Frame acknowledges that organizations are competitive environments in which different factions strive for power and resources. Conflict is seen as a fact of life, and effective leadership involves the use of strategy and tactics to manage relations with different factions. Assumptions of the Political Frame are:

1. Organizations are coalitions of various individuals and interest groups.
2. There are enduring differences among coalition members in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality.
3. Most important decisions involve the allocation of scarce resources and what gets done.
4. Scarce resources and enduring differences give conflict a central role in organizational dynamics and typically make power the most important organizational resource.
5. Goals and decisions emerge from bargaining, negotiation, and jockeying for position among different stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 163).

The Symbolic Frame views organizations through the lens of cultural anthropology. It regards meaning-making as central to organizational life. Shared symbols, myths, and rituals guide activities and lend purpose and passion to peoples’ work. Within the Symbolic Frame, effective leadership means acting as a visionary—creating mottos, stories or other cultural artifacts to foster a sense of belonging and inspiration for the future.

The Frames of Analysis Model is a useful tool for understanding how participants in a district or school community view service-learning and the most effective strategies for promoting it. For example, an administrator that regards a school through the structural frame and believes in rationally organizing efforts to meet accountability goals will support service-learning if it improves student engagement and students learn more and perform better on their exams. A leader oriented toward the human resource frame will view service-learning favorably if it enhances the fit between the school’s operation and staff members’ needs and motivates them to accomplish organizational goals. Viewing a school through the political frame will lead an administrator to regard service-learning as
one of several competing instructional approaches and to weigh its costs and benefits accordingly. An administrator who understands their school through the symbolic frame may strive to align service-learning with its mission or share stories about its impacts on youth in order to arouse enthusiasm for it.

Results

Chicago Public Schools

According to Jon Schmidt, Service-Learning Manager for Chicago Public Schools, having the principal behind service-learning is crucial to a school’s ability to move forward with a program. Individual teachers are often the first to propose service-learning in a school, but having the principal explicitly behind the effort is key to institutionalization.

Schmidt suggests that principals who “get” service-learning typically focus on three major developmental domains: civic, social/emotional and academic in explaining their reasons for using it. With pressure from the government and the community to raise test scores and show how students are growing academically, principals must have a clear rationale for using service-learning. It can’t be simply an add-on nor can it be an exclusive domain of one or two isolated practitioners. Principals who have been successful in achieving service-learning institutionalization in their schools have made a concerted effort to connect it to specific grade-level and content outcomes; in other words, to integrate it into the curriculum.

While service-learning is a graduation requirement in the Chicago Public Schools, ironically, teachers are not required to use it. Schmidt observes that administrators need to step in and develop support and incentives within their schools in order to encourage teachers to adopt it and provide a recognizable structure for teachers to follow as they develop their lessons.

Having a service-learning coordinator is also central to its institutionalization. In Chicago, the coordinator may be a teacher or a guidance counselor (owing to the graduation requirement). In most cases, Schmidt sees the service-learning coordinator’s first job as developing a team of advocates to assist one another in developing and sustaining their projects. Most service-learning coordinators in Chicago also begin with one or two projects in one or two classrooms. Thus, common themes among many Chicago veterans are to start small and don’t try to do it alone.

Recently, Schmidt gathered focus groups of Chicago students to learn why they thought service-learning was important. Their answers varied, but often focused on two themes: 1.) service-learning helped them bridge the gap between their academic learning and their real lives, and, 2.) students felt authentically empowered and engaged in real-world
problems. Keeping young people’s needs and concerns at the core, Schmidt suggests, is a key factor in developing a sustainable service-learning program.

The approaches of the Chicago Service-Learning Manager and coordinators reveal elements of several of Bolman and Deal’s frames. Ensuring that programs are coordinated with existing curricula and content standards is not only good practice, but reflects a recognition that service-learning must be aligned with the central aims of schooling if it is to survive. Beginning a program by building a cadre of advocates indicates an understanding of the need for service-learning to have political support. Schmidt’s comments also show that he is using the human resource frame. He recognized the value of youth voice and linking their views to real sustainable change using service-learning in the school. Had he not followed through with their suggestions, they would see that their needs and interests were not being met and the reform using service-learning in the school would fail.

Greendale School District

In Greendale, Wisconsin, student achievement has risen, while discipline and absenteeism have decreased, especially at the middle school and high school. The Superintendent attributes these trends to the fact that teachers are assuming responsibility for finding ways for students to serve their community as citizen leaders. Merging service-learning and citizenship in children’s learning brings the community into the schoolhouse while making learning more real. Service-learning projects combine community service with student learning in the district’s curriculum in a practical way that enhances academic knowledge and improves our community environment and fellowship.

