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# Reflection Activities for the College Classroom

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# Reflection Activities for the College Classroom

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As educators committed to strengthening the integration of service into academic study, we have provided this booklet of reflection activities as our first attempt to consolidate the collective wisdom on reflection activities that can be used in college classrooms. We invite your participation in this ongoing project by providing additional examples of reflection activities that you have found to be beneficial for your service learning students. Please send examples of reflection activities to us at the following address:

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## CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING LEVELS OF REFLECTION

### 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 belief 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 individual 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.

## Reflective Journals:

Requiring students to write journals is a commonly reflection activity in service learning courses. Journals are easy to assign, yet difficult to grade, and many argue that this means of personal reflection should not be graded at all. Journals provide a way for students to express their thoughts and feelings about the service experience throughout the semester and, with guidance, journals can link personal learning with course content. However, a common tendency is for journal entries to become a mere log of events rather than a reflective activity in which students consider the service experience in light of learning objectives. Before assigning a reflective journal, consider what learning objective the journal is intended to meet. Journals are an effective way to develop self-understanding and strengthen intra-personal skills. Journals can also be a way to collect personal data during the semester to be summarized in a more formal reflective paper near the end of the service learning course. Journals should be collected and reviewed at least twice during the semester. A recent work by Suzanne Goldsmith (1995), Journal Reflection, is a helpful resource guide for service learning educators, and adds to previous work summarized by Kendall and Associates (1990) in Combining service and learning: A resource book for community and public service.

Types of reflective journals include:

Personal journal: Students free-write journal entries each week about any aspect of the service learning experience. If personal journals are submitted to the instructor, students can maintain a sense of privacy by earmarking pages they prefer not to be read by others.

Dialogue journal: Students submit loose-leaf pages from a dialogue journal bi-weekly for the instructor to read and comment on. While labor intensive for the instructor, this can provide continual feedback to students and prompt new questions for students to consider during the semester. Dialogue journals could also be read by a peer. (Goldsmith, 1995)

Highlighted journal: Before students submit the reflective journal, they reread personal entries and, using a highlighter, mark sections of the journal that directly relate to concepts discussed in the text or in class. This makes it easier for the instructor to identify the academic connections made during the reflective process. This type of journal prompts the student to reflect on their experience in light of course content. (Gary Hesser, Augsburg College)

Key phrase journal: In this type of journal, students are asked to integrate terms and key-phrases within their journal entries. The instructor can provide a list of terms at the beginning of the semester or for a certain portion of the text. Students could also create their own list of key phrases to include. Journal entries are written within the framework of the course content and become an observation of how course content is evident in the service experience.

Double-entry journal: When using a double-entry journal, students are asked to write two one-page entries each week: 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. This type of journal is a compilation of personal data and a summary of course content in preparation of a more formal reflective paper at the end of the semester. (Angelo & Cross, 1993)

Critical incident journal: This type of journal entry focuses the student on analysis of a particular event that occurred during the week. By answering the one of the following sets of prompts, students are asked 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 significant to you? What underlying issues (societal, interpersonal, curricular) surfaced as a result of this experience? How will this incident influence your future behavior? Another set of questions for a critical incident journal include the following prompts: Describe an incident or situation that created a dilemma for you in terms of what to say or do. What's the first thing you thought of to say or do? List three other actions you might have taken. Which of the above seems best to you now and why do you think this is the best response?

Three-part journal: Students are asked to divide each page of their journal into thirds, and write weekly entries during the semester. In the top section, students describe some aspect of the service experience. In the middle of the page, they are asked to analyze how course content relates to the service experience. And finally, an application section prompts students to comment on how the experience and course content can be applied to their personal or professional life. (Bob Bringle, IUPUI)

### **Reflective essays:**

Reflective essays are a more formal example of journal entries. Essay questions are provided at the beginning of the semester and students are expected to submit two to three essays during the term. Reflective essays can focus on personal development, academic connections of the experience to course content, or ideas and recommendations for future action. As with any essay, criteria can be clearly stated to guide the work of students. (Chris Koliba, Georgetown University)

### **Directed writings:**

Directed writings ask students to consider the service experience within the framework of course content. The instructor identifies a section from the textbook or class readings (i.e. quotes, statistics, concepts) and structures a question for students to answer. For example "William Gray has identified five stages of a mentor-protégé relationship. At what stage is your mentoring relationship with your protégé at this point in the semester? What evidence do you have to support this statement. In the following weeks, what specific action can you take to facilitate the

development of your mentoring relationship to the next stage on Gray's continuum?" A list of directed writings can be provided at the beginning of the semester, or given to students as the semester progresses. Students may also create their own directed writing questions from the text. Students select which directed writings to complete and submit them periodically during the semester. Directed writings provide opportunity for application and critical analysis of the course content.

### **Experiential research paper:**

An experiential research paper, based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle, is a formal paper that asks students to identify a particular experience at the service site and analyse that experience within a broader context in order to make recommendations for change. Mid-semester, students are asked to identify an underlying social issue they have encountered at the service site. Students then research the social issue and read three to five articles in professional journals on the topic. Based on their experience and library research, students make recommendations for future action. This reflection activity is useful in inter-disciplinary courses and provides students flexibility within their disciplinary interests and expertise to pursue issues experienced at the service site. Class presentations of the experiential research paper can culminate semester work. (Julie Hatcher, IUPUI).

