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Understanding Service-Learning: a new vision of
youth society and a new concept of learning

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James "Jim" Kielsmeier

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THIRD PART
**Spirituality as Intentional Movement towards
Care**



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14. UNDERSTANDING SERVICE-LEARNING: A NEW VISION OF YOUTH IN SOCIETY AND A NEW CONCEPT OF LEARNING

James “Jim” Kielsmeier

National Youth Leadership Council, USA

Abstract

In this chapter, I will discuss how service-learning is a multidimensional concept which, in addition to being a particularly flexible and effective teaching and learning approach, is also a philosophy and a community-development model – qualities that make it well suited to this time of global social change.

Considering mainly the North American context and making use of extensive research conducted by the National Youth Leadership Council (including best practices and other resources), I will point out that a structural shift to service-learning requires two major changes in thinking: a new vision of youth in society and a new concept of learning.

I will close the chapter with a brief reflection on how service-learning can be closely connected to the theological foundation of service in scripture, providing a pathway to the formation of engaged citizens and disciples of Jesus Christ.

Service-Learning as a Philosophy, Community Development Model, and Teaching Strategy

A widely used definition of service-learning is found in the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (Sec. 103), which describes it as an educational experience with the following attributes:

- ▶ Students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with school and community;
- ▶ It is integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity;

- ▶ It provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities; and
- ▶ It enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others⁶⁷.

Service-learning is a complex concept—in addition to being a teaching and learning method, it can also be understood as a philosophy and a community-development model.

However, there was not always agreement in identifying service-learning. The reason for any confusion over its definition may be that service-learning is a complex concept – in addition to being a teaching and

learning method, it can also be understood as a philosophy and a community-development model (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Billig, 2000).

As a philosophy	Service-learning embraces young people as a community resource and asset. It views all people, regardless of age, as citizens with the capacity to contribute.
As a community-development model	Service-learning takes on real issues such as pollution and environmental crises, hunger and homelessness, and racism. Communities change for the better when service and learning are joined.
As a teaching and learning method	Service-learning is a form of active learning that values critical thinking and problem solving. Research shows that when service-learning is effectively implemented students gain in measures of academic achievement, citizenship, and character.

This multidimensionality means that high quality service-learning, as research has shown (see in particular Atkins et al., 2006; Furco & Root, 2010), can have promising outcomes for students:

Personal development

- ▶ Self-Image (likes self; feels worthwhile, confident, competent)
- ▶ Internal Locus of Control (believes self can make a significant difference; everything is not left to chance or luck)

⁶⁷ For further exploration of this claim, see Nathan & Kielsmeier (1991).

Social and Interpersonal Development

- ▶ Social Comfort (is comfortable and feels competent in social situations)
- ▶ Group Work Skills (works well in a group to achieve a task; elicits participation from group members; participates fully)
- ▶ Social Sensitivity (exposure and empathetic to a wider range of people, issues, and places; moving from self-centeredness to broader perspective and understanding)
- ▶ Intergenerational Connectedness (ability to interact and work cooperatively with familial and non-familial adults; effectively seeks advice and learns from adults)

Values Development

- ▶ Team Responsibility (values working with a group to accomplish a task; believes a group can often accomplish more than an individual)
- ▶ Social responsibility (believes that members of society are interdependent and have an obligation to take care of those less fortunate)
- ▶ Civic responsibility (believes that members of society have an obligation to participate in public affairs and processes)

Academic and Cognitive Development

- ▶ Basic Academic Skills (reading, writing and calculation)
- ▶ Specific Subject Matter Knowledge (e.g., social studies, ecology, history)
- ▶ Critical Thinking Skills (e.g., decision making, problem solving, analytical skills)
- ▶ Engages Learner (interested and motivated in learning; invests time in learning)

Spiritual Formation

- ▶ Deepens faith commitment
- ▶ Finds meaning and purpose

What is sure is that service-learning is unthinkable without taking youth seriously.

