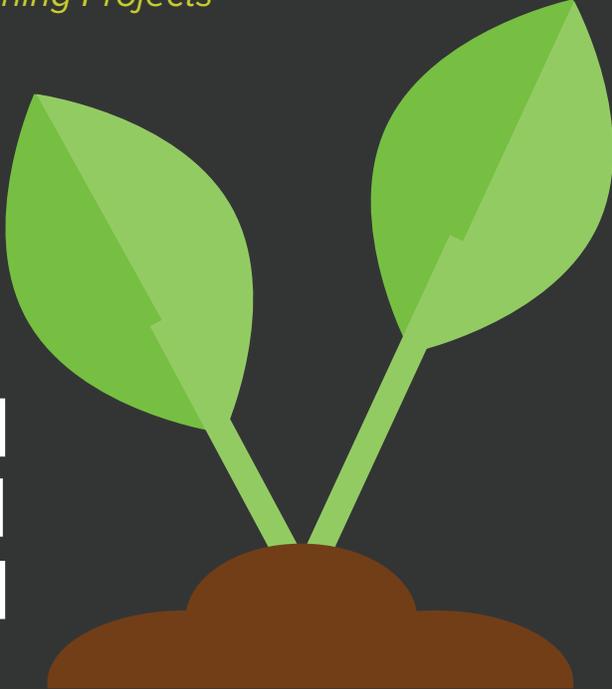


MODULE 1:

Creating Effective Service Learning Projects

WE PLANT SEEDS



*A How-to Guide for Effective Jewish
Service-learning Programs*

Brought to you by Repair the World, in partnership
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MODULE 1

CREATING EFFECTIVE SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, service and social justice work have become increasingly important in American Jewish life, leading many Jewish community leaders to ask how we structure a service project to ensure it has a positive impact on both the volunteers and the community. We want to make sure that the project is meeting a real community need; that it builds relationships and breaks down barriers rather than reinforcing existing injustices; and that it deepens volunteers' understanding of social issues, their commitment to this work and their connection to their Jewish community and identity.

In order to accomplish this, there are eight key elements to keep in mind. While ideally, all volunteer projects achieve all of these things, that isn't always possible or practical. If that's the case, identify three to meet consistently and work your way, over time, towards meeting them all.

The key elements are:

- **Partnership:** Volunteer projects should be rooted in a respectful, mutually beneficial partnership with an organization that has deep roots and strong relationships in the community. In addition, the project should be framed for volunteers as “service with” the community rather than “service for” the community. Finally, to be good partners, the project organizers should be sure to very clearly communicate the expectations of the partner agency to volunteers so there is a shared understanding.
- **Organizational Priorities:** Ideally, partner organizations seek and incorporate input from the community members they serve when setting organizational priorities and developing programs.
- **Meeting Community Needs:** The project should strive to meet the articulated needs of the community in addition to providing a meaningful experience for volunteers. In other words, it should not be an activity created exclusively to accommodate the desires of the volunteer group.
- **Understanding the Community:** Before serving, volunteers should be given a structured opportunity to understand the organization and community. This should include learning the mission of the organization and information about the community being served.
- **Understanding the Issues:** Service should be contextualized within the broader historical, social and economic issues that cause it to be necessary, as well as within Jewish history, text, or tradition. Volunteers should have an opportunity to explore why they're serving and how they connect to and are impacted by the injustices that make their service important.
- **Reflection:** Once the service has been performed, volunteers should have an opportunity to process some of the “productive discomfort” and questions that may arise regarding power, privilege, injustice, inequality and their own role in perpetuating them or bringing about change.

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- **Opportunity for Ongoing Engagement:** Service learning opportunities may strike a chord with participants and ignite a desire for deeper learning or engagement on a particular issue. Whenever possible, opportunities for longer-term engagement with an organization or issue should be offered, including opportunities for service, community organizing and advocacy work on the issue. Resources should also be provided to enable volunteers to learn more about the issue.
- **Evaluation:** All parties involved in a volunteer project should have the opportunity to evaluate it. For volunteers, this is best done either verbally or in writing on the day of the project. For organizations, an honest debrief about how the activity went, whether it met the organization's/community's needs and how future activities could be improved should be scheduled within a couple weeks of the project.

For a checklist containing the seven key elements, including questions to ask as you plan your project, see Appendix A.

PUTTING THE LEARNING IN SERVICE-LEARNING:

Below, we explore the learning process, and some of the above mentioned key elements at the core of learning. Let's dive deeper into the following topics:

- Understanding the Issues - Social Context
- Understanding the Issues - Exploring Jewish Perspectives
- Doing Service
- Opportunity for Reflection
- Opportunity for Ongoing Engagement

For a planning worksheet to help you outline the learning components of your service project, see Appendix B.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES - SOCIAL CONTEXT

Before engaging in service, volunteers should have an opportunity to delve into the issue their service addresses, whether that is homelessness, hunger, educational inequality or something else. Without this context, service is a one-time act unlikely to inspire a sustained commitment to pursuing social justice; with this context, service is an opportunity that expands volunteers' knowledge about and understanding of the world and helps them to begin to explore the underlying issues that perpetuate injustice. Service is both more impactful and more engaging for the participants when there is an opportunity to explore new and complex topics in the context of that service. When this learning delves into and analyzes not just the issue but also the historical, social and economic root causes that lead to that issue - real transformation is possible.

