

Dual Benefits, Dual Challenges

Integrating Community Impact and Participant Development in Jewish Service-Learning Experiences

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At its best, Jewish service-learning has the potential to deliver a unique and integrated dual benefit: it can effectively address problems faced by communities in the outer world – by providing high-impact service to communities in need – while simultaneously transforming the inner world of the participants providing the service by fanning the sparks of both Jewish and civic engagement in the souls of those who serve. To achieve this dual benefit, however, programs must maintain a dual focus on BOTH community impact AND participant development. This article explores what occurs on “unbalanced” service programs that focus on only one of these challenges while ignoring the other. It also offers practical recommendations and best practices for programs seeking to achieve the dual benefit.

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, humanity faces a myriad of pressing public problems: environmental sustainability, educational inequality, disaster preparedness, public health inequities, political polarization, food security...the list is long and sobering. At the same moment, the Jewish community is struggling to keep young Jews engaged with Judaism in a world in which the barriers that once kept Jews separate have been mostly dismantled.

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the Jewish community is now turning its attention to a response with the potential to link these two seemingly unrelated challenges: Jewish service-learning (JSL). At its best, JSL has the ability to deliver a dual benefit: it can help meet problems faced by communities in the *outer world*—by providing high-impact service to communities in need—while simultaneously transforming the *inner world* of the participants providing the service. This is not a false hope or an empty promise: as this issue of the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* makes clear, a growing body of research on JSL—and an extensive literature on secular service-learning—makes it clear that this dual benefit can be achieved. Done right, a high-quality JSL experience can repair the world AND ignite the Jewish souls of those who serve.

This is the unique and exciting promise embedded in every JSL experience; in reality, the execution often does not fulfill this potential. Funders often approach this work with an unbalanced focus that values one of these benefits over

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the other; practitioners may be expert at delivering one benefit while being deeply ineffective at delivering the other. The result is an experience that fails to unleash JSL's full transformational potential. At best, unbalanced JSL has limited impact on both the communities served and the participants providing the service. At worst, unbalanced JSL can harm local communities and perpetuate the problems and injustices it seeks to address while extinguishing the Jewish embers burning in the souls of those who serve.

In this article, we illuminate the dual benefits of JSL in two ways. First, we explore the matter on a theoretical and conceptual level, answering these questions:

- Why are community impact and participant development both important?
- What happens when we deliver one at the expense of the other?

Second, we engage the matter at a more practical and concrete level: What are best practices in designing and delivering JSL experience that result in both community impact and participant development? Finally, we use a perspective grounded in Jewish philosophy as a way of understanding the importance of integrating these dual benefits.

We begin with a brief explanation of terms used in the article. We understand *community impact* as any program outcome that relates to the *community being served* (think of this as the “service” component of service-learning). Examples of community impact include completion of a physical service project like building a home or school, improvement in academic performance as a result of tutoring students in English or math, or a decrease in at-risk behaviors as a result of providing mentoring, education, or leadership development to at-risk youth. Community impact clearly varies from program to program, and its evaluation should be based on clear indicators articulated by the program provider.

In contrast, we understand *participant development* to be any program outcome that relates to the *individuals providing the service* (think of this as the “learning” component of service-learning). This might involve participants acquiring skills such as house construction or group facilitation, gaining a deeper understanding of certain local or global issues, increasing their connection to the Jewish community through study and Jewish ritual, or developing leadership skills and greater self-awareness. Once again, different programs articulate different outcomes based on what they hope participants will walk away with after participation in their program.

These two dimensions of every service-learning experience are distinct, but also deeply interconnected and interdependent. Ideally, programs deliver both sets of outcomes with equal quality and effectiveness; when that does not happen, the power and impact of the entire program are inevitably diminished.

ONLY HALF THE WORK: EXPLORING THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNBALANCED SERVICE

The primary goal of this article is to make the case for designing and implementing “balanced” JSL experiences that integrate a dual focus on BOTH community impact AND participant development. We believe that this BOTH/AND approach is essential for unleashing the unique, integrated dual benefit of a high-quality JSL experience. To clarify why this approach is so important, we explore the potential consequences of programs that focus on “only half the work.” The

more we understand the risks of unbalanced service that focuses on EITHER community impact OR participant development, the more motivated we should become to provide balanced service experiences as we build the JSL field.

Community Impact in the Blind Spot

In this section, we consider the problems that can arise when programs approach JSL with an unbalanced focus that makes participant development the primary goal and treats community impact as an afterthought.

