

REFLECTION AND SERVICE-LEARNING

Rose Olson and Michele Bush

To facilitate the service-learning continuum and develop a program that allows students to reach beyond the provision of service to learning from that service, reflection must be included as a vital aspect of the experience. The Wingspread Special Report entitled, Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning, tells us that "an effective program provides structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience." But, what is reflection? The essence of reflection is the act of pondering and contemplating on an experience to increase one's understanding of that experience through thoughtful insights. It allows for connections to be made to prior knowledge and experiences and for a more profound understanding of the new experiences.

A scientific interpretation of reflection is also appropriate for service-learning. Kolb's definition of the concrete experience in his model of the Experiential Learning Process means to give back an image of; to mirror or reproduce. This is relevant when we ask students to define the "WHAT?" of their experience. They are required to provide an image of the experience when they describe what happened at the service site and the interaction they had with the people they served or agencies through which they provided service.

In Kolb's model, "reflective observation involves giving attention to certain experiences and thoughtfully comparing them or creating alternative meanings (Gish, 1990)." But, reflective observation is only part of the cycle. It provides a transition between the concrete experience and abstract conceptualization which "involves creating ideas and concepts that organize experience, action, and observation" ultimately leading to active experimentation (Gish). Though these may appear to be discrete processes, they form an integrated whole with overlapping links that generate the learning process.

Kolb's model possesses two distinct features: 1) as has been described, it is a process for learning, and 2) it provides an understanding of each individual's unique learning style. People tend to have a preference for one or a few aspects of the learning process which identifies their learning style. To most effectively utilize reflection, both of these features must be recognized and integrated into strategies for reflection. The ability to reflect and the depth of reflection is particular to the student, or teacher, and flows from his/her personal learning style. Reflection, a necessary part of the learning process, can therefore take on many forms depending on the people involved and their personal learning styles.

THE FOUR "C'S" OF REFLECTION

Realizing that there are many reflection strategies, there has to be a clear understanding of how successful reflection is defined. Eyler, Giles and Schmiede found that the process of effective critical reflection contains certain essential elements, it is: continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized.

Continuous reflection "should maintain an especially coherent continuity over the course of each event or experience (Eyler et al, 1996)." It includes reflection before, during and after the experience. "Connected reflection links service to the intellectual and academic pursuits of the students" synthesizing action and thought (Eyler et al.). The "practice of challenging students to engage issues in a more critical way" leads to challenging reflection. This element of reflection requires thoughtful stimulation "on the part of a

Reflection

Community-Campus Partnerships for Health. ²⁹A Guide for Developing Community-Responsive Models in Health Professions Education. San Francisco: UCSF Center for the Health Professions, 1997.

teacher or colleague who is prepared to pose questions and propose unfamiliar or even uncomfortable ideas for consideration by the learner (Eyler et al.)." Finally, reflection is contextualized when it "is appropriate for the setting and context of a particular service-learning course or program; the environment and method of reflection corresponds in a meaningful way to the topics and experiences that form the material for reflection (Eyler et al.)." It is important that the reflection and setting are not so formalized that they begin to look too much like school. These "4 C's" form the basis for successful reflection strategies and should be applied when developing and implementing reflection.

Through Kolb's work we have identified learning styles as well as a process for learning. Keeping these factors in mind, it becomes evident that different types of reflection will impact individual learners to different degrees. The creative service-learning faculty or coordinator will attempt to meet the needs of different learners by using a variety of reflection activities. The "depth of critical reflection grows out of the instinctual reflective process but must be cultivated purposefully as a habit of the mind. The effectiveness of critical reflection on this more complex level does depend on someone taking responsibility for making it happen; and the prompting of a peer or the guidance of a program leader can be indispensable (Eyler et al.)."

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING REFLECTION

The strategies most often utilized by service-learning programs generally fall under four general categories: reading, writing, doing and telling. The Bennion Center of the University of Utah combines these into speaking, writing, and performing activities. "Students can reflect orally through: one-on-one meetings with an instructor; large- and small-group discussions; discussions with representatives of the public benefit organization or community; leading a discussion; or presentations. Students can reflect in writing through: essays; research papers; final papers; project reports; journals, especially when these address specific questions supplied by the instructor; writing a guide for future volunteers; an evaluation of the program; or a publishable article based on the volunteer experience. Students can also reflect through activities: dance movement; art; simulation or role playing games; teaching others; analysis and problem solving; scrapbooks; photo essays; imaging; or any other activity that will help distill their ideas and provide an opportunity to share them with others (Bennion, 1996)."

Given these valuable insights, the process of determining the most effective and appropriate reflection can still appear to be difficult. Using one college's experience as a guide, we hope the example below will assist the reader in developing the reflective component of service-learning.

