

## **Community Service and Design Education**

### **A case study of a school service project with the elderly**

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Community service may appear to be more properly the responsibility of the social services than part of a craft teaching scheme however with careful preparation and planning and a suitable project then community service can be a valuable addition to a craft programme.

There are, of course, many opportunities in our society for embarking on a community service project. Hospitals, Infant Nursery and Junior Schools, Special Schools, Homes for the aged and disabled all give scope for this type of work. In addition there are individuals who probably through bad luck, ill health or carelessness and are living in very unsatisfactory conditions—"poor" people in the old fashioned meaning of the word.

The main difficulty once investigations start is deciding not which is the most needy case but rather deciding which is the most educationally useful. The teacher should be clear about his aims before starting a project. Whatever the teacher's personal beliefs or social conscience may be it is not his job to turn the classroom into an instrument for "do gooding". If the reasons for starting a community service project cannot be justified in the educational interests of our pupils then we must not start such a project from purely social motives. Whilst there are obvious benefits for those who receive the service we are concerned with education and should ask ourselves what bonuses our pupils will get from a community service project.

I think that amongst other things we should try to broaden the horizons of the children we teach, try to help them to look beyond their immediate surroundings and take a closer view of people in circumstances different from their own. Community service is the ideal vehicle for this because boys and girls go outside the workshop or classroom and become involved with other members of the community in which they live.

Community service in schools may take several forms. Most handicraft teachers have been involved in service to the school in making equipment, furniture and fittings for various departments. They often undertake such tasks themselves but not without a certain reluctance, feeling that they are looked upon as the odd job men of the teaching profession.

We should, indeed, be resentful of such a role but should not let this dissuade us from allowing our pupils to undertake tasks which will enable them to perform a useful service to the school. Only when the job is to be done by the pupils should it be undertaken, and even then the main criterion must always be the educational validity

of the work. Whilst the repair of a chair leg may be educationally acceptable, unreasonable repetition of the same task has no place in handicrafts education.

In considering services that may be related to the wider community outside the school two main categories need brief examination.

"Continuous service" is very difficult to operate efficiently within the school situation. In this type of work one has to undertake a service such as 'meals on wheels' over a long period. Such long term commitments may involve changes of staff and pupils who may not wish to accept the commitment from their predecessors. Additionally difficulties presented by holidays, examination timetables, schools trips, and the hundreds of other possible disruptions of the normal timetable mean that a permanent commitment is not normally a viable proposition. The second type of community service is the single task not normally repeated.

There are many examples of this type of work undertaken by secondary schools all over the country. Often the school has a special relationship with nearby Junior and Infant schools from which many of its pupils are drawn. Here is a good opportunity to identify design problems related to recreational and classroom equipment for these schools. In addition it is often possible to help local disabled people with their own special problems.

A particular advantage of this type of "one off" design job is that classes can be arranged into teams, each team helping with the project for two or three weeks whilst the rest of the class continue with their normal work.

Other "out of school" activities are often concerned with the fabric maintenance and decoration of the homes of old people and others who through disability are unable to do this type of work for themselves. This is a very useful type of community service work because it offers a wider range of skills and knowledge of materials than may be presented within the confines of the school workshops. For many pupils a sense of social awareness may be awakened, sometimes with a jolt.

Two years ago I decided to introduce a community service project into the fourth year handicraft programme. The teachers of Art, Home Economics and Rural Studies joined me and we combined our talents in the various aspects of the work.

The situation for a project of this type could hardly have been more favourable. Through the enthusiastic co-operation of the headmaster we were given two forms of boys and girls for one complete day each week. As this involved the whole of our 4th year pupils (all 50 of them!) we had to make some provision for those pupils wishing to take examinations in the various subjects. This was done by ensuring that they involved themselves in tasks which would leave them (and their teachers) sufficient time at the end of the term to complete the allotted syllabus in each subject. Thus all examination pupils were involved in the project for only two thirds of the term. The school leavers continued the project for the complete term.

Before the project could begin there were certain preliminaries. One of the main problems was that of making contact with the people needing our help. I was a comparative stranger to the area near the school and consequently had some difficulty in analysing local needs. Since travel, complete with tools and materials, from school



to the place of work was to be on foot, only a small area was suitable for the project. (A school van would, of course, have allowed a wider area to be covered).

The children themselves often knew of old people who are in need of help, though discretion is essential when making the initial approach.

I found the local Council Rent Collector one of the most useful persons. He calls each week at every council owned old person's house and is often the only person to see conditions inside. He is the mediator between the tenant and the council in matters of property repairs and consequently is well qualified to know which properties are most in need of decoration and repair. The rent collector's immediate superior is the Housing Manager who has details of people who are on the council house waiting list and who are often living in inadequate conditions.