Communities Are Unintentionally Weakened. When community impact is treated as an afterthought, JSL programs can actually weaken local communities and local community efforts. Consider the following story:

Well-meaning volunteers were brought in to paint buildings in housing projects, but residents of the projects were never asked if this would be a helpful form of service. The volunteers were unaware of the fact that community workers were in the midst of a process of engaging residents to take care of their own environment. Important initial work had been done, but the well-intentioned effort by outside volunteers brought an end to these efforts. "Why should I work hard if others will do it for me?" become the attitude of some residents.

In this example, participants surely left the project feeling virtuous, but the impact on the community was negative in some very important ways. The service project actively undermined an existing community empowerment initiative and left the residents less motivated to take responsibility for their own community than if the project had never happened. Despite the best of intentions, the program weakened the community it sought to serve.

Participants Get Turned off to Service in General, or Jewish Service in Particular. When service projects are poorly conceived and executed or consist mainly of "make-work," participants know it and are certain to have a disappointing and unfulfilling experience. There is a chance that this bad service experience will turn participants off to service in general, leading to less volunteering and less interest in enrolling in another service program. There is also the possibility that participants will get turned off to Jewish service in particular. Participants know that secular programs like Teach for America, City Year, or AmeriCorps provide opportunities to engage in substantive, meaningful, challenging, and fulfilling service. If a Jewish service experience fails to live up to those standards, participants who are disappointed by that specific program may extrapolate to JSL programs generally and look outside the Jewish community for future service opportunities. Instead of making a powerful connection between Judaism and service, a bad JSL experience can lead individuals to believe that the desire to serve is best fulfilled in non-Jewish contexts.

Consider the following story:

Participants on a Jewish Alternative Break trip arrived to begin a service project in an urban community; the work included beautifying a park that was established by community members. Participant spent their time planting some flowers and painting, but there was little community participation in the beautification effort. The group bonded with each other and had a lot of fun, but it was not until the end of the service project that they had a conversation with some local community members and learned about the

social significance of the park: it was space often used for alcohol consumption and risky behavior by local youth, and the local authorities had done little to transform the park into a safe space. The beautification project had left the park clean while not addressing any of the issues that made the location a source of stress to the community. Many participants left disillusioned with a service experience that provided such a dubious benefit to the community.

Here again is an example of a project that may have been fun and engaging for participants, but treated meaningful community impact as an afterthought. At best, participants missed a chance to learn more about the strengths and challenges of the local community. At worst, participants hoping to make a difference left the program disappointed by the shallow nature of the service and eager to find another program that took community impact far more seriously.

The Reputation of Jews Among the Local Community Is Tarnished Instead of Elevated. In many cases, service provides an opportunity for Jews to connect with non-Jewish communities. Ideally, this encounter is mutually beneficial and positive for both participants and the community. However, if service is not developed in deep partnership with the local community and does not represent a meaningful, valuable undertaking, the encounter can turn negative. Because local community members view participants on JSL programs as representatives of the larger Jewish community, the reputation of Jews among these communities can be enhanced when service is meaningful and high impact, or tarnished when it is an afterthought.

The Effectiveness of Participant Development Efforts Is Undermined. Because of the ways that community impact and participant development are so deeply integrated into any JSL experience, a mediocre service experience will undermine the effectiveness of any effort to develop the participants' skills and Jewish knowledge. If participants have major doubts about the value of the service, they will struggle to engage with discussions related to the Jewish concepts of *tikkun olam*, or *b'tzelem Elohim*, or any of the many other ways we try to connect Jewish values and history to a service experience. Participants may leave a program feeling that *because they already care so much about tikkun olam, they need to find another service program that takes that value seriously*. In short, an unbalanced approach to JSL that prioritizes participant development over authentic community impact will usually backfire and end up doing neither well.

Participant Development in the Blind Spot

Here are some of the things that can happen when the focus is primarily on community impact, and participant development is treated as an afterthought.

Bad Service. The most obvious consequence of neglecting participant development is that participants are likely to provide service that is low quality, uninformed, and ineffective. Even a project as technically simple as painting some walls can be botched if participants receive no training and support. If groups are providing service that is more technically challenging (building a house, for example), or social or educational in nature (mentoring or tutoring), the likelihood of undeveloped participants providing bad service is increased.

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Service quality can also be undermined when participants are asked to participate in service projects with no understanding of the need that project addresses or of the context in which that service is occurring. At best, participants who have been trained in the technical details of service but lack any deeper understanding of the meaning of the work will miss powerful opportunities to learn from and connect with the community; at worst, they will say and do things that are insensitive or deleterious to the community.

