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Problem-Solving and (You)th

A Problem-Solving Approach to Service Learning Projects



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Letter from the Author



Dear Reader,

I first want to thank you for taking the time to read this guide! You are already showing your commitment to creating more engaging, powerful service experiences, which is such an important endeavor.

The ideas you will discover in this guide have been developed through my years of experience with all types of service-learning, both as a part of school projects and my own initiatives. Since elementary school, I have completed extensive volunteer work in my Seattle hometown, which has more recently inspired me to create a project to empower youth voices and ideas for good (Youth Powerhouse).

Throughout my work, I've been shown time and again that young people possess both the insatiable desire to help others and the unique creative capacity to become powerful catalysts of positive change. Typical service-learning experiences, which often ask students to jump straight from learning about a problem to helping with a solution, skip over the problem-solving process that is so integral to planning effective action. Inviting students to help decide how to address community issues has the double benefit of bringing more *minds* to the effort and dispelling “savior” mentalities by asking students to recognize and leverage community assets.

In the spirit of youth contributing meaningful ideas, I myself am a high school junior! Although this has enabled me to bring a fresh perspective to service-learning, it's important to keep in mind that I am by no means an expert. So, if some of the techniques or lesson ideas you find in this guide may seem unfamiliar, don't hesitate to adjust the logistics based on what works best for you and your students. The guide outlines just one method of implementing a problem-solving approach; see Appendix A for variations based on students' age, time limitations, and other constraints.

Thanks again for taking the first step to developing engaging and meaningful service-learning projects, and here's to a new generation of change-makers!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Becky Scurlock".

Becky Scurlock
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Introduction & Objectives

Have you ever wondered how to incorporate youth voices and ideas into service learning projects? Taking a problem-solving approach allows you to do just this. Through developing their own ideas to address a community problem, students will gain a deep understanding of the issue and a belief in their capability to make an impact. This process allows students to develop important skills such as critical thinking and self-confidence, while learning to view adults as partners in the quest for social change. Whether students choose to support a local charity or develop their own awareness campaign, they will be armed with a deep understanding of how their work fits into the “big picture” and a belief in their potential to really make an impact.

Below, I have outlined a 5-step process for including problem-solving in the service curriculum. For class-wide service-learning projects, choosing one issue to address can be most effective for encouraging collaboration and group participation. However, allowing smaller group or individual projects can allow students to take greater ownership of their work and pursue a cause of their choice. These five steps and their time estimates are merely suggestions; we recommend using this framework as a guide for your program and adjusting it to meet your needs. Some possible variations are discussed in Appendix A, and a brief, student-friendly representation of the problem-solving process is available at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZ_IaKp30g.

The Youth Powerhouse Team strives to make this guide a helpful and effective resource. If you have any feedback or ideas, please email us at info@youthpowerhouse.org.

Let’s get started!

Objectives

1. Students gain a deep understanding of the community they are serving and the problem they are addressing
2. Students learn a problem-solving process that they can apply to addressing other community issues they care about
3. Students gain confidence in their ability to make an impact on problems affecting their community, and in the power of their voice and ideas
4. Students gain an introduction to social action and entrepreneurship as a tool for addressing societal issues
5. Students develop leadership and decision-making skills (K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice: Youth Voice Indicator #4)

Summary

Below is a summary of the problem-solving curriculum. Refer to the corresponding sections for a more in-depth explanation of each step.

Step 1. Defining & Discussing the Problem

Ensure that students are all on the same page in their understanding of the problem your service project is addressing, and have students share what they already know or have observed. Or, if students are choosing the problem to address, guide them in finding a topic that they agree on.

Step 2. Researching and Identifying the Gap

Guide students in thoroughly researching the problem, particularly in the location where you plan to implement the project. From what they have learned, come up with a “gap statement” that describes the current unmet needs.

Step 3. Developing Solution Ideas

Using what students have learned, guide them in developing a wide range of potential solutions that address the gap statement. Consider new relationships to be established, services to be provided, technology to be created, and actions for others to take.

Step 4. Designing the Service Project

Lead students in evaluating and narrowing the ideas that they could implement, and choosing a final solution to pursue (ideally with expert or community input). Encourage them to retain and share ideas that were not selected. Engage students in planning the project’s implementation.

