

Where Service-Learning Meets Design Thinking

Service-learning is ...

an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic and civic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs.

Design thinking is ...

a non-linear, iterative process used to build empathy, challenge assumptions, redefine problems and create innovative solutions to prototype and test.

As the focus on “innovation” moved into education from engineering over the last decade, students and teachers alike have become problem-solvers who empathize, brainstorm, experiment, “fail better”, co-design, and then redesign when they engage in change-making alongside their communities.

Like service-learning, the design thinking process is not a linear process. It is often illustrated as a cycle that includes the steps of inspiration, ideation, and implementation – with an emphasis on the empathy that grows out of human-centered design.

As Senior Innovation Officer at Youthprise Libby Rau says, the design thinking process informs not only work with external partners in finding solutions to issues, but also innovations for internal processes – from staff meetings to program evaluation.

Those closest to an issue are always central to the design team, which “gives more power to the communities we think we’re helping,” says Rau. This approach aligns with the quality service-learning standard that emphasizes building reciprocal community partnerships (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008).

Design for Change (DFC), one of the design thinking initiatives in education, sees intersections with service-learning in the design process that they frame as the “FEEL, IMAGINE, DO, SHARE”. This organization, which has roots in India and a global reach into more than 70 countries, places the initial emphasis on building empathy. Design teams of students start by listening to the voices of those who are closest to a particular issue.

Both NYLC and DFC uphold the importance of youth voice in addressing real community needs that lead to social change, and both approaches frame community needs as local and global, using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals as a unifying framework. According to Tara Seibel, Co-Director at DFC: “Youth-led design thinking shifts traditional power dynamics as young people are positioned to drive intentional, purposeful, and aligned changes in their own communities.”

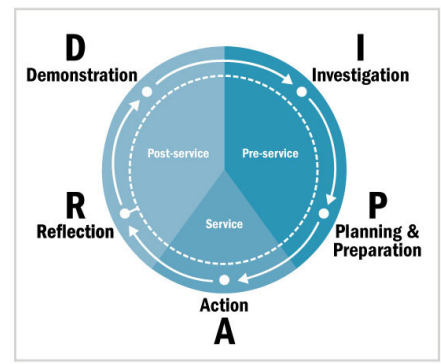
Perhaps most importantly, practitioners of both approaches strive to address the root causes of persistent community issues.



For more information and resources on service-learning visit nylc.org

With profound thanks to Tara Seibel of Design for Change for her contributions to this crosswalk.





NYLC's Service-Learning Process

Investigation:

Through research and inquiry, young people and their partners identify a genuine community need, as well as its root causes.

Planning and Preparation:

Based on that research, young people identify a realistic and meaningful project with clear goals, timelines, roles, and follow-up steps.

Action:

Participants implement their plans, collecting evidence of their project's efficacy and impact.

Reflection:

Throughout the project, participants assess what is working, what could be done better, and how they are addressing the root cause of the need.

Demonstration:

Participants showcase what they have learned and the impact they have had, sharing the news with stakeholders and community partners.



Design for Change's Design Thinking Process

Feel:

During the FEEL stage, students listen to the voices of community members who are impacted by a particular issue. Students also learn about the global context, connected to the UN Global Goals, regarding the particular issue. They consider how they feel, building empathy around the issue. Additionally, they dig into the symptoms and the root causes of that issue before framing their design question. A design question narrows the focus of the students' brainstorming in the IMAGINE stage.

Imagine:

During the IMAGINE stage, using rapid brainstorming techniques, students think boldly about ways to address their design question. After having the opportunity to innovate and ideate, they think critically about the work they are most compelled to act upon in the DO stage.

Do:

In the DO stage, students plan for and then carry out their action plan for changemaking. By employing prototyping and soliciting feedback from community members, students iterate on a design for a solution. They then carry out their change project.

Share:

During the SHARE stage, students intentionally reflect on their work. They consider the lessons learned about themselves, their work, the change-making process, and their community. Additionally, they share both those lessons and the impact of their change-making in order to inspire future action.

Service-Learning/ Design Thinking Crosswalk



Service-Learning Step	NYLC's Service-Learning Process	Design Thinking Step	Design for Change Process
Investigate	Ninth-grade civics students were concerned about the shrinking bee population, and the root causes behind this crisis. In their student-led investigation (inquiry) process, they first consulted with an Extension Service, and learned that farm and garden toxins were part of the problem. Because of the extent of the issue, they moved from their initial idea of promoting bee-friendly gardens to increasing apiaries in the area. But for this to be possible, they needed to propose a change to a city ordinance.	Empathize	Feel Students interviewed community members on the Pine Ridge Reservation, including their elders to better understand the potential impact of the Keystone XL Pipeline. Students also read about and discussed the history of pipelines and their impact on Indigenous land. Students engaged in an "empathy sketch", noting what they heard, saw, felt about the issue of the pipeline. They also conducted a root cause analysis to better understand the issue. Finally, they framed their issue by generating the question: "How might we raise awareness about the impact of pipelines on Indigenous lands?"
Plan and Prepare	The city wasn't accustomed to young people taking initiative to change legislation. So the students consulted with the City Manager, who guided them on the steps involved in proposing changes to city ordinances. They also consulted with Energy and Environmental Commission members, and Chief of Police, who was responsible for overseeing local apiaries. They gathered data – working with a local beekeeper – and documented it in compelling infographics. They planned the City Council presentation, urging a relaxation of the ordinance, with their growing understanding of the municipal political process.	Define	Imagine Students conducted a rapid brainstorming activity in which they wrote their ideas for solutions on post-it notes. They then discussed with one another as well as with community leaders. They also imagined the impact that their solutions might have, broadly. After doing so, they selected an idea that they believed was both feasible and impactful. They then sketched out the steps necessary to create their awareness campaign, including researching policy makers and writing letters to local politicians. Finally, they received feedback on their prototype, made adjustments, and moved into the DO stage.

Service-Learning/ Design Thinking Crosswalk (con't.)

Service-Learning Step	NYLC's Service-Learning Process	Design Thinking Step	Design for Change Process
Act	The students presented their request to the city council, supported by background knowledge such as the necessity of a local water source and size of lot relative to number of beehives allowed – as well as considerations for residents with allergies. Although, their proposed change to the ordinance didn't pass on the first attempt, it did – with some refinements – the second time around.	Ideate	Do After receiving feedback from community members, students finalized their plan of action by writing out the steps necessary. They gathered resources, such as mailing address, posters, etc. They implemented their change by creating awareness building posters and infographics, writing letters to community leaders.
Reflect	After their initial set-back, the students reflected on their experience and re-assessed their strategy. They watched recordings of successful attempts to change city ordinances and redeveloped their presentation for the second attempt several months later, incorporating feedback from City Council members. They also conducted outreach in the community to raise awareness of the importance of bees to local habitat.	Prototype	Share Students engaged in a series of reflections around lessons learned about themselves, their community, and the change-making process.
Demonstrate	Because this project was part of a civics class, the students shared what they had learned in the process with their peers through a school-wide service fair that involved approximately 300 students. The "Bee Girls," also invited the city council members, mayor, chief of police, beekeepers, and other partners to hear about their first-hand experiences with city government, as well as the other initiatives their classmates had led.	Test	Share Finally, students prepared presentations to share their work with their school community and, then, their broader community. Additionally, students were then selected to share their story with the Design for Change global community during a conference in Rome, Italy. Students continue sharing the impact of their work to inspire others' action.