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The ABCs of Reflection: A Template for Students and Instructors to Implement Written Reflection in Service-Learning

by Marshall Welch

Despite the importance and appeal of reflection in service-learning courses, many instructors and students struggle with implementing the process in a meaningful and practical way. This article provides a brief overview of the role of reflection and continues by describing a generic, user-friendly template for written reflection. The description includes an example to illustrate the approach and concludes with suggestions for holistic assessment procedures.

REFLECTION IS A CRITICAL COMPONENT to service-learning (Mintz & Hesser, 1996). McCarthy (1996) stressed the importance of infusing reflection prior to, during, and following service-learning experiences. The Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) manual entitled, *Into the Streets* (1993), maintained the importance of reflection. Kolb's experiential learning model (1984) emphasizes reflection as an important tool students use as they attempt to relate abstract concepts through concrete experiences. In this way, reflection plays an important role in

helping students make sense of information (Silcox, 1993). Reflection, however, is not a new idea in education. Dewey (1933) recognized reflection as an important feature of experiential learning and conceptualized it as an intellectual process requiring the development of a hypothesis and testing it through action. Reflection is a continuous process that must be given a context in which students can make a cognitive connection to what is being taught (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1997).

Faculty members employing various forms of pedagogy, including service-learning, have come to recognize the importance of reflection. Many instructors quickly discover that merely telling students "it is now time to reflect" is a clumsy approach for them and students alike. Students typically respond to this method with catatonic stares and silence or questions regarding how to reflect and on what to reflect. Similarly, instructing students to reflect in their journals often produces a "dear diary" account of events that transpired during a service-learning experience with little or no application of concepts discussed in class. Written reflection usually takes the form of journal entries and many times are merely descriptions of daily accounts or events experienced during the service activity (Waterman, 1997). Students and faculty alike need a generic structure or template for reflection that will guide them through a meaningful process to promote cognitive connections to course topics. Bradley (1997) suggested that written reflection in journal entries should be structured in a way that allows students to observe, analyze, and evaluate their service learning experience

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The ABCs of Reflection

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within the context of what is taught in the classroom by incorporating six components: a) knowledge, b) comprehension, c) application, d) analysis, e) synthesis, and f) evaluation. However, many instructors struggle with the pragmatic challenge of actually implementing these important components of reflection. It is critical to note that instructors often do not ask what reflection is or why it is important. Instead, they ask questions regarding its implementation. Clearly, the issue is not on the value or the purpose of reflection, but on *how* to practice it in manageable and effective ways.

This article describes a theoretically based, user-friendly template for implementing written reflection now being taught to faculty by the Bennion Center at the University of Utah (Welch, 1996). The description of this generic approach includes an example to illustrate the process and concludes with suggestions for holistic assessment procedures.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of the model described below “reflects” the principles enumerated by many scholars in service-learning. However, one particular article played a significant role in developing an approach to promote meaningful reflection in my own courses. The Lowell Bennion Community Service Center at the University of Utah provides an orientation workshop for faculty and teaching assistants preparing to teach a service-learning course for the first time. An article by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff (1994) is included in a packet of training materials. They pragmatically examine the promises and problems associated with service-learning and note that students often merely report their experiences or observations in journal entries without forming any kind of relationship to the course material. Consequently, they suggest that conceptual questions directly tied to the course content be explicitly presented in a reflection question.

Another challenge identified by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff (1994) is that students often lapse into their existing views and perspectives during reflection. As such, many of these perspectives can be racist in nature or perpetuate negative stereotypes. Therefore, they recommend the reflection process provide opportunities for students to challenge their own perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes. The Bennion Center staff continued the workshop by urging faculty to allow students the chance to explore why they held these beliefs or feelings. The basis for these perspectives is generally based on experience. Consequently, the workshop leaders recommended that faculty guide students to reflect on past experiences that may have influenced them, as well as project into the future how the new experiences during service-learning might affect their behavior in the future.

The ABCs of Reflection

These fundamental elements of reflection described by Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff (1994) have been synthesized into a generic template for written reflection referred to as the ABCs of reflection. These features also incorporate and synthe-

size Bradley's (1997) six components of written reflection enumerated above. First and foremost, reflection should be associated with content from the course. Instructors must recognize that students may not intuitively be able to discern those topical areas. Also, faculty must develop somewhat generic questions that can be applied to the context of the service-learning experience. In essence, questions must be developed in such a way that students can demonstrate their understanding of the information from the course.