Ineffective Jewish Engagement. If participant development is not taken seriously, JSL programs will be ineffective in terms of Jewish engagement. If participants dedicate all their time and effort to providing service and never get to step back, reflect on their experiences, and think about how Jewish values and history inform their efforts, the program will be devoid of Jewish meaning. Participants can engage in service for myriad reasons and can think deeply about the experience from many valuable perspectives that may have nothing to do with Judaism (community development, international relations, education reform, leadership, etc). If a program lacks a thoughtful, intentional process for imbuing service experiences with Jewish import, the experience is sure to have limited value as an effort to promote Jewish engagement.

Limited Learning, Insight, and Personal Transformation. JSL has the potential to transform participants in any number of ways. Participants can gain insights into the nature of social change, the benefits and challenges of privilege, and the tragic and unjust consequences of inequality. They can become aware of powerful and unexamined assumptions about the world and their own place in it. They can discover a passion or cause that inspires a lifetime of civic activism.

It is possible that any of these outcomes might occur with no time dedicated to learning and reflection, but the likelihood of deep learning and transformational insight is greatly enhanced when time is set aside for powerful, well-designed participant development experiences. Of course, as personal transformation deepens, the potential of making any experience meaningful in a Jewish way is enhanced as well.

Dynamics of Injustice and Structural Inequality Are Perpetuated and Reinforced—Instead of Being Dismantled and Transformed. This type of unbalanced service experience has the potential to further fracture—instead of repair—an imperfect world. Without effective participant development programming, young adults who were once idealistic and hopeful can emerge from their encounters with poverty and inequality feeling cynical and hopeless; communities can be left feeling even more powerless than before service groups arrived. Dynamics of victimhood or blindness to privilege can be reinforced instead of challenged. When programs do not integrate thoughtful, powerful participant development experiences into their JSL programming, well-intentioned groups can do great damage to both the community served and the participants themselves.

Consider the following story:

A young woman enrolled in a service program that placed her as a volunteer in a domestic violence prevention program in the developing world. She started her service program with a lot of energy, wanting to create real change and have a meaningful experience. As expected, she encountered many challenges: cultural differences, language barriers, and

personal difficulties as a result of being isolated and far away from family and friends. Unfortunately, she received limited support from the staff, and the program offered little in the form of reflection or contextual learning. Within a matter of several weeks, the level of stress became unsustainable; she decided to leave the position and initiate a different project for herself that was needed much less in the community but was certainly easier and more fun. She entered the program with high levels of idealism and energy and left the experience feeling critical of the local community, doubtful about her own skills and effectiveness, and cynical about the possibility of anyone making a positive impact on a difficult problem like domestic violence.

ACHIEVING THE DUAL BENEFIT: BEST PRACTICES IN PROVIDING A BALANCED SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Now that we have explored the connection between community impact and participant development on a conceptual level, it is time to consider these matters in more concrete terms. How do we avoid these undesirable outcomes and instead achieve the remarkable dual benefit of Jewish service-learning? How do we ensure that programs deliver BOTH community impact AND participant development with high quality? What are best practices? In this section, we turn our attention to these important questions. Our list of best practices is surely not exhaustive (entire books have been written about how to do effective service-learning!), but it provides key concepts that we have found to be essential to achieving the dual benefits.

Designing Programs With the Dual Challenges in Mind

As the Chinese philosopher Sun Tzu once said, “Every battle is won before it is even fought.” For a JSL program to achieve the dual benefits, the program design must thoughtfully integrate both community impact and participant development in intentional and powerful ways. Does the mission of the program integrate a focus on both community impact and participant development? Has the program identified a local partner organization and worked together to develop an appropriate service project (more on this later)? Does the schedule include time for both service and learning? Is the program staff skilled in both service delivery and participant development? Are participants recruited with an accurate understanding of the mission and goals of the program? High-quality JSL programs address all of these questions in the design stage, long before the first participant application is received.

Moving From Placement to Partnership

Effective JSL recognizes the critical importance of partnering with communities or local organizations to develop service projects that address what that community self-identifies as an important need. This focus on service as a partnership is essential because it sets up several important dynamics:

- Strong partnerships ensure that the service answers real needs.
- Partnerships allow both the program and the community to identify the mutual benefits that will accrue from a well-executed project designed in partnership with the community.
- Partnerships are key to preventing service that is ineffective or that perpetuates stigmas.

