How Do You Manage a Successful Service-Learning Project?

by

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[Please Note: This AR sample does not include the referenced Appendices]
Abstract

I became interested in the idea of a service-learning project after studying the importance of meaning and relevance in a child’s learning. I searched for a project that would provide real-world applications for my students. The project, under the direction of twenty-seven fifth grade students, soon became a four-month-long quest to get cove base molding installed around the hallways of the entire school. The students worked both independently and cooperatively to design blueprints of the hallways, measure them, compare different products and project costs for each product. They were then able to recommend one product, write a persuasive letter and present the complete proposal with supporting data to the superintendent. The project culminated with an installation party of forty-eight people working together to install more than one-half mile of cove base in the school. Connecting to the fifth grade curriculum, involving families, making meaningful reflection time and finding something the students could get excited about were all fundamental to the success of managing the project.

“What Is Going On?”

In early summer of 2002, I developed the “itch” for service-learning projects. The graduate students in our Masters of Arts in Teaching program were participating in a service-learning project. The project involved pulling weeds from the grounds at a local state park. A teacher from another town and I engaged in conversation as we trudged through the hillside grabbing weeds. She shared how effective service-learning projects had been as a teaching tool with her own students. Throughout the afternoon I listened,
asked questions, and gathered ideas from her, tucking those ideas away in the back of my mind, all the while yanking the biggest weeds I could find.

Several days after our project at the state park, I awoke with swollen, blistered, itchy skin. Those “weeds” I had uprooted were actually poison oak, and soon my body became one giant blister. I remember my feelings of pain, anger and doubt. Why didn’t anyone tell me about this poison oak? I was absolutely miserable. What was I even doing in a Masters of Arts in Teaching program?

I was in the early stages of this teacher education program, wondering where I would begin in identifying and defining my teaching style. My background is filled with experiences with young children, but most of these experiences were not in a formal classroom setting. My desire to teach began as an elementary education major my freshman year in college, but I was quickly turned off because of one education professor.

Although I became a business major, each summer during my college years I continued to work with children at a local camp. I spent one full year in sales after graduation. While the pay, hours and flexibility were extraordinary, I had no belief in what I was selling. Each night I would go home with a heavy heart, feeling guilty. I would tell myself every night, “You are not helping anybody, Michael.” This made me question what I believed and valued. Reflecting on my experiences with children, I realized the value of being a teacher. My values were coming into focus: I needed to reach out to children in a meaningful way.

How could I plan, organize and manage a successful and meaningful service-learning project? The students in my fifth grade class were rarely engaged in authentic
learning experiences at school. Before Christmas we built gingerbread houses, an assignment that touched briefly on finding the area of a house and using a budget. I also taught a work sample that used some authentic learning experiences.

Other than these projects, worksheets comprised most of the math curriculum. Since math was an area of emphasis in my school, I wondered what I could teach to help improve the students’ math education.

So I began exploring some service-learning ideas with my class. Eventually, the principal and I decided the students would work on a service-learning project that would entail installing cove base molding in the hallways of the entire school building. The first day I introduced the project, the students had an almost stunned look on their faces.

“You mean it’s for real?” blurted out Rion excitedly.

“Are we actually going to follow through with this project?” another student wondered. Other hands eagerly went in the air. More and more questions were asked by students: They felt honored to have been selected to work on this project. Their reaction affirmed they were eager to try something different, something that would benefit others. Something that was real.

It was evident to me those first few months of student teaching how little I knew about teaching. While I did not go home at night feeling guilty and heavy-hearted, many nights I simply felt incompetent. I was curious to see what I could learn as a teacher by implementing a service-learning project. From my research and implementation of a project, I hoped to make a few discoveries.

First, I wanted the students to take more joy and responsibility in their work. As one student noted, “We will learn without even knowing it.” Secondly, I wanted to see
change in how I taught. What could I do differently to manage my students outside of the classroom? Could I effectively make transitions and connections? Would I even be able to manage my class during the project? Finally, I wanted to make sure the students were learning. How could I measure the success of this project? Could I meaningfully engage an academically diverse class of twenty-seven?

What I’ve Learned from Distant Colleagues

But what does “service-learning project” actually mean? Kahne and Westheimer (as cited in Duke, 1999) suggest this definition: “Service learning makes students active participants in service projects that aim to respond to the needs of the community while furthering the academic goals of students” (p. 9). According to one study, from 1984 to 1997, the number of K–12 students participating in service-learning projects grew from 900,000 to 12,605,740 (Billig, 2000). While there has been growth, service-learning still has not entered the mainstream school curriculum. Often school administrators are the least knowledgeable about service-learning and, thus, least supportive because of their own misconceptions (Ferman, White, White, 1996). Much of the research has just begun to emerge. Most of the literature I reviewed focused on four major themes. These four themes can be summarized by the following questions:

- Will the project be meaningful to the students?
- How well is the teacher prepared to make this project a reality?
- Will the students be able to practically apply what they are learning to the service-learning project?
- Do the students have ample opportunity for reflection?

These four themes would be the framework for this service-learning project.
Service-Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change (1999), an insightful resource written by Jeff Claus and Curtis Ogden, emphasizes the importance of making sure the service-learning project is meaningful. To illustrate this point, they describe a group of middle school students who worked at a soup kitchen. Through engaging in a meaningful activity, they conclude, the students were “challenged to organize and take on procedural responsibilities” (p. 52). These students ultimately felt a responsibility to work hard since they were providing a real service for others.

Kathi Orr (as cited in Stone, 1999) echoes these same conclusions about making her math class more meaningful. Orr describes her former math instruction: straight textbook teaching. She says, “A lot seemed to be missing from my mathematics program. I thought the children needed to use mathematics in purposeful and exciting ways. They needed to become excited about what they were exploring and discovering” (p. 58). She completely changed her mathematics curriculum to meet her new needs—changes met with excitement and enthusiasm by her students. A meaningful service-learning project will allow the students to get excited about what they are doing.

Mark Cooper (2000), a coordinator for a volunteer action center, offers a list of ten things to consider when planning a service-learning project. Heading the list is the necessity of participants to get excited about the project (p. 213). Nearly every resource I studied emphasized the importance of selecting a meaningful service-learning project.

Claus and Ogden (1999) draw some further conclusions from their studies about service-learning projects. One of these conclusions states, “Implementing service-learning is more complex than it initially appears” (p. 180). They cite numerous examples of practical service-learning projects, all which emphasize the labor-intensity of
organizing a project. Without proper planning, these projects would have had mediocre results or failed completely. Lillian Stephens, author of *The Complete Guide to Learning through Community Service* (1995), gives various suggestions on organizing a service-learning project. She pronounces this warning: “Teachers who wish to initiate a service-learning project need to engage in extensive planning” (p. 18). She goes on to describe the important aspects in setting up the service-learning project.

Carl Fertman, George White and Louis White affirm Stephens in their book entitled, *Service-Learning in the Middle School* (1996). Many of these principles could easily be adapted to my fifth grade setting. This book emphasizes organization. I took special interest in these sections, since organization is not my greatest strength. The authors suggest sending an introductory letter home to inform parents about what the service-learning project looks like.

Then they include an entire table of suggestions for implementing the project (p. 53). Ideas include talking with a few teachers about service-learning, talking with others about developing an activity, inviting participation by the principal, leading a pilot activity team and advising the board of education of service-learning activities. Since the concept of service-learning as a teaching tool is just beginning to develop, they stress the importance of organization (p. 49).

