



# BUILDING CREATIVE BRIDGES: INTEGRATING SERVICE-LEARNING INTO THE INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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## Project Context

Nine junior-intermediate teacher candidates were involved in this project. All were registered in a full-year arts specialty course in the Initial Teacher Education program, OISE. Students aged seven to 17 were involved in both school and community education settings. The ages and numbers of children varied depending on the type and site of the extracurricular program in which they were participating.

## ABSTRACT

The “Building Bridges” project used a service-learning model to strengthen relationships between arts-based associate teachers, teacher candidates, and OISE instructors. By integrating course content with community service and critical reflection, the service-learning model enabled teacher candidates to deepen their knowledge and experience in arts education by working in extracurricular arts programs across the city. The teacher-candidate placements benefited the schools through an infusion of volunteers, improved the connection between associate teachers and the Initial Teacher Education program, and improved teacher candidates’ professional experience in arts education. Service-learning has helped to build broader and deeper connections between teacher candidates, partner schools and ourselves—and should be further explored in the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE in future.

## OBJECTIVES

- To implement a service-learning model—meaningful community service with instruction and reflection—in the Initial Teacher Education program, OISE
- To deepen teacher candidates’ understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, and civic responsibility through service-learning
- To strengthen relationships with arts-based teachers, in order to better utilize their expertise in the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE

Service-learning, a relatively recent addition to university courses in Canada, combines community service, course material, and reflection (Taylor, 2002). Students are offered a unique means of learning that enables them to apply course content in practical ways through community-based service. Due to the growing popularity of service-learning at the University of Toronto, the Centre for Community Partnerships was established in 2006 to actively encourage faculty to incorporate service-learning into their courses. This research project was designed to do just that—to explore the implications of service-learning in the context of arts-based courses in the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE.

Many Canadian universities have long histories of volunteerism, but few have incorporated service-learning into their formal curricula. Service-learning has a longer history in the United States, where it was included in the curricula of some American colleges as early as the 1930s (Taylor & Ballangee-Morris, 2004). According to California State University, “service-learning is a teaching method that promotes student learning through active participation in meaningful and planned service experiences in the community that are directly related to course content” (cited in Jeffers, 2005, p. 29).

Beginning in September 2006, this inquiry investigated the suitability of using the service-learning model for arts courses in the Initial Teacher Education program at OISE. And because it was a continuation of our school-university research project of 2005–06, it allowed us to continue to build relationships with arts-based teachers in partner schools. Our assumption was that the service-learning model would provide a valuable way to develop and strengthen these relationships and, in turn, would improve the arts-based learning experiences of teacher candidates. Our aim was to place teacher candidates in extracurricular arts programs in partner schools or community centres so that they would learn from experienced arts teachers over an extended period of time. While teacher candidates would benefit from this hands-on experience, the teachers and students in the partner schools would benefit from an infusion of artistic skills, energy, and enthusiasm that teacher candidates could bring to their extracurricular art programs.

## **STAGES OF THE PROJECT**

### **Building bridges between teachers and teacher candidates**

We began to identify associate teachers, working in extracurricular arts programs, who might participate in this project: five teachers joined the study as teacher collaborators, and three additional schools and two community centres provided access to their programs. When teacher candidates arrived on campus in September, we invited them to participate in the study, and ten volunteered. We assigned teacher candidates to work with particular arts teachers according to their interest in the art program’s theme, and the suitability of its location or scheduling. At this stage, the teacher candidates and the teacher collaborators completed a pre-program questionnaire.

Service-learning is different from the practicum experience that teacher candidates experience as part of their teacher education program. While practice teaching is on-the-job training, service-learning emphasizes the development of civic responsibility in the context of becoming a reflective educator. Teacher candidates are encouraged to consider how they can engage with their school communities, outside their regular classroom duties, as a means of developing relationships and sharing expertise needed to deal with community challenges. From this point of view, service-learning is an example of the emphasis placed on issues around equity, diversity, and social justice in the OISE Initial Teacher Education program.

