

Information for Students on "Reflection"

What is reflection?

When getting involved with a service-learning course, it is helpful to keep in mind one of the most important aspects of the learning process: **analytic reflection**. This reflection process can take many forms, including integrative papers, class presentations, journals, reflective essays, and class discussions. The reflective process has certain guidelines that need to be followed in order to make the reflections as useful as possible. Although the service-learning course is a valuable experience in itself, reflecting upon and analyzing your experiences can take your understanding to the next level, and can often provide *unexpected* realizations.

Some students, for example, have discovered that the preconceptions they held about certain issues at their site changed drastically between the beginning of their internship and the end. A student from a previous service-learning course recognized a change in his beliefs in the thirteenth week of class, and then described his observation in a journal entry: *"Before taking this class I had previous ideas on the reasons behind homelessness, poverty, and illiteracy, which I will not mention here. Many of these ideas came from sources such as the news or television, and I have come to see that they are generally wrong."*

Another student also commented on the value of first-hand experience in her week-nine journal entry; again, the student compares what she has seen with what she has been told: *"Domestic violence...exists everywhere...and unlike the accounts given on shows like Maury and Montel, this abuse oftentimes goes unnoticed. A note I strongly want to make is that... [it is a misconception] that because a person is an alcoholic, they are abusive, and vice-versa."*

Looking back on what you have accomplished at your learning site and reflecting upon these service-learning experiences can give tremendous insight into any changes that may have occurred over time. And although such changes are not always immediately obvious, they can often be seen much more clearly by analyzing past writings, and then making comparisons between specific issues.

Reflective Work Journal Overview

A common form of documentation used to record student site observations and encounters in service-learning settings is a **reflective work journal**. Keeping a work journal helps students achieve positive results (both personally and academically) by helping them to focus their thoughts and feelings *in relation to learning objectives*.

Basically, what this means is that you should try to connect your experiences at the work site with the things you learn in discussion/class, thus, making your academics more personally applicable.

Staying focused on course theories is extremely important in journal writing because one of the most common tendencies for students is to resort to an objective, 'log-of-events' style of recording; e.g., *"This happened first, then later, this happened,"* and so forth....

This was termed "lecture regurgitation" by Pierrette Hondagnueu-Sotelo and Sally Raskoff in a paper about community service-learning. "Lecture regurgitation" is basically the writing of concepts verbatim from lectures without understanding them or applying them at your site. In order to avoid this kind of objective chronicling of daily events, you will want to maintain a "sense of curiosity" during your everyday observations. This will help you to *subjectively* examine the details of every situation. Try to connect the theory you are discussing with an example in order to help explain an individual's situation, with emphasis on the 'explain' part.

Regardless of the type of journal you keep, you must first know what you should write about, and what kind of journal content is appropriate for your in-class assignment. It may be helpful to note

that the work journal is not the same as the typical daily diary that many people keep. Although there are several basic similarities, there are also many structural differences, as well as certain implied rules that accompany work journal writing. A nice distinction was written by Doris M. Hamner in her book *Building Bridges*: "what is important [in writing a work journal] is *how* you express what you are feeling, rather than *what* you are feeling" (Hamner 38) - the "*how*" refers to things like "detail and honesty."

This is not to say that you shouldn't include your raw feelings in your journal notes; rather, you should use these feelings to describe your encounters at work. Write about things like...

- What you took pleasure in
- What kinds of successes or frustrations you had
- Record unfamiliar situations
- Chronicle important dates and times
- Statements, poems, or narratives if they help you to express your personal experiences accurately
- Write about how the service experience is related to lectures and readings and other assignments
- Review the Student Learning Outcomes on the syllabus and write about how your service experiences help you learn more about yourself, your chosen career, social issues, etc.

Being detailed in your journal entries will not only allow for a better final project, but will also make it easier for you to complete the project. And, on a more personal level, the journals should allow you to develop your own self-understanding and help you to strengthen your intrapersonal skills; that is, journals can help you make sense of things that occur within your own mind.

Some Guidelines for Reflective Journal Writing

There are many different topics that you can write about in your work journal... too many, in fact, to list. So, instead, we offer you a *brief* listing of *possible* topics that may help you formulate new thoughts about your service experiences.

First of all, as a general rule, it is usually a good strategy to compare the things you already know to the new things you encounter at the service site. For example, compare the features of your everyday setting at home (or on campus) with the features of the service-learning site. Identify even the smallest details, like color and decor, as this will help you describe things like the comfort level of the site environment or the overall tone of interaction at the site (formal or relaxed).

Another example of observation involves subtly observing other workers at our work site. Try to decide how the other staff may be viewing you, and then record how you feel about this and how it affects you. Then, problem-solve in your journal about how you think you can rework negative images into positive ones, or how you can make yourself and the staff feel more comfortable.

Common Mistakes in Journal Writing

Equally important in journal writing is the ability to recognize *and avoid* certain, common mistakes in work journal writing. Frequently students limit their journaling to accounts of what happened at the community site. While it is important to include some of this information in your journal, it is extremely beneficial to focus on connecting course theories to your experiences.

Another thing to avoid in your journal writing is the tendency to generalize. Lots of students do this (see, I just did it, and it was a pretty weak statement, wasn't it?). Referring to the group is fine in some situations, but as a rule, share your experiences in relation to individuals. Relating to individuals instead of groups can help you to avoid stereotyping or prejudging. It may even help you to challenge your own beliefs and change your overall perspective of the site.

Sample Reflection Questions to Explore in Your Journal:

1. What is your role at the community site?
2. What were your initial expectations? Have these expectations changed? How? Why?
3. What about your community involvement has been an eye-opening experience?
4. How do you motivate yourself to go to your site when you don't feel like it?
5. What specific skills have you used at your community site?
6. Describe a person you've encountered in the community who made either a strong impression on you, positive (+) or negative (-).
7. How would you describe the benefits of doing community work?
8. Has your view of the population with whom you have been working changed? How?
9. How has the environment and social conditions affected the people at your site?
10. What institutional structures are in place at your site or in the community? How do they affect the people you work with?
11. How has this experience affected your worldview?
12. Have your career options been expanded by your service experience?
13. Why does the organization you are working for exist?
14. Did anything about your community involvement surprise you? If so, what?
15. What did you do that seemed to be effective or ineffective in the community?
16. How does your understanding of the community change as a result of your participation in this project?
17. How can you continue your involvement with this group or social issue?
18. How can you educate others or raise awareness about this group or social issue?
19. What are the most difficult or satisfying parts of your work? Why?
20. What have you learned from any disappointments or successes of your project?
21. During your community work experience, have you dealt with being an "outsider" at your site? How does being an "outsider" differ from being an "insider"?
22. How are your values expressed through your community work? And how you live your life?
23. What sorts of things make you feel uncomfortable when you are working in the community? Why?
24. Complete this sentence: Because of my service-learning project, I am...

Conclusion

Of course, these are merely guidelines. The style and tone of each journal entry will vary with each situation that you are detailing, including the learning objectives that have been laid out in your service-learning course and the service-learning internship site at which you are placed. Throughout your service experience, you will encounter many situations that may be entirely new to you and which will require you to develop new skills in order to achieve success. And, as new experiences continue to offer new perspectives on issues both small and large, thoughtful reflection remains a good way to help yourself understand the project more fully and understand more fully the circumstances involved in social issues. Just remember, journal keeping is mostly for you - try not to think of it as an academic task, but rather, a tool for personal improvement.

Adapted by Deena Sue Fuller
Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN
Center for Service Learning and Civic Engagement