A major component of the preparation and organization of our service-learning project was having the support of my students’ parents. Nearly every source I reviewed mentioned parental involvement in the project. Cory Flood and Diane Lapp (1995) describe a school that worked hard to integrate parents into daily school life. At Gardner
School, teachers “aggressively sought out parents who would spread the word that they were indeed welcome, needed, and valued in the life of the school” (p. 614).

The article notes reasons why many parents are not involved in the classroom, though it argues for the importance of parental involvement. Eileen Faucette (2000) writes how critical it is to integrate parents into the school system. When teachers can do this, she says it will improve teacher morale and student achievement, give the school a better reputation, and give the teacher credibility (p. 57). She talks in depth about how frequently we, as teachers planning our curriculum, do everything except actively involve parents.

What specific strategies could I implement once the parents did come to school? The Student Teacher’s Handbook (1992) gives some specific advice. The authors suggest that when welcoming parents to the classroom, it would be beneficial to give them the objectives and content of the lesson, and illustrate how these fit into the overall goals of the curriculum. The parent can further observe student work habits, student ability to follow directions and interpersonal student relationships. These observations would help provide me with additional insights as I teach.

Stephens (1995) discusses how to integrate service-learning projects into the core subjects. The entire book outlines suggestions for potential service-learning projects in every core curriculum subject area. Fertman, White and White (1996) discuss how to select the project. They describe the critical link of the service project with learning.

Ideally, the learning would directly link curriculum of two different subject areas. Supporting this idea of integration is a music teacher, Gail Barnes. Barnes (2002) shares how the service-learning should relate to each student’s academic curriculum. She also
says the service-learning project should allow the students to use the academic skills and knowledge they are learning, in real-life situations (p. 42). Billig (2000) adds, “there [should be] clear educational goals that require the application of concepts, content, and skills from the academic disciplines” (p. 658). Whatever the service-learning project, it should directly relate to the regular curriculum.

The final common theme throughout much of the literature I studied was offering students adequate time for reflection. Claus and Ogden (1999) emphasize the importance of “critical reflection and the democratic pursuit of social freedom” (p. 135). They go on to describe why it is important to purposefully make time for reflection. Through reflection, students can find and create relevance in their work, and can also think more critically. They add that there can often be some powerful emotions occurring during service-learning activities. Students need time to both write about these emotions and communicate about them with their classmates (p. 85).

Finally, the authors support their claims with research evidence from others. They note seven different “empirical studies [that] strongly support the idea of supplementing service with academic and reflective opportunities” (p. 56).

Barnes (2002) supports this concept of reflection in her music class. She considers reflection as one way to assess what the student is learning. She notes, “Projects that integrate course material and the service-learning experience should be designed to encourage students to contemplate their experience” (p. 44). A typical assignment in her class following a service-learning project is to have the students write a newspaper article related to what they were doing.
One idea Stephens (1995) suggests for reflection is allowing the students to evaluate the project as a whole. They gather information, analyze it, and then make a recommendation for the next year’s class. Some other suggestions she makes are journals, seminars, and an end-of-project celebration. This celebratory time could involve bringing together all the project participants and encouraging them to mingle. Such a celebration could also bring some closure to the whole project (p. 34).

Through my research, I was better able to grasp what service-learning projects looked like. There are numerous details involved in designing a service-learning project. To manage the project successfully, I would need to implement these four concepts I identified from the literature:

- Ensuring the meaningfulness of the project to the class and their ability to complete the project
- Thoroughly preparing myself for the project
- Clearly connecting the project to the standard curriculum
- Giving students ample opportunity for reflection

The Report of the Federal National Commission (as cited in Stephens, 1995) summarizes how a student could feel upon completion of a successful project:

When asked to do something important, something that matters, something that will make a difference in the world, they gain self-satisfaction from having done it well, and respect from others—including adults—from whom they had been isolated. Such an experience transforms who they are—in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Community service is not something done for young people; it’s something done by young people. By serving, they can become planners and doers and leaders. They become valued, competent resources, rather than clients of schools (p. 18).

I adopted this model as the measure of the success of the cove base service-learning project.

**Clarifying my Action Research Project**

The context of this service-learning project was a school located in a quiet, rural
neighborhood, serving primarily lower-income families. Caucasian, Hispanic, Russian and Hmong ethnic backgrounds were represented. The free or reduced lunch program accommodated 53.5% of the school population. Both the superintendent and principal were visible, offering encouragement to the staff and students. The secretaries, custodians, and teachers seemed to reciprocate this positive attitude. I was impressed with this enthusiasm of the administration and most of the teachers.

The service-learning project involved a group of twenty-seven fifth grade students (fourteen boys and thirteen girls). Three of the children were Hispanic, three were Russian, and twenty-one of the children were Caucasian (There were no H’mong children in my classroom.) Approximately fifty percent of the families represented in my class received food stamps.

My research question was, How can I plan, organize and manage a meaningful service-learning project that integrates critical thinking in mathematics and writing?

There were clear limitations to this project, the greatest one being the obvious time constraints. It felt like a continual struggle negotiating time for this project. Each Tuesday, for example, all fifth graders in the building worked on a “problem of the week” for math class. This involved looking at a problem on a piece of paper and going through the process of how to solve the problem. I explored the possibility of replacing this time with service-learning project work, but this “problem of the week” schedule could not be altered. As a result, we had to spend an additional day each week doing another type of problem-solving instead of working on the service-learning project.

Each week felt as if we were falling a day further behind the other classes that were working on the geometry unit. As a student teacher, I lacked experience not only in
teaching, but also in leading service-learning projects. Plus, I had many other responsibilities in the classroom—five hours of daily teaching to prepare for in multiple subjects—and graduate coursework to complete. I was not able to focus solely on this project.

Academically, there were a few problems I discovered within the school. First of all, the school did not have strong results on the state assessments in math and writing the previous year. Math was the school’s greatest weakness. During the previous year, sixty-three percent of the fifth grade students in the school did not meet the state standard in problem-solving. The state average was thirty-eight percent of students not meeting the problem-solving standard. Almost two-thirds of the school’s students had not met the problem-solving standard.

Also, on the mathematics portion of the state assessment, thirty-four percent of the students in this rural school did not meet standard. The state average was twenty-five percent not meeting the mathematics standard. Again, our school was behind the state average.

Lastly, within my own classroom, I noticed a weakness in the area of writing. I was consistently hearing comments like, “I don’t know what to write” or “Why do we have to do this?” Writing by the students was often uninspired. There was usually a moan from the class when I announced it was time to get out their writing journals.

Roadmap for my Action Research Project

How exactly was the service-learning project organized? This project directly addressed the two problems I had identified: mathematics, with an emphasis on problem-
solving, and writing. After talking with the principal, we decided the school’s greatest need was cove base in the hallways. Cove base is the strip of flexible material that attaches to the drywall, covering the space between the drywall and the floor. The school never had cove base installed and the principal had wondered how to solve this problem. This, of course, would be the job of my class: find the most cost-effective cove base material for the entire school. How would we accomplish this?

The students would draw a design of the hallways (white prints), measure the hallways, compare different products and project costs for each product, recommend one product, write a persuasive letter and present the complete proposal with supporting data to the superintendent.

The cove base was a need of the school and one that would be meaningful to my students. According to nearly every resource I consulted, finding a relevant project was critical to the success of the service-learning project. Every Thursday morning during math time, we worked on the service-learning project. In total, I had anticipated using five class periods to complete the project. Each period lasted approximately sixty minutes and began with me introducing a main strategy for the day. While doing this, though, I did not directly tell the students how to solve the problem, whatever it may have been.