Service-learning transforms a deficit vision of youth into a bolder fresh vision that sees young people as assets. This in turn boosts a new idea of learning and how young people can make use and make sense of the amazing amount of knowledge generations have accumulated, while transmitting it in order that it can be remade yet again into something new and useful. This shift can be summarized as follows:

TRADITIONAL VIEW OF YOUTH	SERVICE LEARNING'S VIEW OF YOUTH
Utilize Resources	Act as Resources
Passive	Active
Consumer	Producer
Needs Help	Offers Help
Recipient	Giver
Victim	Leader

Service-learning allows the natural forces of youth —energy, idealism, and creativity — to be converted for a greater good, benefitting young people themselves and larger society⁶⁸.

Young people are like the nineteenth-century coal mine canaries in England and the United States whose extreme sensitivity to poison gasses alerted the miners to danger before their own lives were threatened.

In this perspective, service-learning represents a fresh life-giving approach to the atmosphere surrounding young people, currently immersed in a wealth-oriented mentality that doesn't help their participation and

active role in society. Inundated by images and expectations linked to the culture of material gain and personal prosperity, discontented young people are among the early indicators that all is not well in a world of growing affluence. Put in other words, they are like the nineteenth-century coal mine canaries in England and the United States whose extreme sensitivity to poison gasses alerted the miners to danger before their own lives were threatened.

Thinking about the US case, disengagement of youth from society is an early warning of a malaise that is accompanying the rapid expansion of the world economy. A

⁶⁸ Here are some examples taken mainly from America's K-12 education landscape. In Destrehan, Louisiana, middle schoolers working together are accomplishing an extraordinary achievement as environmental stewards. Dubbing themselves the Wetland Watchers, they are reclaiming wetlands and restoring them for environmental and educational purposes. Students in Virginia, Minnesota, started a dating violence awareness campaign designed to help girls and women facing gender-based abuse. Organizations like the Wyman Center work with school groups across the United States to reduce childhood mortality and improve maternal health through service-learning as a strategy to reduce teen pregnancy. Combating diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria have become the focus of youth-led campaigns across Africa, in Germany, and in the United States. And young people are often promoters of a new ecological awareness. In countless schools they are leading the charge for reducing waste and increasing energy efficiency. They are founding school forests in Minnesota and Wisconsin, reclaiming wetlands in the Gulf Coast, restoring native prairies in Montana and Wyoming.

kind of spiritual “fading” has crept into comfortable communities. The flourishing of economy has brought about wealth and comfort and the same time impoverishment of the soul reflected in a dramatic decline in participation in faith communities in the United States⁶⁹.

Understanding service-learning means shifting away from a mentality that ultimately destines young people to become, as Rev. Jim Wallis underlined in his book *The Soul of Politics* (1995, n.d.),

our poorest citizens, our most at-risk population, the recipient and reflection of our worst values and sicknesses, our most armed and dangerous criminals, the chief perpetrators of escalating violence – and more the object of our fears than our hopes.

What is at stake is the loss of the moral test that the late US Senator Hubert Humphrey posited in 1977, when he declared that the quality of a society is measured by how it treats, among others, those in the dawn of life.

In a nutshell, service-learning has all the qualities to be well suited to this time of global change affecting personal and social instability and can itself become a source of positive societal transformation as well as a strategy both for academic-educational growth and spiritual development.

Young people as active learners and engaged citizens

I reflected on the potential power of young people in South Korea in 1968. As a US army officer, I was sent to patrol the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) but volunteered to lead an experimental human relations project for the 15,000 troops of the U.S. Army's Second Infantry Division. The Second Infantry was positioned astride the historic invasion route to Seoul and on constant alert to repel a North Korean attack.

Ironically, studies showed that South Korean civilians hated the American troops more than the belligerent North Koreans poised to invade the South. Research by M.I.T. showed that a combination of cultural insensitivity and American arrogance, as

69 Of course, we cannot fail to mention youth philanthropy's efforts, as part of nonformal education. Most of the national youth development organizations in the US – 4-H, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire, Future Business Leaders of America, Future Farmers of America, and others – all put service and service-learning front and center as part of the way they work with youth.