### **Building bridges with students, schools, and community centres**

In October, the teacher candidates headed out to help run a wide variety of extracurricular arts programs in partner schools. Some went to inner-city schools or community centres, others to private schools. They were required to work for a minimum of six weeks, but some—highly engaged with their placements—volunteered to stay longer. They worked on a diversity of projects: a mural for St. Michael’s hospital, a clay club run by secondary students, the One World music program at a public high school. They worked alongside the collaborating teachers, built relationships with students, and became integral members of the clubs in which they were involved. After their involvement ended, they wrote reflections on their experience and completed a final questionnaire.

### **Building bridges with the Initial Teacher Education program on campus**

We invited our teacher collaborators to join us on campus for the OISE annual elementary arts conference in January 2007. Having been asked to lead experiential arts workshops for generalist teacher candidates, they shared their expertise in the visual arts, music, literacy, and dance. This was also an opportunity for them to learn firsthand about the Initial Teacher Education program and to meet with other arts instructors in the program. In the spring they returned to campus to participate in focus group interviews that had been designed to solicit their

views on the service-learning model in the context of the Initial Teacher Education program.

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection methods included questionnaires and interviews with teacher collaborators, and questionnaires and written reflections from teacher candidates. With these methods we focused on four research questions:

1. Can service-learning be used to deepen the educational experience of arts education majors in the Initial Teacher Education program?
2. Can service-learning projects build stronger bridges between the Initial Teacher Education program and the OISE partner schools?
3. What can service-learning offer Initial Teacher Education candidates and faculty, on the one hand, and teachers and students at partner schools, on the other?
4. What are the benefits and drawbacks of arts-based service-learning projects for the Initial Teacher Education program?

This study provided a rich set of data from the questionnaires and interviews with teacher collaborators and teacher candidates. Data from the questionnaires and focus group interviews were thematically coded and analyzed.

### Data from the teacher collaborators

All of the teacher collaborators were positive about their participation in this project. They found that the service-learning model was beneficial to their extracurricular programs. They appreciated the extra set of hands provided by the teacher candidates, which meant an increased level of individual attention for their program participants. Echoing the feedback from many of the teachers, one commented: “My students were very positive and voiced on several occasions how helpful it was to receive the extra attention and support.” Another confirmed this: “The experiential nature of [our program] requires time-intensive one-on-one work with the instructor. Having the teacher candidate participate in some of these collaborations was of tremendous benefit.” Many of the teachers described the growth and learning of the teacher candidates during the program, but interestingly, they also noted their own learning. One said, “I’ve learned something myself ... [the teacher candidate] is a really fine bass player, and he was able to teach me. I learned a lot about different ways to teach bass. He made a real contribution to the school.”

Concerning their involvement in Arts Day, the teacher collaborators were delighted with the response they received to their workshops, and they enjoyed meeting others involved in arts education at OISE. One noted that “it was very beneficial delivering the training to a whole range of our teachers and teacher candidates ... I learned a lot from working with you and the other people here.” And while many described the advantages they saw in the service-learning model, none described any drawbacks or apprehensions about this approach to learning and community service, despite having been asked.

### Data from the teacher candidates

The teacher candidates were also effusive about their involvement in this project. They appreciated their placements for the valuable learning they experienced, not only in practical terms of the curriculum and pedagogy but also in terms of the sustained exposure to children in a relaxed learning environment. Of this, one wrote: “This [program] allowed me to really get to know the students, as well as their interests and aspirations in video art, contributing to my overall understanding of an age group (14–18) that I have not had the chance to work with in either of my practicums. [sic] My strong rapport with the students has added to my confidence as a teacher.” Another recognized the importance of extracurricular programs in general: “I realized that a great deal of teaching occurs outside of the classroom. During these times teachers have opportunities to establish relationships with their students in order to build positive communities.”

Teacher candidates voiced few difficulties concerning their involvement in this project. The biggest challenge was one of scheduling; it proved difficult for some to reach the site of their programs on time due to conflicts with their on-campus courses. This limited the location of the programs that teacher candidates could become involved in, and it meant that some programs, which had requested candidates, had to be refused.