For the next forty-five minutes they entered the hallways and gathered data. Each student was put into a group of four or five. This group, along with one parent, would then work on its part of the hallway. The parent ideally would only be an observer, not a leader. Finally, the class would come back together for the final ten minutes. This is where I needed to be clear in making connections and bringing it all together. If this did not happen, there would be only minimal learning taking place.
I continually asked myself, “How will I manage this project?” Fertman (1996) describes the importance of being intentional about connecting the service-learning activities with the existing curriculum (p. 29). Part of managing this project required a strong emphasis on the math standards that our school was aggressively striving to achieve. One of the fifth grade problem-solving benchmarks states the student will be able to “use pictures, models and diagrams to show the main mathematical concepts of the problem.” The student will then select and use relevant information to solve the problem.

Another benchmark states the students will be able to “develop and accurately apply problem-solving strategies to solve problems and communicate the solution in an easily understood manner.” This is where the service-learning project was intentional about making connections to the curriculum. The students would have to find the cost of three or four different products based on the data they (the students) gathered in the hallways. They would determine the cost of the whole project. What will labor cost? Which material is cheapest? Most expensive? Also, the students would work toward some other math benchmarks: measurement, perimeter, money, decimals and graphing.

Once the math and problem-solving sections of the project were completed, the students would focus on writing. They needed to convince the superintendent of the necessity of the cove base project. This step would be essential if the students hoped to acquire the funds to complete the project. Students would use either an expository or persuasive piece of writing to express their ideas to the superintendent. This piece would include relevant facts, details, and examples to give credibility to their rationale. The students were to reflect about what they had learned and communicate this in their letters.
The students would personally deliver their letters to the superintendent and make a formal presentation to him in his office.

This was the basic framework for the service-learning project. How did the literature review help me plan this project? I learned that a key to implementing a service-learning project is selecting a project students could get excited about. I wondered, “Can I set something up that leaves my students wanting more? How can I make a connection with this project to learning?” I immediately discovered that this was going to be a challenge. While the students were elated to work on such a project, several of them were hoping to get paid for their work. It was critical for the students to understand whom we were serving. One solution would be to facilitate discussions with other people involved in this project (principal, interior decorator, carpenter, school board member, parents).

A Few Challenges of the Project

I evaluated what I was learning as a teacher throughout this journey. Management of the service-learning project was a main focus for me. Our class clearly had a tendency to socialize too much, oftentimes without concern for learning.

Many of the boys were similar: they liked to control the class, but in different ways. One day I observed which students most often interrupted my cooperating teacher while she taught. Nine of the ten interrupters were boys. Later, she observed four interruptions while I taught, with the same results. I realized that I would have to talk with some of these boys individually. Would they be able to handle the freedom of the hallways?
Another major challenge of this project was making sure it did not turn into an art project or a free time in the hallways activity. It was important for the students to learn as they worked to get the cove base installed.

A final challenge I recognized as the project progressed was staying organized and on task. The project continued to grow and expand throughout the course of the three months we spent working on it. The literature is accurate: a service-learning project is indeed more complex than it appears! Maintaining organization of the project would be vital to its completion and success.

Data Collected

Although data collection officially started my first day of student teaching, it more formally began in January and continued through the end of February. I collected information from several different sources, including my own observations, my cooperating teacher’s observation, student reflections, work and roundtable discussions, a shadow study and parental input.

As the project progressed, I anticipated gaining more information from each student. This information would lead me through the whole process the student went through. Some of the homework I assigned was related to the cove base project (Appendix A). I received some type of reflection from each student at the end of every cove base day. This helped me evaluate how they were growing through the project. I asked my cooperating teacher to make specific observations during some of these sessions. During lunch on Thursdays, I established a roundtable discussion with the same four students, which I tape-recorded and later analyzed. I hoped to get even more insight
into their thoughts through spending this extra twenty minutes with them each week. Finally, by communicating with the parents through letters, phone calls and surveys, I would gain another perspective.

**My Story**

I was ready to begin the cove base project, a service-learning project inspired by one long afternoon stuck in poison oak. I did not realize how thankful I would be for what seemed like at the time, a miserably itchy, sour experience. Fortunately, none of my students would have to endure such discomfort as they worked on their service-learning project!

At the end of our first cove base session, one of the students teased my teacher who had been out of the classroom. “You missed it all!” he hollered with a large smile. Another student said this about the whole project: “We’re not used to doing this. This is a big shock compared to what we normally do.” What exactly were these students talking about?

Because of the results of teaching my work sample, I knew the students would be able to handle the change of teaching style the service-learning project presented. My work sample was different than our typical math lessons. Not only did the students embrace this change for an extended period of time, all twenty-seven students showed some form of growth. The work sample consisted of many best practice lessons. A typical math lesson in my classroom came straight from the textbook.

Students were often restless and sometimes even agitated at the end of these math lessons. (This may have been because math came right before lunch.) I taught geometry
the same week we started the cove base project. Each time I asked the students to take out their geometry journals, many of them gave me long, tired looks. I began to observe for eye contact at the end of the geometry lessons. Only four or five students consistently had their eyes affixed on me, and their body language demonstrated how uninterested they were in the lesson. The students took a test at the end of the first week and the scores reflected this lack of understanding. I wondered, “Why can’t I make my lessons more like Orr (as cited in Best Classroom Practices, 1999)?”

I wanted to make all of my math lessons universally meaningful the way Orr did. This is where time became a limitation. I began to introduce the cove base project in addition to teaching the geometry unit. Again, I observed the students’ reactions throughout the class period. I was amazed at the amount of student interest in this project.

At the end of the first two cove base sessions, about twenty of the students were focused on the class discussion. It was obvious I had the attention of the classroom. These sessions, like the geometry unit, took place during the period immediately before lunch. Not one of the students complained or made comments about wanting to get to lunch. This was surprising, since a typical day yielded a handful of, “When is lunch?” comments.

My students were honest and frank (Appendix B). I asked them if the gingerbread houses, which we spent three days working on, helped them with their math. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “most helpful,” the class averaged only 5.5. While a few of the students showed math improvement, most were unable to make clear connections with the math curriculum; consequently, it seemed to me we actually spent three days doing an
“art” project. I did not want the service-learning project to become such an “art” project. I had to offer them opportunities to actually learn.

Before I laid the foundation for this cove base project, I wanted to find out what captured the interest of the students. The questionnaires I gave the students at the start of the process helped me structure the project. I wanted to check that my own observations resonated with what the students were really thinking. The questionnaire also asked the student for reactions to the completed gingerbread house project and what the most exciting part of math had been up to that point. I expected most of them to say the most recent lesson on gingerbread houses was the most exciting. This would seem to correspond with the mind of a typical student, which generally remembers the most recent events.

To my surprise, fifty percent of the students talked about the unit I had taught from my work sample nearly two months earlier. One student said he enjoyed “the two weeks when Mr. Greller taught prime, composite, arrays, multiples and factors.” Another student described her favorite math moment to be when, “Mr. Greller tried to play guitar about factors.” Not only were best practice methods incorporated into this two-week work sample, the students retained the material. The post-assessment scores showed the overall growth of the class. One trend I noticed in this two-week work sample was movement and change. The students were constantly moving around through the variety of lessons, something they normally did not do. This appeared to have made a positive impact and was something I would emphasize during the cove base project.

Half of the students chose the gingerbread houses as the most exciting math event of the year, and had obviously been excited spending time on that project. (Not clear,
“spending time with this project”—which project, gingerbread houses or cove base? If it’s the cove base project, it should read, “and were obviously excited about spending time on the cove base project.” I believe the students still would have selected the gingerbread houses as a highlight, even if more math had been involved. Students chose the gingerbread house math and prime number units on ninety percent of the surveys. These authentic experiences told me the service-learning project could work.

