Reflection: Helping Students Make the Connection

Reflection is one of the most important tools necessary to ensuring a successful service-learning experience. It is the means through which someone can make sense of what they are seeing and doing and learn from it. The complete reflection process is essentially never-ending. It stays with students during every step of their journey and assists them in searching through the basic questions of: what, so what, and now what?

According to, "The Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning" (Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, 1996), there are four important principles to keep in mind for effective critical reflection*: continuous, connected, challenging and contextualized.*

Reflection is continuous, connected, challenging & contextualized.

Without a commitment to deliberate and guided reflection, students may not learn from their experiences, in fact they might even reinforce existing prejudices. A commitment to reflection by allocating class time must be made to truly integrate academic service-learning into a course. Connected reflection is essentially the component that links the "service" the students are doing at their community organizations with the structured "learning" they are working through in the classroom. Without structured reflection, students may fail to make the connection between the course content and its relationship to the service work.

Reflection leads to understanding, which in turn leads to more informed action. Effective reflection leads to a better understanding of social problems and to the quest for better solutions.

Faculty members utilize a variety of methods and tools to conduct reflection. Whatever forms of reflection are chosen, it is important to start integrating reflection into the course early in the semester to assure that students understand the process and its connection to the service-learning experience.

Methods for helping students reflect include:

Personal Journals Guided & Key Phrase Journals Dialogue Journals
Small-Group Work Ethnographies Group Problem Solving
Reflective Essays Artistic Projects Case Studies
Histories Class Discussions Electronic Discussion Groups
Products Created for Organizations Portfolios Multimedia Class Presentations
Problem-Solving Papers Theory Application Papers Case Studies Papers
Agency Analysis Papers Presentations to Community Organizations