

---

## Community Service Learning with Unemployed Young Nova Scotians

---

Clarence De Schiffart

*Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture*

---

### ABSTRACT

Community Service Learning for Unemployed Youth is a "learning-by-doing framework" in Nova Scotia that uses tools, techniques, and processes found within service learning, career development, and community development principles. This framework and the community-based programs under this framework, target unemployed youth. The approach actively engages young people in their own learning by giving them the opportunity to perform services that directly benefit their community. By incorporating this framework, community service learning for unemployed youth helps to build life-long connections between youth, their communities and the rapidly changing world of work.

### RÉSUMÉ

Le programme Community Service Learning for Unemployed Youth (Apprentissage du service communautaire pour les jeunes chômeurs) est un "cadre d'apprentissage par l'expérience", pratiqué en Nouvelle-Écosse et qui se sert des outils, des techniques et des procédés utilisés dans l'apprentissage du service, le perfectionnement professionnel et les principes de développement communautaire. Ce cadre et les programmes communautaires en découlant visent les jeunes chômeurs. Cette approche encourage vivement les jeunes à s'instruire eux-mêmes en leur donnant la possibilité d'accomplir des tâches bénéficiant directement à leur communauté. En incluant ce cadre, le programme Community Service Learning for Unemployed Youth (Apprentissage du service communautaire pour les jeunes chômeurs) contribue à l'établissement de relations qui dureront toute la vie entre les jeunes, leurs communautés et le monde, en rapide évolution, du travail.

In Canada, successful labour market attachment for young people continues to challenge policy makers, the education and training system, communities and individuals. In the past eight years the national, provincial, and local economies have endured dramatic changes that are characterized by a shift away from primary resource sectors to the information-based technologies of global markets.

Structural change such as this affects all age cohorts but it has a more dramatic effect on youth who are attempting to find entry-level jobs in a shrinking yet competitive labour market. Youth unemployment in Nova Scotia ranges between 10% in the province's capital to over 16% for youth in outlying areas with the provincial average rate of 15% (Statistics Canada, 1999).

Traditional entry-level opportunities in fishing, mining, and forestry have disappeared (Beck, 1992). Communities are attempting an economic transformation by moving to more knowledge and technology based industries (Beck, 1995; Rifkin, 1995). The Nova Scotia Labour Market Secretariat, in its report *Towards*

*An Integrated Labour Market Framework* (1999), agrees with this change in the work dynamic by saying:

The interaction between the economy and the labour market directly influences youth employment. The new skills required to succeed in the knowledge-based economy and the steady increase in non-standard employment have created a work environment different from what any generation entering the labour force has ever seen. Young people must be prepared to enter this new environment (p. 25).

With the announcement of the Federal Youth Employment Strategy in February, 1997 an interdepartmental group was created in Nova Scotia to explore means of assisting rural youth who are experiencing chronic unemployment. The provincial committee was made up of representatives from the following Nova Scotia government departments: Community Services, Education, Labour, Economic Development and Tourism, Sport and Recreation, and the Youth Secretariat. They identified several issues for youth which included low skill levels, lack of knowledge of how the world of work is changing, and a lack of awareness of how to find employment. After receiving input from groups involved in youth leadership training, career transition, and community development, it was decided that an innovative approach to addressing youth unemployment would be to combine the principles of service learning, community development, and career development into a project of community service learning.

### *Service Learning*

Service learning is a form of learning-by-doing. This method actively engages young people in their own learning by giving them the opportunity to perform services that directly benefit their community (Smith, 1994) and that can help to build life-long connections between youth and their communities. It is also a constructive means to channel young people's talents, energy, and resourcefulness (Althaus, 1997). While focusing on building a spirit of community participation and forging an understanding of what "community" means. Community-based service learning helps youth develop a clear understanding of themselves, including their aspirations and future goals. This ultimately strengthens entire communities by helping to reinforce social responsibility, foster partnerships, and recognize and locate community assets (Smith, 1994).

Service learning has been used by teachers in colleges, universities, and secondary schools to enhance traditional ways of learning (Liu, 1995). In Nova Scotia for example, Saint Francis Xavier University and Sir John A. Macdonald High School have incorporated components of service learning into their curricula. These institutions provide formalized learning experiences which actively engage students in their own education through situations that support their course work, and foster lifelong connections among the students, their communities, and the world outside the classroom (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993).

A number of authors have identified what they consider to be the necessary parameters for service learning to exist. The essential ones include:

1. Having community organizations be sufficiently prepared. This includes setting objectives for skills and attitudes to be learned, as well as planning projects which contribute to the youth's broad learning at the same time work gets done.
2. Performing a valuable and necessary service for and with the community.
3. Creating opportunity for participants to analyse the experience, draw conclusions through discussions with others, and reflect on the work being performed.
4. Providing young people with opportunities to use acquired skills and knowledge in real life situations within the community.
5. Helping to foster a sense of caring and citizenship for others in the community.
6. Providing academic credit for all or part of the learning by an educational institution. (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform, 1993)

Creating opportunities for youth to think about and reflect on service work performed increases their understanding of the experience and the way service can address the needs of a community (Cone & Harris, 1996). It helps youth raise their awareness of community issues and then increase their level of commitment to being involved in finding solutions. These two aspects are integral to being an active citizen. At the same time, analysis and reflection allow youth to identify, to absorb, and finally, to apply what they have learned to future opportunities in their own work and life.