I recognized that classroom management would be my greatest obstacle. This was confirmed on a late December field trip. Parent helpers were assigned to each group of students, and I observed student behavior throughout the day. In all but one of six groups, the parents appeared to have no control. More distressing to me, most of them did not dialogue with the students. One explanation for this was the lack of instruction the parents received. While parents had received a letter in the mail, at no point did they receive verbal instructions. The only communication between my cooperating teacher and the parent helpers occurred five minutes before the field trip began. At this point, the class was in chaos, making it even harder for my cooperating teacher to engage the parents. There was no real introduction of these people and their purpose in accompanying the class before the field trip began. This scenario gave me significant insights into how to plan the management of the cove base project.

My foundation had been laid. The survey results confirmed my belief that the students found these authentic experiences beneficial. Shelley Billig (2000) stresses in her article the importance of communication and interaction with members of the community. She goes on to talk of the importance of forming partnerships and then
collaborating with these people (Billig is it necessary to list her name here since you’ve referred to her already in this paragraph? p. 658).

About a week before the official launch of the project, we had two guest speakers: George, the custodian, and Mrs. Walsh, the principal. George gave the students a unique perspective. He articulated the value of cove base material and how it could accomplish more than just “making the school look good.” The students valued his input and asked eleven questions before I stopped the question and answer session so he could leave. Later that afternoon, Mrs. Walsh came in for an update about the project. Since she was the liaison with the superintendent, it was important for the students to share their thoughts with her. The students would soon hear from several parents about potential products. These guest speakers would help frame the cove base project for the students.

Moving into the Hallways

At this point in the service-learning project, I had spent about two class periods introducing it, as well as other informal moments of class discussion. Based on our classroom discussions, I wanted to gauge the current student reactions to the project. I gave them a simple questionnaire asking them what seemed exciting and what seemed difficult (Appendix C).

One student wrote, “The fact that this is real and that this is going to help the community excites me because I like to do things for the community. Also doing fake problems gets boring.” Another student added, “I like the idea of a hands-on project rather than sitting in the classroom doing POWs (Problem of the Week) and things like that.” In addition to these comments, one student said she was excited about “helping out
with the school because these type of things make me feel special.” One student even wrote he was excited because “we [would] go down in history.”

These kinds of comments showed how much the students valued this project. I was surprised by the diversity in responses among the students. It seemed like every one of them envisioned a unique difficulty: the whiteprints, measuring, installing the cove base, the whole project not happening, etc. “The difficult thing about this project is getting everyone to work together,” noted one of the students. With few common themes, I knew I would need to be conscious of many different details throughout the process.

Part of being aware of details meant maintaining contact with a variety of parents. Parent helpers were crucial to the success of this project. Other than the field trip, there had been no parent involvement in the classroom. Based on the research, I believed that parental involvement would make managing this project much easier. It was logical to incorporate parent helpers, since project management was a main focus for me. If the parents were going to come into the classroom and further enhance learning, I would have to openly and thoroughly communicate with them. In addition to the letter I sent home, I chose to make phone contact with every parent who would be helping. In the week prior to the service-learning project, I began soliciting help over the telephone. Despite only one parent signing the “I can help out” handout at the beginning of the year, I found success in gaining support for this project. This journal entry summarized the feelings I experienced that night:

Today in class I asked my students if any of them thought their parents may be able to help out. Of the eight I have gotten a hold of tonight, all but one (work commitment) have been more than willing to come help out. I was almost shocked with the excitement many of them shared with me—offering to install it, call their “connections,” observe, etc. One parent shared this with me: “There is no way you should pay somebody to install this. Surely we can get ten to twelve dads together some weekend to put this in.” He went on to say he would, “pull some strings together” in finding samples for the students. Although I only got to talk to two of the parents about what
their child was telling them, I have a strong impression the students are talking about it (and not just saying, “I did nothing at school today”). My student with autism is doing “a lot of talking with his dad at home,” according to his mom. It has made me curious to explore the importance of teacher-parent involvement—how do my conversations with the parents affect my relationship with the students? What insights does this give me about the student?

My excitement was tempered when the first day of the actual project work arrived. Three of the four parents, who had said they would come, did not make it. One was unable to make a flight connection that morning and the other set of parents had an emergency. The first day we went into the hallways, there were just three adults—the teacher, a parent and myself—for twenty-eight students. (Thought there were 27. Plus see my note about how many parents in the next paragraph. You’ll need to rework these paragraphs so the math is correct. How many said they would come? How many came? How many kids were there?)

On this first day, the students were simply drawing “whiteprints” of their assigned hallway. The two parents (thought you said 3 out of 4 who’d said they would come didn’t make it) that did come were instructed to mainly observe and only help out when the students were beyond frustration. As part of my data collection, I instructed the parents to look at specific tasks and evaluate their completion. This was part of Schwebel’s (1992) suggested strategy in utilizing parents (p. 109). Unfortunately, this did not happen effectively the first day since the three (?) of us were simply trying to maintain order.

This portion of a journal entry from January 16 captured the concern I had:

> When these parents did not arrive I kept thinking to myself, “just keep treading water today.” Basically I did not want the students to get too frustrated or off task. While I was not able to write down some of the comments I heard among the three groups I was working with, I was able to recall much of what took place.

There was no unanimity in the research about how much modeling to give the students. Some researchers felt it was very important for the teacher to consistently model and lead the students, while others asserted the project should be completely student-
driven. I never felt completely comfortable with this aspect of the project: How much control do I give the students? The time factor was the main reason I did not give the students all the control. If we progressed at a true “student pace,” the project would have consumed nearly every one of my teaching days. Ordinarily the students were responsible for figuring out most everything, though I occasionally intervened and gave them necessary direction when they seemed overly frustrated. Each time I talked with the parent helpers, I reminded them who was leading the project: the students.

While the students worked the first day, I tried to observe while helping out with three of the six groups. What did I observe? Of the three teams I observed, everyone immediately jumped in and began drawing their hallway to scale (Appendix D).

While this readiness demonstrated their eagerness, there was not much organization or communication taking place. The members of each of these three groups were not working cohesively with their team members. I gathered them together ten minutes into the session and reminded them of the importance of working together. From that point forward they demonstrated significant improvement. The teams were able to divide the hallway into sections with each team member taking one section.

In assessing my own communication with the students, I wondered why team unity did not initially occur. I reviewed the notes from my introduction and recognized that I had not given them any reminder of the importance of working together as a team. What had been my main point of emphasis? Behavior. I had warned them of the many distractions they would face: most of the classes would be walking down the hallways to lunch during this time; they might see some of their friends; freedom; etc. I had reminded them of what lay at the end of this long road: a meeting with the superintendent. If
teachers spoke highly of how on-task the students were, this could have an impact on the superintendent. Knowing that behavior was the greatest class weakness, coupled with the distractions they would face, I had felt it was important to emphasize behavior.

In the three groups I worked with, I was astonished by their ability to stay on task. As other students passed, the teams continued their work. This did not normally happen in the classroom. Their ability, for the most part, to behave well and yet struggle to communicate, confirmed that the students had listened attentively to my introduction. As I prepared for the next—and possibly final—day in the hallways, I would need to emphasize group communication.

