Importance of Reflection

Why Reflection?

Reflection is the key ingredient for transforming service experiences into learning. It is basic to the process of integrating service with the academic concepts presented in the classroom:

"The academic payoffs of having students engage in community service are substantial when the service activity is integrated with traditional classroom instruction. The key word here is integrated. The kinds of service activities in which the students participate should be selected so that they illustrate, affirm, extend, and challenge material presented in readings and lectures. Time in class meetings should be set aside regularly for students to reflect upon and discuss what they are learning in the community. These recommendations are consistent with conclusions of others who have studied service-learning (e.g., Barber, 1992; Hedin, 1989; Station, 1990)."


Reflection is a key component of any service-learning course and is vital to its success. Reflection is a process of examining and interpreting experiences to gain new understanding.

Benefits of Reflection

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. Reflection is integral to the service-learning experience in the following ways:

- Reflection transforms experience into genuine learning about individual values and goals and about larger social issues.
- Reflection challenges students to connect service activities to course objectives and to develop higher-level thinking and problem solving.
- Reflection works against the perpetuation of stereotypes by raising students' awareness of the social structures surrounding service environments.
- By fostering a sense of connection to the community and a deeper awareness of community needs, reflection increases the likelihood that students will remain committed to service beyond the term of the course.
Facilitating Reflection

Why reflect?
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 classroom topics. It fosters learning about larger social issues such as the political, economic, and sociological characteristics of our communities. It enhances students' critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to assess their own values, goals, and progress.

How can reflection be facilitated in the classroom?
Effective reflection depends on appropriate contexts and real problems and issues. The culture of the class community must be one in which students feel included, respected, and safe. The dialogue between instructor and students must be meaningful to the students. Students are helped to feel respected and included in the class community through small groups in which they can exchange concerns, experiences, and expectations about the service and the class. Ensuring that topics and experiences are relevant to students and over which they have some control facilitates meaningful dialogue. Underlying meaningful dialogue is students' "need to know." 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.

Effective reflection:

- links service objectives to the course objectives by integrating the service experience with course learning;
- is guided and purposeful;
- occurs regularly within the course
- includes components that can be evaluated according to well-defined criteria
- provides opportunities for both private and public reflection
- fosters civic responsibility
- is continuous, connected, challenging and contextual

Tips for Facilitating Reflection:

Reflection is a process designed to promote the examination and interpretation of experience and the promotion of cognitive learning. It is "a process by which service-learners think critically about their experiences." 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. 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.

- Prepare a framework for guiding the discussion
- Lead the group by actively engaging each student
- Set the tone by establishing norms of behavior such as:
  - Anyone in the group may speak at any time - no hand raising is required, but the rules of polite conversation are followed.
  - No profanity or sexual innuendoes are necessary to make a point.
• Speakers should be respectful, open-minded, and not aim to put anyone down.
• Insist that responses are clear, coherent sentences, not just a few words.
• Clarify students' responsibilities and expectations (jot them down or copy for all).
• Arouse interest and commitment to the service-learning.
• Assess the values, knowledge, and skills that each student brings to the project.
• Develop background information about the people and problems the students will encounter in the service situations to sensitize them and help to revise any misconceptions.
• Develop and practice any skills that will be required, including being active observers and questioners of experience.
• Get closure on emotional/affective issues by the end of each reflective session.
• Leave some cognitive/topical issues open until the next session to give group members an opportunity to think more about them.

Source: Santa Monica College Service Learning Center

The following tips for facilitating reflection are adapted from Colorado State University's Office for Service-Learning and Volunteer Programs: (2003)

• Schedule regular opportunities for guided and purposeful reflection.
• Communicate in writing students' responsibilities for reflection and provide well-defined criteria for evaluating their participation.
• Seek to engage each student in both group and individual reflection activities.
• Challenge each student to assess the knowledge, values, and skills he or she brings to the project.
• Establish norms of behavior and a framework for reflection that guides students from objective observations and subjective responses to interpretation, awareness, and action.
• Devote some reflection time to orienting students to people and problems they will encounter and allowing students to practice skills that will be required, such as active listening and observing.
• Seek closure on emotional issues by the end of each reflective session.
• Leave some cognitive and topical issues open for ongoing discussion to encourage reflection between class sessions.

