

## A Visit With . . . Robert Shumer

Robert Shumer has been involved in educational programs for almost 50 years. He has taught from middle school through graduate school, been a school librarian, vocational/work experience teacher, and he ran a community school in the 1970s where students spent 70% of their time in the community. He has served in higher education as Assistant/Director of Field Studies at UCLA, founding director of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at the University of Minnesota, internal evaluator for the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education at the University of Louisville, and he taught courses on service-learning, experiential education, teacher education, career and technical education, youth development, civic engagement, and participatory/empowerment evaluation at several universities in the United States, as well as in Hong Kong, Beijing, Mexico, and Singapore. He has been involved in many research studies covering these noted areas and published articles and books dealing with various experiential learning programs. He has also served as president of the National Experience-Based Career Education Association, the Minnesota Evaluation Association, and Vice-Chair of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE). Similarly, he has served on many national organizational boards, from education to community organizations.

**IJRSLTE:** How did you get involved in education, and especially experiential and service-learning?

**Robert Shumer (RS):** As I have already shared in the *Pioneers* book and in my recent book, I got involved, just as Andy Furco indicated in this interview with the *IJRSLTE*, by sheer coincidence and accident. I was a high school reading teacher working in my first year when I discovered my students hated school, hated reading, and were basically bored with school experiences. I was in a master's program in reading and learning about language experience stories . . . having students tell stories about their life and then writing down what they said to use as actual reading instruction. It usually happened in the elementary grades. Since I was in a high school setting and there weren't any high interest, low vocabulary books available in 1969, I simply discussed the possibility of my students going to a nearby elementary school to help first graders to learn to read . . . and have my students read books to them (because they were easy for my students and wouldn't be insulting because they were reading to six-year-olds). In addition, we did language experience stories with the first graders. They would tell stories to my students. My students would write down what they said and then take their notes to

write (in large print format) the stories, correcting their spelling errors as they did their work. So the experience was part of my spelling lesson. Students would develop their individual list of words they misspelled and then test themselves in their texts for the first graders. The first graders would draw pictures at their school to illustrate the stories and then use my students' texts to make books for their class. The first-grade teacher used this activity as part of his art lesson, and the elementary students would actually produce books written by them as gifts for their parents.

The experience was a wonderful example of service-learning. My students were helping the first graders, and the first graders were producing books for their parents. What was most important about the experience was my students were forming relationships with the first graders. First graders would cry when their high-school-buddy would be absent for their exchange. My students were proud of their first-grade partner; we would have them come to the high school every other week. And my students would walk the students across campus, holding their hand, and getting smiles and accolades from their peers that they were doing something that was fun and helpful.

The most important lesson came from my students themselves. When I asked them, how things were going and why they seemed to enjoy the experience so much, several students said, “I don’t want them to grow up to be like me.” They knew what it was like to go through school and be a poor reader and suffer the consequences of poor grades, upset parents, and a feeling of being stupid and a loser. In true service-learning spirit, they were sharing their expertise with the children in a beneficial way and the children were sharing their love and adoration of their high school buddy, making them feel needed and feel good about themselves. And they both gained academic knowledge and skills from the experience, so it met all the criteria for being a high-quality service-learning experience.

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But it all happened by chance. I had never heard of service-learning. I had never planned to do anything like that when I student taught. I was just lucky to have a situation where I was able to do something a little out of the ordinary. And the result was the principal was impressed with my teaching ability . . . and later gave my permission to develop my own program involving student engagement in the community. I ran a class in social studies called Urban Workshop where students did things in the community that were of service. As a result, I got involved with a national movement called Experience Based Career Education, where students would learn academic knowledge and skills through work-based activities in the community. It was developed by four regional educational laboratories, Far West Lab, Northwest Labs, Appalachian Labs, and Research for Better Schools (Philadelphia). Through this experience I was able to develop a high-school program where students spent more than half their day in the community exploring careers and learning academic subjects through their experiences. No one called it service-learning, but many of the activities were of a service nature, and the focus on academic learning through community projects has been foundational to all my educational efforts since then.

**IJRSLTE:** Did that experience provide any insight about the role of teacher education in developing educational reform efforts?

**RS:** What was important about this experience is it exposed me to a national network of people and actually engaged me in research efforts that were developed by the labs to support the programs. What was very important, besides being able to travel around the country to see programs and build relationships, was the impact and outcomes of the research. When the program eventually lost federal funding because the research didn’t necessarily support some expectations of the funders, I learned, through the work of Tom Owens at the Northwest Labs, that one of the reasons the educational reform initiative wasn’t

sustained was “because it failed to get the support of teacher education programs across the country.” This experience and knowledge stuck with me, the realization that any effort to change education is heavily rooted in teacher education programs. If teachers aren’t trained to do programs, especially ones that take more time and coordination, such as service-learning or career and technical education, then those programs will never survive long-term. Thus, effective teacher education programs are actually critical to sustaining any educational reform.

This point about the importance of teacher education was expanded when I actually did a study of teacher education in Minnesota. What I learned from the community partners was the way to learn to do community based learning was “to do it.” University faculty thought the way to provide teacher education programs was to include the concepts of service-learning in academic theory courses (build it into the curriculum). So, in many ways, the wisdom of how to prepare teachers for service-learning came from the community, not in the educational institution. Learning to teach service-learning came from “actual experience doing it.”

