What is service learning?

There are two models that we are aware of. Both involve learning and service:

Service Learning (lately being referred to as Community Service Learning in Canada)
This involves a partnership between a post-secondary institution, a community agency and a student. The goal of this is to foster active citizenship particularly in young adults and to support the university to play a partnering role in supporting community organizations. This model is used within Canada and internationally.

Community Development Service Learning
This model involves a similar partnership but the partnerships and learning outcomes are driven by a community organization. The learning partner is most often a non-formal or informal learning organization and/or a school in the K-12 system. The focus is local. The goal of this model is for social and economic change as determined by the community and/or neighbourhood and the results are first and foremost in the community.

How have we been involved in Learning and Service?

We have been involved with both models of learning and service. In Service Learning projects we have been the community organization that partners with a post-secondary institution. In this model we provide supervision, mentorship and a meaningful project for a post-secondary student. Our involvement with this model of learning and service has included:

Institution: OISE
Student: Education student
Project: Supervise a summer youth popular education team in healthy eating/active living activities
Conduct action research about the community’s relationship with food
Duration: 4 months

Institution: University of Victoria
Student: Recreation Management student
Project: Design and Implement a summer recreation program for children 5 to 12-years-old
Duration: 4 months

Institution: Northwest Community College
Student: Geography students
Project: Research one potential eco-cultural tourism project for Upper Skeena
Duration: 1 month
The model of learning and service that we are most familiar with is *Community Development Service Learning*. This happens entirely in our community. We have always been the instigator. This model of learning and service has evolved into three programs briefly described below:

1. **Making the Rules**

   We have created a plain-language handbook for elementary and high school students. In this model one of our staff works with either a class or a small group of students to explore democratic citizenship and what change they believe will make the school more democratic for all citizens (students and all staff). This program involves a 1.5 hour weekly visit with the students over 8 – 10 weeks. It combines group process (the “wake-up”, linking passion/interests with action, reflection-on-action) and product (planning, preparing, implementing, evaluating a project). The outcomes are determined and monitored by the students. Often the students involved in this model receive credit for work experience and/or leadership experience.

2. **Community Development Service Learning (CDSL)**

   This program is quite organic and so happens in many forms and places in the community. It often takes place over a 6-week period but the time varies according to the individuals involved in the program. It always involves a group of learners usually from the local community college or first nations education centre. In this model, one of our staff acts as a CDSL liaison. They facilitate an orientation with learners and a separate orientation with instructors and community practitioners. During this orientation each individual involved identifies citizen assets they would like to foster during the project and also have fostered during the project. This immediately shifts the power dynamic of who teaches and who learns. It creates an environment of learning with and from each other. We introduce several community projects that require service (for example: organizing books in the basement of the ice arena for our book mobile; codifying elders tapes for a local museum; harvesting and cleaning community gardens; gleaning fruit trees for seniors and people with limited mobility). The learners then link their interests for service and for skill development with a community project. Their instructor helps work out the logistics of getting learners to the work site (sometimes staying with the learners and giving service) and co-facilitating the reflection tools with the Storytellers’ staff member. The instructor also helps with the final evaluation. Outside of the service and learner contact time, the instructor and community practitioner reflect on their experience, evaluate the experience and share in a wrap-up conversation about citizenship engagement and how they can incorporate fostering citizenship skills within their respective work environments. The learners who are involved in this program receive credit for work experience from their institution.

3. **Upper Skeena Service Learning Agriculture Program**

   This is the most formalized of our Community Development Service Learning programs. This program is full-time for six months. We put out a “call for students” and young adults who are out-of-school and out-of-work apply. Students are usually referred to the program by an employment counsellor, social worker, band administration and/or family member. The majority of students who enter this program have not finished high school and have rarely held a job. We accept nine students per program. This program is divided in to three phases. The initial phase uses popular education techniques for the “wake-up”. We focus on developing personal and political power of the individual and the group. We use a lot of outdoor experiential programming such as ropes courses, hiking, skiing. We find this helps build connection beyond self and provides an opportunity for the students to connect with the natural environment around them. The second phase introduces students to the food citizenship work in the Upper Skeena. This
phase combines service (working for other organizations involved in food citizenship) such as helping with the elders lunch program, good food box distribution, demonstration garden sites, etc. with educational activities such as culture and language, feasts, health and nutrition, environmental education and food security education. The final phase supports the students to create a work and life plan. This plan is created in conjunction with a service worker (social worker, counsellor, etc) and with an extended family member. This phase also involves the students entering a work site so they learn the expectations and benefits that come with holding a job. By the final phase the students are leading a community project that they have designed and planned within a small group. Throughout each phase we place a strong emphasis on relationship building and social networking. We believe that it is the development of healthy and extended relationships that sustain the young adults within and beyond the life on any one program. This program involves a high level of community partnerships and support.

