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Preflection: A Strategy for Enhancing Reflection

by Diana Falk

"PREFLECTION" IS A STRATEGY DESIGNED as a tool to enhance and enrich the reflection process. It is actually a reflective session that is held prior to the service experience. Students are encouraged to imagine what the experience will be like and to express any feelings they might have as they anticipate their involvement. Comments are recorded and are reviewed with the students after the service has been completed. Being able to look back on their pre-service thoughts and feelings and compare and contrast them to the reality of the actual experience has the effect of promoting and focusing discussion, and deepening

insights into the relevance of the service for all participants. For those interested in expanding their repertoire of options for the reflection component of service-learning, preflection can provide the framework for a variety of reflection activities.

I recently worked with our high school's drama class and their teacher to design a service component that would give the students insight into the characters they would be developing for the play, "In The Middle of Grand Central Station," about homelessness. Arrangements were made for a day-long visit to the Grand Central Partnership which is a day center for the homeless in New York City. Students served lunch, toured the facility, and spoke to the homeless clients.

On the day prior to the visit, a preflection session with the drama students was held. The focus was on their thoughts and feelings regarding the homeless and the planned activities for the next day. All their comments were recorded on easel paper. These included the following:

"I'm nervous about what might happen tomorrow."

"I'm excited about the chance to hear what homeless people have to say."

"What if they're dirty and smelly; we might be too clean?"

"What if the people have weapons, or are into drugs or drunk?"

"The place might be crowded. We might feel awkward and out of place."

"People might want to be left alone."

"Could they get angry and lose control?"

"We should show respect and concern, but not pity."

"Will people be resentful that we're there?"

"Will they know why we're there?"

A lively discussion stimulated further opinions, thoughts, and feelings. Students were informed that we would look at their statements again during our reflection session the day after our visit.

Reflection time began with the facilitator putting up the sheets containing the students' statements from the preflection session. The students spontaneously began reacting to their statements; the facilitator recorded their comments which included the following:

"They didn't look like homeless people."

"They were more educated than I thought they'd be, and mostly polite."

"The food they had there was good — like we eat at home."

"Mostly everyone was clean and their clothes were okay."

"Most of the employees there were formerly homeless."

"They struggled to turn their lives around."

"I never thought of it before, but homelessness can happen to any of us."

"Sometimes things happen beyond a person's control."

The facilitator then encouraged the students to reflect upon what they learned, what they might do differently, and how their thinking might have changed, or not changed. Some of their comments were:

"Homeless people are like us."

"Homeless people can be misunderstood."

"There's a fine line between me and the homeless."

"Homeless people are just like us with more to overcome."

"I'll talk to homeless people."

"I'll make eye contact and smile."

"I won't ever think that homeless people are so much different from me."

The play turned out to be a great success. The students portrayed their characters with respect and sensitivity. The drama teacher and the students thought that the day of service, and the preflection and reflection sessions helped them understand and develop their characters more fully than they might have. According to the drama teacher, the service experience enriched the realization of the play for him, as well.

Following are suggestions for using the recorded preflection statements during the reflection period:

■ Distribute preflection statements and review them in small groups; have group members discuss statements and record reactions, changes in thinking, new ideas, etc.

■ Ask individuals or small groups to write paragraphs about their thinking before and after the site visit; reactions to a selected preflection statement; or in what ways their thinking stayed the same or changed as a result of the service.

■ Create a collage illustrating an individual's or the group's feelings about some aspect of the experience.

■ Discuss the results of these activities.

Preflection is a strategy and tool for reflection that you can adapt, embellish upon, and make your own.

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