One further word about council property. The council are responsible for the fabric of the property and all external redecoration. Inside decoration is the business of the tenant and often no help is given towards this even in the case of old or impoverished people. One old lady I visited had lived in the same bungalow for 12 years when it was newly built. She was not able to afford decoration throughout that period and the walls were still in the original pink Seraphite plaster colour as left by the builders.

The most obvious source of information regarding people living in poor conditions is the Local Welfare Officer. He is able, at his discretion, to give information about people who have physical, mental and economic problems which prevent them from maintaining their property in a reasonable condition.

A rather unusual source of information were the local solicitors. Through their knowledge of the courts they know of cases where the main wage earner has been imprisoned or where bankruptcy makes the prospects for property maintenance very poor.

From whatever source we found the properties we soon realised that it was necessary to have a formal introduction to the people by one of these officials. I became aware of this very quickly when I found that several people (usually O.A.P's.) refused to open the door unless they had been previously informed of the visit. The police warn old people not to admit strangers into their houses.

When I made my initial visits to householders I was fortunate in having a lady member of staff to accompany me. This helped considerably and made for a more friendly and relaxed atmosphere, particularly where old ladies were concerned.

Whatever their economic or social position I found that almost all the people we talked to in these initial visits were proudly independent. They flatly refused to co-operate with anything that smacked of charity. It was often necessary to emphasise to them the educational aspects of our work. I found in several cases that we were then allowed to work in houses where other organisations had been turned away.

The thought of groups of children coming into a house to splash paint and paper on the walls may make even the most experienced teacher think twice, but until this project was envisaged I had not realised the unease, distrust and outright fear that teenagers engendered in many people. Several people who were really in rather desperate straights refused the offer of our help because they were literally scared

stiff at the thought of teenagers about their home. We found that the only way one could alleviate such fears was by explaining to the pupils how apprehensive these people were. The children responded remarkably well to this.

Whilst we were searching our small town for suitable homes for our project we were also preparing stocks of materials and tools to use in the houses. (I should explain here that all preparations were made during the summer term and during the summer holidays in time for work to start in earnest in September). It might at this stage be useful to anyone contemplating a community service project if I enumerated our supply sources. When one considers that we were employing 40 or so people for about 30 days on 10 or so houses, one realises that considerable quantities of tools and materials had to be amassed.

We obtained a grant from the L.E.A. towards our tools—brushes, scrapers, rollers and plastering equipment were bought with this money. A small amount of cash was made available from the School Fund and this was used to buy the items which we were not given such as plaster, turpentine and strippers etc. I then sent some 80 letters to any company who I thought might manufacture anything useful for the project. The response was quite staggering and my “paint store” quickly began to bulge under a veritable avalanche of materials of all sorts. Thousands of ceramic tiles and cement; hundreds of square feet of laminated plastic; door furniture and every conceivable type and colour of paint. Some manufacturers offered literature, instructional films and talks by their technical staff. Of all these suppliers by far the most useful was a paint and wallpaper warehouse. They gave all their damaged tins of paint and all their discontinued lines of wallpapers. I should imagine that at the beginning of the September term the “paint store” held some 50 gallons of paint and two hundred rolls of wallpaper. Local builders added to this stock with bags of cement, plaster and adhesives.

On our first full day of the project the pupils were assembled in the hall and the idea of the project was explained to them. The need to achieve a high standard of work and behaviour was emphasised. The pupils were also told about the fear that the old people had of young people and were urged not to give them any cause to be upset.

The children were then sent to the specialist rooms in 4 mixed groups, each group to be responsible to one teacher and for the redecoration of one house. At this stage we explained to each group what their allocated tasks would be. Any details which we thought necessary that they should know in advance about the householder were explained at this meeting. It seemed wise to explain in advance that one person had a speech impediment, another had a heart condition and that a third had recently lost a son. We were later very pleased that we had done this—it saved many unintentional slips, the groups were on their guard and surprisingly sympathetic.

After the group meetings in their own classrooms they were then taken to view their own project house. In the initial stages we chose fairly straightforward tasks—3 old ladies’ bungalows and the council house of a blind man and his wife.

Each group took from our paint store a selection of paints and wallpapers from



which to select their colour schemes. It was only when we were walking to the houses that I realised that each group had, with no staff prompting, collected enough to buy a bunch of flowers for the householder. (This, as one might guess, was the girls' idea).

The introductory meeting was an interesting experience. Both the children and the old people seemed very strained at first. One old lady later confessed to me that she had not slept for a week through worrying about a dozen teenagers coming to her house.

The fact that there were girls present, and the gift of flowers, certainly helped to ease the tension at the first meeting. The girls quickly began chatting about colour schemes, curtain fabrics and coverings for chairs whilst boys explored the possibility of fitting kitchen cupboards and boxing in pipes etc. After a short while a very cheery atmosphere seemed to develop though I was still very worried—seeing 12 teenagers in a tiny bungalow made me think that we would never be able to occupy them all in such a small space—not without catastrophe. I had visions of tins of paint being knocked over and the old ladies' treasured possessions being ruined by careless boys and girls.

