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# Bringing the Gap between Service and Learning

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# REFLECTION

**Bringing the Gap between Service and Learning**

Learning theorists recognize that not all experiences result in learning, particularly discipline-based learning. John Dewey called for education to be deeply rooted in experience (1916), yet he acknowledged that experience in and of itself is not always educative (1933). Experiences often create controversy, and if the controversy is not reflected upon, it can be a misleading, even harmful experience, which produces a lack of sensitivity and responsiveness in the learner (Dewey 1933). Although an encounter has the potential to develop key perceptions that foster personal growth, it is only when the experience is thoughtfully considered and analyzed that generalizations are formed to influence future action (Glenn and Nelson 1988).

We define service learning as a type of experiential education in which students participate in service in the community and reflect on their involvement in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content and of the discipline and its relationship to social needs and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher 1996). When students contemplate their service activities, there is potential to reformulate assumptions, create new frameworks, and build perceptions that influence future action.However, if students do not think seriously about their service, their experiences may support presuppositions, reinforce stereotypes, and fail to critically guide future action (Sheckley, Allen, and Keeton 1993).

Teachers who design service learning classes typically see the world through the lens of their discipline. They can easily conceptualize the connections between course content and the service experience. For students, however, the connection is not always as apparent. Unlike the predictability of a textbook, a service experience can be both unpredictable and confusing. Thus, classes must be designed in such a way that students themselves can meaningfully consider their service experience in light of the curriculum.

David Kolb's experiential learning theory (1984), built upon the foundational work of Dewey (1916; 1933), provides a conceptual framework for service learning educators. There are four aspects of Kolb's experiential learning cycle: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation. Kolb (1981) notes that learning can begin at any point on the cycle, and the preferred point of entry for learners is an indication of their learning style preference (i.e., diverger, assimilator, converger, accommodator). Reflection is essential to this learning process, for it can link the concrete to the abstract.

Interestingly, in spite of its importance and pervasiveness in experiential learning theory, reflection, or deliberation, remains an underdeveloped aspect of the pedagogy. Allen Wutzdorff, former executive director of the National Society for Experiential Education, called for professionals to "move toward a greater understanding of the complex process of reflection" and invited national dialogue to bring clarity to the field (Wutzdorff 1994, 2). Giles and Eyler (1994), leading researchers on the impact of service learning on undergraduates, articulate the need to develop "a clearly defined and commonly shared body of knowledge in order to develop and refine a solid research agenda for service learning," and they include reflection as part of this research agenda (77).

In part, the vagueness about reflection in service learning exists because the term reflection describes both a cognitive process (Dewey 1933; King and Kitchener 1994; Kolb 1984; Mezirow 1991; Schon 1982; Sheckley, Allen, and Keeton 1993) and a structured learning activity (Goldsmith 1996; Henry 1994; Silcox 1993). We define reflection as the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives.

Although reflection is agreed to be an essential element of effective practice in service learning (Howard 1993; Jacoby 1996; Porter-Honnet and Poulsen 1989), and external funders (e.g., Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, Corporation for National Service) have called for clearly structured reflection components as part of community service learning program proposals. teachers have not had much guidance in designing structured learning activities that promote intentional consideration.

We would like to focus on how to design effective reflection activities within a service learning course and to describe a variety of appropriate activities, (e.g., directed readings, directed writings, electronic-mail and class discussions, ethical case studies,

experiential research papers, personal journals, personal narratives, and service learning portfolios). These activities will give students a conceptual framework for learning from their service experience.

## Guidelines for Effective Reflection Activities

The pedagogy of service learning has been documented since the mid-1970s, and currently, more faculty members are integrating curricular-based service into higher education (Mohan 1994; O'Brien 1993; Smith 1996). Many campuses have devoted resources to assist faculty on the design and implementation of service learning classes (Smith 1996). When we consult with faculty on the design of service learning courses (Bringle and Hatcher 1995), we offer the following guidelines to clarify the nature of effective reflection activities, which link experience to learning objectives, are guided,occur regularly, allow feedback and assessment, and include the clarification of values.

