

A typical high quality academic service-learning experience

Hayes Bilingual Elementary School Service-Learning Experience Milwaukee, Wisconsin



What began as a simple example of high quality instruction evolved into a deep service-learning experience for two fifth grade classrooms and the library media specialist at Hayes Bilingual Elementary School in Milwaukee.

School librarian Tomás Kelnhofer and two fifth grade teachers at Hayes used a project-based learning framework to investigate the Kinnickinnic River. They implemented a service-learning experience in partnership with Friends of Milwaukee's Rivers, Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, The Park People of Milwaukee, and University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee School of Architecture and Urban Planning. Fifth-grade students also engaged the rest of the school in portions of this project, as they sought to increase awareness of the effect of pollution on our environment. Through their advocacy efforts, a team of educators was recruited to increase the use of service-learning as an instructional pedagogy at other grade levels next year.

Most students at the school are Latino. Teachers provided for differentiated involvement and addressed diversity throughout the project to broaden students' understanding of themselves and their community. The project involved a high level of coordination between the school and Friends of Milwaukee Rivers and Sixteenth Street Health Center. They worked together to organize an art project from junk collected during a spring cleanup, collaboratively researched issues, and developed an action plan to address needs in multiple ways. The sculpture they created was used as an outreach tool to educate the public about why they should care about cleaning up the Kinnickinnic River, one of three major rivers that empty into Milwaukee Harbor.

The project began within the context of an ecological anthropology unit on the nearby Kinnickinnic River, with service-learning elements being incorporated during instructional planning. The unit focused on the relationship between Milwaukeeans and this urban river over the course of time. At the beginning of the unit, many students reported that they didn't even understand that it was a river, as in their neighborhood, it looked more like a drainage ditch and was often used as a dumping ground for garbage.





The students started by investigating essential questions to build background knowledge. They teamed up with local river experts, a nearby high school, and other concerned citizens to sample and monitor the water quality of the river and look for trends in river health. Students examined a broad range of topics, from environmentalist movements and wildlife and habitat conservation to traditional ecological knowledge and best practices. Students researched articles and other web resources on related topics at differentiated reading levels, which were placed in a Moodle course for students to access online. The information they acquired was used in class discussions to further their learning and address ethical issues related to the environmental problems. These classroom discussions continued in online discussion groups in the Moodle course.

The project covered several subject areas, including science, language arts, social studies, math, and technology. Students kept science notebooks and built reflection into their data collections. They used technology to gather information for their research, enter data in spreadsheets, analyze information in graphs, and communicate in written documents. Students developed PowerPoint presentations to synthesize and convey learning throughout this unit. They discussed the ethical issues of polluting the river and learned about the history of the river. In collaboration with community-based organizations and a high school located on the river, students explored the river in canoes and did water quality testing. Students continued to assess the effectiveness of their project throughout implementation. As the experience continued, students worked to keep the community safe from dangers around the river, as well as help reduce the waste polluting the river.



Fifth graders had a great deal to say about all they learned during the Kinnikinnic River service-learning experience. They analyzed how their learning was more effective because of the service-learning process, the effect it had on student attendance, and how they felt valued as community members due to their work. Their comments included:

- “Service-learning makes school more interesting.”
- “We learned a lot more. We learned a fun way, not just sitting in the chair and doing normal stuff.”
- “Almost no one is absent anymore unless they’re really sick.”
- “We learned about all of our subjects, and now people know that it’s a river and is something important to our environment. Many people used to think it was just a place to throw garbage.”
- “We want the city to use less salt on the roads. Salt hurts the river, because the runoff goes into the storm drains and causes animals to die.”
- “We like to help our community. If we get it cleaned up, the health center is going to help us build a bikeway so we can have picnics by the river.”
- “Service-learning helps our learning because we learn how to cooperate and work in groups.”

In addition to these advocacy efforts, students helped design the layout for rain gardens at Cleveland Park, created informational signs about the benefits of rain gardens, and placed

informative stickers on storm drains to educate the public about how to keep chemicals out of the river. Their long-range goal is to build a natural filtration system along the river and have a bike path developed as a cooperative effort between community agencies and a local health clinic so the community can easily access a picnic area that will be established.