Youth philanthropy is a force in society. It's becoming a common form of youth participation because it's a good way for young people to get started thinking about the issues they care about and how they can make a difference.

well as sharp contrasts in incomes and lifestyles, fueled a climate of mutual disrespect between the occupying army and our Korean hosts.

My attempts at lecturing American troops about changing their attitudes and behavior toward our Korean allies were a dismal failure. A new plan was needed. Chung Young Bok, a liaison officer from the 27th Regimental Combat Team, South Korean Army, shared my concern.

Lt. Chung and I found a way to place American soldiers as volunteer English language tutors in all fourteen Korean middle and high schools in the Second Infantry Division area. Despite warnings from my commanding officer that American soldiers would not volunteer and that we could never adequately prepare them to teach English, young troops volunteered in droves. We enlisted the Peace Corps to train them, a cross-cultural experience for both the Army and the Peace Corps. The Korean schools were delighted with the effectiveness of the American tutors.

The Korean press discovered what came to be called the English Language Assistance Program and widely publicized the story of how Korean and American goodwill was demonstrated through the tutoring partnership. The Army embraced it once it proved to be successful and replicated it throughout Korea. My boss in the Army, who initially thought that I had created a doomed plan, wound up giving me the Army Commendation Medal.

Later, in the heart of one of America's most depressed inner cities, the insights I gained in Korea were reinforced. St. Louis, not surprisingly, was scorching hot in June 1982. I was working with a team of high-school youths, preparing them to mentor over 3,000 middle-school students five days a week for ten weeks of the summer. The high-school students would be assisting adult teachers that summer and took their positions very seriously. Their training began each day with physical exercise involving music and movement. Eventually the older students would lead these same exercises for their younger, inner-city counterparts.

Derek Jackson, a 16-year-old African American young man, was always on time. Six-foot-two inches tall, strong, and quietly determined, he could have been a tight end on the football team. One day at the physical conditioning class, I noticed Derek suddenly leave the gymnasium. I found him outside sitting on the steps. He said he had been accidentally kicked during the exercise class. I kidded him, "What kind of an excuse is that?". Derek stood up stiffly and replied, "My leg really does hurt!". He rolled up his pant leg, exposing a jagged bullet hole in his calf, still oozing blood.

As we drove to the hospital, Derek said he had been shot the night before. He had been afraid to say anything because he really wanted to keep the tutoring assignment, to help the younger students. Happily, his leg healed, and he went on to be an outstanding leader that summer.

From passive students and gullible consumers to active learners and engaged citizens, giving evidence that collective change is possible.

Chung Young Bok and Derek Jackson epitomize the countless people their age and younger worldwide, who are pioneering new roles for

themselves in society; from passive students and gullible consumers to active learners and engaged citizens, giving evidence that collective change is possible, as Robert Kennedy pronounced in his 1966 “Ripple of Hope” speech in Cape Town, South Africa:

Each time a person stands up for an idea, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

The youth of this world are serving on the front line of community need as never before. Schools, colleges, and community-based organizations have sought to tie this strong desire *to be of use* to academic and civic outcomes through the way of teaching and learning we call service-learning.

A new concept of learning

A group of African American eighth graders from the Academy of Science and Foreign Language Middle School in Huntsville, Alabama, was touring the Maple Hill Cemetery. Their questions brought the tour to a complete halt. After hearing thorough biographical descriptions of the many important 19th century citizens of Huntsville who were buried in the cemetery, the students asked if any of them were African American. The guide did not know. The answer, discovered later, was that this beautifully maintained resting place for civil war veterans, former governors, and other upstanding individuals was for “whites only”.

After the cemetery episode, the students and the teachers of the academy set off on a journey to discover where Huntsville’s African Americans from the last century were buried. Along the way, they learned a great deal more. They found Glenwood

Cemetery, a resting place for African Americans, in a deplorable state, with unmarked graves, vandalized headstones, and poorly kept records. They also found an equally unrecorded larger history that would have remained forgotten had students and teachers not launched a project that has changed the community.