Link Experience to Learning Objectives

To establish the integrity of service learning within higher education, reflection must foster academic learning (Enos and Troppe 1996; Howard 1993). We recognize that there are learning objectives that transcend a particular discipline that can be realized through service learning (e.g., career exploration, civic responsibility, leadership development, personal growth). Those objectives alone may be sufficiently persuasive for instructors to integrate service into academic study. For example, if a learning objective is personal growth and development, a personal journal may be an effective activity, but if an objective is to apply knowledge to real problems, directed writing may be recommended (Silcox 1993, 47).

Many kinds of journals can be used in service learning classes, and selection depends on the learning objectives and course design (Goldsmith 1995). Personal journals are commonly required of service learning students, yet professors frequently attest that personal journals do not necessarily challenge students to integrate their service experience with the course objectives. A personal journal often results in a mere log of service activities undertaken rather than a thoughtful analysis of the experience. And personal journals can be difficult to evaluate. To link a journal more directly to course learning, professors can require a list of terms to be included within journal entries, or ask students to reread their journal entries every other week and highlight comments that relate directly to course content. Double-entry journals direct students to write about course content on the left page and the service experience on the right page; students then draw connections and identify contradictions whenever possible. Other reflection activities that link the service experience to the course content include directed writings and structured class discussions. Directed writings prompt students to analyze the service experience in light of a section from the text (e.g., a selected theory, quotation, statistics, or chapter summary). Short written assignments can lead students to critically review the text and synthesize it with their service experience. Examples of directed writings that we have used include:
Referring to Gray's model of mentor-protege relationships (Gray 1984), identify the stage that best describes your mentoring partnership and identify three specific action steps you plan to take to move the relationship to the next stage.

Select and describe the essential elements of two of the personality theories discussed in chapter 5 of the text. Describe how these two theories apply to what you have observed as you read with your elementary students. For instance, have you seen examples of lack of congruence between purpose and behavior; have you seen children respond positively and negatively to situational factors; or have you observed that shyness and sociability are stable factors across different types of situations?

Robert Coles (1993) identifies a number of emotional stages or "hazards" in the fourth chapter of The Call of Service. Briefly describe each hazard. As you consider some of the emotions you have felt during your service experience, which hazard can you most easily relate to and why?

Teachers can provide a list of directed writings at the beginning of the semester or ask students to propose their own directed writing based on course readings. These writings can create a frame of reference for class discussions and become the basis for a more comprehensive paper at the end of the semester.

Structured class discussions also give students an opportunity to integrate the service experience with course content. Teachers can ask students to cite examples from their service experiences that illustrate or contradict a course concept. This provides a public forum for consideration and allows students to learn from one another and to gain a broader disciplinary perspective from the teacher. Preliminary research at Portland State University indicates that this type of classroom-based reflection is a critical component of effective service learning (Driscoll and Arante 1996).

Give Guidance for the Activities

In many cases, the guidance is provided by the instructor or negotiated between the instructor and student. This does not diminish the value of reflection activities facilitated by agency supervisors, campus student personnel, or student assistants; all of these people can contribute to students' learning. However, we believe that the teacher should guide at least some of the reflection activities to be consistent with the course objectives. This is particularly important when the product of reflection (e.g., class presentation, directed writing, experiential research paper, a service learning portfolio) is to be evaluated and graded.

Students need to have a clear understanding of expectations, a description of tasks to be completed, and the criteria for evaluating the reflection activity if it is to be evaluated. We recommend that there be at least one contemplative activity that is evaluated by the instructor based on clearly defined criteria. When students enroll in a course, they should be well informed about the expectations and requirements of the service component. as well as of the reflection activities that will link the service to coursework. This information can be in the syllabus. Bradley (1995) has contributed to the field by adapting the work of King and Kitchener (1994) to identify three levels of reflection. Instructors can articulate the expectations for these levels of reflection in personal journals and theory-to-practice papers and use the three levels as criteria to assess student work (Bradley 1995). We provide guidance for intentional consideration when we ask students to write an experiential research paper to identify a social issue confronted during the service experience, and, informed by a literature review, to include recommended strategies to address the social issue. Writing this paper prompts students to work through the four stages of Kolb's experiential learning cycle (i.e., concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation). As with other assignments, the clarity of the evaluation criteria provides guidance and increases the chances that academic expectations will be met.