Step 5. Implementation & Evaluation

Support your students in carrying out the project plan they have developed, adapting to unexpected circumstances or findings. Upon completion, engage students in personal and group reflection on the project’s success, learning objectives, and next steps.

[Appendix A. Variations](#)

[Appendix B. Potential Challenges](#)

Step 1. Defining & Discussing the Problem (30 minutes)

The first step in starting any service-learning project is to ensure that all participants are on the same page. In a problem-solving approach, it is particularly important to develop a commonly agreed-upon definition of the problem. It can also be helpful to discuss what students have already observed or learned about the problem.

Materials: whiteboard or flipchart for note-taking

Goal: Students agree on and develop a shared understanding of the problem they will approach, and begin to consider their role in contributing to a solution

Process:

1. If you have chosen the topic, briefly present it to the students, including basic background information about the issue, but *not* mentioning potential solutions or your opinion on the issue (students should develop their own understandings)*. Passing out a “project description” document can help clarify the goals and outline of the project. Then, have students discuss the following questions (10-15 minutes), keeping track of all ideas:
 - a. What is the problem, and can we agree on a shared definition? Why is this a problem?
 - b. What is your role or responsibility in helping address the problem? Why?
 - c. What efforts do you know about that are already addressing the problem? Why might they not be fully solving the problem?

Encourage students to back up their responses with actual observations or experiences, rather than inferences.

2. If you are letting the class choose the topic, ask them to brainstorm ideas for a topic in a 5-10 minute class discussion. A community-mapping activity or newspaper review can facilitate this process (see “K-12 Service-Learning Project Planning Toolkit”). Take a vote on which issue to select, briefly discussing topics if there is a tie. Then, discuss the questions as listed above.

*However, if you believe students are lacking awareness or misunderstanding the issue, it can be helpful to contribute your knowledge in a respectful way that allows students to analyze and respond to this new information (this also applies in Steps 2 and 3).

Step 2. Researching & Identifying the Gap (60 minutes)

One of the most important parts of engaging students in solving real-world problems is ensuring that they gain a solid understanding of the issue they are addressing. The following activity is time-adjustable, but the more time spent on it (or the more research you do in advance for the students), the greater understanding of the problem and ability to develop insightful solutions your students will have.

Materials: computers (for research), whiteboard or flipchart

Goal: Students gain a deep understanding of the problem’s root causes, contributing factors, current efforts and their effectiveness, and experience of those living with it in the community they are serving.

Process:

1. Ask students to research answers to the following questions for your topic from a variety of sources (such as NGOs, government websites, community blogs, and reputable news websites). Artistic sources, such as narratives and film, are invaluable in helping students develop an empathetic understanding of the issue (Cipolle). If you have the time, it is also extremely valuable to have students interview people engaged with the problem (e.g. those affected by, knowledgeable about, or working to address it) for direct insights. This could be in the format of a class-wide interview, or students could complete their own interviews of friends or family members. You can divide the questions among the group, or have students research individually.
 - a. What are the *needs* of those affected by the problem?
 - b. What effects does the problem have on people and/or the environment?
 - c. How does the problem vary in different locations? Examine how it manifests in your community.
 - d. What are the root causes of the problem? (Why is it happening?)
 - i. What other factors contribute to the problem?
 - e. What is already being done about the problem?
 - i. What services, policies, partnerships, and technology already exist (particularly in your community)?
 - ii. What is limiting the success of these current efforts? (Are they fully addressing the needs and root causes you identified?)
 - f. What are the obstacles to addressing the problem?

Encourage students to probe deeply into the questions, and search for data to back up their findings. Although this might be a difficult or uncomfortable process for some students, it is important that they have a complete picture of the situation and explore it empathetically from multiple viewpoints.

If you chose to divide the questions among students, have them report and discuss their findings with the group.

2. From what students have learned, ask them to develop a “gap statement” that defines what those affected by the problem still need, in spite of current efforts (5 minutes). This statement will likely contain multiple parts (and can take the form of multiple statements). Students can do this individually, or through a class discussion.

Step 3. Developing Solution Ideas (30 minutes)

What solutions could fill the gap? Now that students have a deep understanding of the problem, they can develop ideas for how new relationships, actions, services and technology could meet the needs they have identified.