Teachers at the academy responded to the interest of students and found answers to many questions, including one that is left out of most classrooms: “What are we going to do about it?”. The answer to that question was the creation of the Alabama African American History Project and a dazzling array of community contributions and learning experiences.

Students subsequently led the restoration of Glenwood Cemetery, raising funds to replace or repair 166 headstones. They also saw to it that the state placed an official registry sign at the cemetery. Math classes plotted the previously unmapped site using resources donated by the University of Alabama. The students’ concern about the neglect of Glenwood Cemetery led them to ask state legislators to change a state law that related to preservation of cemeteries.

The young people scoured court records, city council minutes, deeds, marriage certificates and will, family inventories, and *The Negro Gazette*, a locally published newspaper from the 1800s. They also listened to and recorded oral histories. Curricular materials developed by the middle-school students from original historical sources became the basis of a third-grade social studies unit about the history of Huntsville. Over the years, the students published several books based on their research on prominent African Americans from the area.

Service-learning is the equivalent of an education commons: a pedagogical meeting place where, rather than the work of one person, the group effort establishes a long-term, sustainable model for peer education and inspiration.

This example, but many others could be mentioned, shows how the eighth-grade students from Huntsville, while reclaiming the desolated cemeteries to honor their forebears, became *active citizens*, and, at the

same time, shows that service-learning is the equivalent of an *education commons*⁷⁰:

70 This notion of community dedicated to service and the cultural commons that makes this possible is beginning to find some formal and informal structures around the world, most notable is the Ibero-American Service-Learning Network cofounded by CLAYSS in Argentina and the National Youth Leadership Council in the United States. This affiliation of organizations working to combine the streams of national service, youth development, and both K-12 and higher education can be a model for sharing information and resources.

a pedagogical meeting place where, rather than the work of one person, the group effort establishes a long-term, sustainable model for peer education and inspiration – a model that is then extended to society at large in strong connection with its actual community needs.

Interestingly, in the United States this approach, despite its proven positive outcomes and its long tradition, has struggled to be extensively institutionalized. Whether the American origins of service-learning lie with its roots in non-military national service espoused by William James in 1910, or in John Dewey’s philosophy of experiential education in the 1930s, or the social tides of the turbulent 1960s, the practice has grown modestly⁷¹. As Furco and Root (2010, p. 16) emphasized a decade ago,

Service learning has been a part of America’s K-12 education landscape for more than 30 years. Yet today, service learning is found in less than 30% of K-12 schools in the United States, even though it’s achieved a substantial footing in American institutions of higher education and the primary, secondary, and higher education systems of many other countries (...). Skepticism over service learning’s educational merit continues despite published research reviews showing a consistent set of positive outcomes for students

A structural shift to service-learning requires not only a change when thinking of “youth” in society but also a new concept of “learning”.

A structural shift to service-learning requires not only a change when thinking of “youth” in society but also a new concept of “learning” (Kielsmeier, 2010).

71 If we were to trace a history of service-learning in the United States, we might do so starting with the early twentieth century need to figure out an alternative to war and violence and a means of identifying common cause for the country, as enunciated by William James and his 1910 essay “The moral equivalent of war”. Other key moments were the creation of Civilian Conservation Corps, i.e., President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s most popular antidote for the blight of the Great Depression of the 1930’s, and President Kennedy’s call to young people to join the newly formed Peace Corps, which brought new vitality to national service.

Later, George H W Bush and Bill Clinton shaped the contemporary expression of what we know now as National Service. In that concept there was introduced Federal legislation that included participation for school and community-based service-learning programs.

At the same time parallel public policy initiatives supporting service-learning for K-12 schools and higher education were initiated at the state and federal level. In essence defining National service as not a free-standing program such as Peace Corps or AmeriCorps or City Year but as a sustained and funded partnership between the federal government, states, and public schools known as Learn and Serve America. Stipends were offered to all State Departments of Education for K-12 Service-Learning and financial incentives to colleges and universities to integrate service-learning.