### *Community Development*

"Community development is the process by which communities develop the internal expertise and resources to help themselves" (Nova Scotia Labour Market Development Secretariat, 1999 p.10). The key for community growth and development is to consolidate local assets and begin connecting them in ways which increase their power and effectiveness (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). The Nova Scotia Labour Market Development Secretariat (1999) suggests that if communities could focus on youth, this might help stem the tide of young people leaving Nova Scotia. Smith (1994) argues this could happen as communities assist youth in becoming more involved and willing to fully support their own place within their community. Indications of community development include:

1. *Community capacity building.* Community groups take responsibility to plan and implement community development projects, programs, and activities.
2. *Long term benefits to the community.* Development projects such as community resource mapping can continue to be useful well past the completion of the project.
3. *Sustainability.* Communities are better able to create increased and enhanced opportunities for prosperity without further external support.

### *Career Development*

Helping young people make important decisions about their future and how they navigate the transition to work begins with understanding the underlying frameworks of career decision making. Awareness on how career and work/life planning occurs can help youth see that decisions made each day can influence future career opportunities. A person must also see that career development is ongoing and life long if one is to take advantage of the learning which can come from performing work (Hache, Jarvis, & Redekopp, 1998).

Most career development models include three broad areas: (a) personal management, (b) learning and work exploration, and (c) life/work building (Hache, Jarvis, & Redekopp, 1998). Knowledge in these three areas can assist youth in choices related to future learning, family, or work roles. Changes and adjustments are easier to make if individuals know that managing their work/life is influenced by who they are and the circumstances surrounding them in their lives (Bridges, 1994). Attempting to understand the relationship between their self-awareness and the changing work world is complicated, but it may make a big difference in assisting youth in making more intentional career decisions and handling the ongoing transition.

### *The Community Service Learning Project for Youth in Nova Scotia*

The creators of this project see incorporating components of service learning, community development, and career development as a means of addressing unemployed youth's lack of skills, low education levels, poor self-concept, and limited knowledge of the changing world of work. We believe that the learning and work experience would promote the learning-by-doing philosophy utilizing community ownership and service projects in small communities. Further, it is hoped that this approach will assist communities in helping unemployed youth with developing work/life skills, knowledge and attitudes which could improve their future work prospects through increased community awareness. These attitudes would help people discover their career passions and find the means to live their passions more fully throughout their lives.

We believe that the involvement of communities in the Community Service Learning Project for Youth in Nova Scotia will enable them to work towards short- and long-term community improvements. In focusing on youth, benefits to the community would be a new understanding of youth and the challenges facing them. The community's specific responsibility in each project would be to support and utilize the youth, as well as to manage the concrete outcomes. For long term benefits, communities involved in service learning projects could be making a contribution to their prosperity helping to ensure their own future viability.

One unique aspect of the Community Service Learning Project for Nova Scotia Youth is that it becomes the community sponsor's responsibility to create learning components. In a traditional service learning approach, formal educational institutions look after this aspect and assign credit for service learning

work (Cone et al., 1996). The Community Service Learning Project for Nova Scotia Youth does not have the capacity to offer formal learning credits.

The Community Service Learning Project for Nova Scotia Youth does, however, incorporate formal learning experiences, such as training in life skills, entrepreneurship, career exploration, and computer skills training, which take place outside the regular context of the service work. The formal learning, along with meaningful community work, benefit both the youth and the larger community. Having the community sponsor customize the structured learning experiences for each group recognizes that the experiences, education, and personal background of each participant varies. It acknowledges and promotes the value that becoming active community citizens extends far beyond formal education.

From a career development perspective, the Community Service Learning Project for Nova Scotia Youth aims to increase the ability of participants to develop and match their specific and transferable skills and knowledge sets with the requirements of today's labour market. This includes:

1. *Career understanding*. Understanding the components of a career including life-long learning, leisure activities, employment and other roles, labour market requirements, and emerging economies.
2. *Essential employment attitudes*. Attitudes which are required of employees in any job or occupation to be successful and maintain this success.
3. *General and specific employment skills*. Job skills specific to the labour market as well as reading, writing, computation, or computer literacy (Hache et al., 1998).

