edutopia

SERVICE LEARNING

Empowering Students to Change the World

NOVEMBER 18, 2015

By Chase Mielke, Teacher, Trainer, Ed Blogger

Photo credit: NEC Corporation of America via flickr (CC BY 2.0) (https://www.flickr.com/photos/neccoi

The evening is warm and humid. People of all ages and backgrounds stretch along the local park as bluesy rock music thumps the air, played passionately by a group of students. Nearly everyone is wearing a "Spread Positivity" t-shirt. Free popsicles are passed around. A collection jar is stuffed with change. It's a free concert put on by students for the entire town in an effort to create something positive. The project will go on to raise hundreds of dollars for our school's future "positivity projects."

The "Spread Positivity Project" is among the dozens of successful projects that I've seen and helped students create as a part of a unit on group problem solving. Students have collected and donated hundreds of shoes and clothing items for Third World countries and local causes. I've seen students create fundraising workouts for the Wounded Warriors Project. I've seen students raise thousands of dollars for a classmate who was re-diagnosed with cancer, and in the process spark what would become an inspiring non-profit, DC Strong, that now raises even more thousands of dollars for children battling cancer.

If an end goal of education is to create skilled, altruistic citizens, why wait until after a student's post-secondary training? Whether it's an after-school community service group, project-based unit, or team-building event, allowing students the time, support, and freedom to create a positivity project is a direct route to building better thinkers and doers. The process that I've used to help students change their world is something that just about any school or classroom can -- and should -- do. By creating real projects, students will be immersed in 21st-century skills while embodying altruism. Here's how to get started.

1. Grouping Matters

I've let students choose their own groups. I've also chosen them myself. However, creating groups that balance skill sets and interests is important. Balance personality types and backgrounds as much as possible to foster flexibility and open-mindedness. If students choose their own groups, provide a set of roles that must be undertaken within their group. After some prep time, students can go around the room "selling their skillsets" to others, forming groups more organically. The group size matters as well. I've found that 4-6 members is ideal for holding each student accountable to sharing and contributing.

2. Give Guided Freedom

Students value these projects because they get to *own* the project. Provide an open-ended topic like: "You have the next three weeks to make a positive impact, locally, nationally, or globally." The prompt is open enough to interpretation that it allows creative projects. The challenge is that some students are used to more structure, so **guided freedom** comes into play.

Check in with every group every day, offering tips and strategies to help them succeed. Provide a sample calendar for when each sub-task should occur. Help brainstorm networking opportunities. Guide students through paperwork requirements for fundraising and advertising. But do any and all of these things *only* if they request it and *only* after they try it on their own first. It's their project and their learning. Our role is to guide from the side.

3. Teach Creative Problem Solving

Creativity is a skill. Critical thinking is a skill. Both must be fostered and coached. Teach students to explicitly bounce back and forth between divergently creating ideas and then convergently narrowing down the best ideas. Show them the value of generating ideas independently first -- crazy ideas, ample ideas, related ideas -- and then sharing as a group. Every moment of the project can and should utilize *both* divergent and convergent thinking skills.

4. Teach Communication Skills

I am fortunate that these projects are a part of our interpersonal communications class, where communication is the goal. However, any time that students are working in groups, they must be coached on *how* to work in groups. One of the biggest mistakes we make is assuming that students will learn how to work in a team simply because we place them in a team. Here are some of the many activities that can be used to help students develop both successful projects *and* collaboration and communication skills:

Meetings on video

The most powerful strategy is documenting student group meetings on video (preferably in a room separated from their peers). Students can then watch the videos to notice habits and recognize strengths and needs. They can tally their positive moments compared to their negative moments.

Fishbowl observations

Pair up groups so that one group engages in conversation as the other observes from the side. Give the observers guided prompts for offering suggestions and praise, such as:

- What is one thing that this group is doing well?
- What is one thing that could help this group become more successful?

Conflict resolution strategies

Teach students verbal sentence stems for voicing concerns (such as using an "I statement") or apologizing for errors.

Nonverbal strategies

It's never too late or too early for teaching students about the importance of facial expressions, hand gestures,

vocal tone, or proximity.

Rapport status checks

Ask each student for an independent report on how he or she feels about the group process. Use these for individual check-ins and coaching students on communicating their needs maturely.

Make It About the Process

Many teachers are wary of group projects because of the assessment challenges. Fear not. With a little planning, a group service project can be one of the most practical and robust ways of assessing student growth. Assessment should be varied, timely, and specific. I use clear rubrics for assessing students in each of these ways:

- Self-evaluations
- Confidential evaluations of one another
- Reflections from videos of meetings
- A whole-group "task completion" evaluation
- Weekly evidence of individual contributions

Why wait for change to happen? Why wait for altruism to develop? Let your students create positivity now. You won't be disappointed -- and neither will our society.

In the comments below, please discuss how you've empowered your students to change the world.