Materials: drawing paper, colored pens or pencils

Goal: Students explore how a variety of efforts approaching different aspects of the problem could fill the “gap” they have identified.

Process:

1. Ask students to individually brainstorm solution ideas in each of the four categories listed below (at least 10 minutes) for *one* part of the gap (each part should be addressed by at least one student). To promote creative thinking, encourage students to draw or model the situation, look for patterns in the research, consider how solutions implemented elsewhere could be applied locally, and not discard “bad” (difficult or impractical) ideas. It can be helpful to first develop a list of specific “tasks” that need to be implemented to address the gap (e.g. a task for “people don’t care about helping the environment” could be “educate people about why and how to protect the environment”).

Relationships: Form connections between existing individuals and/or organizations.

Examples: Raising awareness about how food waste can be minimized; fundraising for an environmental organization (connecting the general public with organizations)

Services: Meet the needs of those experiencing the problem by directly helping them

Example: A career consulting program for unemployed people

Technology: Leverages scientific advancements to meet needs in new ways

Examples: an app for tracking junk food consumption; a more effective wind turbine

Actions: What organizations could do to better address the problem

Examples: the state government could increase funding to early childhood care; a nonprofit could create an afterschool program for homeless youth

2. Once students have had space to think through the problem, allow them to share their ideas with one another and brainstorm collaboratively. Have each student aim for at least 20 possible solutions.

After the activity, interested students can share their solutions on the Youth Powerhouse Map to get feedback from professionals addressing the issue, connect with other youth problem-solving in their communities, and maybe a chance for the class to meet with an expert (www.youthpowerhouse.org/map).

Step 4. Designing the Service Project (45 minutes)

While the class’ ideas are being reviewed by experts, ask them to consider what they could do to fill the “gaps” they identified on a local level.

Materials: whiteboard or large flipchart

Goal: Students apply their understanding of the problem and solution ideas to develop a thoughtful project that fits the constraints of their service program and is consistent with what they believe could impact the problem most

Process:

1. Narrow the solution ideas to what it is feasible for your class to do. On a whiteboard or large sketchpad, draw three section headings:
 - a. Solutions that could be implemented by supporting a current effort (that was found through the research in Step 2)
 - b. Solutions that could be implemented by adding on to or enhancing a current effort
 - c. Solutions that would be feasible for the class to complete independently

In a class discussion, invite your students to share ideas that they think would fall under each category (5-10 minutes). For now, don't weed out ideas that you don't agree would be possible: in this first step, the goal is to get all ideas on the table. Encourage students to submit ideas that don't fall into one of these three categories on the Youth Powerhouse website so that they can be considered by people who could implement them.

Once all of students' ideas are on the board, ask the class if there are similar ideas that could be combined, consolidated, or expanded upon. Next, mark any ideas that you think could be difficult to implement, then ask the class for further clarification. Students may have unique ideas about how to implement a solution (e.g., an idea for a policy change could develop into a class advocacy project, or a need for raising awareness about a national issue could be implemented on a local level). If you decide that the student's idea is still impractical, explain why and allow for a response before erasing it. You can encourage the student to still share their idea at www.youthpowerhouse.org/map.

2. Now that you have a final list, it's time to narrow down your ideas to a final project decision. If you have the time and resources, it is a great learning experience to have students discuss their ideas with topic experts, representatives of local organizations, and people affected by the issue. This can validate students' understanding of the problem, and provide additional insights into which solutions could be the most effective for your class to implement or fill the gap.

Otherwise, ask students to reflect on which solutions could best fill the gap by writing in a journal for 5-10 minutes. Students might decide that none of the solutions truly fill the gap by themselves, so help them understand that although there are limitations to what the class project can accomplish, they can pursue their other ideas independently if they are interested (confirm that you will support them!). An alternative is to have students discuss in small groups the merits and challenges of the different options.

Once students have had a chance to reflect, have students vote on all possible project ideas to determine the project that the class will implement (you may consider a blind vote). If there is a tie, discuss the topics further and then re-vote. Encourage students whose ideas were not chosen to pursue them, with support from yourself and/or the Youth Powerhouse website.