By contrast, the other three groups seemed to communicate well within their teams. One of the parent helpers remarked, “My two groups were very focused during the activity and worked remarkably well as a team. I think they were all engaged and feeling like they really had a job to do that mattered.” I had not talked to these three teams about communication and teamwork any more than with the three groups I worked with. What was the difference? These three groups had more supervision (one group had one adult helper and the other two groups shared an adult helper), and I believe that played a significant role.

There was also a clear imbalance of personalities. When I divided the students into groups, I tried to pair each student with a friend and balance the groups in terms of academic strengths. The three groups working with me were made up of students more likely to act out in class. Five of the six most disruptive students (mentioned in my three-day observation) were on my side of the building. These students often seemed most isolated from the class. When the students elected classroom representatives in early
January, three of the nine candidates were the students (all on my side of the building) who tended to interrupt during class time. When I tallied the votes, these three students were in the bottom four of the voting.

These students, who often sought center stage during class discussions, were not necessarily well-received by their peers. My cooperating teacher added, “Isn’t it interesting that the students who are the loudest are not necessarily the most popular.” Perhaps some of the students in the groups I was observing did not want to work with these students with strong personalities.

Even though the entire class had time to debrief in the final ten minutes of each period, I wanted deeper insight. Some of the student answers from the weekly questionnaires were hurried or vague. In hindsight, most of these questions could have been phrased more effectively. I decided to follow four students through the project and chose roundtable lunch discussions as the format. This proved to be one of the most beneficial tools of the entire project.

When I introduced the concept of roundtable lunch discussions, the whole class wanted to participate. Many of the students were visibly upset and jealous that they could not be included in the group. Their overwhelming response confirmed student interest in the project. What student would joyfully give up recess to discuss something educational? This was a new response from my students.

At lunchtime of the cove base days, four students would join me for a taped twenty-minute discussion. I tried to select a random sampling of the class. One of these boys, Matt, was being observed by a doctor for autistic behavior. He continually made comments under his breath while we were teaching. He was on a behavior plan and met
with the principal nearly every day. Matt became frustrated easily and did not get along with many of the girls. While Matt was a significant behavior challenge, academically he was quite strong when he applied himself to the task at hand. Nearly anytime he was pushed academically, though, he would respond with anger and resentment.

Ben was the top math student in the class. He often approached me on “Problem of the Week” day to show me how he had solved the problem. But Ben also had trouble staying focused during class, and I wondered if he could maintain focus working in the hallways. My cooperating teacher had a rule for students who played with toys at their desk: Toys out during teaching time were confiscated until the end of the school year. Ben’s cache of toys comprised the majority of her confiscated toy collection.

Cory was a student with endless energy and charisma. Because he was so eager to share, he often spoke out of turn in class. Matt, Ben and Cory were three of the nine students who received the most tallies for class interruptions.

Amy was, academically, one of the highest achieving students in the class. She articulated her thoughts and ideas well and, for the most part, stayed on task. Math was not her greatest strength, and I was curious to see how she would respond to this project. Together, I hoped these four students would provide me candid and essential feedback on the cove base project.

Through these four students, I did see different perspectives about what was taking place in the various groups. Take, for example, their responses to what it was like working together the first day. Cory said, “A lot of people jumped in to help and wanted to do it. It was okay until we got to the measuring. We finally figured out a plan where we took turns every corner.” He later added, “I got to know people a lot better through
this project (other three students nodded in agreement). When we were set up into groups, me and Kristi started talking to each other a lot. A lot of people started telling what they liked and what they didn’t like. It was hilarious (laughs). There were some interesting things I learned.”

Ben added, “Teamwork was important because if you didn’t work together then things wouldn’t get done very fast. We agreed with everything we did.” Then there was Matt, who had a slightly different perspective. He struggled with one particular member of the group: “One of them really gave us a bad time. No brain, she was not very smart...I expected it to not be how it was. It’s hard to explain. Well, I expected all of my group members to be a little more intelligent. It really upset me especially because me and her don’t really get along that well anyway.” The student he described was one of the better math students in the class. I asked him if it would be important for him to openly communicate with her and he said he was not sure. I challenged him to work at getting along with Megan.

I had an informal talk with the students about the project at the end of the first week after Christmas vacation (and after the whiteprints). Many of them were beginning to assume the project was all but a done deal. They seemed a little too complacent and confident with the project as a whole. I knew there was still a good chance we would not receive funding for the implementation of the project. This journal entry from that day elaborates upon what I shared with the students:

We talked about the possibility of this project never even materializing. I asked them the question, “Would you have still learned something?” While there were a few dissenting voices, most all of the students said they would still have learned something. I knew, too, I could not guarantee the project happening—this would really upset the students if it was assumed it would happen and then it did not.
Of course, there was information I did not share with my students this afternoon. When we first started talking about this project, I knew all along that we were going to find a way to make this happen. Personally, it felt like a responsibility of mine to see this thing through. I am a competitive person and this spirit was being put to the test. I will find a way, with the help of my students, to make this happen. I also get the feeling other teachers think this project will never actually happen. One teacher openly laughed at me for attempting the project. This is part of what motivates me. Thankfully, it seems like the parents I have talked to do have great confidence in this project. In fact, they almost assume it is going to happen. Three of the parents in particular have gone to great lengths in finding deals on the cove base product. Their support has been part of what has pushed me. I do not want to let them down.

I created doubt in a handful of their minds by suggesting the possibility of the project actually not transpiring. I wanted to remind them that nothing was guaranteed, but we needed to present a strong case to the superintendent.

Day two in the hallways arrived the following week. Four parents (three fathers and one mother) arrived to help out. I met with them during recess and outlined my expectations. As I talked, I saw how knowledgeable they were about cove base materials. Did I not do enough research about cove base materials?

My university supervisor arrived midway through this meeting with the parents. Since my cooperating teacher, my supervisor, and the four parents were in the classroom during my introduction of the project on day two, I wondered if the students would be able to block out the distractions and give me their full attention. To my surprise, there was near silence throughout the class as I gave my instructions. All eyes were on me! I reviewed how impressed I was with their behavior when they made their whiteprints. I complimented them on their willingness and eagerness to get to work. My main point of emphasis this session was working together as a team. We discussed this concept for several minutes and then I introduced our classroom guests. We set off to begin working in the hallways.
Unlike the first day, this day went as smoothly as I had hoped and imagined. I had the opportunity to circulate and really observe each group. This journal entry captured what I saw both in the hallway and in the classroom follow-up discussion:

As I walked around the hallways I noticed, like last week, every group working extremely hard. There was no interrupting these students. They were focused. When the class came back together we briefly discussed how we could fund the project. One of the students offered to bring $88 from his piggy bank. Another said he had $20. A third student said he could donate $90 a week. (Is that the correct amount per week? If it is, I’d put an exclamation point at the end of the sentence. Just checking.) They were obviously concerned, after hearing me talk a few days earlier about the project maybe not happening. The tone and atmosphere of the whole class was one of concentration. They were all intently listening to what I said. There was no movement in the crowd. One thing I never even thought about was explaining to them how to add up the measurements. This was what they struggled with the most.

I was again surprised to see the class so engaged in discussion right before lunch. This really did not happen often, and I wondered why. I asked my focus group at the roundtable discussion what they thought. Amy said, “We were out of the classroom and doing it on our own and we were not sitting down just watching.” Matt then added, “Yeah, usually it’s pretty boring just sitting there listening and here it was much more exciting.” Finally Cory added, “When we were learning by the book we weren’t actually having to do anything. Today we had to actually get out and do something.” One of my goals for this project was to make it meaningful. These rich comments led me to believe the cove base project was certainly meaningful to the students.