Some ways to structure this aspect of the volunteer opportunity include:

- Identifying a recent news article that looks at the issue that the project will be addressing
- Using a poem on the topic as a discussion starter to delve more deeply into the topic

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- Finding a video or audio clip that explores the issue
- Exploring statistics on the issue nationally or in your area
- Bringing in a speaker from your partner organization or a local non-profit that does community organizing or legislative work on the issue
- Hearing from someone who's a member of your own community and who has been directly impacted by these issues.
- Exploring the history of the issue you're working on - how has the issue changed over time?
- Investigating the legislative side of the issue - what laws or policies, current or historical, are contributing to the perpetuation or alleviation of the issue?

Some potential sources of materials include:

- <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice>
- <http://zinnedproject.org/teaching-materials/>
- <http://nationalhomeless.org/references/teaching/>
- <http://www.rac.org>
- <https://www.nokidhungry.org/problem/hunger-resources>
- <http://mazon.org/the-reality-of-hunger/>
- <http://www.rac.org/advocacy-activism>

In addition to these resources and suggestions, later modules will provide in depth information and activities on several key issues, including food justice and educational equity.

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES - EXPLORING JEWISH PERSPECTIVES

Social justice has deep roots in the American Jewish tradition. Some of American Judaism's proudest moments are captured in photos of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Abraham Joshua Heschel walking together with other Jewish and Christian community leaders, in letters from Jewish Freedom Riders written to parents and friends, in labor leaders' shouts of protest in urban squares during the 1920s and those of feminist organizers during the 1850s and 1960s and 70s.

In the recent past, this historic tradition has evolved into an intentional, professional field in American (and global) Jewish life, where students in various Jewish educational settings are engaged deliberately in "Jewish service learning" (JSL). There are a wealth of resources that exist for linking Jewish text, history, tradition, ritual and culture to social issues. Connecting pressing social issues, service and Jewish wisdom is a powerful way to help volunteers find, explore and/or strengthen their connection with their Jewish identity.

Exploring this connection can take a variety of forms, including:

- Engaging in a text study using an ancient, medieval, or modern text
- Participating in a ritual which relates to or can be connected to the issue - for example, exploring how blessings before and after meals relate to issues of hunger or how hanging and blessing a mezuzah can inform our understanding of homelessness
- Identifying a local rabbi, educator or Jewish leader engaged in work on that particular issue who can join the group to discuss their work and why they see

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that work as inherently Jewish

- Exploring historical primary source documents, photographs or videos that explore Jewish historical engagement in the issue

Include thoughtful discussion questions that ask participants to go deeper with the material, connect it to their own experience and consider implications for the broader social issue you're dealing with in the service project as well as the Jewish community's approach to it. In addition, explicitly encourage participants to generate their own questions and to pose them to each other.

Some sample resources include:

- <http://mazon.org/jewish-social-justice/hunger-and-jewish-texts/>
- <http://www.on1foot.org/>
- <http://jwa.org/teach/livingthelegacy/documents>

Some tips for identifying and preparing compelling text sources:

- When presenting a text, especially an ancient or medieval one, include information about the source document, author and historical context within which it was written.
- Make explicit that language about God in a text is open to interpretation and should be interpreted in ways that balance comfort and educationally productive discomfort for the participant.
- Rather than including only the relevant line or two, consider including at least a full paragraph, if not a few, to provide more context for those lines and to give volunteers more to “chew” on as they discuss.
- Consider including several texts which challenge one another or the issue itself. Volunteers are much more likely to feel deeply engaged in a text study when there's a real question, challenge or contradiction to wrestle with - rather than a text which simply affirms the importance of an issue.

In addition to these resources and suggestions, later modules will provide Jewish texts on several key issues, including food justice and educational equity.

DOING SERVICE

The act of engaging in service - of working alongside others on a task that needs to be done - can be a powerful tool to spark volunteers' interest in further learning. See Module 2: Facilitator Guide - Section III. Facilitation Tips for Difficult Conversations for advice on facilitating conversations on sensitive subjects that may arise during and after service.

REFLECTION

Equally important to contextualizing service within the broader social issues you aim to address is ensuring that volunteers have an opportunity to reflect on the service once it's done. Reflection allows volunteers to wrestle with questions, challenges, conflicts or discomfort that arise during the service itself, to analyze their own actions and feelings about the service and to begin to integrate the experience and learnings into their broader life and understanding of the world.

