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Social Enterprise for Learning: A Replicable Model of Service Learning and Civic Engagement

by

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Many schools offer service learning — community service linked to classroom studies — to help students become more effective participants in a democratic society. Different forms of service learning combine various amounts of discussion and analysis of social issues with engagement in activities that have real impact outside the classroom. What we call "Social Enterprise for Learning," or SEfL, involves students in both thinking about a civic or public issue and doing something about it. In this paper we describe the process we have developed for organizing SEfLs in high schools and how they evolve together with local educational and community partners. We include brief accounts of several SEfLs in San Francisco, to demonstrate how this process can be successfully replicated.

Purposes of Service Learning and SEfL

Accumulating evidence shows that service learning can develop students' skills, knowledge, and commitment to participate in addressing collective problems in the community and society (Billig, Root, & Jesse 2005; Kahne & Sporte 2008; David 2009; Levinson 2009). Leaders in the field of civic education have endorsed service learning as one of several ways schools can help to develop competent and responsible citizens (Gibson & Levine 2003). Levinson (2009, p. 35) emphasizes the importance of the experiential component: "Civic education at its heart must be about active participation, not passive observation." At the same time, Kahne and Westheimer (2003, p. 36) caution that effective education for democracy must be "more than good deeds." It also must include knowledge of governmental institutions, and opportunities to analyze and debate collective issues. Kahne and Sporte's study of high school students in Chicago found that gains in students' civic commitment was strongly associated both with classroom discussion of civic issues and with participation in active service learning projects.

Social enterprise for learning (SEfL) is a form of service learning we began developing in the late 1990s. It involves a group of students analyzing a collective need in their community or in the larger society, then working together to provide a product or service that addresses the issue. Students act as social entrepreneurs, investing their time and other resources to transform an idea into a tangible product or service that benefits other people. For example, a SEfL project might organize a new recycling service on the school campus or in a neighborhood park.

One of the important things students are intended to learn in SEfL is the concept of a shared or collective good. According to conventional economic theory, private goods can be efficiently provided through market exchange, but ordinary markets are not efficient in providing shared goods such as clean air. Some kind of collective action, usually through government, is required to produce efficient allocation of shared or public goods. (We use the terms "shared," "public," and "collective" goods interchangeably.) The prevailing definition of collective goods in economics was first formulated by Paul Samuelson (1954); for a more recent exposition, see Joseph Stiglitz (2000). Samuelson was the first American to win a Nobel Prize in economics, Stiglitz shared the Nobel in 2001, and the 2009 prize was awarded to Elinor Ostrom in large part for her research on efficient allocation of shared

resources. Despite the prominence of this idea in standard economics, high school students seldom learn it, according to a study by Walstad and Rebeck (2001), who found that market failure and the role of government were the least well understood microeconomic concepts assessed by the Test of Economic Literacy.

What defines shared or collective goods is that benefits received by one person do not diminish benefits for other people, and excluding anyone from these benefits would not be feasible. Categories of collective goods include:

• Environment — protection or improvement of air, oceans, climate, natural landscapes, and other aspects of the environment.

• Infrastructure — roads, bridges, parks, sanitation systems, national defense, law courts and other such physical and institutional infrastructures are all collective goods when they are not congested.

• Public health measures – prevention of communicable diseases or promotion of practices that preserve health.

• Culture — preservation and advancement of science, art, and other cultural achievements.

Many political issues have to do with how best to provide collective goods, and the proper role of government relative to the private sector. Public debates on these issues are often complex, contentious, and confusing. A clear understanding of what is and what is not a shared or collective good is useful in thinking about these issues.

Step-by-step Process for SEfL

From 2005 to 2009 the Center for Cities and Schools at the Berkeley campus of the University of California worked with several high schools in San Francisco Unified School District to develop SEfLs. The Center for Cities and Schools is an action-oriented, interdisciplinary think tank that conducts research, provides professional development, and develops policies that are all designed to bring the school into the city and the city into the school. SEfL is one such practice. The SEfL work has developed a five-step process:

• **Starting up:** identifying a shared or collective need in the community or larger society and finding a client organization. The teacher presents possible issues related to the subject of the class. American government, U.S. history, economics, environmental science, and chemistry are among the academic courses that would be natural settings for this kind of discussion. Technical classes in subjects such as engineering, health, information technology also lend themselves readily to SEfL. In San Francisco the district administrator who initially sponsored the district's involvement in SEfL was in charge of career-technical education, so the SEfLs were developed by teams of teachers who were already working together in career academies (Stern, Raby, & Dayton 1992; Kemple 2008). After discussion in class, students and the teacher decide which issue to work on. Once an issue is identified, students and the teacher work to identify an organization that would benefit from the SEfL, to be the "client partner." This could be a public agency, nonprofit organization, or a business. In addition to providing relevant information and guidance, the client organization serves as a proxy for the wider community to ensure that the SEfL provides a product or service that is truly useful.

• **Making sense of the city:** identifying community resources. "Community mapping" is an important part of SEfLs. Students map resources, assets, opportunities, and other features of the community. Data collection uses multiple methods including interviews, internet research, compiling available reports, and first-hand observation through community walking tours. Students analyze the qualitative and quantitative information and create a clear argument and explanation about the defined need and opportunity in the community.

