

# The Importance of Reflection in Service-Learning

## I. What is critical reflection?

- A. "Reflection is simply another word for learning. What distinguishes it from some other forms of learning is that 'reflection' grows out of experience."
- B. Through reflection students analyze concepts, evaluate experiences, and form opinions. Critical reflection provides students with the opportunity to examine and question their beliefs, opinions, and values. It involves observation, asking questions, and putting facts, ideas, and experiences together to derive new meaning and new knowledge.
- C. Reflection is a process designed to promote the examination and interpretation of experience and the promotion of cognitive learning. It is the process of looking back on the implications of actions taken - good and bad - determining what has been gained, lost, or achieved, and connecting these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts.
- D. Reflective thinking is not only an organic component in the learning cycle, it is simultaneously the very ground from which knowledge and belief spring. Reflective thinking, in short, is both process and product. As such, reflective thinking is key in experiential learning theory and the "operational linchpin" of service-learning pedagogy.

## II. Why reflect?

- A. Reflection is an essential process for transforming experiences - gained from the service activities and the course materials - into genuine learning. It is crucial for integrating the service experience with the course material. It enhances students' critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to assess their own values, goals, and progress.
- B. Reflection improves basic academic skills and promotes a deeper understanding of course subject matter and its relations to the non-academic world; it improves higher level thinking and problem solving, and students' ability to learn from experience. Reflection promotes personal development by enhancing students' self-awareness, their sense of community, and their sense of their own capacities.
- C. Reflection in service-learning leads students to new "ah-ha moments."

## III. How can reflection be facilitated in the classroom?

- A. Effective reflection depends on appropriate contexts and real problems and issues.
- B. The culture of the class community must be one in which students feel included, respected, and safe.
- C. The dialog among instructor and students must be meaningful to the students. By involving them in real community problems, service-learning provides students with a need to know, a desire to enhance their skills and a commitment to solving problems of importance to them.
- D. If used in faddish or mandated ways without understanding and appreciation of the larger perspectives, it does not serve its intended purpose.

#### IV. Principles of Good Practice for Effective Reflection:

- A. Links service objectives to the course objectives by integrating the service experience with course learning;
- B. Is guided and purposeful;
- C. Occurs regularly within the course;
- D. Includes components that can be evaluated according to well-defined criteria;
- E. Provides opportunities for both private and public reflection;
- F. Fosters civic responsibility;
- G. Eyler, Giles and Schmiedes, in A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning identify "The 4 Cs of Reflection" as:
  - 1. Continuous in time frame - an ongoing part of the learner's education and service involvement, that allows students to formulate new ideas following Kolb's Cycle of Learning.
  - 2. Connected to the intellectual and academic needs of those involved - This is where the connection between real life experiences and course material are compared and become relevant.
  - 3. Challenging to assumptions and complacency - Reflection must challenge students and provoke thought in a more critical way.
  - 4. Contextualized in terms of design and setting - Faculty determine if the reflection is appropriate for the context of the service-learning experience, thus adding to the linkage between thinking about course content and actually applying it.

#### Reflection Activities and Questions

- When facilitating reflection, vary the activities to accommodate multiple learning styles.
- Create a reflective classroom, rather than just adding a reflective component.

#### Group Discussions

The groups may involve either the entire class or just small numbers of students. If they are small groups, the instructor may allow students to choose their own group members, or s/he can set criteria for group composition (e.g., no groups composed of a single ethnicity or gender), or s/he can assign students to groups. The group members exchange ideas about the course topics and/or the service experiences. The instructor may either pose general or narrowly focused questions for discussion. A scribe may be assigned to submit a summary of the discussion to the instructor.

Oral reflection (feelings, expertise, and cognition) helps students express their feelings, concerns, and frustrations. Done in class, this fosters a sense of bonding and trust. Students can be encouraged to participate in a cognitive approach by directing oral reflection. This requires a series of four questions:

- a) What was done?
- b) What does it mean?
- c) How did it come to be this way?
- d) How might things be done differently?

## **Journals**

Most instructors find that written journals provide a valuable springboard for critical reflection.

Journals are tools for facilitating critical reflection, but may not necessarily assure critical reflection unless they are specifically structured to do so.

