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# Reflection in Service Learning

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# Reflection in Service Learning

Reflection describes the process of deriving meaning and knowledge from experience and occurs before, during, and after a service-learning project. Effective reflection engages both faculty and students in a thoughtful and thought-provoking process that consciously connects learning with experience. It is the use of critical-thinking skills to prepare for and learn from service experiences. (Glossary, National Service-Learning Clearinghouse)

Service learning is a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities, such as structured journals, small-group discussions, and class presentations.<sup>1</sup>

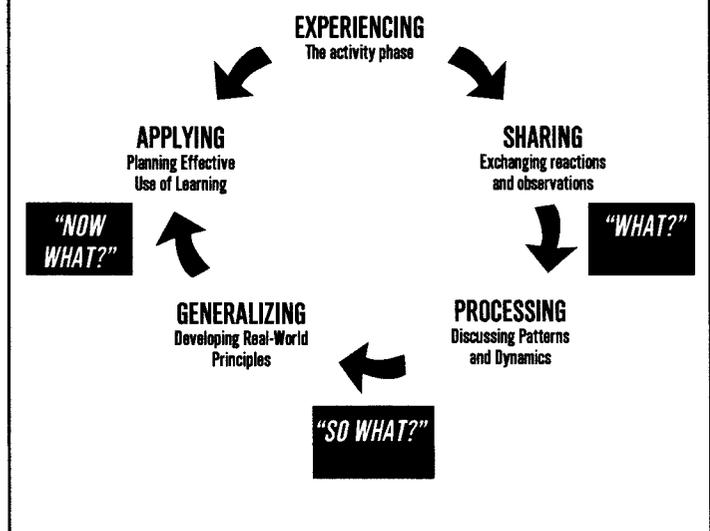
The process of reflection is a core component of service learning.<sup>2</sup> Service-learning practitioners and researchers alike have concluded that the most effective service-learning experiences are those that provide “structured opportunities” for learners to reflect critically upon their service experience. Through the reflection process, students make connections between classroom and out-of-classroom learning. They discuss and document knowledge, skills, attitude change, and accomplishments resulting from the community service experiences in relation to their coursework. Structured opportunities for reflection can enable learners to examine and form their beliefs, values, opinions, assumptions, judgments, and practices related to an action or experience; gain a deeper understanding of the action or experience; and construct their own meaning and significance for future actions.<sup>3</sup> Reflection “facilitates the students’ making connections between their service and their learning experience.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Theory behind Reflection

Service learning is deeply rooted in the action-reflection theories of John Dewey and David Kolb, who both describe the importance of combining individual action and engagement with reflective thinking to develop greater understanding of the content being studied.<sup>5</sup> Widely cited for providing a scientific interpretation of reflection, Kolb illustrates the process of reflection in the Experiential Learning Cycle<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1). The process – involving “experiencing,” “sharing,” “processing,” “generalizing,” and “applying” – begins with sharing information about the

service project or experience itself (*What?*) and follows a continuous cycle towards discussing the implications of the experience (*So what?*) and the applications beyond that particular project or experience (*Now what?*).<sup>7</sup>

Figure 1  
The Experiential Learning Cycle



## The “Four C’s” of Reflection

Effective strategies for facilitating and supporting the reflection process are based on four core elements – the “Four C’s” of reflection: *continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized*.<sup>8</sup>

### Continuous

Reflection activities are undertaken throughout the service-learning course, rather than intermittently, episodically, or irregularly.

For the greatest learning outcomes over time, critical reflection must be an ongoing component of a student’s entire education and service involvement. In the context of a particular course, *continuous* implies that reflection must occur before, during, and after the service-learning experience. Pre-reflection assists in preparing students to render service in

the community and to address relevant issues. Reflection during service occurs mainly through problem solving and feedback on site. Post-service reflection generates data and information that can be used for an assessment of student learning and an evaluation of the course and the overall service-learning program.

### **Connected**

Reflection efforts are structured and directly related to the learning objectives.

In service learning, reflection must connect experience to intellectual and academic pursuits. Service experiences make theories real, turn statistics into people and situations, and pose questions in ways that might not happen in a non-experiential context. In turn, students develop their own models to help explain what they experienced through service. Connected reflection draws bridges between classroom learning and first-hand experiences.

### **Challenging**

Reflection efforts set high expectations, demand high quality student effort, and facilitate instructor feedback that stimulates further student learning.

Challenging reflection poses old questions in new ways, reveals new information and perspectives that require thought and investigation, and raises new questions. The notion of balancing challenge and support is key to this component of reflection.

### **Contextualized**

Reflection activities are appropriate to the particular course. It is commensurate with and complementary to the level and type of other learning activities in the course.

When designed with context in mind, reflection provides the link between thinking and doing, and preparing for doing again. The context of the course helps to guide choices about reflection – its process, content, and location. Reflection may be designed as, for example, informal conversation, structured journal, and small-group interaction. It may occur in the classroom or at a community site, with community partners, or individually.

## **Strategies and Methods of Reflection**

There are wide-ranging and effective strategies and methods of reflection that can be incorporated into service learning, including the frequently used approaches listed below. The list below<sup>9</sup> will help you jumpstart your own brainstorming about reflection strategies for your course or project.