Another example of guided reflection is writing a three-part journal, which includes (a) description of service activities, (b) analysis of how the service relates to course material, and (c) application to their personal or professional life. When three-part journals are collected early in the semester, it is a typical pattern that students write more on description than on analysis and application. As expectations are taught and clearly communicated, the three-part journal entries become more thoughtful and demonstrate increased discipline-based learning from the service experience.

The degree to which reflection activities need to be guided may be dependent upon the skills, competencies, and preferred learning style of the students in the class (McEwen 1996). Thus, reflection activities in an introductory course for freshmen may require more structure than those in a capstone senior seminar. Some students may enter a service learning class quite adept at contemplation, with experience in writing personal journals and compiling learning portfolios; other students may be unfamiliar with these tasks. One way to strengthen reflection is to teach competencies, which enhance learning from a community service experience. Menlo (1993) identifies four such competencies (i.e., reflective listening. seeking feedback, acuity in observation, and mindfulness in thinking) that can be discussed and taught in the classroom as well as acquired through practice and experience.

Schedule Activities Regularly

To enhance learning, a variety of reflection activities can be designed to occur regularly throughout the semester. Students should write personal journal entries at least once each week. An assignment due at the end of the semester (e.g., experiential research paper, class presentation, service learning portfolio) should be designed in such a way that regular reflection activities during the semester (e.g., directed writings, personal journal entries, minute papers) can clearly contribute to the final product.

Regular reflection activities support a developmental model of learning. Dewey identified five phases of reflective thought: (a) perplexity, confusion, and doubt, (b) a conjectural anticipation and tentative interpretation, (c) a careful examination and analysis to clarify the problem at hand, (d) a consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis, and, (e) testing the hypothesis by doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result (Dewey 1916, 150). Clearly this process takes time. Regular and varied analytical activities can lead a student through different stages of reflection, enriching the learning from the service experience throughout the semester.

If engaged in regular reflection activities, students have the opportunity to move appropriately through a developmental process and track their own learning during the course. For example, if all students are involved in community service as part of the requirements of the course, then structured class discussions, directed writings, and directed readings can become a regular aspect of the course. Directed readings can stimulate class discussion and frame the service experience within a broader context. Two recommended texts, Service-learning Reader: Reflections and Perspectives on Service (Albert 1994), and Education for Democracy (Barber and Battistoni 1993), provide a collection of appropriate readings.

If the service component is optional, and only some students choose it, regular reflection activities may be more challenging to design. One solution is an electronic-mail discussion group. Students can participate in weekly dialogue with each other and complete directed writings through an electronic list-serve. Students' comments can be regularly monitored by the instructor, or responsibility for the discussion group can be shared and rotated among students. Some teachers offer a "fourth credit option" for those students who choose to be involved in service as a part of the course (Enos and Troppe 1996). By adding an additional credit to the course, instructors can meet with the service students for reflection sessions in addition to regular class meetings.

Allow Feedback and Assessment

Although the primary goal of reflection is to enhance student learning from a service experience, regular activities can also provide feedback to assess student learning and improve the teaching. Assessment is particularly important for service learning

teachers. There is a continual need to assess a students' ability to connect the concrete to the abstract, to relate what was learned in class to the world outside, and to understand course material (Silverman and Wetley 1995).

Classroom assessment techniques provide a way for instructors to improve teaching (Angelo and Cross 1993). Many classroom assessment techniques (e.g., double-entry journal, ethical dilemmas, minute paper, muddiest point, and pro/con grid) can be adapted for use in service learning classrooms. Minute papers ask students to write for one minute on a specific topic, for example, What was the most frustrating aspect of your service experience this week? Or describe an incident when you observed positive peer pressure among youth at your service site. The papers can then be exchanged with peers or collected by the instructor.

In addition to classroom assessment, self-assessment techniques can be used for students to reflect on their service experience and assess their learning. Self-assessment is a complex process that focuses on the learner, what was learned, how it was learned, or a combination of all three (Kramp and Humphries 1994). Teachers can ask students to complete a personal evaluation grid, write an impact statement, or submit a service learning portfolio. Those portfolios contain evidence of both processes and products completed during the course (e.g., service learning contract, weekly log sheet, double-entry journal, experiential research paper, photo essay, agency project). Portfolios often include an integrative essay that is a critical review of completed work and personal development during the semester.