The Superintendent has been instrumental in encouraging schools to adopt and institutionalize service-learning. To him, school leadership means setting goals and developing plans with others to advance student learning. Service-learning is a way to show the Village of Greendale how the faculty is working to strengthen bonds between the community and its schools. By building student connections to the community, Greendale educators have been able to demonstrate that adults can contribute to student learning and address community issues, like voter registration or stream rebuilding. By allowing youth to play an active role in local decision making, educators and village residents have seen the impact of youth voice in local government and school operations from political campaigns and local government to serving on district advisory committees, cleaning up green space, to helping the homeless who live in a neighboring arboretum.

The Superintendent noted that a small grant could lead to transformation in a school district. In the fall of 1999, with a grant of only $1,000 from the American Association of School Administrators in a program called “Opening School House Doors,” the Greendale district was able to launch a service-learning program. Through the Education Commission of the States’ National Center for Learning and Citizenship, they received
research briefs and toolkits for teacher leaders in schools. Groups of high and middle school students began working with teachers and principals and the district’s AmeriCorps volunteer to lead service projects. Students began volunteer work in area nursing home and attended local government meetings, weighing in on district policy and serving on committees.

Today, each school has a small budget to fund service-learning and civic engagement projects. Additional funds can be redeployed from existing instructional budgets, and service-learning budgets can be supplemented with funds from local service and civic clubs, Learn and Serve grants or private donors or foundations.

Greendale’s Superintendent recommended that superintendents keep four mantras in mind when attempting to institutionalize service-learning in their district: Hire for it. Train for it. Evaluate for it. And witness it! Specific strategies for driving service-learning in a school district include:

- Interview every teacher and include a question regarding service-learning to determine their interest in developing a sense of responsibility in young people. Look for the spark for service and involvement in local affairs.
- Require a strand of activities and learning outcomes in each curriculum document from kindergarten through grade twelve. Include service-learning and citizenship outcomes in the curriculum development process and train staff during implementation years.
- Teach teacher mentors about service-learning, expecting them to support it in classroom, as well as model it for new teachers.
- Train new teachers in service-learning and citizenship as part of their two-year orientation process. Link training to familiarization with the curriculum.
- Evaluate for service-learning and citizenship activities or units of instruction in schools or classrooms. Expect principals to advocate for and support instruction in these areas. Include principals’ support for service-learning in their yearly performance review.
- Require a budget line item for service-learning and citizenship activities in each school’s budget.
- Support teacher leaders using service-learning and citizenship in their classes both emotionally and logistically. Recognize their work with students and their colleagues.
- Ask principals and teachers to tell you in measurable ways what they are doing through service-learning and citizenship to increase student achievement.

The Greendale Superintendent clearly viewed the institutionalization of service-learning through the structural frame. After reporting that a service-learning program met a number of overall goals for his district, he recommended strategies for institutionalization that involve multiple levels of district operation from teacher hiring to new teacher orientation to principal evaluation. In building small groups of faculty in each school committed to youth voice and service-learning to demonstrate the value of
this work as well as provide support to those in the adoption stage of service-learning, the Superintendent also used a political frame. Use of the symbolic frame is evident in the Superintendent’s understanding that contributing to community well-being is central to the district’s mission, that the culture of the school and community are intertwined and youth voice and engagement in quality service experiences involve both.

Districts and schools use educational policy to establish the purpose of service-learning in the structural frame, while the principal who believes the better the fit and relationships between teachers and students is leading using the human resource frame.

Minneapolis Public Schools

“Everything’s about relationships,” said Rebecca Dallinger, Service-Learning Coordinator for Minneapolis Public Schools. She commented that service-learning practitioners in Minneapolis are typically building-based and, while engaged with community contacts outside their school, rarely get an opportunity to support and share with others in the field. This observation has prompted Dallinger to focus her institutionalization efforts on developing forums and opportunities to bring these practitioners together.

Dallinger has seen many teachers wrestling with fear and perceived loss of control as the district struggles to meet federal and state testing mandates. Their perceived loss of power and control has tended to enhance teachers’ apprehension and inhibit their willingness to take on novel or different teaching approaches, such as service-learning. Through events such as recognition dinners and formal and informal training sessions, Dallinger has attempted to provide practitioners with safe places to network and develop their skills.