What have been the challenges with learning and service?

Service Learning

When we accept a post-secondary student, we always end the relationship wondering if there have been enough benefits to the community for the amount of time it takes to support a young person coming in to learn. This always leaves us in a conundrum because we truly believe in mentoring young people yet our community struggles with huge social and economic issues that require attention. We recognize that our work is place-based and thus organic. In this context we wonder if the university really understands the limited help a university student “coming in” for a short period of time can honestly give, regardless of skill set.

We are located in the North. We are a small and culturally diverse population living in municipalities, First Nation reserves and rural ranching communities. We are remote and far-removed from any university. Our closest is more than 500 kilometres away and outside of that the next is more than 1,000 kilometres from us. It makes it very difficult to develop relationships with the institution. Students are coming “cold” to us. And often they are urban and so the culture shock for them is huge. As is the isolation — there is little infrastructure for recreation, arts, culture -- there is little in the way of restaurants, pubs, gyms, cafes, or stores so when we “take on” a student it isn’t only around work. We are their social network and they rely on us to meet other people and to discover where and how to access social events. We are also geographically separated as communities (up to 100 kilometres apart) with no public transportation — if a student doesn’t have a car, they again, rely on us to get around. Bikes are okay if someone is fit and can handle biking in extreme weather conditions. The closest town is outside of our region and is 80 kilometres away on the highway. When you add on to this isolation the extreme social and economic struggles of the community, the high suicide rates and the dysfunction that comes from colonization, we are similar to an international development placement. Most students come unprepared for these living conditions. And so, we are left to provide as much emotional support as we can to the student. It becomes a lot of work for us and a huge stress and cultural shock for the student. We also worry that when the student returns to their university there is limited understanding of their experience. We have heard from past students that they didn’t feel any debrief happened for them on the emotional level it needed to.
A final key challenge is **funding**. As with most non-profit organizations we don’t have **core funds**. University students come for service (don’t cost us wages) but supporting, organizing and managing that person requires resources. We have limited administrative funds and so we always have to be creative to fund the staff person’s time to support the student. Sometimes, this time becomes volunteer time. It limits how often we can accept a student simply because we can’t afford the luxury of service learning. It also limits how much support we can give the student on paid staff time.

**Community Development Service Learning**

The biggest challenge in CDSL is funding. Again, because we **lack core funds** we never know from one year to the next if we can offer a program. This makes it difficult to **retain staff** and it makes it difficult to **solicit potential participants**. It seems we secure funds for one or two programs and this builds momentum in many levels and then the funds are no longer available. We try to organize among our partners so that one staff person is always searching for funds. It takes a lot of **time and energy** away from what we consider very successful programming.

Many students entering our programming struggle with social and economic issues. In six months they are usually just beginning to recognize change within themselves, building the confidence to dream and act on dreams and be comfortable to network with others. We rarely receive funding for any longer programming length and so we often feel as though we are **ending the support of the program just as the young person is gaining confidence and skill** to make transformative changes.

The other worry about programming length is determining what is the best length of program to provide a supportive environment that encourages, challenges and demands expectation of the participants, and when does a program become too long that dependency sets in? Dependency has been cited as a key barrier to young people taking action on their ideas for change. We are constantly reflecting and critiquing our practice to make sure we are not fostering dependency.

A final key challenge in CDSL is **lack of recognition** by governing bodies of formal institutions. We have excellent and diverse partnerships at the local level. However, it is always our organization that secures the funds, organizes the projects and manages the logistics. We have not received any support from the decision makers. We think partly this is due to our isolation; most **decision makers are far-removed from our community**. And we think it is partly due to our **lack of advocacy** and lobbying. In 2008 we plan to focus on inviting and challenging formal institutions to share some of the costs of CDSL. We also require advocacy for **more enabling policy** to support place-based CDSL.
What have been the benefits from learning and service?

When service learning has worked it has certainly strengthened intergenerational relationships between young people and adults. Past students have also told us it has led them to feel an increase in connection to their society. We have heard this from students coming from post-secondary institutions and youth in our local programming.