Major private sector investors in service-learning have included the Kellogg Foundation and State Farm Insurance as well as many smaller community-based philanthropies. The National Youth Leadership Council I led was an advocate and implementer of a network of state-based service-learning initiatives as described in a variety of publications.

In 2008, the National Youth Leadership Council brought forth the first standards for service-learning in K-12 education⁷². While this book is devoted to higher education, I consider that it may be fruitful to remind here these evidence-based criteria, which have been adopted again and again by school districts, and national, state, and provincial ministries of education both in the United States and internationally in Australia, Canada, Argentina, and others.

The standards for service-learning in K-12 education outline the body of evidence for the necessary elements to make sure that service-learning is a rigorous and high-quality way of teaching and learning within our schools.

- ▶ *Meaningful Service*: Service-learning actively engages participants in meaningful and personally relevant service activities.
- ▶ *Link to Curriculum*: Service-learning is intentionally used as an instructional strategy to meet learning goals and/or content standards.
- ▶ *Reflection*: Service-learning incorporates multiple challenging reflection activities that are ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society.
- ▶ *Diversity*: Service-learning promotes understanding of diversity and mutual respect among all participants.
- ▶ *Youth Voice*: Service-learning provides youth with a strong voice in planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning experiences with guidance from adults.
- ▶ *Partnerships*: Service-learning partnerships are collaborative, mutually beneficial, and address community needs.
- ▶ *Progress Monitoring*: Service-learning engages participants in an ongoing process to assess the quality of implementation and progress toward meeting specified goals and uses results for improvement and sustainability.
- ▶ *Duration and Intensity*: Service-learning has sufficient duration and intensity to address community needs and meet specified outcomes.

These standards, when well implemented, form the basis of a high-quality and complex methodology, that is,

a way of combining the methods of experiential education with the needs of society. It is serving and learning, and it is a way of creating the world. Young people need real employment and real service opportunities – and communities need genuine work and service accomplished. (Benson & Roehlkepartain, 1993, p. 11)

⁷² See “K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice” at <https://www.nylc.org/page/standards>.

The result, as previously mentioned, is the shift to active and meaningful learning and higher retention rates, as the following table shows:

RETENTION RATE	ACTIVITY	ENGAGEMENT
5%	Lecture	Passive Learning
10%	Reading	
20%	Audiovisual	
30%	Demonstration	
50%	Discussion	Active Learning
75%	Practice	
90%	Teach Another	

Growing to Greatness: a resource for service-learning studies

In this book devoted to spirituality, I think that a good resource for reflection on this topic in the light of a new vision of youth and learning are the results of the National Youth Leadership Council's annual National state by state review of K-12 and higher education service-learning entitled "Growing to Greatness". Below is an abstract of this project as summarized by Mary Beth Neal PhD, research director of the project.

The "Growing to Greatness", the state of service-learning project (G2G) series, from 2003 to 2010, presents a comprehensive view of scope, scale, and results of service-learning. It serves as a resource to help practitioners make the case for service-learning to decision-makers as well as to improve their practice by offering examples of successful service-learning programs. It addresses a wide variety of important questions: What is it? And what are the strategies for ensuring its utility, quality, and sustainability?

Each issue includes the following:

- ▶ Inside front cover: "Service by the numbers" (quantitative descriptors supplied on an annual basis by collaborating service-learning organizations).
- ▶ Research articles (both quantitative and qualitative, including two original US national-level surveys; one surveying US school principals, and a retrospective survey of youth ages 18–28 regarding the effects of service experienced during their elementary and high school years).

- ▶ Research to identify quality standards for high quality service-learning.
- ▶ Special topics, for example service-learning targeting a certain demographic or concern such as dropout prevention, violence prevention, parental involvement, equity and justice, transition to adulthood, career development, civic engagement and more.
- ▶ Recent policy supporting service-learning on local, state, and national levels.
- ▶ Scope and Scale/Prevalence: Articles describing most recent data and indicators of service-learning scope, scale, and impacts from local to international levels – to document effects and communicate the value of service-learning to the general public.
- ▶ School based program examples (either as a stand-alone article as well as part of US state profiles).
- ▶ Community based program examples (either as a stand-alone article as well as part of state profiles).
- ▶ Service-learning in higher education and in internationally-
- ▶ US State profiles showing infrastructure, policy, program examples, and scope/scale data.
- ▶ Back cover endorsements from those individuals and organizations who find the G2G series useful.

