Community Based Learning:
Developing Practical Resources for Schools and Service Agencies

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Introduction
Guide to Effective Community Based Learning: Opportunities for students in years 9 and 10, is the title of a practical resource released in September 1999. Published by the Australian College of Education and the Australian Student Traineeship Foundation, this publication is designed to generate high-order learning outcomes for 14-16 year-olds. The purpose of this paper is to provide a rationale for CBL and to address some of the implementation issues.

What’s New?
For many schools, community involvement or service is not a new experience. What is new is making this involvement a structured part of student learning, and in a way that fosters higher order learning outcomes.

Among the calls for the fundamental reform of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of student learning (that is, the curriculum, teaching and organisation of schools), many have argued for a greater focus on ‘life skills’ and ‘key competencies’ with a view to ensuring that all young people make an effective transition from school to further education, training or employment.

Some have advocated that new relationships between students and teachers need to be established, whereby the former take much greater responsibility for their own learning and the latter fulfil the roles of guide and coach. Others have placed greater emphasis on the need for increased flexibility with regard to the use of time, infrastructure and people at both school and community levels.

Underpinning these calls for reform is greater recognition of the impact of the ‘information age’ and the ‘knowledge society’ on notions of education. For example, schools are no longer seen as the primary producers, deliverers and assessors of knowledge and skills. Rather they are seen as one player—albeit a very important one—in a new model of education where the focus is on learning how to learn, experiential learning and lifelong learning.
Community Based Learning

Out of the classroom

It is in this context, that community-based learning can be seen as having an important role to play in the transformation of conventional approaches (for example, didactic, discipline-based teaching) to more innovative practices (for example, self-directed, holistic learning).

Community-based learning is a structured approach to learning and teaching that connects meaningful community experience with intellectual development, personal growth and active citizenship. One of the fundamental features of community-based learning is that learning takes place in the community, beyond the confines of the classroom and the school. Another is that it involves individuals other than teachers as part of the learning process.

The twin goals of community-based learning—the improvement of student learning and achievement, and community and social development—are underpinned by a number of basic principles and beliefs. For example, the student is seen to be at centre of the learning process, while remaining connected to and supported by teachers, parents and other community members. The emphasis is on engagement in meaningful and productive work that has a clear educational focus, with well-defined outcomes. It is important that students participate in activities that are real rather than simulated, and that the main results of their work are exhibited, presented and acknowledged in community settings.

There are four basic principles of community-based learning. It is learner-centred. Students are to develop a sense of ownership with regard to the learning activity and assume an appropriate level of responsibility for planning and development.

It is outcomes-based. All partners need to agree in advance on the knowledge and skills that are to be developed by students and the means by which they are to be assessed. It has a real-life context. The learning activity is to focus on a specific problem, issue or practice that has been negotiated with teachers and other relevant partners.

It is cooperative. All partners will be involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning activity, contributing resources as appropriate.

For years 9 and 10

Community-based learning is thought to be particularly appropriate for students in years 9 and 10. Why is this the case?

A 1998 national study by the author, School Reform in Years 9 and 10, found that compared with the middle years (years 5–8) and the post-compulsory years (years 11 and 12), relatively little attention in terms of research, development and resourcing has been paid to years 9 and 10 over the past decade. The report found that a degree of ambiguity exists across systems and States with regard to the role, function and status of years 9 and 10, and that there would be considerable value in articulating a new rationale, philosophy or ‘vision’ for these years.
Another national study conducted by Dr John Ainley and colleagues at the Australian Council for Educational Research—Schools and the Social Development of Young Australians—found that the views of students in year 10 differed from those in year 5 on a number of issues including relating to others, commitment to community wellbeing, and adherence to rules and conventions. A significant finding of this sample study was that the gap between the views of girls and boys is wider in year 10 than in year 5 for each of these three aspects of social development, and is twice as wide in the case of relating to others and community wellbeing.

For example, student survey data from this study revealed that 'helping in community groups' was seen as extremely important by 35 per cent of year 5 students, but by just 11 per cent of those in year 10. A conclusion of the study was that the widening gap between girls and boys in their commitment to community wellbeing is a major issue deserving further investigation and action.

