

Blinded by the Light: Reflecting on Reflecting in Serving and Learning

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Session Description

Much is said about the importance of reflection in the service learning experience. While reflection is often associated with the end experience, the premise of this session is that it is never too early to reflect. The presenters will share specific reflection activities—some designed for the beginning of an experience, some for the middle, and some for the end. All are adaptable for a wide range of subject areas.

Session Foundations

Reflection—the fixing of the mind on some subject; serious thought; contemplation

Spend more than about five minutes or so researching the topic of service learning, and you are bound to run across the term “reflection.” While we all realize that it is the reflection that students take part in during their service learning experience which pushes them to the higher order level of thinking such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom), for some instructors, reflection can seem like a confusing and daunting task.

There is also a tendency to think of reflection in service learning from the perspective of the student. That need not, and should not, always be the case. Reflection can be effectively utilized by students, instructors, and community partners from the very beginning of a service learning undertaking to the very end. If we consider David Kolb’s research in the area of learning theory, we know that learning can begin at any point of the cycle and that reflection is essential because it links the concrete to the abstract (Kolb).

The Nexus—Students, Instructors, Community Partners

For the instructor or the community partner, whoever initiates the idea for a service learning opportunity, reflection begins at the moment of conception. The most effective reflection, at this early stage of the process, requires reflection from three perspectives: the students, the community partner(s), and the instructor(s). In each case, the focus is on benefits and costs.

What's in it for the students? This is, arguably, the most important reflection at the nexus stage. This is the group for whom the connection between the serving and the learning must be most clear. Start with the learning. What are the learning outcomes for the course? Are they documented? (If not, document them.) What kind(s) of service experiences do you have in mind? Where and how will those service experiences tie into the learning outcomes?

What's in it for the community partner(s)? Be careful here. It's far too easy to assume that a community partner gets some free labor; what could be better than that? Think in terms of both costs and benefits. Yes, chances are the community partner will get some volunteer hours out of one or more students, but what are the expectations of the community partner? They're called community partners for a reason. They will, most likely, be taking on an instructional role with the students—both in terms of teaching them the skills they need in their volunteer activities and in the process of helping them find connections between the college classroom and the volunteering. (By the way, this is a good place for community partners to start reflecting, if they weren't the initiators of the service learning experience.)

What's in it for the instructor? Since service learning is most frequently initiated by the instructor, what is the motivation? What are the professional costs and benefits? What are the

personal costs and benefits? What kind of support system is in place, if any, to initiate and maintain a service learning course?

These are among the questions that should drive three reflective activities on the part of the initiator of the course. Be sure to document. Write in a journal, design and complete a form, or draw a mind map—whatever works for you. The information you document at this early stage will prove valuable down the road.

Start Me Up: Reflecting Your Way into the Classroom

There's a lot of logic to beginning reflection activities on the very first day of class. It's an opportunity to define a starting point. Expect to provide a good amount of structure, especially to early reflection activities; you may have to do quite a bit of guiding to get students focused on the topics you want them focused on. That's okay; there's no rule that says reflection can't be guided.

It's nice, but not essential, to have a common theme running through most or all of the reflection activities planned for a semester. Such themes can help students (as well as instructors and community partners) make connections and, hopefully, see change and growth from start to finish.

Keeping the Faith: Reflecting Throughout the Course

While we are all aware of the importance of reflecting on and celebrating the successes of the learning experience, it is also important to reflect upon the difficulties and struggles that have occurred throughout the service learning experience. It is often when the water becomes most muddy that students make the greatest cognitive leaps. This is also the time when it is most necessary to reflect. As Julie Hatcher and Robert Bringle comment in their article, *Reflections: Bridging the Gap between Service and Learning*, "Experiences often create controversy, and if

the controversy is not reflected upon, it can be a misleading, even harmful experience, which produces a lack of sensitivity and responsiveness in the learner” (12).

Consider incorporating reflection on a regular basis throughout the course. This process of continual reflection will help highlight change or growth over the course of a semester. Here again, a consistent theme running through most or all reflections will help keep reflections focused and suitable for comparison.

While a consistent theme can be desirable, consider varying the strategies used for reflection. There are lots of ways to structure reflection activities: journal writings, essays, rubrics, mind-maps, group discussions, oral presentations, scrapbooks, projects, and so on. Varying the strategies can help keep the reflective process fresh, and, at the same time, may help to reveal thoughts that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. This is a direct tie to the concept of using different teaching styles to help play on different learning styles.

While there can be a lot of benefit to oral forms of reflection, most notably the ease with which information can be shared among a group, there is a real value to documenting all reflection activities in some way (e.g., taking “minutes” or videotaping a group discussion). As the service learning experience comes to an end, all of these documented reflections provide a road map for the final reflection.

Don’t leave all the reflecting, at this stage, to the students. Instructors and community partners should consider regular reflections as well. Journal entries are great, but not all of us have the discipline to do these on a consistent basis. If journaling isn’t for you, create a simple form that will enable you to track things that have worked well, things that haven’t worked well, things you might want to do differently next time, and so on. Documenting these things on a regular basis will greatly enhance your ability to improve the course the next time around.

Along the Road: Looking Back

Well, the big moment has come. The course is winding down and it's time for the final reflection—time for some serious thought and contemplation on how well the serving and learning have intertwined. Thanks to a process of consistent reflection throughout the course, participants have a trail of information. A final reflection project, whatever form it takes, should demonstrate a thoughtful analysis of all the reflections. (Again, this process need not be left just to the students.) It's that thoughtful analysis of the pieces documented along the road that will allow participants to develop a whole picture of serving, learning, and growing.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Benjamin S. Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals: Handbook I, cognitive domain. New York; Toronto: Longmans, Green. 1956.
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