

Championing Student Leadership: How can we be better supporters?

By Rebecca Gillman, Serve Learn Educational Consultant

We've all grappled with the challenges that are presented by the label 'student leader'. We've all witnessed senior students barking orders at their Middle School peers as they misguidedly assume the habits of a dictator to 'lead' an extracurricular activity or service group. Equally misguided are some teachers whose interpretation of student leadership means that they act solely as warm bodies in rooms for health and safety purposes, watching another 'student-led' meeting descend into savagery of Lord of the Flies proportions and shaking their heads in despair as they answer their emails in the shadowed corner of the room. How many times have we heard the phrases such as 'we've got to give them the chance to fail' and 'they'll learn from their mistakes' bantered nonchalantly around the faculty lounge during yet another exasperated conversation about student council meetings going over time by an hour or a group of disaffected year 9 boys being off task for an entire service trip planning session?

We know that students learn best through *doing*. Experiential service learning is particularly important when it comes to global issues education. Phrases such as 'improve the world', 'make a difference', and 'find solutions' adorn our mission statements and in order to achieve these noble ambitions, students need to be given opportunities to speak out for what they believe in, initiate action in these areas of interest and lead projects that seek to bring about positive change. However, if we are committed to creating these opportunities to lead, we also need to be committed to equipping students with the necessary tools, skills and support to give leadership their best shot. Service learning connects community needs, global and local issues to curriculum. These real problems or issues provide opportunities for students to apply their learning, but also make meaning by understanding- which leads to transfer in the real world.

Let's take an extracurricular service learning activity as a case in point. The service learning 5 stages standards and benchmarks can help guide students to tackle authenticated community needs head on. Linked to curriculum it leads students through the five stages (Investigation, planning and preparation, action, reflection and demonstration), each of which guides them in their thinking and doing to ensure that:

- the need that they are addressing is authenticated
- the action they ultimately carry out is beneficial to all those involved
- they enjoy their learning through collaboration and shared decision making with peers as well as community partners is encouraged.
- Their learning occurs when they take risks, transfer their classroom knowledge and skills to service learning experiences.

We all know that everything is awesome; everything is cool when you're part of a team. And we knew this before the catchy Lego Movie theme tune got lodged in our heads.

So, how can we ensure our inspired student leaders reach for their own dreams whilst motivating others to share their vision and more importantly, contribute to it? What can we do to foster shared ownership over projects so that all students involved are engaged and learning through meaningful participation? And most importantly, how we can

ensure everyone is having fun whilst engaging in these student-led service projects?

There is no magic formula; every group of students is different, as is every school and cultural context. But here are some tips (and reminders for many of us) that can help us be better supporters of our student leaders:

- Assume the role of mentor (rather than teacher, facilitator or supervisor.)
- Know your students and ensure they know themselves and each other. Conduct a personal inventory; their passions, interests and talents are valuable. Take time to recognize them.
- Nurture and promote connections. This could be a common interest two students have, issues they care about, communities they are a part of, places they love.
- Inspire through storytelling. Share stories of change involving people and places that students can relate to and, in turn, share their own related stories about.
- Use media to engage students in current debates or to share tried and tested strategies for action.
- Ask critical questions at key points in the planning process
- Give feedback through questions rather than statements.
- Be present. Listen actively, show an interest in everyone's ideas, probe understandings through questioning.

Teaching and Learning in the 21st Century means that we have a wealth of support materials at our fingertips. If you are looking for engaging instructional practices, articles, standards and benchmarks, videos, pdf's to promote service learning in and out of classrooms? Check out our website: www.servelearn.co

Want the latest on educating for sustainable mindsets? Check out 'Alan Atkisson: [How To Be a More Effective Agent of Change](#)

Be data driven in your decision making on student learning. We love 'John Hattie' Note ***Service Learning has a steady increase as one of the major influences on students learning***: [250 Influences on student learning](#)
This will also support your proposal for more collaboration time on your teacher schedule?

At times, the range of resources available to support us feels overwhelming. So, to make this easy for you, here are our top two resources that have been shared with student leaders over the years. Nuggets of gold that have made a significant and lasting impact on how leadership is approached.

Simon Sinek [How great leaders inspire action: Start with Why](#)

David Rock [SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others](#)

Having seen student-led meetings transformed simply through students remembering the elements that make up SCARF. And by using the golden circle theory to reflect upon projects and communicating this to members, student leaders winning over fellow members, who then increase their commitment to projects as they too, develop a vested interest in the WHY?

What we need to ask ourselves is what can we do as to not impede students as they strive to take action and lead?

The worst that any of us can do is to stand back, without equipping them with the skills and strategies necessary to learn through *doing*. After all, we want everything to be awesome, right?

If you would like to find out your service learning program rating in a survey designed for leaders in schools, check it out our resources: www.servelearn.co