

Reflection in Higher Education Service-Learning (Expanded)

Source: Kara Connors and Sarena D. Seifer, Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, September 2005

Introduction

The process of reflection is a core component of service-learning. Service-learning practitioners and researchers alike have concluded that the most effective service-learning experiences are those that provide “structured opportunities” for learners to critically reflect upon their service experience. 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 them and construct their own meaning and significance for future actions (Moon 1999). Reflection “facilitates the student's making connections between their service and their learning experience” and indeed the hyphen in the phrase “service-learning” can has been interpreted as representing this connection (Eyler and Giles 1999). This fact sheet provides an overview of reflection in higher education service-learning and links to helpful resources.

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 (Crews 1999). Kolb is widely cited for providing a scientific interpretation of reflection (Olson 2000). Kolb illustrates the process of reflection in the Experiential Learning Cycle (Figure 1). The process begins with a defining and sharing of the “*What?*” of the student's experience and follows a continuous cycle towards “*So What?*” and “*Now What?*”. Answers to the what, so what and now what questions are tied together to form a comprehensive and integrated discovery and learning cycle for the student throughout the duration of a service-learning experience (Eyler 1999).

The Experiential Learning Cycle

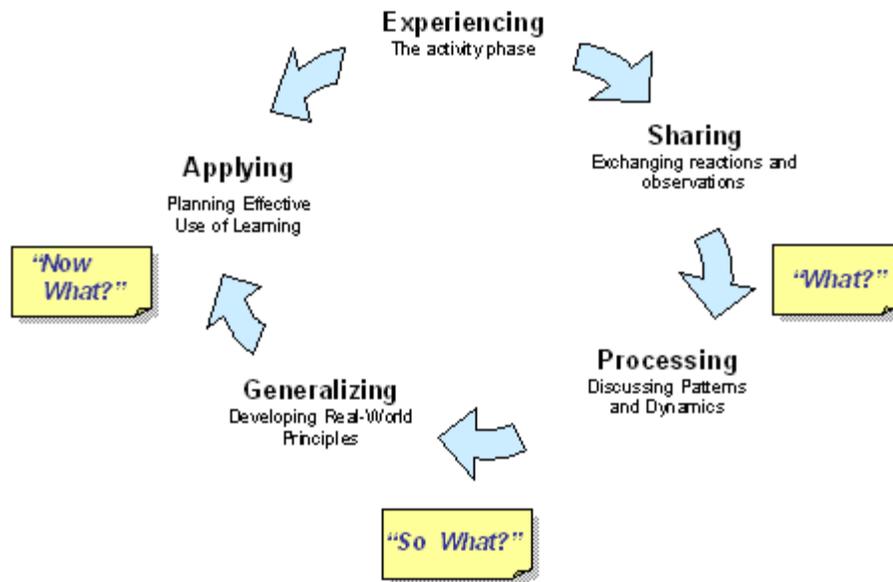


FIGURE 1

Strategies for Fostering Reflection

Effective strategies for fostering reflection are based on four core elements of reflection known as “the four C’s” (Eyler and Giles 1999). These elements are described below:

Core Element	Definition
Continuous	The reflective process is implemented and maintained continuously before, during and after the service-learning experience.
Connected	The service experience is directly linked, or connected, to the learning objectives of the course or activity and allows for “synthesizing action and thought.”
Challenging	Learners are challenged to move from surface learning to deeper, critical thinking through the use of thought provoking strategies by the instructor or community facilitator. Since learners may encounter uncomfortable feelings, it is important that the students feel they are in a safe and mutually respectful atmosphere where they can freely express their opinions, ideas and thoughts.
Contextualized	Reflection is contextualized when it “corresponds” to the course content, topics and experience in a meaningful way.

When developing opportunities for reflection in service-learning, it is important to

consider students' diverse learning styles. The most effective reflective practices will appeal to and meet the needs of different student's learning styles. Having students complete Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (described at <http://www.coe.iup.edu/rjl/instruction/cm150/selfinterpretation/kolb.htm>) can help to inform an instructor's selection and design of reflection activities.

Eyler's reflection map template, below, can be a helpful tool for thinking through the various options for incorporating reflection into a service-learning course or program (Eyler 2001). A slide presentation that describes the reflection map is available at http://depts.washington.edu/ccph/pdf_files/Reflection.ppt.

