

Applying Kolb's Learning Cycle

USING REFLECTION PAPERS TO INCREASE THE LEARNING POTENTIAL IN SERVICE-LEARNING

Students are often asked to keep journals or to prepare papers dealing with their experience in service-learning as a way to reflect on that experience and as a way for supervisors to monitor and assess their learning. Students sometimes have difficulty making these assignments really useful in the learning process and often don't see the connections between their experience and the formal theory and concepts presented in their more didactic course work.

David Kolb's (1984) learning cycle (See Chapter 3 for related information) provides a model which has proven useful as a way to structure the writing process so students are led to seek more specific and informed explanations of the organizational dynamics they see in their sites (which can be found in the theory provided by instructors and text material).

A coherent Reflection Paper format can be based on Kolb's four basic phases of the learning process:

1. *A concrete experience.*
2. *A time to reflect on the experience.*
3. *An opportunity to apply concepts, models and theories to explain the experience.*
4. *An opportunity to test, evaluate, and reconceptualize one's understanding of the experience.*

The Reflection Paper is a strong method to encourage students to apply the concepts in the text and lecture material to their own experience. It has worked well, for example, as a way to help more students make the leap from more superficial and idiosyncratic explanations of group dynamics to more educated and insightful understanding of the processes at work in group situations.

Advantages:

- ♦ Provides more structure so students are led through a more complete learning cycle.
- ♦ Provides 'prompts' (questions) to stimulate thinking and help make connections from theory to practice.



- Provides more structure for the instructors to evaluate students' written products connected with the service-learning course.
- Provides a vehicle for an instructor to assess what concepts need to be reinforced and taught.
- Form can be modified for use in several ways (different written assignments with slightly different objectives) during the service-learning experience and can provide an integrating element in the academic part of a service-learning experience.

Reflection Paper Format... ...and Criteria for Evaluation

PHASE 1 Concrete Experience

Description of specific behaviors which occurred during the incident or facts related to a particular situation. Use names, dates, places and be objective.

- ◆ Level of detail and specificity.
- ◆ Include descriptions of your behaviors and the behaviors of others (verbal and nonverbal behavior).

PHASE 2

Reflective Observation

Personal reflection about the event(s).

- ◆ Your thoughts and feelings about the incident(s)/situation.
- ◆ Your perceptions of others' thoughts and feelings about the event(s).
- ◆ Your perceptions of how this event has affected individuals in your service setting and why.

Disadvantages:

- Can require considerable instructor time to evaluate and give written feedback.
- Can inhibit some students from expressing what they view as their important learning.

PROCESS

The generic structure for this paper is provided in Sidebar Format on this and the next page. Students are encouraged to use their journal entries to begin the reflection process in Phase 1, Concrete Experience. Conceptual elements in Abstract Conceptualization can be furnished from readings, group discussion, or previous reflection papers.

Reflection Papers are usually five typed pages in length. Students are taught the generic model in class by focusing on and writing about a critical event early in their field work. They then complete four Reflection Assignments which use the format over the course of the class or service-learning experience. Each assignment has a slightly different emphasis and poses different questions to help students develop each of the four phases of the paper. Among the topics are stages of service, organizations external environments, goal setting and accomplishment and social issues. Each instructor chooses the topics and assigns the appropriate readings.

SAMPLE CONTENT

The Kolb cycle can be used to structure papers on almost any topic of relevance to the service-learning experience. The following shows the flow of a paper assignment focusing on Community Partnerships.

Reflecting on Community Partnerships

This framework can be used for written or oral discussion, reflection with partners in the community. It is designed to help individuals "reframe" the way in which they view community partnerships.

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

Community Partnerships in service-learning can generally be defined as relationships among the following parties:

- ◆ Educational institutions
- ◆ Citizens
- ◆ Agencies/Organizations
- ◆ Students/Volunteers

Describe a situation in your service experience where you have been in a community partnership. Describe the interaction you had with the other party. Include descriptions of verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Be objective in your descriptions.

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION

- ◆ What was your reaction to this event?
- ◆ What were you seeking in this relationship?
- ◆ What do you think the other party was seeking in this relationship?
- ◆ What assumptions did you make about the other individual(s)?
- ◆ How do you think the other party felt about the interaction? What assumptions do you think the other party made about you?

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

Given your experience and observations, how would you explain the nature of this partnership? In particular, what models or concepts might help explain the dynamics and outcomes of this relationship? For example:

- ◆ What influence does *culture* have on the nature of this relationship?

FIGURE 3

Abstract conceptualization

Relationships between the event(s) observed and experienced, and the theoretical concepts studied

- ◆ What happens in the reading and material presented in class helps you to explain and understand the situation itself and/or the individuals you saw and interacted with?
- ◆ How do you think your assumptions changed before or afterward? How do you see things differently?
- ◆ Given the situation as you understand it, do you have any critiques of different theories or educational models?

FIGURE 4

Active experimentation

How do the concepts you relate to other people or situations might encourage you to change?

- ◆ How do you think your new assumptions affect yourself, others, or the organization?
- ◆ This framework could apply to what kinds of situations in the future?
- ◆ Next time, what would you try to change in the situation?

- ◆ What influence does *power* have on the nature of this relationship?
- ◆ How might *assumptions* you made be faulty, or *stereotypes* you had be shortsighted?
- ◆ How does your definition of "service" impact your behavior and goals in this relationship? How does society define "service" and how does it compare to your definition? How do you think the other party defines "service"?

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

- ◆ How might this learning impact the way in which you relate with community partners in the future?
- ◆ How has it impacted your definition of "service"?
- ◆ What can you do to become more aware of cultural differences and how factors in the external environment impact service experiences?
- ◆ Next time, what would you try in a similar situation? What opportunities exist in this relationship?

USE IN A SERVICE INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

This format is very effective in a semester's internship course. Students are required to keep a more traditional daily journal in which they record the events which serve as the background for the Reflection Papers.

SERVICE-LEARNING APPLICATIONS

Such structured reflective journaling can be used in service-learning in several ways. It can be used to reflect on small group dynamics, organizational structure or the dynamics of a community service project. It can also be used to enhance the learning about a community problem (e.g. homelessness), the nature of service, and accompanying policy issues. Reflection Papers provide a means to integrate readings, concepts and students' personal experiences. We have found that they eliminate student complaints about the drudgery of daily journaling, especially over long periods of time.



SOURCE
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