A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION

When the service-learning initiative started at GateWay Community College in the Fall of 1994, faculty enthusiastically participated. During periodic in-service and evaluation meetings, a common concern began to surface from faculty representing all divisions. There was a need for user-friendly tools to facilitate service-learning reflection activities.

The objective was clear and a task team, comprised of faculty, students, and the service-learning coordinator, went to work to locate or design a reflection tool that could be easily used by faculty and students. Initial activities involved identifying what types of assessment and follow-up activities were already in use by faculty at the college so they could be incorporated. GateWay Community College has a twenty-eight year history with experiential learning due to its multiple occupation-technical training programs. During their program of studies, many students participate in one or more off-campus activities to support and enhance their learning. These might include service-learning clinicals, field studies, internships, and practicums. Follow-up written and verbal activities usually centered on career and workplace related issues. Students participating in service-learning were now engaged in activities that involved unmet community needs and issues that required a different type of processing.

After reviewing existing resources in search of a tool that would enhance what was already in place, it was apparent that no existing tool fit our exact need. However, each book, journal article, and interview provided key strategies or other useful information. The resources we found particularly helpful for our purposes included *A How to Guide to Reflection: Adding Cognitive Learning to Community Service*

Programs by Harry C. Silcox and *The Quickening of America* by Frances Moore Lappe' and Paul Marting DuBois.

It was clear that it would be necessary to use the information that had been collected to design a tool that worked for our community college. Ideally, the tool would assist faculty and students in processing a service-learning experience through the following WHAT? SO WHAT?? NOW WHAT??? continuum while incorporating a cognitive hierarchy that moves participants from the knowledge to critical evaluation level.

With the assistance and dedication of faculty, students, and staff, two semesters of field testing and many hours of work later, the following set of questions was developed:

The WHAT— What happened at the service site? What service did you perform? What people did you interact with? What were their roles? What career opportunities did you observe? (DESCRIBE)

The SO WHAT— What was the significance of the service? What did it mean to me personally? What are my negative and positive feelings about the service site, the people, and the experience? What did I learn that enhances my classroom instruction? What did I learn about the people at my service site and what are their similarities and differences to me? What skills and knowledge learned in the classroom did I use/apply? What skills or knowledge did I lack? How can I get the needed skills? (EXAMINE)

The NOW WHAT— What impact might my service have on my lifelong learning process? What impact did my experience have on my everyday life? What insights did I gain that might assist me in my career or in selecting a career? What is the connection of this experience to my future? What did the experience teach me about community involvement, citizenship, and my civic responsibility? What is the relationship of my service experience to the "big picture" (societal changes)? (CONTEMPLATE)

As intended, the questions serve as a guide to faculty. The method of reflection is determined by the course content, course competencies, available technology, and individual teaching styles of the faculty. The actual reflection activities might involve:

- Writing (journals, papers, articles, poetry);
- Speaking (oral reports, small group discussions, conference presentations, panels);
- Mixed media (video, audio, computer presentations);
- Activities (dance, music, creating group posters, recruiting).

In the process of developing the set of reflection questions for students, a set of reflection questions for faculty emerged. Based on the essential elements of service-learning, a format was created to assist the faculty in structuring service-learning opportunities and selecting methods for the reflective component.

- Reciprocity (Is the service worthwhile for the institution, the community, and the participants?);
- Reflection (Do the participants believe that their service caused them to think in new/different ways?);
- Development (Can all stages from preparation to application of skills and the personal reaction be adequately described and documented?);
- Meaningful service (Was the service worthwhile? Challenging? Provocative?);
- Diversity (Does the experience involve opportunities to explore and understand diversity issues including career options?).

The current reflection tools have been in use for two semesters. Faculty have indicated a high level of success in using the questions to help students get focused. Feedback suggests that the students are moved to think about "the big picture" and how they fit. They also appear more willing to continue their community service when they see a relationship to themselves. Additional faculty members, who have joined the service-learning initiative, find the tool helpful as they integrate service options into their courses. It is expected that the tool will be repeatedly reviewed and altered by individual faculty to

accommodate specific needs, but the questions will continue to provide a framework for the reflection component.

The reflection activities you develop and utilize may tend to reflect your particular learning style. Use your peers in the development of different strategies so that you can begin to meet the needs of students with different learning styles in your program. It is also important to listen to your students, they know how they prefer to learn and will be able to provide you with valuable input. Finally, continually reflect on your own personal experiences so that you can continue learning and better identify with your students.

REFERENCES

- Bonar, L., Buchanan, R., Fisher, I., & Wechsler, A. (1996). *Service Learning in the Curriculum*. Bennion Center, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT
- Eyer, J., Giles, D.E., & Schmiede, A. (1996) *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning: Student Voices and Reflections*. Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN
- Gish, The Learning cycle. *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service* Volume II, 198-205
- Honnet, E.P., & Poulsen, S. J. (1989). *Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning* Wingspread Special Report. The Johnson Foundation, Racine, WI