At the same time, anecdotal evidence from teachers suggests that many believe that most students in years 9 and 10 are ready and eager to participate in new kinds of learning experiences and that they have reached levels of educational, personal and social development that are seldom acknowledged or respected in schools. For example, even though a significant proportion of them have part-time jobs, are sexually active and assume important responsibilities in the home or the local community, they are often accorded the status of 'adolescent' at best, and 'child' at worst.

This is not to deny that there is considerable variation in development within young people of between 14 and 16 years of age. As most teachers, parents and employers will testify, just as there are some very advanced 14-year-olds, there are also some rather immature 16-year-olds. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that less than twenty years ago, nearly 50 per cent of students left school prior to completing year 10.

Since that time, not only have retention rates increased dramatically, but also a good deal of innovation has been introduced at these year levels. Vocational education activities such as work experience, careers education and enterprise education have been implemented in most secondary schools, along with various programs and courses in work education, most of which include a structured work placement.

However, following the recent allocation of large-scale funding to support initiatives in vocational education and training in senior secondary schooling, many employers have found that structured workplace learning for year 11 and 12 students constitutes a more effective use of their resources and generates more productive outcomes than work experience.

It would appear that in some settings the demand from schools for work placements has far exceeded the supply available in business and industry. Hence, the concept of community-based learning that involves the strengthening of links between schools and service agencies and other non-profit organisations has great potential in years 9 and 10.
It should be noted that while some schools have been implementing community service initiatives for many years, these have often been in the form of extra-curricular activities rather than mainstream curriculum and assessment practices. One of the major objectives of community-based learning in years 9 and 10 is to ensure that all students achieve a high standard of generic skill development, so that they will be able to participate effectively in the full range of learning opportunities provided by vocational education and training, senior school programs, and post-school work and education.

**Issues in community learning**

Those involved in secondary education during the early 1980s might remember debates about whether work experience should be for some or all students in year 10. Similar issues have been raised more recently in relation to vocational education in years 11 and 12. Experience has shown that in such situations, students tend to vote with their feet. In other words, if they perceive an activity to be of high quality and generating productive outcomes for them, then they will rush to enrol.

An interesting situation currently exists in the USA: some states have mandated that in order to graduate to senior college, students must complete a required number of hours of community service (a form of community-based learning). This raises a number of issues, not the least of which is the apparent contradiction in making volunteerism a compulsory activity.

Nevertheless, one of the most important considerations for schools would appear to be that community-based learning is, and is seen to be, at least a viable option for all students. To establish it as a second-class activity, for example, something designed primarily for low-achieving students, or for those who are deemed to be 'at risk', would not be in the best interests of students, schools or community agencies.

Most parents and caregivers are keen to ensure that their child succeeds at school. However, success is often portrayed (and therefore perceived) only in terms of 'academic' success (such as a high score for tertiary entrance). Research has shown that the majority of parents actually tend to view the role and function of secondary schools in a much broader context.

For example, they perceive key competencies such as the capacity to solve problems and make decisions, and life skills such as preparedness for entry to the world of work, to be as important as the academic knowledge and skills required for tertiary study. Essentially, they regard academic achievement as one of a number of desired outcomes from secondary schooling. At the same time, parent and teacher concerns that community-based learning might be a distraction, an 'extra', a luxury, cannot be dismissed out of hand.

When implemented effectively, however, community-based learning should complement academic and other intellectual pursuits. In other words, it presents an ideal opportunity for students (and teachers) to integrate theory and practice in two important ways. First, it enables students to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills in authentic contexts.
Second, it enables teachers to derive and explore concepts and theories from students’ learning beyond the classroom.

Few would dispute that the acquisition of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, together with foundation knowledge about the world in which we live, are essential for any young person. However, there is an increasing recognition that today's young people require a broader education that will enable them not only to participate in, but also to contribute to, what has been identified as a more civil society.

Examples of Good Practice
The Guide to Effective Community Based Learning: Opportunities for students in years 9 and 10 contains five examples of schools and service agencies that have worked in partnership. These are Strathfield Girls High School and the Exodus Foundation in NSW; Catholic Regional College Traralgon and Red Cross in Victoria; Mabel Park State High School and BoysTown in Queensland; Leigh Creek Area School and the Nepabunna Aboriginal Community in SA; and Latrobe High School and the Latrobe Council in Tasmania. A significant proportion of this presentation will be devoted to generating a discussion of other examples of good practice and the success factors that underpin them.