After this first meeting the groups returned to school to prepare for work the next week. The rest of the day was spent discussing the techniques of the work and getting equipment ready. Each person in the team was given a specific task—usually with a partner, this task was to continue for perhaps two weeks before they moved to a second task requiring a new skill. In this way almost every child had the opportunity to acquire some proficiency at a wide range of skills over the period of a complete years project work.

If the weather was fine it was usually possible to have two or three pupils busy in the garden.

Since indoor space was at a premium we did all the paper pasting outside. As to the teaching of skills and techniques, so many had to be covered that it was impossible to offer formal training in the workshops; additionally to do so would have been wasteful in materials and remote from reality. Instead, demonstrations were given on site, as opportunities arose, to all the pupils working in any given house.

As the decorating side of the work got underway more specific "school based" skills were brought into play. Girls brought a school sewing machine to make curtains. Boys repolished furniture, glazed windows and rehung doors. Cupboards were made and fitted.

As the term progressed many of my worst fears proved groundless. I was astonished by the response of the pupils. They continued to work with great care, skill and consideration for the occupier of the house. The standard of work turned out was surprisingly high, and did not deteriorate. There was an unspoken affection for the old ladies we were working with, and even the most hardened boys at times demonstrated compassion and thoughtfulness of which I would have thought them incapable.

The first property took each group about half a term to complete, after which the non examination groups moved on to work on a second house. Those boys and girls who were examination candidates had a complete day in school for about one third

of a term—about 6 days. On these days they spent the time working on 2 or 3 subjects whilst the 4 teachers run a shuttle service from house to school to relieve one another in time for the next lesson. This was hard work for the staff but far from having an adverse affect on the examination chances our results this year with our “project pupils” were the best ever with 80% ‘O’ level passes in craft subject.

After the initial success of the project we decided we were now ready to try something more ambitious.

A house, occupied by an old couple, was in a dismal state of repair. The ground floor was ruined by dry-rot, pieces of hardboard covered the holes and the joists had been eaten away completely. For this house the groups were changed so that larger number of boys were available to do the rather dirty and heavy specialist work. Girls were later brought in to help make curtains and to do the outside and inside decorating.

This particular house took much longer to complete than the more straightforward council properties and brought more problems. In general the quicker any task is completed the better, not only for the householder but also for the children. We found that the most unsatisfactory aspect of this project was that each week we would do a little more and walk away leaving a half finished job. This is discouraging both for the house owner and the pupils but there is no simple answer; for most projects of this nature the tasks are the type which take several full days work.

I discussed this problem with my pupils after the year’s project had been completed. Their solution was a simple one—have a complete week free of lessons and get the task completed. In the school situation however this suggestion presents serious administrative difficulties.

After the physical work of the project had been completed other aspects of the work continued.

Pupils still (18 months later) call on the people we helped. Occasionally I am still asked to loan a plane or chisel to someone who is fixing a door or cupboard lock in an old ladies house. One group of girls until quite recently took their guitars every Sunday to give entertainment to the old ladies they had met on the community service project.

Whilst the project was in progress the staff made a conscious effort to get the pupils to look on the properties as their “adopted” houses—this tended to give them an identity with their work.

As the project came to an end each group took the other groups on a tour of inspection of their house—we were surprised to find that they were far more critical of one anothers work than the staff had been.

In the Summer term of this year I was approached by a local housing manager who had heard of the schools community service project of the year before. He asked if we could help with the redecorating of a local old folks’ home and in the individual bungalows which surround it.

This was a good opportunity for an experiment with community service in a different way. The home economics mistress and I took the 4th year leavers’ group



for one morning each week and this involved only a small adjustment of the timetable. Once again I was agreeably surprised with the attitude the children showed toward the tasks they were allocated.

From experience I have found that a leaving class not involved with examinations is often the most difficult to interest in any task—they are usually rather preoccupied with thoughts of jobs and are more interested in their out-of-school activities than with any schoolwork.

On this community service project however I was surprised by the enthusiasm shown by boys and girls who I had only allowed on the project with great trepidation. They were so keen on this work that throughout the term they worked through their lunch hour. The finished product was quite as good as the more academic pupils had achieved the previous year. On the debit side, however, they needed more constant supervision in that they were rather too easily satisfied with a “second best” job so that they could get on with another task.

In conclusion I can see many administrative and organisational reasons why a full scale project involving whole days with large numbers is too difficult a project to embark upon. On the other hand I think there are many teachers who could try a short term project. The raising of the school leaving age may give us the opportunity to try more of this type of work with our non-academic pupils.

The pupils who worked on the projects have a wider range of skills than I could have possibly taught in the confines of the workshop, they are more aware of the problems that beset the old and disabled and the gap between the ages has been bridged by them.

Overall, I consider community service a valuable extension of my work as a teacher of craft subjects.