### **Service learning contracts and service logs:**

Service learning contracts formalize the learning and service objectives for the course. Students, in collaboration with their instructor and agency supervisor, identify learning and service objectives and identify the range of tasks to be completed during the service experience. Oftentimes, a service learning contract can not be completed until the student is at the agency for a couple of weeks and has a clear idea of how their skills and expertise can be of service. A service log is a continuous summary of specific activities completed and progress towards accomplishing the service learning goals. The contract and the log can become the basis for reflection when students are asked to assess their progress towards meeting the identified objectives and identify the obstacles and supports that had an impact on their ability to achieve the service learning objectives. These items can also be submitted in a service learning portfolio as evidence of the activities completed.

### **E-mail discussion groups:**

When service learning is an option in a course, and not all students are involved in service, one way to facilitate reflection is to create a list-serve electronic mail discussion group. Through e-mail, students can create a dialogue with the instructor and peers involved in service projects. Students write weekly summaries and identify critical incidents which occurred at the service site. Students can rotate as a moderator of the discussion every two weeks. Instructors can post questions for consideration and topics for directed writings. Near the end of the semester, a log

of the e-mail discussions can be printed and provide data to the group about the learnings that occurred from the service experience.

### **Ethical case studies:**

Ethical case studies give students the opportunity to analyze a situation and gain practice in ethical decision making as they choose a course of action. This reflection strategy can foster the exploration and clarification of values. 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 create an ethical dilemma. Case studies are read in class and students discuss the situation and identify how they would respond. Lisman (1994) offers a seven-step method for discussing a case study that can be adapted and used in a service learning course. (David Lisman, Colorado College)

### **Directed readings:**

Directed readings are a way to prompt students to consider their service experience within a broader context of social responsibility and civic literacy. Since textbooks rarely challenge students to consider how knowledge within a discipline can be applied to current social needs, additional readings must be added if this is a learning objective of the course. Directed readings can become the basis for class discussion or a directed writing. Two recent books (Albert, 1994; Barber & Battistoni, 1993) provide a collection of readings that can foster discussion about civic responsibility. Literature from philanthropic studies (O'Connell, 1983) can also prompt students to consider their service within the philanthropic traditions of American culture. The Call of Service (Coles, 1993) is also a useful resource for directed readings in a service learning classes.

### **Service learning portfolios:**

In a variety of contexts, portfolios are being used as a way for students to document and demonstrate their learning and work accomplished during the semester, or in some cases, during the undergraduate experience. Student portfolios contain evidence of both products and processes completed and ask students to assess their work in terms of the learning objectives of the course. Oftentimes, final grades are based entirely on the quality of a student portfolio. Service learning portfolios could contain any of the following: service learning contract, weekly log, personal journal, impact statement, directed writings, photo essay. Also, any products completed during the service experience (i.e. agency brochure, lesson plans, advocacy letters) should be submitted for review. Students write an evaluation essay providing a self-assessment of how effectively they met the learning objectives of the course. (Kim Johnson-Bogart, University of Washington)

### **Classroom assessment techniques:**

The work of Angelo & Cross (1993) demonstrates the value of regular feedback and assessment within the classroom to assess learning and improve teaching. In order to assess learning, instructors must assess whether students are conceptualizing from concrete to abstract, assess what students are and are not understanding in class, and assess if students are able to relate what was learned in class to the world outside. Classroom assessment techniques (CATS), such as the "Minute Paper", "Double Entry Journal", "Muddiest Point", and "Everyday Ethical Dilemmas" are example of classroom assessment strategies that can easily be used in service learning classrooms as a way for students to reflect on their experience and for instructors to assess learning throughout the semester.

### **Personal narrative:**

An interesting self-assessment technique that is easily adaptable to a service learning course is to ask students to write a narrative of themselves as a learner (Kramp & Humphries, 1995). Based on personal data through vignettes written regularly during the semester, or based on a personal journal, students create a story about themselves as a learner in the course. This activity sets a context for reflection throughout the course with attention directed to a finished product that is creative in nature. Personal narratives give students an opportunity to creatively describe personal learnings and growth as a student in a service learning class.

### **Class presentations:**

A way for students to share their service learning experience with peers is to make a class presentation through a video, a slide show, a bulletin board, a panel discussion, or a persuasive speech. This is an opportunity for students to display their work in a public format. A similar presentation can be offered back to the community agency as a final recognition of the student's involvement.

### **Photo essay:**

A photo essay is a pictorial representation of the service learning experience with personal reflections written under each picture. Throughout the semester, students record key events on film. If resources permit, students can be given a disposable camera to use for this project.

### **Structured class discussions:**

Structured reflection sessions can be facilitated during regular class time if all students are involved in service. It is helpful for students to hear stories of success from one another. They can also offer advice and collaborate to identify solutions to problems encountered at the service site. Roger Henry, Brevard Community College, has collected a number of examples of structured class discussions to be used in service learning classes in two publications, Reportage and The Toolbox: A collection of reflection activities. The following exercise is an example of a structured reflection discussion: List phrases that describe your senses/feelings at the service site. List phrases that describe your actions at the service site. List phrases that describe your thoughts at the service site. What contradictions did you sense at the service site? (Nadinne Cruz, Stanford University)



**Integrating Work  
with Learning**

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