	Before Service Activity	During Service Activity	After Service Activity
Alone			
With Fellow Students			
With Community Partners			

There are a wide range of meaningful reflective practices and strategies that can be incorporated into service-learning, including the frequently used approaches listed below. The list below was adapted from those developed by The Career and Community Learning Center at the University of Minnesota (www.servicelearning.umn.edu). They are included here to jump-start your own brainstorming about reflection strategies for your service-learning course or program:

- Discuss and/or have a speaker on a certain issue that relates to the students' service experiences.
- Have guided discussion questions in large or small groups that challenge students to critically think 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 and create and discuss questions around relevant social issues. Or, ask students to write or bring in such items and describe how it 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-learning experience connects to larger issues at the state/national/global level and where community involvement and citizenship fit in.
- Have student view a video or documentary to elicit discussion about critical issues that relate to their service experiences.
- Write letters-to-the-editor or to government officials that address issues

important to the community organizations with which they are working and that can help inform the general public.

- Have students make a collage to express how they view their service site and their service.

Have students maintain a print or electronic reflective journal. Writing in journals is widely used by service-learning programs to promote reflection. Journaling exercises are most meaningful when instructors pose key questions for analysis and description concerning their opinions before and after the service-learning experience. This website provides an example of journal instructions from a service-learning course at Michigan State University. <http://www.msu.edu/~gordon46/SLWPReflect.html>

(top)

■ Citations, References and Other Resources

Bringle, R. G., and J.A. Hatcher. "Reflection in service-learning: Making meaning of experience." *Educational Horizons* , 77.4 (1999): 179-185.

Connors, K.M. "[Unit 4: Plan course instruction and activities.](#)" *Advancing the Healthy People 2010 Objectives Through Community-Based Education: A Curriculum Planning Guide* . Eds. K.M. Connors, S. Cashman, S.D. Seifer, and M. Unverzagt. San Francisco , CA: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2003. This unit provides useful reflective learning tools.

Crews, R. "Benefits of service-learning." *Communications for a Sustainable Future* . Boulder , CO : University of Colorado at Boulder , 1999.

Del Piccolo, G.L. [The Importance of Reflection.](#)

Eyler, Janet, and D.E. Giles. [A Practitioners Guide to Reflection in Service- Learning.](#) Nashville : Vanderbilt University , 1996. This guide is a resource for anyone seeking to use critical reflection in service-learning. Drawing upon student testimony of successful reflection, it assists in developing reflection activities for service-learning courses or programs. The guide is practical and interactive by design and should foster active engagement on the part of the reader, through both the nature of its content and it's accessibility. The authors discuss different ways to reflect and learn suited to different learning styles such as the activist, reflector, theorist, pragmatist learning styles. Various reflection activities are covered including reading, writing, doing, and telling. The book includes a reflection bibliography, reflection guides and handbooks, and an interview guide.

Eyler, Janet and D.E. Giles. *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco, CA : Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999. Available at www.josseybass.com

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Eyler, Janet. "Reflecting on Service: Helping Nursing Students Get the Most from Service-Learning." *Journal of Nursing Education* 41.10 (2002): 453-56.

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Kolb, D.A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ : Prentice-Hall, 1994.

Kolb, D. *Learning Style Inventory*. Boston, MA : McBer and Company, 1985.

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Olson, R. and M. Bush M. "[Reflection and Service-Learning](#)." *A Guide for Developing Community-Responsive Models in Health Professions Education*. Eds. K.M. Connors, and S.D. Seifer. San Francisco, CA : Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 1998. This chapter provides an overview of reflection and examples of reflection.

Parrillo, L.A. [How to Guide to: REFLECTION](#). Holland, PA : Brighton Press, Inc, 1994.

Rama, D.V. and R. Battistoni. [Service-learning: Using Structured Reflection to Enhance Learning from Service](#). The purpose of this website is to provide guidance to educators on using structured reflection to enhance the learning from service experiences.

Reed, J. and C. Koliba. [Facilitating Reflection: A Manual for Leaders and Educators](#). This online manual was designed for educators and leaders of service groups who have an interest and a commitment to provide reflection opportunities for students and community partners alike.

[Reflection Activities](#). The reflection strategies described in this online document are based on Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher's "Reflection in Service Learning: Making Meaning of Experience" (1999) as well as examples from community college faculty around the country.

Silcox, H.C. *Reflection: The Key to Service Learning* . New York : National Helpers Network, 1995.

The Feinstein Center at the University of Rhode Island has developed “issue packets” to help students reflect on the issues they will be confronting in their service experiences. Issue packets have been developed for these issues: arts, children and families, elderly, environment, health care, homelessness, hunger and literacy.

Welch, M. “The ABCs of Reflection: A Template for Students and Instructors to Implement Written Reflection in Service Learning.” *NSEE Quarterly* 25 (1999): 1, 23-25. This article describes a theoretically based template for implementing written reflection now being taught to faculty by the Bennion Center at the University of Utah . Students are led to reflect on the following aspects of the service-learning program: the Affect (which involves exploration of feelings and emotions), Behavior (meaning the actions taken before, during, and after the service-learning project), and Cognition or Content (information, concepts, or skills examined).