Reflection Activities and Questions

To enhance student learning, it is critical that instructors devote time and attention to designing reflection activities. Reflection is the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives. Reflection should be both retrospective and prospective: students consider their service experience in order to influence their future action. Effective reflection activities are linked to particular learning objectives of the class, are guided by the instructor, occur regularly throughout the course, allow for feedback and assessment, and include opportunities for the clarification of values.

When reflection activities are integrated into class discussion and appear on exams, students report higher levels of satisfaction with the course and greater academic gains from the experience. A service-learning class should include some type of reflection activity that can be evaluated by the instructor. This affords students the opportunity to document the learning that has occurred from
the service component.

Reflection activities may include any or all that are described below. Varying activities will accommodate multiple learning styles and will help students understand reflection as part of the learning process, not as an isolated activity. When facilitating reflection, create a reflective classroom - don't just add a reflective component.

**Group Discussions (Small and/or Large Group)**
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.

**Personal Journals**
These are easy to assign, yet often difficult to grade. Some contend that this means of personal reflection should be graded only for completion. Personal journals provide a way for students to express thoughts and feelings about the service experience throughout the semester. Structured journals provide guidance so that students link personal learning with course content. 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.

**Critical incident journal**
This journal includes a set of prompts that ask students to consider their thoughts and reactions and articulate the action they plan to take in the future: Describe a significant event that occurred as part of the service experience.

- Why was this event significant to you?
- What did you learn from this experience?
- How will this incident influence your future behavior?
- What new action steps will you take next time?

**Three-part journal**
Each page of the weekly journal entry is divided into thirds; description, analysis, application. In the top section, students describe some aspect of the service experience. In the middle section, students analyze how course content relates to the service experience. And in the application section students comment on how the experience and course content can be applied to their personal or professional life.

**Highlighted journal**
Before students submit their reflective journal, they reread personal entries and, using a highlighter, mark sections of the journal that directly relate to concepts and terms discussed in the text or in class. This makes it easier for both the student and the instructor to identify the academic
connections made during the reflection process.

**Key-phrase journal**
The instructor provides a list of terms and key phrases at the beginning of the semester for students to include in journal entries. Evaluation is based on the use and demonstrated understanding and application of the term.

**Double-entry journal**
Students describe their personal thoughts and reactions to the service experience on the left page of the journal, and write about key issues from class discussion or readings on the right page of the journal. Students then draw arrows indicating relationships between their personal experience and course content.

**Dialogue journal**
Students submit loose-leaf journal pages to the instructor for comments every two weeks. While labor intensive for the instructor, this can provide regular feedback to students and prompt new questions for students to consider during the semester. Dialogue journals also can be read and responded to by a peer.

**Analytic papers**
These provide students with an opportunity to describe their service experience; to evaluate the experience and what they learned from it; and 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.

**Ethical case studies**
These give students the opportunity to analyze a situation and gain practice in ethical decision making as they choose a course of action. Students write up a case study of an ethical dilemma they have confronted at the service site, including a description of the context, the individuals involved, and the controversy or event that created the ethical dilemma. Case studies are read in class and students discuss the situation and identify how they would respond.

**Service-learning portfolios**
Students may be asked to compile materials relevant to the service-learning experience and the course of which it is a part. These contain evidence of both processes and products completed and ask students to assess their work in terms of the learning objectives of the course. Portfolios can contain any of the following: service-learning contract, weekly log, personal journal, impact statement, directed writings, photo essay, products completed during the service experience (e.g., agency brochure, lesson plans, advocacy letters). Students write an evaluation essay providing a self-assessment of how effectively they met the learning and service objectives of the course. Portfolios provide a focus for reflection on the service experience and its documentation.

**Personal narratives**
These are based on journal entries written regularly during the semester. Students create a fictional story about themselves as a learner in the course. This activity sets a context for reflection throughout the semester with attention directed to a finished product that is creative in nature. Personal narratives give students an opportunity to describe their growth as a learner.

**Directed writings**
These ask students to consider the service experience within the framework of course content. The instructor identifies a section from the textbook or class readings (e.g., quotes, statistics, key concepts) and structures a question for students to answer in 1-2 pages. A list of directed writings can be provided at the beginning of the semester.