Second, students must be aware of and respond to their feelings and attitudes encountered during the service-learning experience. Instructors must be clear that students are allowed and sanctioned to feel an array of emotions without fear of being chastised for sharing their impressions in a written journal entry. What is more important is that students examine *why* they feel what they do. The affective component of learning is often ignored. This may be due to an attempt to create a sense of objectivity as often demanded in the culture of academia. It may be due to an instructor's discomfort. In any case, effective reflection provides an opportunity to acknowledge and explore feelings.

Third, the cognitive and affective components of the service-learning should have an impact on behavior. This reflects the fundamental premise of experiential education through action. In other words, it is not merely enough to learn about something and articulate how one feels about what was learned. The behavioral dimension of reflection in service learning integrates feeling and thinking with doing. Students can also be provided other learning opportunities to discuss and examine steps for addressing a topical area or issue that emerged from the service learning experience. Consideration of behavior should be comprehensive over a continuum of the past, present, and future. In this way, students go beyond merely reporting their behavior during the service-learning experience to include a retrospection on their past behaviors and speculation on how they will act in the future. It is important to note that this approach is described below in a heuristic fashion and does not necessarily require a specific chronology of any one of the three components.

Affect

The first component of the ABCs of reflection is *affect*, which involves exploration of feelings and emotions. Students must examine their comfort level with the information and experience they have encountered in the class and service setting. They must identify what they are feeling, as well as why they are feeling the way they do. It is important to note that an instructor must emphasize that no judgments are made regarding what students feel. Instead, this aspect of the reflection process is an *acknowledgment* of feelings. This could include anger, frustration, confusion, joy, or gratification.

Behavior

The second dimension of reflection is *behavior*, which is conceptualized as action. In this respect, students are asked to go beyond merely reporting the chronological events of their service-learning experience. Instead, they are also instructed to reflect on how they behaved in the past given similar circumstances. Likewise, students are asked to speculate how they

might behave in the future as a result of their experience. This component is especially relevant to professional disciplines in which pre-professionals are applying skills during their service-learning experience. In this manner, students have the opportunity to report what they did well or did not do to the level they had hoped. But the reflection does not end there. Instead, the student projects on how she/he might behave or apply the skill in another, perhaps more effective way in the future. This promotes learning from mistakes encountered during the actual experience. Similarly, students must indicate *why* they acted or performed the task they did in the manner they did and reflect as to whether or not it was effective.

Cognition or Content

The final component in the ABCs of reflection is the feature instructors are typically most comfortable and familiar with. *Cognition or content* is conceptualized as the information, concepts, skill, or terms examined in the course. An instructor must consider instructional objectives from the course and identify specific topics or procedures to include in the reflection question. Students must provide an indication of their understanding and mastery of the concept in their reflection responses. In this way, students are making the cognitive connection between the service-learning experience and what is taught in the class. Students are required to think about and apply what they have learned.

The following example is provided to illustrate the ABCs of reflection. As indicated earlier, an instructor cannot provide an ambiguous topic to reflect upon. Instead, the topic must be focused and associated with specific terms or concepts from the course. For instance, an undergraduate, liberal arts education course on disabilities might require students to work directly with individuals who have mental retardation. The course and textbook describe personal characteristics of mental retardation. These characteristics might include limited problem solving abilities, poor adaptive behavior skills in social settings, and physical features such as walking gait or posture. A service-learning activity might involve taking an individual with mental retardation on a social outing such as going to a movie or out for ice cream using the mass transit system. The use of the mass transit system allows the service-learning student to see the individual he/she is working with function in an actual setting in a real-life activity. Likewise, it presents an opportunity to see how the community at-large reacts to and with the individual with special needs. An example of an assignment and a reflection question might be:

After receiving permission and arranging logistical coordination with your case study individual, arrange a social event (i.e., go to a movie, get an ice cream cone) that requires the use of the mass transit system. Be sure to go with another class member and his/her partner. Observe and note any characteristics of mental retardation discussed in the text and class [cognition and content]. Provide specific examples. Were you surprised? Did you see and experience what you expected? Why or why not? Likewise, observe how the community reacts to and with the person with special needs. How did you respond [behavior] to the reactions you received or how did you respond to what your case study

individual did during the activity? How would you have acted prior to learning these characteristics in class and how do you think you will act in the future? What were your feelings during this experience [affect] and why did you feel this way?

