

# Social Studies Methods Students Engaged in Service-Learning: Reciprocity is the Key

Sandra Wetig

As a social studies educator, I have found myself at the end of each semester reflecting on my preservice teachers' practicum experiences. Each semester, the foremost question I had was: Was this practicum the best learning experience that I could provide? Prior to the spring 2003 semester, a typical practicum placement in my elementary social studies methods course consisted of eight lessons (lasting approximately 45 minutes) across four consecutive weeks in an urban elementary school setting. The preservice teachers entered the classrooms eager and motivated to teach the lessons they had researched, but I noted that most of the excitement was generated from my students, not the classroom teacher. The teachers at first appeared enthusiastic about the prospect of preservice teachers entering their classrooms to teach the social studies units, but, early into each practicum experience, I noted that once the ownership of the classroom was turned over to the preservice teachers, the classroom teacher often appeared hesitant and anxious. For example, teachers made frequent checks of the clock that were often followed by the question, "How long do you think you'll be here today?" As a result, preservice teachers many times felt rushed to complete their lesson plans.

Based upon these observations, I recognized that I needed to revisit the practicum experience to reassess my goals, ideas, and priorities regarding how to provide a quality teaching and learning experience for my preservice teachers. As I reflected on the practicum experience, I identified the missing link – reciprocity. The practicum served the purpose of engaging preservice teachers in a teaching/learning experience that advanced their skills, but it did not meet the needs of all stakeholders. In this article, I will describe my efforts to provide elementary preservice teachers with the opportunity to become active citizens through a methods course and practicum involving academic service-learning.

## Defining Service-Learning

Jacoby defined service-learning as a "form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and

reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning."<sup>1</sup> Jacoby also noted that it is through the element of reciprocity that service-learning is elevated to the level of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Kendall noted that service-learning is a philosophy of "human growth and purpose, a social vision, an approach to community, and a way of knowing."<sup>3</sup> Overall, the service-learning experience should actively engage students in forming their own pedagogical schemata through experiential learning in a course-relevant context. As pedagogy, service-learning is education grounded in experiential learning and includes structured time for students to reflect on the experience. It is used by instructors in higher education as well as those in P-12 schools to enhance traditional modes of learning.

## Service Learning Integration

Service-learning, carried out in the context of social studies curriculum, has the potential to foster a sense of civic duty necessary for 21st classrooms. Ellis stated that "...you don't just *learn* social studies as a school subject; you *take part* in it. In that sense, social studies demand of teachers and students a deeper level of knowledge. It demands knowledge lived, not just information studied."<sup>4</sup> In redesigning the practicum experience, I based the service-learning project objectives on the three criteria established by Howard for an academic service-learning course.<sup>5</sup> First, the service provided in the community must be relevant and meaningful to all stakeholders involved. Second, the course must enhance student academic learning, and, third, it must directly and intentionally prepare students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society. Below I describe how each criteria was operationalized in the practicum.

### *Criteria One:*

#### *Efforts to Establish a Relevant and Meaningful Service with the Community*

Ellis noted: "The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world."<sup>6</sup> Integrating service-learning into my social studies methods course would provide an opportunity for preservice teachers to engage in a direct life experience that was both relevant and meaningful to what they eventually would do and to whom they would serve in the community.

To support preservice teachers in acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for teaching social studies, I strive to provide them with an understanding of the knowledge base of social studies. The foundation of elementary social studies curriculum is embedded in the six social science disciplines of anthropology, geography, history, sociology, political science, and economics. Over the years, I noted that the least understood area for preservice teachers was the discipline of economics. The opportunity to strengthen this discipline area, connect with the community, and establish a relevant and meaningful learning experience came in December 2002 when the instructional facilitator at my children's elementary school approached me to see if I would be interested in serving as a volunteer for the Junior Achievement (JA) program beginning spring semester 2003. Because I had prior knowledge of the program, I readily agreed to volunteer for a fifth grade classroom.

The elementary Junior Achievement program is comprised of six sequential themes: Ourselves, Our Families, Our Community, Our City, Our Region, and Our Nation. I noted that JA's elementary

---

**Sandra Wetig is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.**

program complemented the existing social studies curriculum and demonstrated how economics impact people's lives as workers, consumers, and citizens.<sup>7</sup> As such, social studies preservice teachers could benefit from engagement in JA. The JA curriculum would provide an opportunity for them to become more knowledgeable about economics education, with the added dimension of then teaching the economics-based lessons in a building that supported volunteers in the classroom.