Since there is no space for an adequate discussion, I invite the reader to explore the seven reports from 2003 to 2010⁷³, sure to offer an insightful tool for spiritual and institutional reflection on service-learning – “Growing to Greatness” was inspired by the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that *“everybody can be great, because everybody can serve”*, and the reports aims to highlight the “greatness” embodied by the young people participating in service-learning, and to bring insight and encouragement to the practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers who support them.

Service-Learning in context of faith development

What has been said so far about service-learning, if thought of in the context of faith, can bear further fruit.

Several academic studies suggest a positive relationship between spiritual practice and service. Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1999) detected, for example, that students who believe that religion is important in their lives are almost three times more likely

⁷³ The series can be found at the National Youth Leadership Council website: <https://www.nylc.org/page/GrowingtoGreatness>.

to participate in service than those who do not believe that religion is important (see also Hart et al., 2007). More specifically, researchers Youniss et al. (1999) argue that service-learning practices create a transcendent system that provides a faith base from which youth can derive principles for action. Hart and Atkins (2004) describe service-learning as a key source of social capital and when combined with religion.

These few examples suggest that service, in the organized form of a high-quality methodology and an institutional configuration, not only enriches learning by making it multidimensional, but encourages the spiritual growth of students and the educational community, while having as positive spill-over effect a further willingness to serve.

The gospel of Christ is about bringing “good news” to the world, in word and through acts of service to the poor, immigrants, and those burdened with illness or a physical or emotional disability utilizing de facto the tools of service-learning.

After all, this would seem almost “natural”. The gospel of Christ is about bringing “good news” to the world, in word and through acts of service to the poor, immigrants, and those burdened with illness or a physical or emotional disability utiliz-

ing de facto the tools of service-learning. It is not without reason that its practice is found in Roman Catholic, Anabaptist, Quaker, Reformed and evangelical schools and churches as well as faith-based nonprofits. Each of these communities integrate biblical texts and Christian teaching with service-learning activities.

One example is Benilde-St. Margaret’s, a Catholic school in Minnesota, where teachers see service-learning as a way to respond to the National Conference of Catholics Bishops’ call for Catholic Social Teaching on Economic Justice. The President of Benilde, writes: *“Part of our identity, one of our core strengths, is our commitment to service-learning - guiding our students to live in the Gospel messages in a way that improves humanity”*.

I can think of no other time in human history when the revolutionary simplicity of integrating active learning with service is more needed – for the spiritual and personal development of our youth, for their academic achievement and their engagement as global citizens. Our message to the youth of the world should be: “You are needed! We challenge you to lift hammers to help neighbors build homes, open books to tutor younger children and bring a healing touch to our elders”.

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In support of the Global Compact on Education

Uniservitate is a global programme for the promotion of service-learning in Catholic Higher Education. Its objective is to generate a systemic change in Catholic Higher Education Institutions (CHEIs) through the institutionalisation of service-learning (SL) as a tool to achieve its mission of offering an integral education and training of agents of change committed to their community.

“We will not change the world, if we do not change education”

Pope Francis

3 Spirituality and Higher Education: Perspectives from Service-Learning

A research topic that is increasingly attracting the attention of the academic world is the link between teaching and spirituality, understood in its broadest sense. This will be the focus of the volume that we present to our readers today. The aim is to provide, both for Catholic Institutions of Higher Education and universities at large, a space for reflection in their itinerary of discernment about their identity and specific mission.

This book, the third of the Uniservitate collection, explores these topics, bringing together research and experiences of international scope, from the Catholic university world as well as of other creeds and non-religious convictions, which delve into service-learning from the ethics of care and fraternity.

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