If your students' idea will involve other organizations, make sure that the organizations are willing to support the students' project and that they agree it will be beneficial to the cause. If the organization believes the project would not advance the cause, discuss the reasons why with students and revisit previous ideas to choose a project that incorporates these new insights.

3. Now that you have chosen a project idea, engage students in the project-planning process. As a class or in small groups, ask the students to answer the following questions (15 minutes):
 - What are our goals for the project, in the context of our “gap” statement?
 - Does the project require an organization to support or partner with? If so, choose the organization from your research in Step 2.
 - What are the steps to completing this project? List all actions that the class needs to take, then create a timeline for completing them.
 - Do tasks or roles need to be delegated among students? If so, determine who will do what.
 - How will the class evaluate the project's success? What metrics could be used to determine how well your project has bridged the gap?

Depending on the amount of class time you have to devote to the project and the maturity of your students, you may want to make some of these decisions by yourself. However, student engagement in the project planning process can build ownership of the project and help them develop confidence and important skills in organization, collaboration, and project management.

Congratulations! Your class has developed an innovative service-learning project idea based on their solid understanding of the issue they are addressing. Now, they will be able to understand the importance of their work, and believe in its potential to truly make an impact.

Step 5. Implementation & Evaluation (time varies)

To implement the project, follow the plan that you and/or your students created in Step 4. Depending on your students' maturity, you may need to check in regularly to hold them accountable for tasks they have agreed to complete (or, if appropriate, you could complete preparatory work for the project). Allow for a margin of change to the original plans, as the project may not go exactly as expected and new opportunities may arise. While implementing the project, students may gain new insights about the cause they are promoting, and adjust the project to better meet these needs.

Once students have completed the project, it is important to have them reflect on their experience and evaluate their project's success. The following reflection activity is just one option; other, more interactive activities are also possible (see “RMC Research” in Works Referenced for ideas). The goal of this reflection is not only to consolidate students' learning, but to provide guidance for those interested in taking further action (the Youth Powerhouse website can provide further resources and opportunities). Allow at least 30 minutes for reflection.

Materials: journals or lined paper (optional)

Goal: Students collaboratively implement their project and reflect on what they learned from their experience

Process:

In either a group discussion or an individual writing activity (or both), ask students to respond to the evaluation questions they developed in Step 4. Also have them reflect on any of the following prompts that they did not already cover:

- Did our project reach the goals we set for our project? If not, why?
- How effective was our project in bridging our “gaps”? Is there something that could have made it more effective?
- In completing the project, what new insights did I gain about the problem and/or the people we were serving? Did my perspective on the issue change?
- What worked well about the class’ process of planning and implementing the project? What could have gone differently?
- Could our project continue to make a difference if it was continued? How could the class make this happen?
- What is my role or responsibility in solving problems in my community, and why?
- What did I learn in completing this project? How could I apply my new knowledge and skills in the future (e.g. to make an impact on a cause I care about)?

Be sure to congratulate students on their hard work! It is a true accomplishment to take the time to fully understand a problem and design a project to address it.

Appendix A. Variations

1. Short amount of preparation time

Rather than having students go through an in-depth research process, you can present students with information on the issue that you have curated. You can also organize the service project based on the project idea that students have agreed upon (although students will not have the same opportunity to develop leadership skills and a sense of agency). Steps 1, 3, and 5 should be completed by students themselves.

2. Extended project related to curriculum of a class

Students can spend more time in the research phase, applying their knowledge to developing a complex understanding of the issue. If the project is associated with a science class, students can also implement a technology-based solution as their service project (however, they should still consider all solution types in Step 3 to understand how their solution could interact with the government, organizations and individuals).

3. Students collaborate with a local organization to develop an innovative solution

This type of project allows students to get a firsthand understanding of the problem, draw on the knowledge and experience of experts, and develop their project in a real-world setting. It also increases the likelihood that the project will continue after students complete their work. Rather than going through an extensive research phase in Step 2, students can learn about the issue by interviewing the organization’s employees and observing their work (although it is important to remind students that the

organization has its own perspective on the issue, and other approaches should also be considered). If possible, have students complete Step 3 on their own, considering all aspects of the issue *and* focusing on what the organization could do. In Step 4, students should present their favorite ideas to organization and collaborate with them to further develop these ideas and create a project plan.

