Reflection: Helping Students Connect Service and Learning

Story by; Noel Wilkinson, CIC Faculty/Staff Liaison

Reflection plays an invaluable role in community-based learning courses, helping students make connections between their service projects and the classroom curriculum. Weber State University faculty are finding creative ways for students to reflect on their experiences inside and out of the classroom.

But what exactly is reflection? And more importantly, how does it fit in with community-based learning courses these faculty are teaching?

According to a fact sheet provided by the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, reflection “describes the process of deriving meaning and knowledge from experience and occurs before, during and after a service-learning project.” These reflection exercises serve to engage the service-learning participants, the students, in a “thoughtful and thought-provoking process” that will help them to connect what they are learning in the classroom to what they are experiencing serving in the community, and vice versa.

In her paper entitled, “Guide to Integrating Reflection into Field-Based Courses,” Joy Amulya (Center for Reflective Community Practice) explained how proper reflection exercises can and will increase the effectiveness of any course with an experiential learning based element, especially community-based courses. “Systematically exploring and bringing a sense of inquiry to an experience allows the learning from that experience to be surfaced.” The key, Amulya says, is to invite students to go beyond merely living the experience they are having before, during and after the project. Rather, educators should actively look for ways to get students to examine the entire experience, taking into perspective their thoughts, feelings and actions in the process.

This process of actively engaging students in their projects and continually inviting them to reflect upon their actions can produce a change known as praxis. Hopefully this process begins within the first few days of the semester.

Message from the Center

Building a Syllabus Around Community-Based Learning Projects

Noel Wilkinson, CIC Faculty/Staff Liaison

There are a couple of elements that are necessary in a Community-Based Learning course. In the article above, we talked about Reflection - what it is and how to use reflection to connect the curriculum and the service together in such a way that the students grasp the “why,” the “how” and the so “what.” We even gave you a couple of examples how faculty and staff at Weber State University are using reflections in their CBL designated courses. Another important element in a CBL course is creating and building partnerships with community organizations your students will be working with over the semester – but that is a future “Letter from the Center.”

In this message I want to share a technique, or better a tool, you can use as part of your CBL courses to go alongside the semester-long service-learning or community-based projects your students will be working with over the semester – but that is a future “Letter from the Center.”

This is a reminder to all faculty and staff utilizing the CIC to track students’ service hours. Students no longer hand in the Informed Consent Agreement to the center as a printed document. Students elect to agree with the consent form when they register online with the CIC.
course with pre-reflection exercises. (For ideas on how to integrate pre-reflection into your course see this month’s “Message from the Center”) By laying this foundation, you prepare your students by giving them a platform to share their reactions, thoughts and even their theories as the semester continues.

When thinking about reflection exercises during the semester, the Community Involvement Center at Weber State would ask you to keep in mind the “Four C’s of Reflection,” which are continuous, connected, challenging and contextualized. Continuous reflection refers to exercises occurring before, during and after the project, connecting the experience to other areas of the student’s learning and development. Often times, reflections will pose the same questions in challenging and new ways in order to elicit deeper investigation and discovery, while keeping in mind the context of the service-learning project.

An excellent model to follow when designing questions to ask during reflection exercises is “What? So What? and Now What?” One of the major benefits of asking question using this particular model is that it keeps students from getting stuck on the facts or just the feelings of the service experience, giving them an opportunity to share a much broader perspective. Students answer the “What?” by objectively reporting what happened without any judgment or personal interpretation – just the facts and the events of their service experience. Students then respond to questions about “So What?” with their feelings and ideas, offering an analysis of their experience. Finally, students consider the broader implications the service experience had upon them and their learning when answering “Now What?.” This model of asking reflective questions can be used in any of the different reflection exercises below:

**Journal writing**, or journaling, can be done either by hand in a notebook, kept in a Word document file on the student’s computer or, as some faculty at Weber State have done, can be kept online as blog entries. See here for a resource on journaling methods you can use in your class (The information about journaling can be found on pages 6 and 7) Also, students in Dr. Becky Jo McShane’s ENGL 2100 technical writing CBL course were required to keep a reflection journal – for a list of questions she used to prompt these journal entries see below.

**Sample of Reflection Journal Posts from Dr. McShane’s ENGL 2100—Technical Writing**

1.) How do you define “community”? What do you think when someone says “working in the community”?
2.) After meeting with your group, what are your initial impressions, concerns, and feelings?
3.) With which community partner has your group decided to work? Are you comfortable with this choice?
4.) What kinds of writing will your group be doing? Who will your audience(s) be?
5.) After meeting with your community partner, what are your initial impressions, concerns, and feelings?
6.) How did you feel about the proposal writing process?
7.) Why does your community partner’s organization exist? What purpose does it serve?
8.) What kinds of writing are you doing for your community-based learning experience? How is it going?
9.) How many hours do you have left? Do you wish you had more or less time to finish?
10.) What do you want me to know about your group? What do you want me to know about your participation in your CBL project?

**What Reflection Is and Is Not...**

While the term reflection is interpreted and practiced in many different ways in higher education, when done well:

- Reflection is critical thinking that supports learning objectives by expecting students to make astute observations, to demonstrate inductive or deductive reasoning skills, and to consider multiple viewpoints, theories, and types of data.
- Reflection is intellectual work that differs from the dominant academic culture by intentionally engaging the whole person, connecting community experiences with academic content, and cultivating students’ awareness of themselves as active participants in public life.
- Reflection is an activity that contributes to the creation of educational environments in which a diverse population of students thrives by acknowledging the influence of people’s identities and contexts and inviting students to construct and share their own sense of meaning.