- Invite a speaker to address and discuss a certain issue that relates to the students' service experiences.
- Present guided discussion questions in large or small groups that challenge students to think critically about their service experiences.
- Find events in the community that students can attend together and debrief about afterwards.
- Find articles, poems, stories, or songs that relate to the service students are doing; then create and discuss questions around relevant social issues. As an alternative, ask students to write or bring in such items and describe how each item is relevant to (or reflects) their service experience.
- Use case studies or scenarios for students to act out and discuss something they did not know how to handle during their service in the community. Have the students role play appropriate and inappropriate responses to the situation.
- Ask students to create a map that shows how their service experiences connect to larger issues at the state/national/global level and where community involvement and citizenship fit in.
- Have students view a video or documentary to stimulate discussion and elicit ideas about critical issues that relate to their service experiences.
- Write letters to the editor or to government officials, addressing issues important to the community organizations or service sites, which can help inform the general public.
- Have students make a collage to express how they view the service sites and their service experiences.
- Require that students maintain a print or electronic journal. Writing in journals is widely used in service-learning courses to promote reflection. Journaling exercises are most meaningful when instructors pose key questions for analysis and description concerning the students' views before and after service experiences in the community.

## Reflection Activities

Many and varied reflection activities are available to faculty, facilitators/reflection leaders, and students. Reflection activities may involve speaking, listening, reading, writing, drawing, acting, and other forms of expression.

Here is a list of recommended reflection activities:

- Discussions
- Papers/Essays
- Directed reading and writing
- Free-association brainstorming
- Presentations
- Journals
  - Free-form journal
  - Structured journal
  - Team journal
  - Critical incidents journal
- Portfolios

- Interviews
- Role-playing
- E-mail discussion groups/Chat rooms
- Focus groups
- Face-to-face feedback
- Creative projects (e.g., photo essays, vignettes, videos/documentaries)
- Community murals
- Organizational analyses

## Levels of Reflection

Assessment expert James Bradley outlines three levels of student reflection in service-learning courses and criteria to assess each level (Table 1).<sup>10</sup> The first level is, in essence, observation; the second, analysis; and the third, synthesis. Faculty should use this rubric to evaluate reflective writing - journals and papers or essays. In addition, faculty should consider how each reflection activity meets the requirements of the “Four C’s.”

**Table 1**  
**Assessing Reflection in Service Learning**

### Level One

1. Gives examples of observed behaviors or characteristics of the client or setting, but provides no insight into reasons behind the observation; observations tend to be one dimensional and conventional, or unassimilated repetitions of what has been heard in class or from peers
2. Tends to focus on just one aspect of the situation
3. Uses unsupported personal beliefs as frequently as “hard” evidence
4. May acknowledge differences of perspective but does not discriminate effectively among them

### Level Two

1. Observations are fairly thorough and nuanced although they tend not to be placed in a broader context
2. Provides a cogent critique from one perspective, but fails to see the broader system in which the aspect is embedded and other factors which may make change difficult
3. Uses both unsupported personal beliefs and evidence but is beginning to be able to differentiate between them
4. Perceives legitimate differences of viewpoint
5. Demonstrates a beginning ability to interpret evidence

### Level Three

1. Views things from multiple perspectives; able to observe multiple aspects of the situation and place them in context
2. Perceives conflicting goals within and among the individuals involved in a situation and recognizes that the differences can be evaluated
3. Recognizes that actions must be situationally dependent and understands many of the factors which affect their choice
4. Makes appropriate judgments based on reasoning and evidence
5. Has a reasonable assessment of the importance of the decisions facing clients and of his or her responsibility as a part of the clients’ lives

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## Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Bringle, R., & Hatcher, J. (1995). A service learning curriculum for faculty. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 2, 112-122.

<sup>2</sup> Reflection is not the exclusive province of service learning; it is used in other experiential education programs as well. Reflection allows students to connect and synthesize knowledge gained from various activities and experiences inside and outside the classroom.

<sup>3</sup> Moon, J. (1999). *Reflection in learning and professional development*. London: Kogan Page.

<sup>4</sup> Eyer, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

<sup>5</sup> Crews, R. (1999). Benefits of service-learning. *Communications for a sustainable future*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado at Boulder.

<sup>6</sup> Kolb, D. A. (1994). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

<sup>7</sup> Bowen, G. A. (2007). *Reflection models and methods for service learning: A faculty handbook and resource guide*. Cullowhee, NC: Service Learning Department, Western Carolina University.

<sup>8</sup> Eyer, J., Giles, Jr., D. E., & Schmiede, A. (1996). *A practitioner's guide to reflection in service-learning: Student voices and reflections*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University.

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from activities developed by the Career and Community Learning Center at the University of Minnesota <[www.servicelearning.umn.edu](http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu)> and the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse <[www.servicelearning.org/resources/fact\\_sheets/he\\_facts/he\\_reflection/](http://www.servicelearning.org/resources/fact_sheets/he_facts/he_reflection/)>.

<sup>10</sup> Bradley, J. (1995). A model for evaluating student learning in academically based service. In Troppe, M. (Ed.), *Connecting cognition and action: Evaluation of student performance in service learning courses* (pp. 13-26). Providence, RI: Campus Compact.

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