

# Engaging the learner: The ABC's of service-learning



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## KEYWORDS:

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Active learner;  
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## Abstract

Today, educators are faced with the most demanding generation of learners: Generation Y. Service-learning is a means to engage Generation Y learners and empower them as active learners using real-life applications. Service-learning energizes and redesigns the learning environment as it takes traditional classroom experiences into the community. Through service-learning, students have the chance to practice what they learn while enhancing leadership, social, and partnership skills.

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## 1. Introduction

Today, educators are faced with the most demanding generation of learners. The millennium learners or “Generation Y” are those individuals born beginning in the 1980s and the children of the “Baby Boomers.” They are known for being assertive and expecting immediate results in a high-tech environment with structured activities where everyone wins. Generation Y learners are also known as the “me” group, who demand to be entertained. These learners dictate what and how they want to learn while motivated to learn only information that is applicable for the here and now (Hutchinson, Brown, & Longworth, 2012). With the call to prepare the nurse of the future, how do educators engage learners to be successful in education and practice? In Caruso’s (2014) book entitled *Generation Y*, the importance of teachers empowering the student to become more active in the learning process with a focus on creating new learning experiences is emphasized as one of the keys to success in the teaching-learning process. Service-learning is a means to engage

Generation Y learners and empower the student as an active learner using real-life applications.

Service-learning is growing in all areas of academia as an effective way to enhance learning as it replaces traditional classroom experiences. Service-learning is defined as learning that takes place outside of the classroom in a structured service setting where mutual goals and outcomes are achieved. Deliberate partnerships fostering positive community-student relationships, commitment, and civic responsibility are the hallmarks of service-learning. Through collaborative relationships with other professionals in the community, students can help meet the identified community needs (Vogt, Chavez, & Schaffner, 2011).

Richards and Novak (2010) define service-learning as a partnership that bridges academic and community needs. Service-learning differs from volunteer service in that the service-learning experiences are intentional and organized activities based on mutual needs and goals with reflection and sharing of the learning. This learning through service offers self-discovery of one’s values, skills, and knowledge (Bentley & Ellison, 2005).

Service-learning is not a new teaching strategy to academia. Service-learning has roots as far back as the 1900s with volunteer work linking to service-learning activities in the

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1960s (Groh, Stallwood, & Daniels, 2011). In some nursing curricula, service learning is a requirement and is incorporated into community or professional nursing activities. The *American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2008)* describes service-learning in nursing education as a methodology in helping students achieve competencies in the areas of scholarship, professional values, knowledge, skills, and role development.

The benefits of service-learning include support of kinetic learning while enriching civic behavior and community partnerships. Service-learning is a way to build cultural appreciation, critical thinking skills, citizenship, and community resources (Richards & Novak, 2010). Other service-learning benefits include opportunities for students to have a hands-on approach to conducting research to effect community change and establish evidence-based practice (Ostrander & Chapin-Hogue, 2011).

Hirschinger-Blank, Simons, and Kenyon (2009) utilized a service-learning model that showed the positive benefits of service-learning in changing negative attitudes toward diversity, increasing interpersonal, intellectual, and leadership development with opportunities to help others, advancing political awareness and policies, and networking for jobs. Service-learning can assist students to identify, challenge, and bridge the gap between education and practice. With the focus in nursing to increase competency development, providing opportunities for students to engage in community activities is essential in the student's academic and social growth (Bassi, 2011).

The review of literature provides evidence that service learning is one of the most effective methodologies for student engagement to apply education to practice as well as grow in leadership and civic opportunities in the community. This article addresses the process of establishing to evaluating a service-learning project.

The ABCs of designing a service-learning opportunity include the nursing process as a foundation. The components of a successful service-learning project include assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and celebration. In the ABCs of service-learning, A stands for "assessment and evaluation of community and educational needs," B stands for "be flexible and engaging," and C stands for "collaboration and celebration."

### 1.1. A for Assessment

The acronym A stands for assessment and evaluation of community and educational needs while searching for opportunities to engage students in learning. Course objectives and goals are matched to the community need or activity. The most crucial aspect in the assessment phase is establishing trust and respect in the partnership while building on strengths, addressing needs, balancing power, sharing resources, and establishing roles (Foss, Bonaiuto, Johnson, & Moreland, 2003). In evaluating the local community agencies, potential needs or activities can take various forms of addressing physical, spiritual, mental, and/or social needs of the individual, family, and community.

#### 1.1.1. Assess

In assessing for potential partnerships, the faculty and student begin by connecting with the community. This part of assessment starts with going out in the community and establishing relationships. Attending community functions and networking with individuals in the community is a strategic way to identify needs and discuss potential opportunities for service-learning projects. Another method in developing relationships with potential service-learning partners is to invite community members to attend educational functions and offer to give presentations on mutual topics of interest: nursing, education, leadership, etc. Some partners and service-learning needs/activities will emerge immediately, whereas others may take more time to develop. It is important for the faculty member to assess and secure administrative support for the service-learning project, which may be in the form of additional faculty or staff, release time, funding, equipment, and/or supplies.

### 1.2. B for be Flexible and Engaging

The acronym B stands for being flexible and engaging in planning, implementing, and evaluating the service-learning project. In promoting success of the project, all partners must be committed to action and creativity. The key to flexibility is communication and being proactive in planning and outlining activities by considering each partner's goals, objectives, and calendar. The project activities are planned with "doing" activities that are structured and inviting. As the faculty schedules conferences with the community partners to discuss the learning experiences and activities, it provides opportunities for the students to participate in negotiation and leadership skills (Ostrander & Chapin-Hogue, 2011).

#### 1.2.1. Plan

When planning experiences, the faculty should take into account whether the project or activities will be either mandatory and/or voluntary for students. Grading or awarding points for participating in service-learning activities should be decided by the faculty before beginning the project and written information provided to the student. Service-learning activities should be creative and inviting while taking care not to layer on just another assignment. The activities may be included during the classroom time or outside the classroom time as extra credit. Nursing students are involved in service-learning projects at schools, camps, faith-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and clinics in providing nursing care, labor, organizational skills, teaching, leading, and/or mentoring. Service-learning calls students to be innovative in finding ways to engage in the community where a need can be met while meeting educational learning outcomes.

The cultural perspective is incorporated in service-learning activities to promote awareness and appreciation. *American Association of Colleges of Nursing (2008)* identifies the need for developing competencies for cultural awareness in diverse populations. Students also have an opportunity to affect positive social change through their service to the community.

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