**Experiential research papers**
These ask students to identify an underlying social issue they have encountered at the service site. Students then research the social issue. Based on their experience and library research, students make recommendations to the agency for future action. Class presentations of the experiential research paper can culminate semester work.

**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.

**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.

**Electronic forum/Online discussions**
Students may be asked to contribute to electronic discussion on the service-learning course topics using email or a listserv. Students can write weekly summaries and identify critical incidents that occurred at the service site. Instructors can post questions for consideration and topics for directed writings. They may respond to either questions posed by the instructor or to points raised by other students. These are a way to facilitate reflection with the instructor and peers involved in service projects. A log of the e-mail discussions can be printed as data about the learning that occurred from the experience.

**Reflection Activity Questions**
Some questions you might present for your students to consider to participate or facilitate discussions, complete journals, portfolios, student forums, and other contexts:

- What expectations do you have about your service experience?
- What do you think your project or the service agency will be like?
- What do you think you will do and what impact do you think you will have?
- What (will/have you been doing)? Who have you been serving?
- So what (will/have you been learning)? Why is your service work needed?
- Now what (should others do about it)? What are you going to do about it?
- Can you talk more about that? Why do you think that happens?
- What evidence do you have about that? What does this remind you of?
- Do you see a connection between this and ___?
- How else could you approach that? What do you want to happen?
- How might you do that?
- What are the social issues that this project or service agency addresses?
- How does this project or agency address community needs?
- What are the causes of those community needs?
- How do people contribute to this problem?
- How do we help to solve it?
- Did anything surprise you? If so, what?
- What did you do today that made you feel that you made a difference? Why?
- Did anything happen that made you feel uncomfortable? If so what, and why do you think it made you feel this way?
- How does your understanding of the community change as a result of your participation in this project?
- What did you do that seemed to be effective or ineffective in service to others?
- How can you continue your involvement with this group or social issue?
- How can you educate others or raise awareness about this group or social issue?
- What is the most positive thing that happened in your service experience this week?
- What are the most difficult and most satisfying parts of your work? Why?
- What do you think is your most valued contribution of your project?
- Is there a person or activity you finding interesting or challenging in your project?
- What do you see your role as? How does that compare with how others see your role?
- Have you learned from any disappointments or successes of your project?
- Has there been a problem situation that you want to discuss with your instructor?
- How is your service relevant to the readings and discussions in class?
- How does your service experience connect to your long-term goals?


The following model provides a progression of question types designed to move students from reflecting on the concrete experience to analytical and subjective reasoning. It may be used to create journal or discussion questions and to guide assignments and activity types. The progression may be completed within one assignment or over the semester.

The ORID Model

Objective
Begin with questions related to the concrete experience. What did students do, observe, read, and hear? Who was involved, what was said? What happened as a result of their work?

Reflective
Next introduce questions that address the affective experience. How did the experience feel? What did it remind them of? How did their apprehension change or their confidence grow? Did they feel successful, effective, and knowledgeable?

Interpretive
Then ask questions that explore their cognitive experience. What did the experience make them think? How did it change their thinking about…? What did they learn? What worked?

Decisional
Finally, students are prepared to incorporate their experience into a new paradigm. They may have a shift in knowledge, awareness, or understanding that affects how they see things and, ultimately, how they will act. What will they do differently next time? What decisions or opinions have they formed? How will the experience affect their career path, their personal life choices or their use of new information, skills or technology?
What follows are some reflection activities that can be used at the end of the service-learning course as a class/group project, a culminating event, a formal closing of the project or a capstone project.

**Finale**

**Weekly log:** This is a simple listing of the activities completed each week at the service site. This is a way to monitor work and provide students with an overview of the contribution they have made during the semester.

**Exit cards:** These are brief note card reflections turned in at the end of each class period. Students are asked to reflect on disciplinary content from class discussion and explain how this information relates to their service involvement. Instructors can read exit cards in order to gain a better understanding of student experiences. Instructors may want to summarize key points and communicate these to students during the next class.

**Class presentations:** These can be three-minute updates that occur each month or thirty minute updates during the final two class periods during which students present their final analysis of the service activities and offer recommendations to the agency for additional programming. Agency personnel can be invited to hear final presentations.