I contacted the instructional facilitator to ask if the teachers in her building would be willing to participate in an academic service-learning project utilizing the program materials designed by JA, and she agreed. The instructional facilitator then directed me to a state JA staff representative. We discussed the viability of a collaborative partnership between the public school, university students, and JA. The JA representative immediately agreed that forming a partnership would benefit all stakeholders. To prepare for the project, the staff representative visited my social studies methods classroom on campus to distribute materials and to orient the preservice teachers to the goals and mission of JA. For successful implementation of the program, the JA representative asked that the lessons be delivered in the elementary classrooms across five consecutive weeks. The desired time in the classroom varied from 30-50 minutes depending on the grade level.

Following the JA presentation, the preservice teachers were assigned to five-member social studies service-learning project teams. Each team was given two 50-minute class periods to review the following JA materials contained in a specific grade level briefcase: guide for consultants and teachers; master list of materials; activity plans; teaching manual; pre-program and post-program questionnaires; student handouts; certificates; and supplementary materials. Utilizing materials from JA, the teams developed five lesson plans using a standardized template which included: (a) lesson content; (b) lesson rationale; (c) materials; (d) local, state, and national standards addressed; (e) performance objectives; (f) anticipatory set; (g) instructional sequence; and (h) closure. Each team met with the instructor to review the final lesson plans to ensure that the lesson objectives and activities aligned with the goals and expectations outlined by JA. Team leaders were then responsible for contacting the elementary teacher to whom they were assigned to coordinate and schedule five consecutive dates to teach five 30-50 minute lessons. During the meeting with the elementary teachers, the team leaders shared copies of the JA materials and lesson plans. The service-learning project occurred over five consecutive Monday mornings at the partnership elementary school with 43 preservice teachers enrolled in two sections of social studies methods course engaged in the project.

Upon the completion of the spring 2003 service-learning project, each team of preservice teachers was asked to respond to the following question: How has the service-learning project established a relevant and meaningful service within our community? Sample responses demonstrated its effectiveness:

Team 1/1st Grade: "The service-learning project was relevant and meaningful for our community because as future teachers it allowed us to interact with our future environment—an elementary classroom. It was also relevant because it displayed volunteering to benefit others without costing the school anything. We believe it is a posi-

tive influence on the student's outlook on their educational future."

Team 2/1st Grade: "This project established relevance within our community and with the students by connecting material to real-world situations. By having college students come into the classroom we served as higher education role models. The project gave elementary students a chance to become more knowledgeable about economics and their place in a community."

Team 3/2nd Grade: "This service-learning project helped introduce different types of jobs to the students. They also learned the circulation of money. By the end of the lessons they related the money unit back to the lesson on how the community pays taxes which was a huge connection. We thought our part was worthwhile as they were able to make connection across lessons."

#### *Criteria Two:*

##### *Enhancing Student Academic Learning*

JA lesson activities directly aligned with and supported the social studies standards established by the local school district. So the project provided a relevant and meaningful service to the elementary students that enhanced both university and elementary students' social studies experiences. As mentioned previously, the JA elementary school program included the six sequential themes for kindergarten through fifth grade plus two capstone experiences. Elementary students learned concepts and skills at each grade level that built on those taught in preceding grades. Problem-based or "real world" interactive learning activities utilizing experiential learning activities helped students to see the relevance of education to the workplace and to prepare them for secondary school and lifelong learning.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Criteria Three:*

##### *Preparing Students for Active Civic Participation in a Diverse Democratic Society*

As part of the project, preservice teachers were required to engage in reflective activities regarding the economics lessons they had taught which included debriefing activities and whole group discussions following each lesson taught in the elementary school. Discussions were based on the following topics/prompts: (a) positive factors of the lesson; (b) lesson areas that could have been strengthened; (c) personal thoughts regarding the lesson; and (d) lessons learned. After each lesson, team members were required to write an individual reflection based on the following questions: (a) Do you believe the lesson objective was met? (b) What were the positive factors that occurred throughout the lesson? (c) What areas could have been strengthened in the lesson; and (d) How has this project prepared elementary students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society? The team leader was required to keep a team portfolio that included individual team member reflections and a summative team reflection.