Jennifer Pigza offers additional helpful observations about the nature of high-quality reflection in service-learning courses to combat common misperceptions and to bolster good practice:

- “Reflection is not a didactic retelling of the events at a service site…
- “Reflection is not simply an emotional outlet for feeling good about doing service, or for feeling guilty about not doing more…
- “Reflection is not a tidy exercise that closes an experience; reflection is ongoing, often messy, and provides more openings than closings.”


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Building a Syllabus Around Community-Based Learning Projects

Community-based research projects your students are working on. The idea is simple and easy to fit into any CBL class or any class at WSU for that matter, but the beauty of the tool comes from the reflection process you use before and after. What you are going to do is take advantage of a smaller service project/event during the semester that all of your students will be able to take part in together. For example, Adrian Maxson Day of Service on August 31, 2011 at the Ogden Nature Center or the National Make a Difference Day, October 22, 2011, are wonderful one-time service experiences that your whole class can participate in together.

Why would you want to plan this one-time service-learning project on top of facilitating the longer-term projects your students will be working on all semester? Because the benefits for your students and for you as an educator are amazing, and all it takes is a little more investment of effort and planning on your part.

First, by having your students engage in a joint one-time service experience at the beginning of the semester, you provide an opportunity for them to become introduced to community-based learning by doing CBL, rather than talking about CBL and what it is. These experiences will help students better connect why you are asking them to work on a long-term service-learning or community-based research project as part of the class. You could use reflection questions like:

- “What is service?”
- “How is the concept of service-learning similar/different?”
- “What do you hope to gain from your CBL experience this semester?”
- “Why do you think this course is being taught with a community-based learning approach?”

(For further examples of reflection techniques and ideas you can use, please see the above article.)

Second, your students will most likely be working with a variety of different projects in a number of different community organizations and thus having different experiences from each other. A collective service project at some point in the semester gives them an opportunity to connect what they are doing for their individual projects back to the common service experience they had as a class. Why is this beneficial? Because when they discuss the experience and problems in their unique CBL projects, they can discuss them in the context of their shared service experience to help other students relate.

Third, try as hard as you might, sometimes the different CBL projects your students are working on and the curriculum you plan to cover in the course don’t perfectly match up. For example, in a senior level communications CBL course one group of students may be working on an on-line package for a community organization while another group is working on a print package. When this happens, some students are achieving one set of learning outcomes you have in the course, while the others are achieving a different set. One-time collective projects afford you the opportunity to fill in the holes so to speak, making sure that all of your students have the opportunity to work towards all of the expected learning outcomes.

Coming up with collective service experiences can be easy, especially if you utilize the Community Involvement Center at Weber State University. As I have already mentioned, there are two great opportunities for collective service this Fall:

- Adrian Maxson Day of Service, which will be held August 31 at the Ogden Nature Center from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
- National Make a Difference Day, which is scheduled later in the semester for October 22.

We encourage you to build at least one of these two experiences into your syllabus this Fall.

If you really want to spice up the CBL elements in your course, then you can take advantage of other service opportunities the center becomes aware of throughout the semester. Just come by the CIC in the Shepherd Union Building or contact me via e-mail at noelwilkinson@weber.edu.

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Photography journal, similar to journaling, allows students to put together a collection of photographs capturing their thoughts and feeling about their service-learning experience as well as the topic and issues at hand. These journals can be kept online as well.

Inquiry-driven reflection involves developing a set of questions related to the service-project, or the student’s development during the semester. Students can then use these inquiry questions as guides of thought during their experiences. They can also be used in either journaling or dialogues as a means to delve deeper into discussions. The CIC has a number of resources available containing examples of question prompts you can use, see here for an online version of our reflection booklet.

Critical moments reflection is a great tool for courses where students are working with the same community organization either as a part of a group or a team. In this exercise, each student will look at their experience and pick out any moments or occurrences that stand out to them as significant in their mind. When they come together as a group, students take note of the similarities and the differences between the experiences. After selecting 3 critical moments from this combined list, the students then use their different perspectives to analyze each moment, focusing on “issues and challenges illustrated by the moment, and any deeper questions it raises. (Amulya)”

Dialogue is another activity that can be done both in the classroom as well as through online methods. It can be very successful when faculty take on the role as facilitator, “monitoring” the flow of the discussion among students in the course. The key is to raise specific questions that seed the dialogue that will occur, allowing students to link their experiences, thoughts and feelings with those of other participants in the group. When true dialogue has taken place, students will have built “a new understanding of the issue or topic out of the different components of each person’s thinking. (Amulya)” If you are looking at this type of an activity for an online course be sure to have clear instructions in place and provide contact information in case of any difficulties students may have.

Group activities can be used to include reflection in your classes and can take from a couple of minutes to the entire class period to complete. For example, students taking CBL courses in Family Studies will line up shoulder-to-shoulder in class and respond to questions about their individual service experiences by stepping forward (“yes”) or remaining still (“no”). Between each question, students are invited to share their share their feelings and reflect upon their answers. For more ideas, like this one, that you can use inside and outside of class time, see here.

Whatever reflection activities you chose to include as part of your course, remember to evaluate whether or not the assignment generates interest in the learning. When utilized correctly, reflection exercises can and will have a huge impact on the learning outcomes you have for your students.