Students may be asked to keep a journal as they engage in the service experience. The journals should not merely be simple inventories of events. They should address situations objectively, subjectively, and analytically. Instructors may provide questions to guide students in addressing issues and should review the journals periodically. It is helpful to offer written comments, questions and feedback that will encourage, challenge, and essentially provide a dialogue that deepens the students' thought process.

Journal writing encourages students to react to issues, elaborate on issues, or think about the future. Journals are effective in helping students sort through their feelings, think critically, and solve problems. Faculty responses to journal writings should be helpful to the writer:

- On the one hand, responses must be extensive enough to let students know that their journals have received serious consideration.
- On the other hand, responses should make realistic use of instructors' time and not inhibit students' future writing.

The purpose of journal writing should be clear. Students should follow a specific format that you explain (and model) in class.

Directed writings (which can be part of journals) demand specific content, focusing on a topic.

Different strategies accomplish different learning objectives. Faculty must identify the learning objective first and then match the most salient reflective strategy to the desired outcome.

## **Analytic papers**

These provide students with an 1) opportunity to describe their service experience, 2) to evaluate the experience and what they learned from it, and 3) to integrate their experiences with course topics. If the papers are assigned at the end of the course, students can make use of ideas derived from class discussion, journals, and other reflective activities provided during the course.

## **Portfolios**

Students may be asked to compile materials relevant to the service-learning experience and the course of which it is a part. These materials may include: scripts/notes for class presentations, journals, analytic papers, items created as part of the service, pictures, agency brochures, handbooks, time-sheets, service agreement and training materials. Portfolios provide a focus for reflection on the service experience and its documentation.

## **Presentations**

Students may be asked to make presentations to their classmates (and/or to broader audiences) describing their service-learning experiences, evaluating them and integrating them with the course topics.

Artistic expression allows for creativity and individual expression.

## **Reading responses**

Students may be asked to write responses to course readings. Students can be allowed greater or less freedom in how they respond, by posing either general or more focused questions.

Reading selected articles relating to the service challenges encourage students to think more deeply about the issues, and helps students see their experiences in the broader context of life.

## Electronic forum

Students may be asked to contribute to electronic discussion on the service-learning and course topics using email or a listserv. They may respond to either questions posed by the instructor or to points raised by other students.

## Reflective Teaching Strategies (from Silcox, A How-To Guide to Reflection)

TYPE	PRIMARY EXPECTED RESULT	DESCRIPTION
Readings/Creative Projects	Fosters group bonding and leadership; facilitates directed learning	Specific assignments include essays, music, videos, artwork, etc.—both in class and out.
Journal Writings	Fosters personal growth	Student maintains a regular journal that the faculty member reads and responds to.
Directed Writings	Fosters directed learning	Student produces essays that address specific questions or issues required by the instructor.
“Feelings-Oriented” Oral Reflection	Fosters group bonding and trust	Class members participate in a group discussion regarding their service experiences.
“Student As Expert” Oral Reflection	Fosters citizenship, leadership, and cognitive learning	Student leads a classroom session providing a critique of a reading assignment or presenting a solution to a problem.
“Cognitive Teaching” Oral Reflection	Fosters leadership, directed learning, cognitive learning, personal growth, and critical thinking	The faculty member leads a teaching session that fosters critical thinking skills and problem solving.

## Guidelines for Developing Reflection

- Critical reflection assignments and outcomes should be tied to the goals of service-learning as specified in the course syllabus.
- Effective reflection activities are guided and allow feedback and assessment.
- Consider the goals of incorporating service-learning into the course and use reflection activities to meet those goals.
- Consider the structure of the class. How does it lend itself to particular reflection activities?
- Create and publicize expectations.
- Consider your skills as an instructor when choosing reflecting activities. What sorts of activities are you competent to evaluate and facilitate?
- Consider learning styles. A variety of reflection activities, rather than a single type, takes into account that different students learn differently.
- Keep it simple. Don't take on more than you can do thoughtfully.

- Think about evaluation and assessment of the reflection methods. Consider soliciting student feedback on what is working well and what needs to be improved.
- Think about evaluation and assessment of students' critical reflection efforts. What constitutes an A, B, C?
- *Remember the 4Cs: Continuous, Connected, Challenging, Contextualized*