

# everyone can do something

## using service learning to differentiate instruction

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Service learning-instruction that involves helping, contributing, or volunteering in the school or community-seems to be gaining in popularity for students of all ages...and for good reason! According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, service learning aims to change or help both the recipient and the provider of the service. Further it provides students “structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content ([www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)).”

## why use service learning?

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Service then, has affective and cognitive benefits. For this reason, researchers and educators alike are recommending it, using it, and studying it for every population from students with learning disabilities to English language learners to students who need enrichment. Yoder et al. (1996), for instance, found that students with learning disabilities who participated in service learning acquired increased self-knowledge and improved communication, problem solving and social skills. And Terry (2000) has noted that students who are labeled as gifted in certain areas gain confidence and learn perseverance, responsibility, and new perspectives on relationships from service projects.

Clearly, service is an effective teaching tool. It is an especially effective teaching tool for the inclusive classroom as it allows educators to easily differentiate instruction. There are opportunities for different students to engage in different tasks, strive for different goals, address different skills, and pursue individual passions. In addition, a service learning curriculum allows different teachers to work together toward common goals. Special and general educators can co-plan and collaborate on lessons and work together to teach communication skills (e.g., writing letters, holding meetings, giving a speech); functional or life skills (e.g., taking the subway, making a phone call, asking for directions, making change); social skills (e.g., working as part of a team), and standards-based academic skills (e.g., learning about government, reading different types of text) to all students (not just those with disabilities). And teachers across subject areas will find natural opportunities for collaboration as service learning projects almost always address standards and objectives from a range of content areas.

## inclusive service learning: an example

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When I was working as a second-grade teacher, I planned several service learning units with my colleagues that successfully met the needs of all of our students- including two learners with the label of autism, Luis and Katie. One such unit was designed with the needs of all students in mind. We knew that Luis and Katie would need lessons that incorporated movement. We also wanted both students to have a lot of opportunities to interact with peers, since they seemed to learn best in social situations.



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We combined two traditional second-grade units (animals and communities) and designed a new unit titled “How can we support wildlife in our community?” We talked to students about the unit and asked them to think about what we might do to better support wildlife in our community. Together, the group decided we would build birdhouses and donate them to places in our neighborhood. The birdhouse building was the highlight and culminating activity of the unit. In the weeks leading up to the building, students also had opportunities to:

- create “facts about birds” pamphlets using a new software program (the pamphlets themselves became a service project and were distributed to libraries and animal supply stores in our area);
- write letters to local businesses asking for materials or funding for bird house building;
- engage in authentic mathematics exercises related to the bird houses (e.g., how many nails would we need, how much would it cost to make each bird feeder);
- listen to bird calls and create paintings based on this music; and
- learn about birds from a visiting expert who brought a slide show and gave a mini-lecture.

On the building day, we invited parents, teachers (e.g., the art teacher used her planning hour to work with us) and other community members (e.g., local college students) to contribute to the bird feeder project. The response was incredible. We had so much support that students were able to work in pairs with one adult assisting each pair. Students needed assistance with tools, but were able to do a lot of the work independently. For many learners, this building experience was their first time using a hammer or screwdriver. They learned new skills and gained confidence, as well.

After the feeders were built and painted, students voted as a class on where we would deliver our gifts. After a long discussion about helping our community and what types of businesses and services exist in our area, students decided to donate the feeders to a father of one of the students in our class who had helped our class get supplies, an area hospital, a senior center, the specialty shop that had helped us learn about birds, a local library, the town’s domestic violence center, the YMCA, and a community center. Students with strong communication skills made arrangements over the phone for the deliveries.

Finally, we took small groups of students into the community to deliver the bird feeders. Students were required to use community maps to find buildings and were asked to give a short dedication speech when presenting the feeders to the organizations.



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Both students with autism were able to participate in this unit with a few adaptations:

- While every student with a signed permission slip got to visit at least one community site, Luis and Katie each went on several trips. The outings gave both learners opportunities to practice communication and social skills and to learn new skills related to the community (e.g., riding the bus).
- For the bird feeder building, Luis and Katie were paired with familiar and trusted peers.
- Katie was allowed to work on a cooperative art project while others did individual pictures of birds. Instead of spending class time listening to the bird calls and developing a picture, Katie drew a small bird (with the help of a friend) and then wandered around the room, handing her picture to classmates, and getting them to add something to her collective picture.
- Luis's physical therapist worked with his group during building and showed many students the best (and most comfortable) way to use the screwdriver.
- When students wrote letters to local businesses, Katie worked on the computer with a friend to compose a letter and Luis participated by stamping the school's address on the top left-hand corner of every envelope.

We also made many adjustments for students needing more enrichment. Some students were targeted to engage in more complex tasks than others. Some had more involvement in calculating the amount of money we were collecting from donations and others were charged with researching the needs of the community on the internet and by contacting community leaders.

All students made contributions and all received—to some extent—personalized instruction through the service learning unit. Differentiation occurred daily as we assigned tasks, designed lessons, and created daily instruction. Since we were engaged in “real work”, there were many different jobs to do and as many different learners to do those jobs. Unlike many other types of instruction, service truly offers “something for everyone.”

As a wise person once said, “Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something.” Service learning has the potential to not only help students grow academically but to work together as members of a shared community and to see and value what each individual can get from a project and, of course, what he or she can give.

## references:

- Terry, A.W. (2000). An early glimpse: Service learning from an adolescent perspective. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 11(3), 115-135.
- Yoder, D. I., Retish, E., & Wade, R. (1996) Service learning: Meeting student and community needs. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 28, 14-18.

