

**A New Modality: Service-Learning and Vocational Assessment**

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## Abstract

The traditional definition of service-learning is a teaching strategy which encourages students to learn through active participation in community based problem solving activities. Community based experiences have always played a crucial role in the vocational assessment process. Service-learning projects provide another venue in which the best practices of vocational assessment may be conducted. This paper highlights ways in which service-learning becomes not only a tool for educational development but also a new medium for vocational assessment and its professionals.

## Making the Connection: Service-learning and Vocational Assessment

Community based experiences play a crucial role in the vocational assessment process.

Assessments of quality should be both holistic and humanistic. Holistic assessment takes into account issues of diversity, the attributes of the individual, and his/her existing or potential environments, and the interactions between the two (Smith et al., 1995). Humanistic evaluations and assessments focus on benefiting the people served by involving them in processes that highlight their individual abilities in an environment that fits them as individuals (Smith et al., 1995). Our nation and its educational systems have also recognized the benefits of taking a holistic and humanistic approach to designing youth programs, and service-learning is a prime example of how these two qualities may be incorporated into educational methods.

This paper attempts to highlight how the best practices for vocational assessment and service-learning are similar, as well as to underscore the potential benefits to youth, teachers, evaluators, and communities by combining both of these processes. Service-learning and vocational assessment both focus on involving students in self-directed searches of themselves and their communities through hands-on experiences. Setting goals and evaluating them through personal reflection are crucial to both programs. When service-learning and vocational assessment work together students learn about themselves, evaluators may work within existing programs, teachers do not have to sacrifice valuable class time, and communities benefit from the service that is performed. The potential for synergy between these is revealed by defining service-learning and examining that definition against established best practices for vocational assessment and evaluation.

## Definition of Service Learning

As long as there has been work to be done, there has been volunteerism and service. As early as 1933, with the development of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the federal government has recognized the benefits of youth in service to our nation's communities. The CCC provided work for young adults while helping to revitalize economies and support families (Corporation for National Service, 1999). Through the years, the federal government continued to play an active role in encouraging youth in service. The most recent involvement was with the signing of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. This act created the Corporation for National Service, the governing body of Learn and Serve America, which has helped to define service-learning, and has aided our nation's educational systems in implementing youth service-learning projects by providing seed funding (Corporation for National Service, 1999).

According to the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, a consortium of public and private service-learning organizations, service-learning is defined as the method by which young people learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences. These experiences must meet six criteria to be considered service-learning. School based service-learning must:

- Meet actual community needs;
- Coordinate in collaboration with the school and community;
- Integrate into each student's academic curriculum;
- Provide structured time for students to think, talk, and write about what they did and saw during the actual service activity;
- Provide young people with the opportunities to use newly acquired academic skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities;

- Be a practical application of what is taught in school; and
- Help to foster the development of a sense of caring for others (Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1995).

When the key principles of service-learning are compared to the best practices for vocational assessment similarities are noticed; opportunities begin to unfold where fledgling K-12 service-learning programs may be able to tap into the expertise of the vocational assessment community.

#### Comparison of Best Practices: Vocational Assessment and Service Learning

Just as vocational assessment has best practices as established by the Interdisciplinary Council on Vocational Assessment and Evaluation, service-learning is guided by the Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning as set by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform. Comparisons may be drawn that emphasize the congruencies of these two processes as is seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Competency Comparisons

Vocational Assessment Best Practices	Standards of Quality for School-Based Service-Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of methods, tools, and approaches should be used to provide accurate vocational evaluations and assessments. Attempting to determine what makes an individual unique by evaluating such factors as individual interests, skills and abilities, aptitudes and learning-style preferences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth are involved in planning service-learning experiences. Experiences are guided by the individual's skills, interests, and needs. The goal of service-learning being a tangible or visible outcome.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information should be verified using different methods, tools and approaches including observations of work performance, self-reported or expressed statements, surveys, structured interviews, or tests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service-learning is accompanied by opportunities to reflect on experiences allowing students to think, talk, and write about their service. Effective service-learning also integrates systematic formative and summative evaluation, which not only reflects students success but provides a means of program evaluation.</li> </ul>

Table 1 Competency Comparisons (*continued*)

<b>Vocational Assessment Best Practices</b>	<b>Standards of Quality for School-Based and Community-Based Service-Learning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Behavioral observation either formal or informal is essential in any vocational assessment process. Observation may occur in a variety of environments, via a variety of people and should be documented and presented in an objective and non-biased manner.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In service-learning student self-reflection and skilled adult guidance and supervision are integral to student success. Adult supervisors, from either the school or service program, serve as facilitators for the service-learning project and they can foster reflection as well as provide feedback.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational evaluation and assessment is an on-going, developmental process occurring at different junctures over a career lifespan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective service-learning reflects the developmental and learning needs of youth. The duration, type, desired outcome, and structure for reflection must all be designed to be age-appropriate.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational assessment and evaluation should be an integral part of the larger service delivery system. This system is the basis for planning needed services, resources, and support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service-learning projects should be coordinated in collaboration with the school and community. Schools and community institutions become genuine partners, and service-learning must be understood and supported as an integral element in the life of the school.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational assessment and evaluation require the collection of input from a variety of individuals. Interdisciplinary team approach translates into effective planning, implementation of activities and fulfilled vocational development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In service-learning a youth's efforts are to be recognized by those served including peers, school, and community.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation and assessment should be current, valid, and relevant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Service-learning allows students to accumulate experiences that make classroom studies relevant as they apply their skills in real-world experiences.</li> </ul>