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Choosing and developing the right partnership are complex and need to be done well before the volunteers arrive. It is critical to establish that the partner understands the mission of the program (which is surely more broad than the focus of the specific service project that will ultimately be implemented), that there are key staff dedicated to working with the volunteers, and that there is a genuine interest in a relationship that is beneficial to both sides. Furthermore, it is crucial to connect with a partner that is well accepted in the community and to pay attention to different dynamics at play on a local, municipal and national level to determine the effectiveness of the partnership. This process takes time and requires significant energy on the part of the JSL organizer.

Aligning Service AND Learning

At its best, service-learning is a form of experiential education that uses the service experience as a starting point to stimulate learning and learning as a tool to contextualize service. It is possible to build time for both service and learning into the schedule and have a strong service component and a strong learning component—but fail to align the two. If participants are involved in literacy tutoring all day and then have an educational seminar focused on, say, fair trade practices, they are likely to be confused unless the connection between the service and learning is made in a clear and compelling way. The relevance of the learning to the service (and vice versa) should be looked at during the design phase, and program staff should be continuously searching for ways to powerfully connect the service and learning components throughout the experience.

Choosing the Right Staff

The skills and competencies that are necessary for facilitating service and those that are essential for participant development are not the same, and care must be taken in hiring staff who have both of these skill sets. We have seen very successful programs where one staff member was clearly responsible for working with the local community and another staff member took the lead in ensuring participant development. In some cases, one well-rounded staff person can be found with experience and abilities in both areas. In either case, organizations should invest in training staff members in both of these skill areas and emphasize both as goals of the program.

In addition, staff should be trained to make the most of the many “teachable moments” that happen regularly over the course of any service experience. Consider the well-meaning volunteer coordinator who encounters a volunteer who is dissatisfied with his placement. The coordinator may be tempted to simply move the volunteer to a different placement, but needs to recognize the golden educational moment embedded in this situation. Taking the time to explore with this participant the reasons for his dissatisfaction and making the effort to work with him through those difficulties can provide a powerful participant development experience. This process might lead to the unpacking of hidden cultural biases, personal struggles dealing with a certain population, or any other number of challenges. There are clearly times when a clear intervention is needed and volunteer placements need to be changed, but this should be done only after a thorough educational process designed to unpack the important lessons embedded in these types of challenging situations.

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Preparing the Community

One of the most critical aspects of ensuring positive service experience is proper preparation of the receiving community or host organization. Proper preparation often includes goal setting, cross-cultural training, and clarification of expectations. Just as important in creating a balanced program is setting the expectation that both parties will benefit from the proposed service. A clear and explicit articulation of the ways both parties hope to benefit from the partnership levels the playing field and creates a situation in which both parties are givers and receivers. When properly prepared, members of the host community understand themselves to be valuable contributors to the overall success of the experience, not merely passive recipients of service.

Preparing Participants—Recruitment, Preparation, and Orientation

Beginning with recruitment, an effort should be made to understand prospective participants' motivation for service, past experiences, and goals for the program. Participant interviews are an opportune time to begin communicating the goals of the program and the type of service the participants might expect. Before beginning their program, participants should be informed about whom they will be working with and what that work will look like. This pre-trip orientation helps familiarize participants with the service and learning components and validates that they will be gaining tremendously from the experience as well. Explicitly communicating the values of the service-learning organization and the service partner is critical to enabling participants to start the experience with the right mindset.

Having Ongoing Communication and Evaluation

To successfully balance service and participant development, continuous changes in emphasis and content must be made, and to know what changes to implement, it is imperative to collect feedback from multiple stakeholders in real time. Feedback should be solicited from (1) program participants, (2) program staff, (3) partner organization staff, and (4) external educators. Having frequent check-ins to triangulate and understand the feedback is critical, as are formalized ways to make changes based on feedback received from various sources.

Because striking the right balance between community impact and participant development is at least as much art as science, participant feedback and behavior represent critical sources of information for day-to-day decision making on any program. Participants are rarely shy about sharing their feelings when they are asked to do so, and the daily mood and dynamics of the group provide important insights into appropriate next steps for the program. Of course, it is critical to have program staff who are skilled at facilitating these types of feedback conversations and are able to effectively handle the emotional and relational dynamics that surface in these discussions.

Partner organizations are also an excellent source of feedback. However, this is only possible when the partnering organization is willing to hear feedback as well as provide it and can act on the feedback to provide a more suitable experience. Of course, it takes skill to engage in real-time feedback that is open and honest between a service group and a host community; again, it is important to hire staff who can manage these relationships with skill, openness, and effectiveness.

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Sometimes these evaluations will lead to the understanding that a new host community needs to be found. When this necessary change is not made, there is a real risk for damage. For example, a village in the developing world that has received too many volunteer groups might begin to develop a slew of problems ranging from internal tensions to an unsustainable economic dependence on volunteer groups. JSL programs and their partners should be constantly evaluating the capacity of a community to host groups of participants.