Another self-assessment technique is to ask students to write a personal narrative (Kramp and Humphries 1994), that is, a story based on personal data and vignettes written regularly during the course. Near the end of the semester, students read a short story that relates, to some extent, to their service experience. Students then compare their own narrative to this reading, which can increase their understanding of their development as a learner.

Include the Clarification of Values

Service learning extends the classroom into the community, and students frequently encounter unfamiliar situations that challenge and contradict their perspectives. Real world issues (e.g., crime, homelessness, illiteracy, and poverty) provide rich opportunities for students to reconsider their values in light of their own and other students' service experiences. Values are presumed to guide decisions. As values are explored, clarified, and altered, it would be expected that a student's behavior would also be modified. The Community Service Learning Model, developed by Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990), describes a developmental model in which career change, advocacy, and lifelong commitment to social justice are behavioral changes that can result from service experiences. Reflection activities that encourage the clarification of values can support the students' personal development (McEwen 1996).

Service learning is distinguished from other types of experiential education by its commitment to and its potential to clarify values related to social responsibility and civic literacy (Lisman 1995), which includes both understanding one's role in a democratic society and acting upon that role. Research indicates that undergraduates who participate in service learning report an increased desire to serve their community, a deeper sense of personal responsibility to meet community needs, and a deeper level of commitment to community service (Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Summary of Major Findings: Learn and Serve America 1996).

One cannot assume, however, that students automatically connect their service participation to concepts of civic responsibility (Smith 1994). And service learning does not necessarily lead to a change in political attitudes and behaviors (Mohan 1994). As an experienced educator commented, "participation in service is not a panacea . . . service will not in and of itself teach students citizenship or make themselves tolerant of each other" (Cohen 1994, 103).

For students to reap the full benefit of service learning, reflection activities should include opportunities for values clarification. Faculty members who want to foster students' civic responsibility must carefully consider the activities selected. Obviously, not all will meet this objective. Ethical case studies provide a format for students to analyze a situation and gain practice in ethical decision making as they deliberate and choose a course of action. Lisman (1994) offers a seven-step method for discussing an ethical case study that is adaptable to a service learning course. Lisman makes the following suggestion:
The instructor should be on the lookout for opportunities to develop case studies from the students' service experience in the course. For example, students doing service-learning could write up case studies of ethical dilemmas they have confronted that are related to the academic subject they are studying, and these case studies can be discussed in class. The instructor also should search opportunities to draw upon the students' service experience to reflect on other ethical dimensions of the course content. (Lisman 1994, 3)

Values clarification can also occur in structured reflection sessions. An example is a session in which participants are asked to (a) list words/phrases that describe their senses/feelings at the service site, (b) list words/phrases that describe their actions at the service site, (c) list word/phrases that describe their thoughts at the service site, and (d) describe what contradictions they sensed at the service site. This exercise can assist students in processing the conflicting values that are often a part of a service

experience, and this type of values clarification supports students as they choose between "forked-road situations" common to experiential learning (Dewey 1933, 14).

Values clarification can also occur in personal journals and other forms of creative writing and self-expression. Asking students to write a poem, paint a mural, or tell a story often results in a poignant description of the personal impact of the service. Although such creative activities are more difficult evaluate using traditional measures, that does not undermine their value.

## Conclusion

We believe that effective reflection activities (a) link experience to learning objectives, (b) are guided, (c) occur regularly, (d) allow feedback and assessment, and (e) include the clarification of values. We posit that when reflection activities with those qualities are integrated into service learning courses, students will be better able to connect the service to coursework, and their learning will be enriched. Furthermore, because students who do this type of reflection will find their experiences more rewarding, they will be more likely to enroll in other service learning classes and become involved in additional voluntary service activities that cart lead to lifelong civic engagement.

When effective reflection activities are integrated into service learning courses, faculty will also benefit. We anticipate that as students' learning is enhanced, faculty will become more satisfied with teaching service courses. As faculty use effective reflection activities, their teaching will become more dynamic and interactive. Furthermore, when faculty thoughtfully ponder their teaching, they will become reflective practitioners (Schon 1982) and identify additional ways that their discipline and their expertise can address the needs of society (Boyer 1994). In doing so, they will become models for other faculty for how reflective practice can improve learning, foster instructional change, and enhance professional development (Brookfield 1995).

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