Teacher candidates valued the positive mentorship of teacher collaborators they worked with. One described his teacher as “an unending source of information, feedback, and support, and a connection to a number of important organizations and groups.” Because he was able to see “a teacher engaged in real action,” he found his teacher’s approach to education

and social justice “inspiring and affirming.” Many candidates were enthusiastic about the connections they found to the social justice theme promoted in the Initial Teacher Education program. For example, some candidates assisted programs—run by Arts for Children of Toronto—that build community pride in troubled neighbourhoods; others assisted school programs that aim to provide extracurricular activities for children whose families can’t afford them otherwise. One teacher candidate summarized this well by saying, “In the end, I am walking away from this project having gained just as much, if not more, than what I have given.”

## **IMPACT**

“Building Bridges” has lived up to its name by helping to create broader and deeper connections among arts-based teacher candidates, educational partners in the community, and OISE instructors. The research project has demonstrated the benefits of the service-learning model, not only by improving connections among these groups but also by linking course material to field experiences for a greater good. Service-learning has brought benefits to all participants—teacher candidates, associate teachers, students, and OISE instructors—by enhancing learning, increasing self-confidence, and strengthening relationships. It has also helped to strengthen the social justice initiatives in the Initial Teacher Education program and to support the value of arts education programs in schools and community centres across the city. Through this process, we have shown that service-learning is a valuable addition to arts courses in teacher education.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION**

This research project supports a growing body of literature that acknowledges the benefits of service-learning in the arts in school and university environments (Barnes, 2002; Edwards, 2001; Jeffers, 2005; Taylor & Ballangee-Morris, 2004). Having experienced these benefits, we are convinced of the value of the service-learning model in the context of the teacher education curriculum. Teacher candidates were able to participate in extracurricular school and community arts programming that had the powerful effect of developing students’ skills and knowledge and enriching their lives. For many students, these programs provide a degree of success and fulfillment that they do not find during their regular school day.

The implementation of service-learning on a larger scale in the Initial Teacher Education program could have profound implications: connections with associate teachers and their communities would be strengthened; teacher candidates would have a rich set of teaching experiences and enhanced resumes; and an emphasis on social justice would be supported more broadly in the educational community. Associate teachers could also become better connected to the goals of the Initial Teacher Education program, which would ensure a stronger connection between theory and practice. This could potentially improve the quality of teacher candidates’ experiences during their practica, as well as provide an alternative means for candidates to hone their teaching skills in non-evaluative settings where they have more latitude to experiment with different pedagogies and curricula. By supporting social justice work, service-learning provides tangible benefits to our educational community. It demonstrates the importance of volunteerism for teachers and students, which in turn better connects teachers with students and provides ways for them to develop and deepen relationships outside of the classroom. Sharing expertise and strengthening relationships is a positive step towards better supporting students, schools, and communities in need.

## **NEXT STEPS AND NEW QUESTIONS**

Given the success of this study, the number of participating teacher candidates and associate teachers in the service-learning program will be expanded next year. Ideally, there will be access for teacher candidates to a broader range of sites, and they will remain involved throughout a full term or academic year. During the next few years we will be seeking to identify further characteristics of service-learning experiences, including the optimal length of programs.

The results of the study will be shared with other instructors in the program, with an aim to encourage them to incorporate service-learning into their own courses; this could take place in the context of regular professional development sessions. Broadening the implementation of service-learning into a range of different subject areas would help to spread its benefit beyond the arts into more facets of city life: imagine the power of sending 1300 volunteers from this program into under-serviced communities throughout the Greater Toronto Area each year! The project findings will also be shared with associate teachers in partner schools through meetings and workshops, with the aim of encouraging the development of new sites for service-learning in local schools.

Inspired by similar projects run by American teacher education programs, in future, we would like to investigate the possibility of establishing at OISE an arts education program for needy children in Toronto. We would provide leadership to create programs that could not only serve children in need in our community but also provide a rich training ground for arts-based teacher candidates. As one teacher collaborator so beautifully articulated, “These initiatives taken by OISE are paramount in reframing the way we perceive education and the arts. The arts are tools for building healthy individuals and strong communities. They are the stories, rhythms, and illustrations that make us who we are, celebrating our difference and communicating a shared experience. The arts are our common ground.” We hope that arts-based initiatives will continue to grow in the fertile ground of service-learning in the years to come.

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