Seeing the Macro in the Micro

One capacity we have sought to bring to balanced JSL experiences is the ability to see macro-level dynamics in micro-level events. In this way of understanding events, even seemingly small and insignificant occurrences provide powerful ways into major issues related to service. This can be a powerful technique for ensuring the alignment of service and learning by using daily service experiences as ways into exploring the deeper questions related to service. Consider the following story:

Fifteen American participants traveled to Honduras to complete an irrigation system for a very rural community. Every day, the participants would grab shovels and pick-axes and spend hours digging a long ditch that would one day bring a water pipe from a distant water source right to the center of the village. The children of the community were supposed to be in school during the day when the service was occurring, but one child continually skipped school to spend the day with the participants. The Americans had decided as a group not to give this child any of their food (cookies, sandwiches, etc) so as not to encourage the child in his decision to skip school. Nevertheless, one day a member of the group gave the child one of the many packages of Oreo cookies the group brought for snacks during the day.

That night, the group leaders opened up a space to reflect on the day, and the group turned on the participant who had broken the rules. The conversation began to turn into an ad-hominem attack on the character of the participant who gave the child a cookie, until the group leaders reframed the discussion using the “macro in the micro” concept. They asked the group to consider how the “Oreo cookie incident” mirrored larger issues involved in the trip. Soon, the group was deep in a discussion of what it meant to have so many resources (many, many packages of cookies) in a community that had so little. What were the ethics of sharing the group’s resources? What were the ethics of not sharing those resources?

Clearly, the most challenging macro-level issues related to the service program were embedded within the micro-level Oreo cookie incident; when participants were asked to consider this perspective, the conversation quickly turned from a personal attack to a thoughtful conversation about relations between the global North and global South, and the moral and ethical issues related to trying to help others while genuinely empowering them instead of perpetuating conditions of dependency or subservience. It was a discussion that deepened the development of participants while generating a nuanced and substantive understanding of the challenges of creating community impact.

This is one example of the way high-quality programs can unleash the full transformational potential of a JSL experience. The “macro in the micro” technique allows program staff to create teachable moments that use everyday service experiences as ways into deep explorations of substantive, meaningful issues. As

a result, the dual benefits of community impact and participant development are both advanced in integrated, powerful ways.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This list of best practices is hardly exhaustive. It is meant to bring some basic level of clarity and practicality to the effort to create the balanced JSL experience discussed at a conceptual level in the first half of this article. We hope that practitioners and funders find this mix of theory and practice to be valuable in terms of both understanding the importance of creating balanced JSL experiences and creating programming that achieves the dual benefits.

We leave you with one final way of thinking about the importance of balanced JSL that is grounded in Jewish philosophy. In his seminal book *I and Thou*, Martin Buber distinguishes between two types of relationships. In “I-Thou” relationships, we see others as sacred, holy, and fully human individuals with feelings and needs every bit as real and important as our own. In “I-It” relationships, we see others as objects or obstacles to be manipulated to our own ends; others are somehow less fully human—and less deserving of respect and compassion—than ourselves.

When we engage in JSL that prioritizes participant development while overlooking community impact, we have chosen to have an “I-Thou” relationship with participants and an “I-It” relationship with the community being served. In an important sense, we are treating members of the local community as objects to be manipulated for the purpose of creating powerful experiences for the participants, whose needs and feelings we take very seriously.

Conversely, when we engage in JSL that prioritizes community impact over participant development, we have chosen to have an “I-Thou” relationship with the community and an “I-It” relationship with participants. We see participants as objects to manipulate for the purpose of creating real change in a community full of individuals whose humanity is fully respected.

In both these cases, some set of individuals is being dehumanized and dismissed in ways that are deeply problematic. When we fail to honor the humanity of any stakeholder connected to a service experience, we risk doing damage to the world despite a wealth of good intentions. We will surely not unleash the full promise and potential of JSL to simultaneously repair the outer world while transforming the inner world of those who provide the service.

The dual benefits of JSL can only be achieved when we engage everyone involved—participants, community members, program staff, and funders—in “I-Thou” relationships that recognize the sacredness, humanity, and holiness of those we encounter. This is surely a difficult challenge, but it is the only way to unlock the full transformational power of high-quality, balanced Jewish service-learning. In this way, the Jewish community has an opportunity to unleash a force uniquely capable of addressing pressing public problems while igniting and sustaining the Jewish souls of vast numbers of otherwise disengaged young Jews.