

Implementing Service Learning: Facilitating Critical Reflection and Discussion

Critical Reflection Defined

What is critical reflection?

Reflection is a process by which individuals analyze their experiences as a means for identifying and absorbing what they have learned. It is where service learners think critically about their experiences by looking back on the implications of actions taken - good and bad - determining what has been gained, lost, or achieved, and connecting these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts. Through reflection students analyze concepts, evaluate experiences, and form opinions. Critical reflection provides students with the opportunity to examine and question their beliefs, opinions, and values. It involves observation, asking questions, and putting facts, ideas, and experiences together to derive new meaning.

Why reflect?

Reflection is an essential process for transforming experiences gained from the service activities and the course materials into genuine learning. It is crucial for integrating the service experience with the classroom topics. It fosters learning about larger social issues such as the political, economic, and sociological characteristics of our communities. It enhances students' critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to assess their own values, goals, and progress.

How can reflection be facilitated?

Effective reflection occurs before, during and after the service experience both in the classroom and in the community. Eyler and Giles (1996) suggest that good reflective practice is continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. Reflection can happen in a variety of ways, and should encourage students to make connections between course content and experiences in the community. Reflection affords students the opportunity to document the learning that has occurred in service, provides a mechanism for faculty members to assess this learning, and creates an opportunity for community partners to contextualize student learning. (Owen and Troppe, 2002).

In order for effective reflection to take place, students need to feel included and respected. Students feel respected and included in the classroom and in the community when they can exchange concerns, experiences, and expectations about the service and the class, both individually and in groups. The reflective process can challenge students to think and consider ideas that may be unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable. An environment that is respectful is essential for students to engage in the sometimes difficult work of examining assumptions, applying new concepts, and synthesizing classroom and community work.

Reflection Methodologies and Questions

When facilitating reflection, vary the activities to accommodate multiple learning styles. Create a reflective environment-don't just add a reflective component.

Group Discussions

The groups may involve either the entire class or small numbers of students. The group members exchange ideas about the course topics and/or the service experiences. The instructor may either pose general or narrowly focused questions for discussion. Group discussions can also occur in community-based organizations where more than one student is involved in service learning (either from the same course or from different courses).

Some potential questions for group reflective exercises include:

- **What, So What, Now What?** —These foundational reflective questions allow students to articulate what they experienced, what that experience may mean, and how these experiences will inform future actions and/or thoughts.
- **Connecting service experiences to course content**—Develop questions that help students tie their community experiences to what they are learning in class. Ideas include: How does your experience at your community-based organization relate to the concepts we read about in the first three weeks of the quarter? What have you learned at your site that relates to course lectures? Have your experiences in the community caused you to question any of the concepts we have learned in class? How has what you learned in class affected your experiences in our organization?
- **Learning from each other's experiences**—Develop a set of reflective questions that allow students to compare and contrast their experiences in the field, and to relate these experiences to what they are learning in class. Examples include: Describe your first week at the community organization. What is one thing you learned that surprised you? How do these experiences relate to what you have learned in class thus far?
- **E-mail discussions**—Students in the same course, or students serving at the same community organization can be invited to join a list serve or discussion group to share their experiences and thoughts via e-mail. Students can write summaries of their experiences in the community, and faculty and/or community partners can pose questions for consideration and refer students to appropriate resources for further learning.

Journals

Students may be asked to keep a journal as they engage in the service learning experience. The journals should not merely be simple inventories of events, but they should address situations objectively, subjectively, and analytically. Instructors may provide questions to guide students in addressing issues and should review the journals at regular intervals. Community partners can also play a role in reviewing and responding to journals, prompting students to think about their service work in the context of the community they are working with.

Journals can take a variety of formats; the three examples below are adapted from the University of Maryland Faculty Handbook on Service-Learning (2002).

- **Three-part journal:** Each page of the weekly journal is divided into thirds: description, analysis and application. In the first section, students describe their service experience (you may choose to focus them on a particular component of the experience). In the second section, students analyze how the course concepts relate to the experience they have described. Lastly, students apply what they have learned by writing about how the experience and the course content relate to their personal and professional lives and aspirations.
- **Key-phrase journal:** The instructor, community partner or a group of students provide a list of terms and key phrases from the course content and/or community experiences. Students include these terms in their journals when describing and analyzing their community based experiences.
- **Double-entry journal:** Students describe their personal thoughts and responses to the service experience on the left page of the journal, and describe their thoughts and responses to the class discussion(s) or readings on the right page of the journal. Students can then draw arrows indicating relationships between the community-based experiences and course content, and write a short entry describing these relationships.

Analytic papers

Analytic papers provide students with an opportunity to describe their service experience; to evaluate the experience and what they learned from it; and to integrate their experiences with course topics. If the papers are assigned at the end of the course, students can make use of ideas derived from class discussion, journals, and other reflective activities provided during the course.

Portfolios

Students may be asked to compile materials relevant to the service learning experience and the respective course. These materials may include: journals, analytic papers, scripts/notes for class presentations, items created as part of the service, pictures, organization brochures, handbooks, and training materials. Portfolios provide a focus for reflection on the service experience and its documentation.

Over the last year UW faculty teaching service learning courses have utilized the Catalyst Portfolio tool to assist them with integrating students' community experience with academic course content. The Catalyst Portfolio can be accessed online:

<http://catalyst.washington.edu/how-to/portfolio/participant/index.html#top>

Presentations

Students may be asked to make presentations to their classmates (and/or to broader audiences) describing their service-learning experiences, evaluating them and integrating them with the course topics. Community partners may consider inviting students to present what they have learned to organization staff, volunteers and/or clients.