4. Very young students (elementary school)

Pre-adolescent students may not be capable of the same complexity and depth of understanding of the problem as older students. Consider presenting students with simplified information rather than asking them to do their own research, and making the individual activities listed in steps 1-5 class-wide collaborations.

5. Older students (college)

Older students may be able to go into greater depth and develop a more complex understanding of the issue than younger students. In Step 2, you may consider asking them to write a paper outlining the findings of their research. Focusing on individual and small-group activities, and dividing students among multiple projects, may be more feasible and allow students more autonomy with their projects.

6. Students work individually or in small groups

More mature or independent students may enjoy working on their own projects or in small groups. This approach may also be more appropriate for optional or extracurricular programs, and will often result in smaller-scale projects (depending on the program's duration). In Step 1, ask students to brainstorm at least five issues they see in their community, and choose the one they would most like to address (rather than choosing the topic as a group). Small groups may self-select based on topic choice. Have students go through each following step (including the discussion in Step 1) in their smaller group, but provide opportunities for them to consult and share with the larger group to get feedback and new perspectives on their project. The teacher or facilitator may also want to guide students in developing their project in Step 4. If the service learning program is genuinely individual (students are expected to complete service on their own time), students can complete the individual activities in each step and document their process, with the time spent on the preparation counting towards service hours. These students may find the YouTube video listed in the introduction and the Youth Powerhouse website particularly helpful.

7. A large, diverse group of students

This type of group can be challenging because students may have many different interests, and involving all students in the planning process can be difficult. One approach is to choose a topic for students, and to have them go through steps 1-3 individually and in small groups. Students can vote on a project to pursue, and the teacher/facilitator can be the lead organizer of the project. You can also have students self-organize into smaller groups to work on the issue, and guide each group in developing and sharing their project. The latter approach will give students a better opportunity to pursue a project they are genuinely interested in and develop leadership skills; however, teachers may struggle to guide and supervise the many projects.

8. Incorporating problem-solving into a pre-existing project

A problem-solving approach can also be incorporated into ongoing service projects. Although you are already taking action to support the cause, steps 1 and 2 can make your service much more meaningful by showing you the role of your efforts in solving the problem overall. This understanding will help you both appreciate the importance of your service and see new opportunities for increasing your impact. Step 3

may also deepen your understanding and illuminate ways that your project could better meet community needs. Make sure to collaborate with your partner organization as you consider adjustments to your service: it is an important stakeholder in your work and could provide valuable insights and support. Finally, the reflection questions in Step 5 could be helpful for deeper reflection on how problem-solving affected you and your service project.

Appendix B. Potential Challenges

You may encounter challenges with a problem-solving approach, or even have questions now. Here are some potential situations I have considered and constructive ways to respond.

1. My students want to implement a politically charged project

This is a difficult issue that turns many educators away from critical service learning approaches. However, advocates of this method note that all educational institutions, in making decisions about course content and school activities, show partisanship (Cipolle).

If this is a concern for you, I would recommend discussing this project with school administrators in advance. Informing students at the beginning of the project that political advocacy will not be an option for the service project will help students avoid developing a project idea that they cannot implement. However, in Step 3, students should feel free to imagine, discuss, and share ideas for political solutions to their issue of focus.

2. My students are intellectualizing the project

An important part of any service project is developing a sense of empathy and compassion for the individuals affected by the problem. During the process outlined above, students may forget the human side of the issue being approached. In her book *Service Learning and Social Justice*, Susan Benigni Cipolle outlines several effective strategies for helping students develop a human-centered understanding of the issue. She suggests reflection on personal values, responsibility to others, and personal relationship with the issue through perspective-taking, critical dialogue, and critical narratives (58). Exposing students to artistic representations of the problem can also help students understand the experience of people affected by it.

3. I need to connect with any volunteer organizations well before implementation

This concern has an easy fix: have students go through the first four steps before you need to coordinate with the organization(s). The only consideration is that students might forget what the research that they have done about the problem, and their process for developing their project idea. In this case, it can be helpful to have a refresher lesson before implementing and evaluating the project. Another option is a two-part project in which students volunteer at an organization and then complete the problem-solving process. They can plan a second project either for themselves or for next year's students.

Acknowledgements & Works Referenced

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I referenced the following sources while compiling this guide; they may be of interest for further reading.

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