Suggested Assessment Procedures

Assessment is a process for discerning students' understanding of the content from the class. Serow (1997) recommended the use of a holistic form of assessment to determine the impact of service learning on four sets of outcomes for students: a) change in skill, b) change in behavior, c) change in knowledge, and d) change in attitude. The ABCs of reflection described above lends itself to assessing these dimensions of students' service learning experiences. Based on the cognition/content passage of a journal entry or comments during class discussions, a faculty member can determine if students have grasped the meaning of a given concept or term. Pragmatically speaking (and many educators do not like admitting this), students are not always intrinsically motivated to engage in reflective journal writing. Consequently, instructors are often compelled to (albeit reluctantly and somewhat regrettably) award points for reflection.

One approach is to award points for each component of the ABCs in written journal entries. The point system described here can be modified. For example, an instructor may require a weekly journal entry. Each entry is worth 10 points: three points for affect, three points for behavior, and four points for content. The points are qualitative and somewhat subjective in nature. In the case of affect and behavior, three points are awarded for a complete, well-organized and articulated passage. Students must clearly understand that points are *not* awarded for reporting the "correct" feelings. Instructors must provide a safe environment in which students are free to be honest in revealing their emotions without fear of reprimand. Instructors must indicate some kind of criteria to students so they understand what constitutes a quality passage. This may include written mechanics such as grammar and spelling. However, many instructors are more interested in the content. In any case, an instructor must make this decision and articulate the standards to the students in the syllabus. A student is likely to deserve all three points if he/she provides a rationale or explanation as to why he/she felt or did what he/she did.

An instructor may choose to award two points if the passage lacks depth or appears to be a "hurried" response with little introspection. This does not suggest, however, that quantity is a part of the criterion. On the contrary, a brief passage may be passionate and heartfelt. Awarding one point is generally reserved for students who are merely going through the motions of addressing each component in a perfunctory manner with little thought.

Awarding points for cognition and content is also qualitative in nature. However, because the emphasis is on the course objectives, more points are awarded. In this respect, points can be awarded for "correct" or accurate passages. Clearly, a student who makes an imprecise or faulty association between an experience with a definition, procedure, or concept in class should not receive the total points possible. Many instructors,

however, are uncomfortable with the idea of awarding students points for reporting information that is merely "correct" or compatible with the instructor's personal opinion or philosophical stance. Therefore, an instructor may wish to award all points possible to a student who makes a compelling and contrasting argument that is well supported with theoretically based information.

It is also important to note that assessment also helps an instructor determine to what extent the learning experience in the classroom or service setting was effective in promoting assimilation of information. In essence, this allows an instructor to assess his or her own performance in mediating the learning experience. As such, this second aspect of assessment helps an instructor in making instructional decisions as to whether a specific concept or idea merits further discussion and clarification. An instructor may choose to revisit a topic if the majority of the class was inaccurate on a specific concept or topic in the cognition/content portion of the reflection process.

Conclusion

The ABCs approach of reflection provides a generic template for ensuring students to examine the multi-dimensions of reflection. First and foremost, the pedagogy of service-learning is directly tied to the content of the course. Secondly, the reflection process described here acknowledges students' feelings and enables them to ask challenging questions regarding why they feel the way they do. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this reflection process assists both students and faculty to explore feelings and tie them to learning that promotes the idea of changing behaviors and taking action.

Reflection is a critical component to service-learning yet it can be intimidating, not only to students, but to faculty as well. Academicians tend to shy away from the affective dimension of learning, perhaps under the veil of objectivity. For faculty, instructional objectives usually take precedent over emotional growth. Similarly, instructors have legitimate concerns about how to assess the affective aspect of learning. The ABCs method described here presents a "safe" mechanism for integrating emotion and cognition for students and instructors alike. The reflective aspect of service learning can often encompass a spiritual dimension of education that is often viewed as something separate from the cognitive aspect of learning. The ABCs of reflection provide a generic template for teaching and learning that enable students to explore their feelings within the context of what they are learning and experiencing during service learning activities and dialogue in class discussions or written journals. For learning to be truly meaningful, it is equally important for students and instructors to make cognitive connections to their experiences and information from a course in the hope of facilitating meaningful changes and growth at the individual and community level. This approach makes a critical movement away from traditional higher education's focus on "what is the answer" or "what do I need to do to get a grade" to "deeper education" by exploring multiple dimensions of students' experience by asking "what do I think and feel about this and what can I do to make a difference?" Ultimately, the ABCs of reflection may be more of a teaching tool rather than learning tool, as it also provides instructors with an opportunity to reflect as well.

Instructors can and should model these three dimensions to their students in class discussions. Students may actually see a deeper side of their instructor if we as faculty do more than merely disseminate information. We must include our own feelings and articulate ways we have behaved or intend to take action. Regardless of the method we take, ABCs are a rubric to engage the whole student and, perhaps, even the whole instructor.

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