My greatest struggle this day was not having enough time at the end of the period. I needed about five more minutes to discuss adding up their measurements, which seemed to be the common struggle of the day. Another concern of mine was gathering feedback from the parents. I had written a short survey for the parent helper in each group, hoping to get more specific insight into each student’s work habits. Unfortunately, most of these surveys appeared to have been quickly completed with little detail. While I did have the student work (the whiteprints with corresponding measurements, all but one
group with the correct hallway measurements), I had hoped to have an additional perspective.

At the end of the period, each student described the communication that took place in his or her group (Appendix E). After talking about communication during the introduction and also having parent support for each group, I expected improvement. My assessment, wholly as an observer, was that there had been much improved student communication. Would the students’ perceptions support my observations?

One of the students in Matt’s group said this: “I think it went well this time. It was better than last time because nobody was fighting with Megan.” I had purposefully kept Matt in this group, even though he wanted to change groups. We talked about the importance of him learning to work with those different from him. Did this project have any effect on his ability to understand the perspective of others? I am not really sure of the answer to this question.

Another student shared how his group “worked well because [they] were on task helping each other.” In addition, one student said, “We worked really well. First the boys measured the wall, then the girls re-measured the wall to make sure we were right. I liked it.” Echoing these thoughts, another agreed saying, “We all double-checked and we all kept contact really good. We always checked again!”

I was starting to feel much better about the communication in the groups and their willingness to work as a team. Amy was impressed with her team’s communication. She said, “It was really good because we moved along as a group, not separate. John, our adult helper, made sure everyone was following along and understanding everything.”
All but three of the students in the entire class spoke positively about the communication that had taken place in their group.

**Problem-Solving: Pushing the Students**

The class had spent two full math periods working in the hallways, building the foundation for the project. Based on my own observations, other people’s observations, and student input, it was obvious the students were enjoying the project. While they did seem to have a common enthusiasm, I struggled throughout the project with trying to find common themes to unify the class. No two students seemed to be in the exact same place academically. I wanted all the students to be challenged academically by this project.

According to my research, this was a primary goal for service-learning projects. I knew that some of the students were already too challenged, while others found the work simple. I made these assertions based on the student work I saw. The roundtable discussion students gave me further insight. Matt said, “Yeah, I thought it (the measuring) was going to be hard.” Then I gave the students a survey asking them to rate how difficult the whole project seemed (Appendix F). The students on average chose the “so-so” selection. The project needed to be more challenging, so I decided to make the problem-solving component more difficult.

Before beginning the problem-solving, I had to get the prices lined up from the various parents who were doing some research. Part of managing the project meant making connections with various people, an aspect I did not fully anticipate before the start of the project. Despite reading about the “extensive planning” needed to conduct a
service-learning project, it did not make complete sense until I was finally done with the project and had more time to reflect.

In terms of finding a common thread throughout the project, this was certainly one of them. Beyond communicating with the students, I was in contact with twenty different families. I also was talking with university faculty and staff, the principal, superintendent, custodian and other teachers, and my own cohort group. There were three specific parents who researched and found discount prices. Could this project have happened without them? I never appreciated the significance of these people and, in retrospect, realized my good fortune in having such helpful and capable parents involved.

Once I had prices for the four potential cove base products, I designed a problem-solving piece to compare the four products. On this problem-solving day, I received the help of three additional parents. The project was moving along about as well as I had expected to this point. My smooth, comfortable ride crashed as the students began working on this new problem-solving piece.

The beginning of my journal entry from this day describes the horror of that ride:

Today was the day we put all of the numbers together and tried coming up with the price for each product. One of the groups had incomplete data (from the measuring) so I went ahead and finished it for them so we could have a total footage. But for some stupid reason I had them go out in the hallway and do it anyway. This ended up being a major mistake. It began what would soon be a miserable day. I never realized how difficult this part of the puzzle would be for my students. Each product was set up in a different kind of story problem (Appendix G). Apparently much of it was just a little over their heads. Unfortunately, I did not realize this until later that night while looking at what some typical questions are on their state test. Five or six of the students completely checked out because they could barely multiply, let alone figure out a problem with division and multiplication. The rest worked hard for awhile. Then many of them became discouraged. Not even my top math students could solve one of the problems. It was obvious this lesson was beginning to bomb.

Problem-solving is not an easy concept for fifth graders and this day was certainly no exception. After reviewing the problems I gave them, I realized my mistake: I had given them not only too much information, but also information that was beyond their
capabilities. I showed my cooperating teacher afterwards and she confirmed these suspicions with a hearty chuckle. It was one of those lessons where everything seemed to backfire. This lesson was doomed before it even began because I had failed to properly set it up.

I made another major mistake that day by sending one group back to the hallway to finish their measurement. The result of that misjudgment is detailed in my daily journal entry:

Then my other group arrived back (the one in the hallway finishing up their measurements) with only twenty minutes left in the period. They were still trying to add up all of their measurements when I decided to bring the class together and go over this problem-solving part. Oh boy, were they upset with me. And in hindsight, rightfully so. They didn’t even get a chance to figure these problems out. Then I couldn’t find an extra packet for them to follow along with. I had to split their group up and send them to tables that did have the packet. One of the students, Matt, threw his papers in the air. I didn’t even dare look back at my helpers who had come to help. I was rattled, frustrated and in a state of shock myself.

As a student teacher, I had never felt so much tension in my classroom until this moment. Thankfully, I had a chance to connect with Matt during our roundtable discussion and he openly shared his frustrations. “Everything frustrated me. Like why you didn’t just put the answer down (the measurement part) and let us work on the problem-solving,” he angrily said.

His comments confirmed what was going through my mind immediately following the lesson—I needed to attempt to keep the teams working at a similar pace. Yes, this seemed to contradict everything I had learned. I at least needed to more clearly communicate my expectations for each session. If students were not completely caught up, perhaps I would have to make certain concessions to allow them to work with the rest of the class.
I continued on with the lesson as I attempted to recover something meaningful and worthwhile from this wreck of a session. This journal excerpt describes that effort:

I desperately tried going through the problems explaining what I was doing. Some of them were with me. I tried showing the division part of the problem in a different context using a student. In the end, we figured out three of the problems. The other one was just way too much. Then somehow we got talking about funding for this project—not a good topic, considering how frustrated they already were. I reminded them, again, that there was a chance we would not get to complete this project. While 90% of the students were okay with this, the other few spoke their minds. I then gave my most passionate speech of the year. I reminded them of the alternative we could be doing for learning this material. Like, “measure that wall just to...measure the wall.” Or, “persuade me to buy that chair just to...have a chair.”

After this lesson I had time to regroup. I realized I needed to keep encouraging the students, so I did just that throughout the rest of the day.

My roundtable discussion gave me additional student insights about the rest of that lesson. First Matt talked about his frustrations saying, “I didn’t know we were doing this to learn; I thought we were doing this to help the school. Well, I knew I was learning, but I thought we were just doing this to help out the school.” He acknowledged that he had been learning, despite some of his frustrations. His comment also reminded me to continue to tell the students of the purpose of the project.

Amy then pointed out, “It was boring at first and we weren’t doing anything important, but then I realized this is like how much it would cost if we had the budget.” She went on to say this was her motivation in figuring out the problems. Aha! Isn’t this the whole purpose of the project? The project was meaningful enough to force Amy to work through her frustrations. She was able to see the purpose behind the learning.

Ideally, I wanted all of the students to make this connection. At the end of our discussion I told them of my concern about how much modeling they should receive from me. I found it baffling when all four responded they didn’t want more or less help—“it was perfect how it was.” According to Cory, “If you help us too much, you are just
basically doing all of the work. So you should give us just enough help to get on track.”