#### *Anticipated Outcomes for the Community Service Learning Project for Nova Scotia Youth*

Service learning is a teaching and learning methodology which integrates community service with learning and skill acquisition. To deepen participants' and communities' understanding of service learning, the provincial government departments asked that specific criteria be met. These criteria guided each community in their submission of specific and customized proposals for community service learning projects. The following expectations served as a guide for each service learning project proposal:

1. Participants would acknowledge work content skills attained through prior experiences by using prior learning assessments and recognition. While this in itself is valuable, proposals had to account for structured learning time which would assist youth and communities in looking past the work aspect of the experience.
2. Each project would instill in participants an understanding of the meaning of community and each youth's personal connection to it. Community sponsors needed to identify learning which enhanced the youths' understanding of active participation as citizens by recognizing their capability to take responsibility for their own behaviours and respecting others.

3. Projects would assist youth in defining their self-image, incorporating their skills, desires, interests, temperament, and matching these with labour market opportunities.
4. Communities would recognize that the youth are important and do make a valuable contribution to the well being of the community.

### *The Pilot Phase*

The pilot phase of the project involved: a) marketing the concept of community service learning, b) steering the selection process, and c) supporting the projects once they were implemented.

Orientation sessions outlining the philosophy of service learning and career development were conducted for community groups and the youth. A budget of \$250,000 was allocated for the administrative and operational aspects of the pilot phase. Funding was able to support eight projects out of the 21 proposals submitted. The successful projects were chosen by a group of provincial and regional representatives based on the selection criteria previously described.

The eight selected projects employed 41 youth and involved over 30 partnering organizations and community groups. The projects ranged from renovating a community hall, building an outdoor classroom to working on a community ecology/environmental project. The structured learning opportunities included workshops on life skills management, career exploration, environmental issues and trends, ecosystem management, public speaking, team building, as well as health and safety issues for the job site.

An independent consultant conducted a formal evaluation to measure the degree of success connected to the project. This involved a review of the background material for the project, interviews and discussions with community sponsors, as well as provincial and regional committees. Highlights of the evaluation and that influence the project in the future included:

1. The pilot project achieved considerable success in addressing each of the four principle goals set out above, and provided substantial evidence of the efficacy of the service learning model for youth employment programming;
2. Key factors in the success of local projects were the mix of educational and work experience background among the participants and having some participants with leadership capabilities.
3. The work experience and attendant training activities in the local projects helped participants develop general job skills and contributed to confidence building, career planning, and social integration (GTA Consultants, 1999).

### CONCLUSION

The experience with the Community Service Learning for Youth in Nova Scotia thus far has generated a great deal of interest to expand and continue with this approach in other regions of Nova Scotia. The evaluation may have major

implications regarding how the project changes or is strengthened. It is anticipated that helping youth increase their self-awareness and increase their knowledge of the changing world of work will make a difference in the youth's lives as well as in the life of the community. As a summary, a quote from a participant on her work at the half-way point captures many of the young people's thoughts on being involved. "I think this project has helped me with my communication skills and leadership skills. I feel as though it better prepared me for future jobs by giving me the guts to go out and get what I want (project participant)."

### *References*

- Althaus, J. (1997). Service-learning and leadership development: Posing questions not answers. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall, 122-129.
- Beck, N. (1995). *Accelerate*. Toronto, ON: Harper Collins.
- Beck, N. (1992). *Shifting Gears*. Toronto, ON: Harper Collins.
- Bridges, W. (1994). *JobShift*. Don Mills, ON: Addison-Wesley.
- Cone, D., & Harris, S. (1996). Service-learning practice: Developing a theoretical framework. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall, 31-43.
- GTA Consultants Inc. (1999). *Evaluation of the Nova Scotia Youth Service Learning Pilot Project*. Halifax, NS.
- Hache, L., Jarvis, P., & Redekopp, D. (1998). *Blueprint for life/work designs: K-adult handbook*. Ottawa, ON: National Life/Work Centre and Human Resources Development Canada.
- Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993). *Building Communities From the Inside Out*. Chicago, Ill: ACTA.
- Liu, G. (1995). Knowledge, foundations, and discourse: Philosophical support for service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall, 5-18.
- Nova Scotia Labour Market Development Secretariat (1999). *Towards an integrated labour market framework: A consultation with Nova Scotia's labour market partners [Executive Summary]*. Halifax, NS: Government of Nova Scotia.
- Rifkin, J. (1995). *The End of Work*. New York, NY: G. P. Putman's Sons.
- Smith, M. (1994). Community service learning: Striking the chord of citizenship. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, Fall, 37-43.
- Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform. (1993). *Standards for quality for school based service-learning*.
- Statistics Canada (1999). *Labour Information Report*. Ottawa, ON: Government of Canada.

### *About the author*

Clarence De Schiffart, M.Ed.(Counselling) currently works as a Career & Transition Specialist with the Nova Scotia Department of Education & Culture. He also teaches graduate courses and conducts professional training sessions in vocational development and career counselling.

Address correspondence to Clarence De Schiffart, Career and Transition Services, Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, P.O. Box 578, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3J 2S9.