It is exciting to see youth identify personal interests and then connect these to community issues and opportunities. We have seen youth become fully engaged citizens. Activism becomes a way of life for them.

Our community programming has shown us that despite our struggles and our differences we can work together. The benefits to local programming have been tremendous. Our experience demonstrates that when the community is supported to determine what outcomes they want, and work together to make such change, the ripple effect is far greater than when someone from outside sets the learning outcomes. We really believe that if we have managed learning and service in our community, any other community or neighbourhood can do so too! It demands skills, knowledge and a set of tools to keep you rigorous in the learning, mentoring and reflection.

Probably, we would say the greatest benefit is the quality relationships that have been established. Regardless of projects, activities and even the physical infrastructure that has come from both forms of service learning, it is the relationships that sustain us. Locally those relationships are woven between youth, adults and elders. Regionally, and even nationally, those relationships are woven between youth, community members and academics.

The nature of these relationships results in continual work together whether or not funding is available. It also gives us a sense of solidarity and a feeling that we are not alone. I think Gustavo Esteva sums up the benefits we see from learning and service:

We need flexibility and openness to walk our own path – creating a situation in which no condition for learning is scarce. And where opportunities to learn with and from each other are plentiful. And there as citizens, more and more, we discover ourselves, who we are, in the eyes of our friends.

Gustavo Esteva
What reflections are you left with?

On working in community:

- The process and approach are part of the outcomes. It is not about service delivery, it is about building relationships and building capacity in the community.

- Community involvement is inclusion versus exclusion; the community is the expert and the benefit is huge when community is empowered.

- By being in the community for a long time then relationships happen naturally. People work together because they have gotten to know each other. The work is people focussed rather than issue or project focussed.

- You can’t build the capacity well without actually being in the community and building the relationships.

- Using a learning and reflective lens means we learn from our experiences rather than only live them.

- Service and learning when combined in community provides an opportunity to see how knowledge can benefit society and influence democratic decision-making.

When community frames the learning:

- It becomes living and learning as neighbours rather than providing a service or sharing knowledge. It opens up the opportunity for a profound experience of sharing a common life.

- The act of sharing service, reflection and learning politicizes each of the lives affected by the experience.

- The learning is approached from a social movement lens rather than for credit. The learning and service leans towards change for social outcomes. It builds a momentum of confidence, hope and intention.
Considerations for the continued support of CDSL

1. Learning for transformation

We need more places for informal and non-formal learning to be accessible to people in their local neighbourhoods. This demands discussion at the local, regional and national level. It requires being able to honestly explore questions such as, “who controls learning”, “who teaches”, “who learns”, “where does this happen”. And it requires a shift in policy that currently promotes education as only existing within the formal institutions.

We recognize and advocate for formal education. The skills and information provided within institutions is critical for a healthy society. We find it exciting and hopeful that the universities are being supported to play a role in learning for social outcomes. We hope that the institutions can learn to partner with community organizations. Funding such as the McConnell Foundation grants will hopefully allow for more dialogue and relationship building between community partners and institutions.

However, for a community partner to engage in such dialogue we believe funding needs to be granted locally. We struggle to secure funds for local programming let alone to discuss pedagogy and tools for the expansion of such programming.

**Recommendation:**

Policy becomes enabling for communities and neighbourhoods to enter into peer learning and dialogue about learning as a tool for social change.

Funds become available for local practitioners to come together and learn with and from each other about learning for social outcomes.

2. Building relationships between community and the academy

We like the question posed by the McConnell Foundation; *Can universities and community organizations become knowledge partners and thereby contribute to the resilience of Canadian communities?* We believe this is a worthwhile exploration. The CDSL Initiative by CCEDNet, also funded by McConnell, can advocate for the community partner in this exploration. We hope that this project can model peer learning among community practitioners and networking between community and university.

However, we also recognize that the epistemological foundation of Canadian education is culturally different and, in some cases, counterproductive to the epistemological foundation of our community’s culture. With the cultural diversity in Canada including First Nations, Immigrants and Refugees, there must be as Gustavo Esteva says, “flexibility and openness to walk our own path”. This demands a comprehensive approach to education and learning.

**Recommendation:**

Resources are provided so that people at the local level can share their differences and be involved in the conversation with academics regardless of their literacy skill set.

Resources are provided so that more people at the local level and within formal education institutions learn about CED and how this approach can build resilient communities across Canada.