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One great way to start is to give participants a sentence to complete out loud, with each other, in small groups or in one large group. Such sentences might include:

- “The most interesting thing I saw today was...”
- “I was surprised by...”
- “I feel gratified by...”
- “I feel confused by...”
- “I feel frustrated by...”
- “I want to know more about...”
- “I felt my Jewishness most powerfully today when...”

See Module 7: Reflection for a collection of reflection resources and activities.

OPPORTUNITY FOR ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

Hopefully a service project is a stepping stone to deeper, ongoing engagement in learning, service and social justice work. To encourage this trajectory, project coordinators can proactively identify and prepare information for the group about next steps they can take based on their experience volunteering.

There are three main types of next steps to consider:

- **Learning:** Engaging in ongoing learning about the organization, community and/or issue. This can be encouraged by providing additional readings, links to other resources or information about upcoming educational events on the subject.
- **Service:** Committing to additional service at the partner organization, ideally on a regular basis. This can be encouraged by working with the partner ahead of time to identify and outline additional volunteer opportunities for participants.
- **Addressing Root Causes:** Exploring and engaging in action that seeks to address the root causes of an issue that are leading to the need for the service. This can be encouraged by identifying local and national organizations, Jewish and non-Jewish, who are engaging in community organizing or policy work on that issue.

Some Jewish organizations offering social change advocacy opportunities include:

- <http://mazon.org/take-action/>
- <http://www.rac.org/>
- <http://www.jufj.org>
- <http://www.jfrej.org>
- <http://www.jcua.org>
- <https://jewishcommunityaction.org/>
- <https://www.jcrcboston.org/>
- <http://bendthearc.us/>

CLOSING

By using this framework and being cognizant of the various service project components identified above while planning your service activities, you can ensure that it will be a meaningful and transformative experience for your volunteers, as well as provide impactful and supportive service to the community with which you're partnering.

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APPENDIX A SERVICE LEARNING PLANNING CHECKLIST EIGHT KEY ELEMENTS

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Ideally, all volunteer projects would include all of these key elements; however, that isn't always possible or practical. If meeting them all initially seems too distant, identify three to meet consistently and work your way, over time, towards meeting them all.

- Partnership:** Is this volunteer project rooted in a respectful, mutually beneficial partnership with an organization that has deep roots and strong relationships in the community? Is the project framed for volunteers as partnership and “service with” the community rather than “service for” the community?
- Organizational Priorities:** Does the organization with which we're working for this opportunity have a client advisory board or in some way solicit the guidance of the community it serves when setting its programs and priorities?
- Meeting Community Needs:** Does this volunteer opportunity meet the needs of the community we're serving in addition to providing a meaningful experience for our volunteers - in other words, is the service work needed?
- Understanding the Community:** Do volunteers understand the organization and community with which they will be working? Are they being exposed to the mission of the organization and information about the community being served?
- Understanding the Issue:** Do volunteers know why they're serving? Is the service that they're doing (e.g. serving a meal at a soup kitchen) being contextualized within the social, economic and historical policies and context that causes a need for that service (i.e. the structures that lead to certain groups of people not having access to sufficient amounts of healthy food)? Are there opportunity to explore these social issues and service within Jewish history, text, or tradition?
- Reflection:** Does the structure of the volunteer activity provide an opportunity for the individuals/group to process some of the “productive discomfort” and questions that may come out regarding power, privilege, injustice, inequality and our own role in perpetuating them or bringing about change?
- Opportunity for Ongoing Engagement:** Are there ways for volunteers to engage in ongoing service with the partner organization if they are interested in making a longer-term commitment?
- Evaluation:** Are the organizers of the volunteer activity setting time to complete a participant evaluation? Do you have an honest debrief with the partner organization planned to discuss how the activity went, whether it met the organization's/community's needs and how future activities could be improved?

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APPENDIX B SERVICE PROJECT LEARNING PLAN WORKSHEET

CREATING EFFECTIVE SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

DATE OF SERVICE:

SERVICE PARTNER:

START TIME:

END TIME:

TYPE OF SERVICE:

VOLUNTEER DEMOGRAPHICS:

Number of Volunteers:

Age Range of Volunteers:

Organizational affiliation of volunteers (if applicable):

OUTCOMES:

As a result of service (which includes learning and reflection), volunteers will:

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OVER THE COURSE OF A PROJECT/DAY/EVENT:

- **Understanding the Issues - Social Context:** What do volunteers need to know about the community and the issue in order to understand why they are doing the project?
- **Understanding the Issues - Exploring Jewish Perspectives:** How will you contextualize the issue and the service within Jewish tradition, text, history or ritual?
- **Doing Service:** What will the service project entail?
- **Reflection:** What activity will you use to help volunteers synthesize and internalize the experience?
- **Opportunities for Ongoing Engagement:** How will you support volunteers in considering how they can extend the impact of the project beyond that day - through action or learning?
- **Evaluation**
 - » Plusses and Deltas – Ask volunteers for feedback.
 - › What went well about the service today?
 - › What could have been better?
 - › What additional, topics, ideas, and/or issues are you interested in exploring?