

Reflection: Connecting Service to Academic Learning

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To enhance student learning, it is critical that instructors devote time and attention to designing reflection activities. **Reflection is the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives.** Reflection should be both retrospective and prospective: students consider their service experience in order to influence their future action. Effective reflection activities are linked to particular learning objectives of the class, are guided by the instructor, occur regularly throughout the course, allow for feedback and assessment, and include opportunities for the clarification of values. When reflection activities are integrated into class discussion and appear on exams, students report higher levels of satisfaction with the course and greater academic gains from the experience. A service learning class should include some type of reflection activity that can be evaluated by the instructor. This affords students the opportunity to document the learning that has occurred from the service component.

SAMPLE STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING REFLECTION INTO YOUR COURSE

PERSONAL JOURNALS are easy to assign, yet often difficult to grade. Some contend that this means of personal reflection should be graded only for completion. Personal journals provide a way for students to express thoughts and feelings about the service experience throughout the semester. Structured journals provide guidance so that students link personal learning with course content.

- ***Critical incident journal:*** This journal includes a set of prompts that ask students to consider their thoughts and reactions and articulate the action they plan to take in the future: Describe a significant event that occurred as part of the service experience. Why was this event significant to you? What did you learn from this experience? How will this incident influence your future behavior? What new action steps will you take next time?
- ***Three-part journal:*** Each page of the weekly journal entry is divided into thirds; description, analysis, application. In the top section, students describe some aspect of the service experience. In the middle section, students analyze how course content relates to the service experience. And in the application section students comment on how the experience and course content can be applied to their personal or professional life.
- ***Highlighted journal:*** Before students submit their reflective journal, they reread personal entries and, using a highlighter, mark sections of the journal that directly relate to concepts and terms discussed in the text or in class. This makes it easier for both the student and the instructor to identify the academic connections made during the reflection process.
- ***Key-phrase journal:*** The instructor provides a list of terms and key phrases at the beginning of the semester for students to include in journal entries. Evaluation is based on the use and demonstrated understanding and application of the term.
- ***Double-entry journal:*** Students describe their personal thoughts and reactions to the service experience on the left page of the journal, and write about key issues from class discussion or readings on the right page of the journal. Students then draw arrows indicating relationships between their personal experience and course content.
- ***Dialogue journal:*** Students submit loose-leaf journal pages to the instructor for comments every two weeks. While labor intensive for the instructor, this can provide regular feedback to students and prompt new questions for students to consider during the semester. Dialogue journals also can be read and responded to by a peer.

EXPERIENTIAL RESEARCH PAPERS ask students to identify an underlying social issue they have encountered at the service site. Students then research the social issue. Based on their experience and library research, students make recommendations to the agency for future action. Class presentations of the experiential research paper can culminate semester work.

ONLINE DISCUSSION is a way to facilitate reflection with the instructor and peers involved in service projects. Students can write weekly summaries and identify critical incidents that occurred at the service site. Instructors can post questions for consideration and topics for directed writings. A log of the e-mail discussions can be printed as data to the group about the learning that occurred from the service experience.

ETHICAL CASE STUDIES give students the opportunity to analyze a situation and gain practice in ethical decision making as they choose a course of action. Students write up a case study of an ethical dilemma they have confronted at the service site, including a description of the context, the individuals involved, and the controversy or event that created the ethical dilemma. Case studies are read in class and students discuss the situation and identify how they would respond.

SERVICE LEARNING PORTFOLIOS contain evidence of both processes and products completed and ask students to assess their work in terms of the learning objectives of the course. Portfolios can contain any of the following: service learning contract, weekly log, personal journal, impact statement, directed writings, photo essay, products completed during the service experience (e.g., agency brochure, lesson plans, advocacy letters). Students write an evaluation essay providing a self-assessment of how effectively they met the learning and service objectives of the course.

PERSONAL NARRATIVES are based on journal entries written regularly during the semester. Students create a fictional story about themselves as a learner in the course. This activity sets a context for reflection throughout the semester with attention directed to a finished product that is creative in nature. Personal narratives give students an opportunity to describe their growth as a learner.

EXIT CARDS are brief note card reflections turned in at the end of each class period. Students are asked to reflect on disciplinary content from class discussion and explain how this information relates to their service involvement. Exit cards can be read by instructors in order to gain a better understanding of student experiences. Instructors may want to summarize key points and communicate these back to students during the next class.

CLASS PRESENTATIONS can be three-minute updates that occur each month or thirty minute updates during the final two class periods during which students present their final analysis of the service activities and offer recommendations to the agency for additional programming. Agency personnel can be invited to hear final presentations.

DIRECTED WRITINGS ask students to consider the service experience within the framework of course content. The instructor identifies a section from the text book or class readings (e.g., quotes, statistics, key concepts) and structures a question for students to answer in 1-2 pages. A list of directed writings can be provided at the beginning of the semester.

WEEKLY LOG is a simple listing of the activities completed each week at the service site. This is a way to monitor work and provide students with an overview of the contribution they have made during the semester.