



Reflection in Higher Education Service-Learning

Source: K. Connors and S. D. Seifer, *Community-Campus Partnerships for Health*, September 2005, updated Zahra Ahmed, Liz Hutter, and Julie Plaut, *Campus Compact*, September 2008

For additional resources on this and other service-learning topics visit Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at www.servicelearning.org.

Critical, structured reflection is essential to high-quality service-learning. Reflection activities guide students toward discovering, exploring, and evaluating relationships between the course content as they encounter it in readings, lectures, and discussions, and their experiences in the community. Reflection thus ensures service-learning is a dynamic, integrative process that develops students' knowledge, skills, and judgment. This fact sheet highlights key principles, identifies useful resources, and suggests reflection activities that can be modified for courses across the curriculum.

What Reflection Is and Is Not

While the term reflection is interpreted and practiced in many different ways in higher education, when done well:

- Reflection *is* critical thinking that supports learning objectives by expecting students to make astute observations, to demonstrate inductive or deductive reasoning skills, and to consider multiple viewpoints, theories, and types of data.
- Reflection *is* intellectual work that differs from the dominant academic culture by intentionally engaging the whole person, connecting community experiences with academic content, and cultivating students' awareness of themselves as active participants in public life.
- Reflection *is* an activity that contributes to the creation of educational environments in which a diverse population of students thrives by acknowledging the influence of people's identities and contexts and inviting students to construct and share their own sense of meaning.

Jennifer Pigza offers additional helpful observations about the nature of high-quality reflection in service-learning courses to combat common misperceptions and to bolster good practice:

- "Reflection *is not* a didactic retelling of the events at a service site..."
- "Reflection *is not* simply an emotional outlet for feeling good about doing service, or for feeling guilty about not doing more..."
- "Reflection *is not* a time for soap-boxing..."
- "Reflection *is not* a tidy exercise that closes an experience; reflection is ongoing, often messy, and provides more openings than closings."

The Theory Behind Reflection

Many service-learning practitioners refer to David Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984), which details the ongoing interaction of four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection about the experience, formation of abstract concepts through synthesis of the experience, and testing these concepts in new situations. Students may

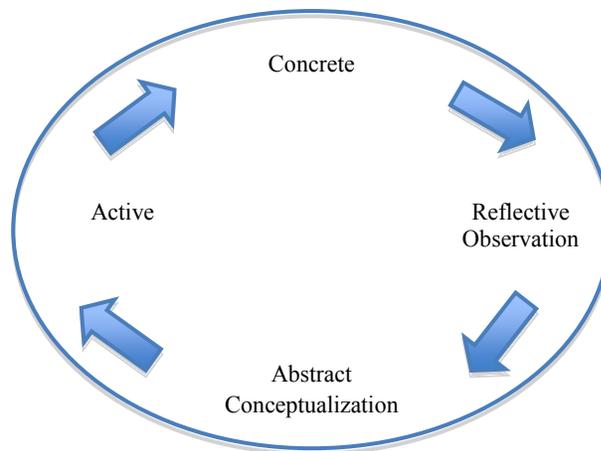


enter the experiential learning cycle at any point, which thus accommodates multiple learning styles.

High-quality reflection in service-learning also contributes to the creation of educational environments that support the success of students from what Roberto Ibarra calls “high-context cultures” (2001). These cultures tend to draw on multiple streams of information surrounding an event, situation, or interaction in order to determine its meaning; cues may come from tones of voice as well as words, gestures, body

language, and the relationship or status of the speakers. Since the dominant academic culture at most higher education institutions is distinctly low-context and increasing numbers of students come from high-context cultures, service-learning that invites students to reflect on and address multiple aspects of their community and classroom experiences is a promising strategy for engaging and retaining a diverse student population.

Experiential Learning Cycle



Key Characteristics of High-Quality Reflection

The classic *Practitioner’s Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning* by Janet Eyler, Dwight E. Giles Jr., and Angela Schmiede, emphasizes four principles, often referred to as “the four C’s”:

1. Reflection activities are implemented **continuously** throughout the course. Multiple opportunities for reflection before, during, and after community experiences prepare students to engage effectively in community work and invite them to explore the questions, challenges, and insights that arise over time.
2. Reflection activities are **connected** to course goals and objectives. Reflection is deliberately integrative, designed to meet desired outcomes such as deep understanding and application of course material and development of particular skills (e.g., communication, teamwork, problem-solving) or attitudes and dispositions (e.g., sense of efficacy, ongoing commitment to civic engagement).
3. Reflection activities are **challenging**, requiring students to think critically. Effective reflection creates a safe space without being so comfortable that assumptions or opinions go unexamined; it is essential to foster open inquiry, encouraging students to express and consider multiple perspectives in an environment, and stressing the values of civil discourse, reasoned analysis, and reflective judgment.
4. Reflection activities are **contextualized**. Meaningful reflection addresses the course content and immediate community experience in ways appropriate to the larger curricular and community contexts, as well as students’ knowledge, learning styles, and backgrounds.

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/he_facts/he_reflection/expanded.php

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