• **Into action:** developing the enterprise. In this phase, students organize the service or develop the product that will provide a shared benefit to the community or larger society. For example:

• At Lincoln High School, students in the Academy of Information Technology chose to work on reducing friction between students and people living near the school, who were concerned about littering, graffiti, noise, and just the mere presence of students whom they perceived as disrespectful or even threatening. Students had an incentive to work on this issue because the principal had kept students from leaving campus at lunch time due to neighbors' complaints. This SEfL's client was the office of the elected Supervisor representing this district of San Francisco. In 2007-08, students produced public service announcements on video and broadcast them over the school's internal television to urge other students to stop littering and graffiti, and generally adopt a more respectful attitude toward the school's neighbors. In 2008-09, students organized a community summit, an evening meeting at the school for neighboring residents and businesses. More than 50 residents attended, and participated in small-group discussions which the students had been prepared to facilitate. The discussions identified issues which may be the focus for subsequent SEfLs. The elected Supervisor was present and spoke in strong support of this effort. A video presentation about this

SEfL is available at http://www.lincolnhigh.net/spotlight.html?view=sefl_2009

• At Wallenberg High School, students in the Health Academy produced videos aimed at promoting healthy eating and exercise among teenagers. The client partner was Kaiser Permanente, which encourages healthy lifestyles through its publicity campaign and slogan, "Thrive." The student-produced videos are intended to be shown in waiting rooms at Kaiser clinics.

• Students in the Engineering Academy at Burton High School partnered with the San Francisco Parks and Recreation Department to assess the conditions of paved pathways in nearby McLaren Park. They developed a cost analysis that will be used to inform a grant proposal seeking funds to restore the pathways. Students also researched recommendations for other park improvements such as community gardens, lighting and safety. They presented their findings to a meeting of community members attended by the local Supervisor and other park advocacy groups. This work is part of a larger project aimed at increasing utilization of the park.

• High school students in the Build SF program worked to elicit the participation of youth residing in the Bay View Hunters Point housing development and inform them about revitalization of their neighborhood under the federal Hope SF program. Build SF students did research on the history of the project and the background of Hope SF. They produced a video and organized a youth forum for eliciting ideas about redevelopment. Client partners were the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency and the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association.

• **Going public:** taking the work to a broader scale of influence. On May 21, 2009 students and teachers from these four SEfLs and two others all presented their work in a large meeting room at San Francisco City Hall. The Superintendent and other officials of the San Francisco Unified School District made opening statements, each SEfL team gave a PowerPoint presentation, some with videos, and a panel of administrators responded with feedback on the presentations. This event increased awareness among all participants of the potential for this kind of service learning.

• **Looking back, looking forward:** reflecting on what was learned and future possibilities. Reflection considers three kinds of evidence corresponding to the words in SEfL: (1) Social benefits to the community inside and outside of school, (2) Enterprising activity organized by students and (3) Learning outcomes for students, e.g., social studies content standards, or the concept of a shared good.
The Center for Cities and Schools collaborated with two other groups that provided important support. The Pearson Foundation instructed teachers and students on the use of video editing software and other tools. The Bay Area Writing Project helped teachers develop writing exercises so that students could build core literacy skills through reflection on their experience as the SEfL progressed. For example, the following excerpts from students' writing illustrate how they understood the kind of collective or shared benefit their SEfL would provide to the community:

- From Burton High School:
  - "This project will benefit those who use McLaren. It will make it a better neighborhood if people actually utilize the park. Better pathways will make it safer and people won't get lost if there are maps."
  - "This project will benefit the community because when we improve the park more people will be able to appreciate the natural beauty, and that will improve the reputation of the community."
  - "[T]he community will benefit from this project by getting a better and safer park. It will be safer for bikers, joggers, and dog walkers that use the paths. Also if the park does decide to add our other projects like the art wall and community garden then that will unite the community together. It will probably reduce the amount of crimes near the neighborhood too."

- From Lincoln High School:
  - "I was glad to hear that Supervisor Carmen Chu was attending our Town Hall meeting. This shows that she cares what the public thinks. She sat in my circle group and I saw her taking notes. Not only this shows that she cares on what the public thinks, but also that she is a listener. We all know that if you listen to one-another, we can build a stronger relationship with others. Furthermore, Carmen Chu had astonishing ideas for our community."
  - "We are trying to reach out to the community and let the community know that we care...What we are doing in this meeting is very important. People are usually afraid to stand up for something they believe in alone, but most of the attendees in this meeting will see us standing up for our school, trying to make a change, and will then know they are not the only ones standing up for what they believe in and will then want to make a change also."

- From Wallenberg High School:
  - "The ones who will benefit from what my project produced are the ones who need to change their lifestyle due to past unhealthy habits such as poor eating habits, or to prevent sickness such as diabetes."
  - "This project will reach our peers and put across a message that will benefit not only our future but the future of our community. By promoting a healthier lifestyle, it will save money and sickness for those who can't afford the hospital bills."
  - "This video might make ... our community and cities have healthier people in it. There will be more people living longer and there will be less disease."

Conclusion

Social Enterprise for Learning (SEfL) engages students in a kind of service learning that combines action with reflection, gives students the experience of collaborating with peers and adults for a collective purpose, and prepares them to participate as informed citizens by teaching the concept of a shared or collective good which is central to many civic and political issues. SEfL can be successfully replicated through the five-step inquiry process we described.

If organized on a larger scale, SEfLs could provide significant shared benefits to local communities. For example, SEfLs could engage students in activities such as:

- energy auditing and retrofit analysis for schools and residences, as part of a class in physics, engineering, or (less technical version) social studies;

- surveying young people to provide a youth voice in local decisions about planning and land use, as part of a class in social studies;

- collecting, analyzing, and reporting longitudinal data on local air, water, and soil quality as part of class in chemistry or environmental science;

- collecting and analyzing data on local conditions related to environmental health or infectious disease, as part of a class in biology or health;

- increasing community preparation for various possible disasters, as part of a class in social studies.

These kinds of projects enable students to make substantial contributions to their communities while still in school and prepare them for a life of active civic engagement. By empowering young people to think and act for the public good, SEfL makes classroom learning more meaningful, collective action more effective, and communities more vibrant.

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