Table 1 Comparison of Vocational Assessment Best Practices as determined by the Interdisciplinary Council on Vocational Assessment and Evaluation (Smith et al., 1995) to the Standards of Quality for School-Based Service-Learning as set by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1995).

## Service-Learning as a Method of Vocational Assessment

As demonstrated by the comparisons, there are congruencies in the vocational assessment and service-learning processes. Therefore, service-learning projects may provide evaluators with a new medium in which to perform their assessments. By using service-learning projects that are already established within their school communities vocational evaluators may not have to coordinate the development of additional situational assessment or real work experience sites. By providing practical examples of service-learning, the congruencies between these processes may become clearer, demonstrating that service-learning may be an untapped source for vocational assessment opportunities.

A student who is interested in working with animals, and prefers being outdoors doing manual tasks, might volunteer at a local therapeutic riding program. Perhaps a student interested in biology who enjoys working with water would choose to participate in a stream reclamation project. These are examples of service-learning projects in which students determine their participation by their individual interests and the skills with which they feel comfortable. These projects, therefore reflect students' interests as well as their skills and abilities.

Self-reflection may be considered a crucial aspect of both vocational assessment and service-learning. In service-learning projects students should maintain a log or journal of their experiences. Journaling encourages the students to reflect on not only what they have learned academically, but what they have learned about themselves, such as their physical skills and abilities, or how they may apply their service experience to the workplace.

The adult supervision that is integral to the service-learning experience can become the source of vocational observation. Teachers may be asked to complete pre- and post-service-learning observations on how their students perform in class. Facilitators in the community could fill out employability skills

surveys to evaluate student work performance. Additionally, a student's log of experiences may have a section in which a supervisor could make a note of observations for the day's work performed. All of this information could then be shared with the vocational evaluator.

Just as vocational assessment is a developmental process, service-learning experiences may occur throughout a student's educational career from kindergarten (Laplante & Kinsley, 1994) to adulthood. Service-learning projects for very young children may develop from learning about the effects of litter and helping to recycle at school, and grow with the children into studying the sociology of gangs in America and participating in a project to remove graffiti from community walls. An evaluator could assess students at different milestones in their service-learning projects in order to develop school-to-work transition goals.

In this model, the cooperation and coordination of service-learning activities between the school and the community it serves become the larger service delivery system of vocational assessment. Within the schools service-learning must be an accepted educational method across all programs. For example, teachers as well as a child's peers need to support the idea that learning can occur outside the classroom and that a student's schedule may need to be flexible in order to complete service-learning projects. Information that students, advisors, parents, and evaluators gain from the service-learning may be used to develop IEP goals or to make other classroom recommendations to address the student needs. Indeed, students may have needs identified from their service-learning experience for which outside community agencies are needed to provide services such as counseling or anger management.

The student, parents, teachers, service-learning facilitators, community members, and vocational evaluator become the interdisciplinary team of vocational assessment when the service-learning project is the assessment environment. These participants may all be asked to play a role in the educational and



career development of a student. Ultimately, by assessing students' interests, skills or abilities in a service-learning project in which they chose to participate, and which reflects their educational goals, validity and relevancy are insured.

### The Role of the Evaluator

The vocational evaluator may play a valuable role in service-learning projects. Evaluators who have developed a variety of connections within their community may provide numerous resources and contacts for the development of projects. Their knowledge of employability skills can be beneficial in the student preparation and training process which is prerequisite to involvement in the community. The opportunity to observe and assess student participation in service-learning activities may also facilitate transition recommendations to the educational team in the areas of career development and academic supports. The evaluator may be a valuable resource in training project supervisors in the area of objective, non-biased observation.

### Conclusion

When exploring new methods of assessment it is the evaluator that takes the lead. The basic fundamentals of utilizing service-learning in the vocational assessment process exist inherently in the nature of its design and standard of quality. However, to be able to develop it as an assessment tool requires effort and desire on the part of the evaluator, especially if service-learning is not already established in a school system. Developing new methodologies takes a willingness on the part of the evaluator to step outside the profession and to become a part of the classroom education community.

The best practices of vocational assessment are designed to insure that the recipients of assessment and evaluation services are empowered participants. Service-learning adds the dimension of fostering civic responsibility (Corporation for National Service, 1999), therefore, empowering not only the youth who participate but strengthening the communities that they've touched by their service.

## References

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