Later research by teacher education faculty like Mary Kennedy of Michigan State suggested

that “despite our best intentions, teachers teach as they were taught.” So developing efforts to reform teacher education for service-learning required that students have experience with the process in all their schooling, especially secondary and post-secondary programs. Reforming teacher education couldn’t happen apart from actually creating experiential, service-oriented schools and universities.

**IJRSLTE:** What are your thoughts about the establishment of a community engagement major or minor or even a community engagement master’s degree program as a way to enhance service-learning in higher education?

**RS:** Interesting that you ask. I have been teaching in a Civic Engagement Minor for the past 8 years at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul. I teach a course called Principles of Civic Engagement.

It involves a community engaged project along with readings on the history of civic and community involvement, as well as constructivist curriculum. The focus is on developing a community project that involves learning in a variety of contexts, always emphasizing academic areas related to the nature of the project. In essence, it is a service-learning model and teaches students about the potential of engaging and learning from community. While we briefly use the term service-learning, the focus is on the broader concepts of community-engaged learning.

I sometimes have students who are enrolled in our teacher education program who take the course to learn more about how to teach academic subjects in a community context. So in many ways, it introduces them to the concepts of service-learning as a civic engagement process. Student responses have been very positive, and several students have decided to pursue a career in teaching as a result of their excitement for learning in an active, fun, and socially responsible manner.

I would strongly support developing similar efforts to promote community engagement majors or minors to expand and enhance teacher education programs. Connection with community for improvement and change is a goal for the programs—and can be supported in several academic disciplines. While our program does have some connection with political science, there are other disciplines that strongly support the teaching of academic content in a community context. So yes, developing a community engagement major or minor is a good idea for expanding service-learning and teacher education.

**IJRSLTE:** How would you describe the current status of service-learning in K-12, higher ed, and teacher education?

**RS:** Service learning has had its ups and downs in the past 25 years. Development of local initiatives, coupled with the federal support from the Corporation for National Service, provided a network and framework for service-learning in states and helped create a state infrastructure for public school efforts. Also, development of Campus Compact and the continued promotion of service-learning from the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE) and the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) helped to expand programs and research in higher education. Involvement of key faculty in higher education, such as Alexander Astin from UCLA, helped to promote research emphasizing service-learning and civic engagement. Support from the political world from Bill Clinton, with AmeriCorps and the national service efforts, as well as George Bush with Points of Light Foundation, helped focus schools and universities on the role of service in learning and helping to solve social issues. And the

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development of a rich literature on the subject, including a national journal, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, and a multitude of other journals and publications, helped to establish the field as a legitimate area of study, investigation, and development. The *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Teacher Education (IJRSLTE)* is one of those journals that has focused attention on the field and the role of research in promoting and improving the conduct of teacher education supporting service-learning.

Perhaps one of the best programs to come out of the Corporation for National and Community Service was the Community Higher Education School Partnership (CHESP). It required that programs be developed that connected higher education with schools and community organizations to conceive, develop, implement, and evaluate service-learning efforts that required collaboration and cooperation between all entities. If the major way to learn to be a service-learning teacher is to do service-learning, then one of the best ways to do this is to connect undergraduate programs with schools and communities to produce high quality projects that connect college students with schools and community groups so that all educational levels engage in the process. Through such efforts the potential teacher education pool is greatly expanded because all undergraduates have the opportunity to engage in service-learning and do so in connection with actual school programs. It not only produces a new cadre of potential teachers who have experience with service-learning, it gives them access and opportunity to do this in a school (elementary and secondary) setting.

**IJRSLTE:** Why is this important to moving teacher education in service-learning forward?

**RS:** This is important because when students enroll in teacher education programs, they have already had previous experience that puts them at a whole new level: they've done it both personally and in a school context. The service-learning movement is aligned with the experiential learning efforts and traditions of the past 90 years engaging community experience as part of educational foundations in elementary/secondary school learning. Service-learning is about experiential learning and is connected to many contexts, such as career and technical education, civic education, and simply active learning. Creating

a culture of service/experiential learning in an entire college/university context will greatly improve the knowledge and skills of a huge number of potential teachers for years to come.

**IJRSLTE:** We're about at the end of the interview. Is there anything else you would like to share that we haven't discussed?

**RS:** Perhaps the one point we haven't discussed is the importance of governmental policy formation in creating and sustaining teacher education programs that will emphasize developing service-learning programs across the K-graduate school environments. One of the best ways to do this is to actually focus the service-learning community on serving itself. This involves developing and conducting good research efforts and ensuring that good evaluations are performed on all programs. It means making policy makers aware of the research and the personal impact of such programs on people and on communities. This can be done by having students at all levels working with policy makers to engage them in the development and assessment of projects. It also means that teacher educators need to personally get involved in the politics of developing educational policy. I think of no better exemplar of this than Joe Erikson from Augsburg College. Joe has been involved in teacher education in service-learning for years. Joe has also run for school board member and been successful in actually becoming the chair of the Minneapolis Public Schools. Putting service-learning researchers and practitioners in charge of public policy is one important way to get the support necessary to implement and sustain the service-learning/teacher education movement.