But was I giving them enough help to get on track?

**Getting Back on Track**

I was heavily burdened by the project after spending two days discouraged by the problem-solving piece. Was the project becoming too frustrating for the students? Were the students on board? Would I be able to find money to fund the project? I was wasting time fretting over all my unanswered questions. My questions and doubts were quickly calmed by an unexpected phone call. My journal excerpt describes this transformation I experienced after dropping off the students at the buses:

So anyway I answer the phone and it is my cohort leader. She says she has good news. A breath of fresh air? She announces we will be receiving $500 from the university toward this project! Whoa, what did you say? She repeats herself. But, uh, duh, what, huh, excuse me, whoa! I pranced down to my principal’s office. She about knocks me over when I tell her the good news. Now she is convinced this project is going to happen. “Oh wait until Al, the superintendent, hears this,” she hollers. She said she will make sure we get the rest of the money. Right now I cannot begin to describe what is going through my head. Sure, I told myself all along that this was going to happen. So why should I be surprised? I guess the reality of it all is beginning to hit me. I believe this is the boost the students, and me, are going to need to keep pressing forward.

Looking back over the course of the service-learning project, I began to see the many peaks and valleys. Obviously this journal entry captured a peak experience. I was learning through experience to expect the unexpected in my research journey. The main question I sought to answer through the service-learning project was how to manage the project effectively. Something I took for granted on the journey was acquiring funds to actually make it happen. In addition to the university grant (Appendix H), the project materials were discounted by $1200 through the help of a parent who worked at a local hardware store.
The principal informed me she had received a $475 donation from a private school in the area. For future service-learning projects, I will strive to have the funding secured before even beginning the project.

What would have happened if my students had gotten all the way to the point of writing the persuasive letter, and then found out we were not going to go through with the project? As they admitted earlier, they would have learned valuable concepts along the way. Yet, if I were to put myself in the shoes of a fifth grade student, this would be highly upsetting. I do not think it is necessary to always “lure” students into learning. Overall, I think the not knowing part of this project really disgruntled two or three students. These voices often consumed me and took away some of my enthusiasm. By assuring the students we were going to do the project, I could have created more of a constant enthusiasm.

After such a rough couple days of problem-solving, I needed a vehicle to bring the class back together. I recognized who was to blame for this momentary disaster—me. I wondered what I could do to better set the students up for success. I reviewed the types of problems they would possibly encounter on the state fifth grade assessment test. Why had I not done this initially? I plugged in three of the cove base products into these state test problems. Before the students took the quiz (Appendix I), we reviewed as a class possible ways to solve similar problems. These adjustments helped the majority of students ease through the quiz. Now it seemed like the problem-solving was too easy. Why couldn’t I find a balance?
“Are You Convinced?”

Our long journey finally entered the writing phase. I was warned by the fifth grade teachers that persuasive writing was the hardest writing concept for most fifth graders. My cooperating teacher suggested using the grant proposal letter I had written to my university as a persuasive letter example. Although the letter captured the students’ attention, it was clear they would need much more guidance in the process. I spent nearly twenty minutes lecturing about the form of the letter. The students had only ten minutes to begin their writing. I was bombarded with questions—the students were lost. I was not completely surprised, however, because during most introductory writing sessions, the students had trouble getting started.

The primary reason for this temporary state of confusion was my inability to break the letter into smaller parts. The majority of questions were similar—they did not know where to start. I had told them to begin with the third and fourth paragraphs. Since we had never started a writing piece this way, many of them became confused.

“You know how you said just go to the second paragraph?” Cory asked. “Well, some people were still trying to figure what to do for the introduction.” I saw this mistake, and several others, after our ten minutes of writing for the day were finished.

Matt wanted to know why we couldn’t write one letter as a whole class. Cory suggested my cooperating teacher come back and provide additional help.

The next day I knew I had to make adjustments. Here is an excerpt from my journal describing more specifically what took place:

For as difficult as yesterday was, that’s how smooth today went. About ten minutes into the period nearly all of the students were diving into their papers. A few things happened that I changed up. First, I let them begin with the introduction. Yesterday I tried having them focus on the third and fourth paragraphs. This was too much for their minds to comprehend. I began to read aloud examples from the students—this really helped others get ideas and a beginning. The noise level
of the class was nearly perfect. I did not have to say a word. Also, I think it helped that I made a new letter for them to follow along. The new letter was written in the form I had described to them yesterday. I wrote it from the perspective of one of the students in the class. They are so used to modeling that I felt this was necessary.

After this lesson, I did minimal teaching over the following days. Once the students got going with this piece of writing, they worked at an efficient pace. Matt said, “Once I got started I got a little more into it.” In fact, I let them continue working for an extra thirty minutes because they were so intent on their writing. As they continued to work on their story the next few days, I became more and more impressed with the content of the stories.

Before this writing assignment, the students wrote stories about a lost tooth and how to eat an Oreo cookie. They were allotted the same amount of time for these stories as they were for the cove base story. When comparing these three different writing pieces, it was clear how much stronger the content was in the cove base piece. It was a much more complete piece of writing.

In the majority of letters, too, the students showed a strong understanding of what it meant to persuade (Appendix J). The major weakness I observed in the letters was the conventions. Most of the letters seemed to have more grammatical errors than usual, but this could have been because of the lack of time they were given to compose these letters and the emphasis on content.

As the writing component of the project continued, I realized how much time we could have spent on this piece of writing. It could very easily have encompassed all of the major modes of writing for the fifth grade curriculum. We focused, though, on making it a persuasive piece of writing.
Many of the students also made it into an expository piece by sharing about their experiences along the journey. We only had about six class periods to work on this final writing piece. What kind of value did the students see in their letters? According to Ben, “It doesn’t seem like they are just a bunch of words, they are actually going to help us along. The words have life!” Since he had an audience and a real purpose for this letter, he saw this writing in a different light.

Another student told me, “It’s exciting because we get to write about [what] we have done. We’ve actually been doing the action. We’ve been like doing it all ourselves.” In other words, he felt ownership over the letter and project as a whole. Looking through all of the letters, I began to see a clear voice in each student’s writing.

Despite these encouraging comments, not all of the students wrote inspiring letters. Five or six of the students turned in work that was, at best, average. Although disappointed with these students’ work, I wondered if it was realistic for me to expect each student to always perform at his or her highest level. In the future, I would take their results and try to find new ways to motivate them (as I did for others with this writing piece).

**The Home Stretch**

Each day of the service-learning project I began with a road map leading to the superintendent’s office. The day finally arrived when all of the students, along with the principal, filed over to his office and delivered their messages.

Six students volunteered to share a brief overview of the project. Although the students were a little frenzied from all of the Valentine candy they had already consumed
at the class party, the meeting went well. We returned to class after our twenty-minute meeting and awaited the decision.

The principal came to our class shortly before the final bell and shared the good news with the students. Now it was frenzy and chaos!

After nearly four months of planning, working and learning, the project came to a celebratory completion on March 8. This day, like many others, did not go exactly as I had planned.

About eight people, including the installer, arrived before the announced 9 AM start time that Saturday. I wanted to have everybody meet in the classroom for a formal time of thanks to all those who had contributed to the project, but not everyone had arrived yet. I asked the installer give a detailed description of how to install the cove base. A soft-spoken man, uncomfortable in front of large groups, he gave a two-minute mini-lesson to only half of the helpers.