As an example of criteria three, the JA elementary school program for second grade focused on *Our Community*. The five lessons in the program examined the responsibilities and opportunities available within the community. Through hands-on activities, students learned about workers, the jobs they perform, why workers are paid, the role of taxes, and where and how to save money.<sup>9</sup> During lesson four,

the elementary students engaged in a lesson that required them to determine the best use for an empty store on a “How Does a Community Work?” poster. The students were led through a step-by-step decision-making process designed to assist them in understanding how group decisions are made. The following comments are representative of one team’s response to the question: How has this project prepared elementary students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society?

Team 1/2nd grade: “The students engaged in a realistic voting process where they had to decide which business had to fill the empty space. They based their decisions not only on their personal preference, but how it would benefit the community as well. The lessons focus on how a community interacts and the roles and jobs people have to help form a community.”

In a second example, the JA elementary school program for kindergarten focuses on Ourselves. The five lessons in this program introduce the economic role of individuals.<sup>10</sup> The collective team response for Team 2/Kindergarten to the question stated above was as follows:

“This project prepared the elementary students by providing practical ways for them to be involved in the community. The project also provided the students with a diverse multicultural outlook on the community of other children. For example, a student took an idea from one of the stories from the JA curriculum about ways to earn money. She went home and made bookmarks and sold them in her neighborhood. She made \$9.00 and told us she was going to save it to buy a house! This is just one of the ideas that made students learn throughout this project.”

**Conclusion**

Upon the completion of the project, each preservice teacher was asked to evaluate the project on a teacher-designed ten item Likert survey (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree) that included items such as: (1) I was satisfied with the service-learning project at the elementary school; (2) I believe the students learned basics concepts related to economics education; (3) The service-learning project established a relevant and meaningful service within our community; (4) The students at the elementary school were receptive to learning; (5) The lessons enhanced student learning; and (6) The project has prepared elementary students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society. All respondents *strongly agreed* or *agreed*.

Through the collaborative efforts of all stakeholders involved in this project, I believe the three criteria for an academic service-learning course were met through reciprocity. Preservice teachers and elementary students were engaged in lessons that were relevant and meaningful as well as supportive of existing social studies standards. In addition, Junior Achievement lessons taught by pre-service teachers both promoted and enhanced student academic learning. Preservice teachers administered a pre-program and post-program questionnaire at each grade level. For example, second grade students were asked to complete a four item matching question, three short answer questions, and one multiple choice item that had five correct responses for a total of twelve correct responses. Students showed measurable improvement on the number of correct responses between the pre-test and post-test. (See Table 1). Third, through engagement in this service-learning project, elementary and university

**Table 1**  
**Student Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores**  
**on Social Studies**

Pre-Test		Post-Test	
# Items Answered Incorrectly	% Students Responding	#Items Answered Incorrectly	% Students Responding
0	13	0	21
1	33	1	38
2	29	2	33
3	21	3	0.4
4	0	4	0.4
5	0.4	5	0

students were involved in an activity that assisted in their preparation for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society.

Since the 2003 spring semester, 173 elementary social studies methods preservice teachers have been engaged in an academic/community service-learning practicum that integrates social studies skills and content and structured reflective activities. In my quest to redesign the practicum experience to include service-learning, I found that service-learning was more than just a program: It is also a philosophy and a pedagogy.<sup>11</sup>

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Jacoby, “Service-Learning in Today’s Higher Education,” in *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, eds. Barbara Jacoby and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Jane C. Kendall, “Combining Service and Learning: An Introduction” in *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service*, eds. Jane C. Kendall and Associates (Raleigh, National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1990), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur K. Ellis, *Teaching and Learning Social Studies*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Howard, ed., “Three Necessary Criteria for Academic Service-Learning,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Companion Volume (Summer 2001): 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ellis, *Teaching and Learning*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> JA Worldwide, “Elementary School Programs Overview,” [http://www.ja.org/programs/programs\\_elem\\_overview.shtml](http://www.ja.org/programs/programs_elem_overview.shtml).

<sup>8</sup> JA Worldwide, “Bringing the Real World to Kids,” <http://www.ja.org/default.asp>.

<sup>9</sup> JA Worldwide, “Elementary School Programs: Our Community,” [http://www.ja.org/programs/programs\\_elem\\_comnty.shtml](http://www.ja.org/programs/programs_elem_comnty.shtml).

<sup>10</sup> JA Worldwide, “Elementary School Programs: Ourselves,” [http://www.ja.org/programs\\_elem\\_selves.shtml](http://www.ja.org/programs_elem_selves.shtml).

<sup>11</sup> Jacoby, “Service-Learning in Today’s Higher Education,” 5.