Dallinger has also observed that some teachers are concerned about letting go of power and control in their classrooms. As many experiential educators note, allowing students to take more responsibility for their learning outcomes requires a certain improvisational approach to teaching, sort of like a jazz musician’s music. Dallinger noted that in both cases, you’re assured something will happen, but until you hear it or see it, you’re not quite sure what will happen and whether it will be “good.” Turning over a classroom project to include authentic youth voice enhances relevance, but also increases vulnerability and risk. Because of this, Dallinger believes that her role is, in part, to provide opportunities for relationships and connections, a safety net for risk-taking teachers and their community partners.

Dallinger offered as an example one of the district’s signature service-learning projects—the publication of a periodic newspaper called Shine On! (http://commed.mpls.k12.mn.us/Shine_On.html). Shine On! is produced by a student-led staff of editors, writers and photographers. Students make all decisions about the topics, design, and production of the periodical. The result is a project that not only gives
learners authentic “youth voice,” but also demonstrates the faith in students that Dallinger feels is key to service-learning.

Dallinger agreed with Schmidt that one should not approach service-learning as a “lone ranger.” Start with a team, start small, and target mini-grants to help people get started were her three key ideas for developing a sustainable program.

*Dallinger clearly recognized the significant influence of political issues in determining teachers’ willingness to adopt and maintain service-learning practice. While those in the political frame recognize that conflict is inevitable, this conflict can be managed and in fact welcomed, as a sign that change is occurring. Managing teachers’ political concerns by allowing for high levels of communication and a risk-free environment became a key strategy for institutionalizing service-learning in Minneapolis.*

**Long Beach Unified School District**

Merideth Joyce, Coordinator of service-learning in the Long Beach, California Unified Schools reported that she employs a network of service-learning coaches to support Long Beach’s effort to touch every student in their large urban school district. With 90,000 students in 93 public schools, Joyce has had to be pragmatic and flexible. But she and other advocates of service-learning have a powerful incentive on their side: all students in the district are required to perform 400 hours of service in order to graduate. Joyce suggested that this mandate, established by the School Board in 2003, makes each school and its administrators accountable which leads to buy-in, a key factor in the success of efforts to institutionalize service-learning.

In the Long Beach district, each school is empowered to develop a unique plan to integrate service-learning in a fashion that suits their students and community. Teachers then plan projects that link service to curriculums standards and meet student and community needs. According to Joyce, training has been crucial to teachers’ capacity to engage in this planning. With the support of a CalServe grant, Joyce and colleagues have brought the district’s service-learning coaches and school curriculum leaders together to design training.

Joyce reiterated the need to be pragmatic and flexible in attempting to promote service-learning in a large district. Long Beach provides its students with multiple paths to meet the district’s service requirement. In addition to curricular service-learning, students can meet their service obligation through working with a community partner. Students and their potential partners link up at an event called “Volunteer Village,” where more than 60 community agencies offer different ways of making a difference in the community.

Joyce pointed out that tracking and documenting so many students’ service hours could be an overwhelming task. Fortunately, Long Beach Unified’s service-learning office has developed a strong partnership with co-workers in the district’s data management office to track service hours.
Although Joyce’s strategies for promoting service-learning reflect the operation of several frames, they are most representative of a human resource frame. Each school was empowered to develop a plan that fit the needs of the school site. This allowed school faculty and teacher leaders to work in small groups, collaborating with one another while designing a program that met the individual needs of their students and situations.

Frames of Analysis: A Practical Theory for Effective Leadership

Individuals are vital to the success of any organizational change, including the adoption of service-learning. A useful analytic tool such as the Frames of Analysis model provides service-learning administrators with flexibility and practical wisdom—powerful tools for creating successful organizational change. As social psychologist Kurt Lewin said, “…there is nothing so practical as a good theory” (1951, p. 169).

By building awareness of the perspectives that administrators and teachers bring to their work, the Frames of Analysis model can suggest communication strategies likely to be effective with different audiences. The model can help service-learning leaders identify and prioritize those impacts of service-learning most apt to matter to different groups. An awareness of different frames can also be the basis for designing professional development content and activities.

In this study, we analyzed the perspectives of four service-learning leaders in urban districts that have developed sustainable service-learning programs. We found that rather than using one approach or narrow set of practices, leaders achieved success through flexibility and the capability to employ multiple lenses. Depending on the features of their districts, effective service-learning leaders also emphasized certain “frames” more than others. Success in social situations is most frequently the result of having multiple options and the wisdom to know when to employ which option (Bateson, 2000). The Frames of Analysis model is like a set of tools—no one tool is “better” than another. Effective leadership comes from having many tools in one’s toolbox and the discernment to choose the right tool, or set of tools, for each job.

References