I will never forget the first few pieces of cove base that went up on the wall. I wondered aloud, “Is this really happening?” I really did not need to say much else as everybody found a place to work. In total, there were forty-eight people who contributed their time on this particular Saturday, including sixteen students and seven of their siblings.

Over 1,600 feet of cove base were installed in the hallways in less than two hours. The students repeatedly made comments like, “I know other kids are going to notice the cove base next week.” Their job was complete and others would take notice (Appendix K). As I walked the hallways, I recalled the quote from the literature that I had used as a model to measure the success of the project (as cited in Stephens, 1995):
When asked to do something important, something that matters, something that will make a difference in the world, they gain self-satisfaction from having done it well, and respect from others—including adults—from whom they had been isolated. Such an experience transforms who they are—in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Community service is not something done for young people; it’s something done by young people. By serving, they can become planners and doers and leaders. They become valued, competent resources, rather than clients of schools (p. 18).

The cove base project was a clear success!

**Further Reflections on my Action Research Project**

Even though I seemed to get lost many times on my journey, my experiences have begun to give me a better understanding of what teaching is actually about. Before the journey began, I laid out a basic framework for the project, based on my research. Was the project meaningful to the students? Among other things, hearing the students talk about the project, watching them in the hallways and reading their letters, assured me the project was meaningful. Most all of my data reflected the interest the students took in the project.

Did I thoroughly prepare myself for the project? Although I made an attempt, I would be dishonest to say I was fully prepared. I learned the importance of having the funding for the project secured before even starting. It is important to look at what a fifth grade curriculum emphasizes.

What other areas could have been connected to the project? With a little more planning, I believe this project could have encompassed the other core subjects.

Were the students given opportunities for reflection? Through the use of questionnaires, I gave the students ample time to reflect. After the first three questionnaires, though, I was not pleased with the depth of reflection of the class as a whole. We then spent more time verbally sharing our thoughts at the beginning and end
of class sessions. The final letter the students wrote also played a major role in this reflective process.

Did this project connect to the curriculum and did the students learn? Without a doubt, the project connected with the curriculum. Further, I was able to naturally integrate the project into two different subject areas, something my literature review stated was important. For as well as the cove base project connected with the curriculum, there were times when not all of the students learned. I did not make proper modifications to lessons for learners with special needs. The first problem-solving piece was poorly set up and this temporarily affected student learning. These are problems that need to be addressed for future projects.

In addition to the ongoing analysis of the teaching part of each cove base lesson, I noticed some major themes throughout the project. One major theme I have already mentioned was my struggle to find a proper balance in how much modeling to give the students. In the beginning, I wanted to allow the students complete freedom in directing the project.

As the project progressed, I observed the students needed more modeling than I had originally anticipated. The students were accustomed to a substantial amount of modeling all year, so perhaps I should not have shifted gears so quickly. Will I ever be able to find this balance in modeling? This was a question brought to the forefront throughout the cove base project. It was something that I wrestled with during each lesson. I am convinced, despite my own misgivings, that the students ultimately felt ownership of the project.
The reality of my role in the classroom while conducting this project was another major theme: the role of student teacher. I never had ultimate authority in the classroom and could not really determine the tone of the classroom environment. I wanted to integrate this project into more of the school day, eliminating other material that was already in place. Although I controlled the creation of the lesson plans, I had limited time to implement them. It was at times awkward trying to lead the project from the position of student teacher.

When we gathered on installation day, I felt some tension at the beginning. How could this student teacher stand in front of forty-seven people and give directions? How could I lead a group of students to the superintendent’s office when I was not even a full-time staff? It was sometimes difficult for me to appear completely confident because I was only an aspiring teacher. I did not have the knowledge of more experienced teachers.

I made other mistakes along the way due to my lack of experience. For example, my discomfort in teaching problem-solving was clearly evident in my data. Fortunately I was able to make the appropriate adjustments to keep the project moving along. Having little experience to draw from, I was trying to incorporate these subjects into something larger. I wondered, “Would an experienced teacher find more success leading a service-learning project?” I will have a better idea about the answer to this question when I conduct a future service-learning project.

During this service-learning project, I began to see the students’ lack of interest in some other subjects. On the days when we worked on the project, the excitement was high. By contrast, they seemed to have little enthusiasm for everything else that day. Why did this happen? What changes could I have made to avoid this dilemma?
Part of the difficulty for me was planning for these other subjects because facilitating a service-learning project consumed large amounts of time. I made over two dozen phone calls alone to the parent who worked at the hardware store. Every letter I sent out seeking assistance I followed up with a phone call to those who offered help (Appendix L). I even called parents if I had not gotten a reply to the letter.

Over the course of the project I received help from thirty-four adults, some of them coming in more than once. All of this required a time commitment, and I often sacrificed my planning in other subject areas. Because there were no pre-arranged lesson plans to “borrow,” all of the service-learning project lesson plans were originals that I designed. Creating these lesson plans impacted my ability to plan for the other subject areas.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of this project was its ability to bring together a community. Others beyond our class noticed the impact of the project on the school. The project created a stir around the school. Despite a major district and statewide budget crisis, the principal shared in the school newsletter how “we have rallied as a staff and continue to focus on the good things” (Appendix M).

Our project gave people something to get excited about. The principal added in a later newsletter the project was “just another case of positive results when community and business work together to support our schools!” (Appendix N). Throughout the duration of the project, people outside of the classroom had opportunities to join and help. Our custodian was even able to get involved.

Looking through my journal entries, I saw real growth in the willingness of the students to work together. Despite a few personality conflicts, the students knew they had
to work together as a class to get this project into place. Forty-eight people participated on installation day. After being out of the classroom for the two weeks prior to Installation Saturday, I did not anticipate this strong of a turnout. I had not called those who did not turn in the volunteer forms, so this number could have been even higher. I was impressed with the commitment and excitement the project had generated.

Installation Saturday was an amazing, remarkable, unforgettable day. Here are some “snapshots” of what I saw that day in the hallways:

- Amarissa and her two brothers, Rion, Matt and his two brothers, Jill, two moms and three dads together putting up the first piece of cove base
- The principal herself on her hands and knees, intent on the task, sweat dripping from her brow
- Four students walking around delivering doughnuts and drinks
- A family of four quietly working together
- Two student photographers capturing the installation on film
- Moms using the adhesive nozzles to apply the glue, dads cutting strips of cove base, moms and dads switching jobs
- Two girls and a boy scraping the cove base with their bare hands, spreading the glue to places that needed more

The installation had become a two-hour family affair, and many openly shared their excitement in seeing the culmination of all of our planning.

After everyone left, I walked the silent hallways and savored this service-learning project. Now that the cove base was installed, I could catch my breath and reflect. I
wondered, “Why has it taken me so long to have this feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment?”

As the project grew, I did become more and more stressed. Perhaps I felt the burden and uncertainty of obtaining the funding. The students and parents were on board from the start. I was not prepared to let them down. Perhaps I was feeling the time constraints of keeping up with my own schoolwork and planning. It felt good to just look down the hallway, knowing that we had done it!

The cove base project had come together as well as I had imagined. I was proud of how the class had worked so hard together, how these students had learned so much, how the parents had joined in so enthusiastically and how the funding had so wonderfully materialized.

I remembered those miserable, itching days of summer, when a service-learning project was a foreign concept to me. And here I stood, looking at 1,600 feet of cove base in the hallways. Twenty-seven children growing and working hard to make it happen. This is the kind of fulfillment that I yearn for as a teacher.

Works Cited


Cooper, M. Planning Your Next Successful Volunteer Project. (2000, February).


