

Reflection Matters: Connecting Theory to Practice in Service Learning Courses

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Abstract

Service learning courses enable students to integrate academic study with service in the community to better understand course content through direct engagement in active learning. Reflection is a powerful educational strategy that enables students to make connections and derive meaning from their experience. Students have opportunities to reexamine and test their knowledge, assumptions, values, and beliefs about complex social issues as they combine their discipline-specific coursework with service in community-based, real-world settings. Integrating well-structured reflection exercises into course requirements has been found to enliven teaching and enrich learning in ways that are enduring. As students take more responsibility for their own learning, they are empowered by their active participation in important work that can make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others. Reflection *does* matter.

Introduction: Benefits of Service Learning

Since the early 1990's, the pedagogy and practices of service learning have been integrated into the curriculum at a growing number of colleges and universities. When students learn through service in the community, learning is transformed because it is grounded in experience. Service learning connects "different kinds of discipline-specific knowledge *and . . . connect[s] that knowledge to an overt commitment to the common good*" (Zlotkowski, 1999, p. 102). It is the responsibility of faculty to ensure that there is educational value in the service work of students and to guide students as they make connections between the academic content of a course and service in the community. Although service learning provides faculty with a vehicle to invigorate their teaching (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Brookfield, 1995), it also enables faculty and students to connect . . . "theory to practice in order to meet challenging social problems" (Boyer, 1994, p.48). Service learning "counters the isolation of learning" (Eyler, 2002, p. 517) as it moves learning beyond the walls of the classroom into real life, community-based settings where students work side by side with professionals and service recipients in local organizations.

When service learning programs work with organizations in local communities, they have the opportunity to build long-term partnerships that benefit students, faculty, community organizations, the university, and service recipients. The adoption of a *partnership approach* results in collaborations that

- provide for continuous, sustainable support from and reflection by faculty and students, who work with community-based organizations and with service recipients from one semester to the next;
- facilitate the mobilization and coordination of financial, human, and technical resources to meet identified community needs; and
- make it possible to have more efficient and effective risk management practices.

Although the students enrolled in service learning courses change from one semester to the next, the relationships formed among partners, faculty, and service learning staff are more stable, enabling faculty to work together with community partners and service learning program staff to revise and enhance both service positions and reflection assignments over time. Long-term relationships also expand opportunities for personal and professional reflection through interdisciplinary collaboration, discussion groups, debriefing sessions, and the creation of scholarly products.

Service learning courses are not all alike. Some are designed to be service-based, some are content-based, and others are designed to strike a balance between service work and traditional academic coursework. According to Keith Morton (1996),

Service-centered courses are designed to integrate learning with service Content-based service learning courses integrate service in order to achieve preexisting course outcomes. Faculty who are teaching courses with discipline-based, content-driven learning objectives sometimes elect to integrate service learning as a way to build liberal education objectives, but they more often do so as a way to achieve particular content outcomes. (pp. 277-278)

Whether course objectives are centered on service or discipline-specific content, “reflection is central to achieve student learning and developmental outcomes” (Morton, 1996, p. 286).

Well-structured service learning courses afford family and consumer sciences students excellent opportunities to work with diverse populations. In addition to learning course content, students have “real world” opportunities to explore

- ways in which individuals and families experience life events in similar or dissimilar ways as a result of who they are (gender, racial and ethnic identities, socioeconomic status, ableism, age);
- ways in which individuals and families access (or do not access) community-based resources;
- broader social issues impacting the various populations served by community partner organizations; and
- public policy implications for individuals and families over the life course.

Reflection

Reflection activities provide students with “‘a sense of agency’ or belief that . . . [they] are engaged in important work and can make a difference” (Eyler, 2002, p. 526), thus reflection activities can serve as a springboard for sharing different perspectives, understanding nuances, appreciating alternative points of view, employing self-monitored learning practices, pursuing new information, and clarifying values and attitudes. The use of reflection in service learning courses enables students to explore beyond standard educational outcomes that may include technical, academic, personal and professional development to gain an appreciation of the “importance of reciprocity” (Zlotkowski, 1999, p. 107), as well as the skills necessary for democratic discourse (Brookfield, 1995). Faculty can use carefully structured reflection assignments to help students further develop and refine their habits of learning as they seek to understand and analyze cultural, social, and economic issues affecting our society and to become caring, contributing citizens in a democratic society (Eyler, 2002).

Through reflection exercises faculty can “ask students to describe their experience (what?), discuss what it means (so what?), and identify next steps (now what?)” (Eyler, 2002, p. 528). Reflection also helps teachers to view their “practice through students’ eyes” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 33) and teach more responsively. Thus service and reflection accrue substantial academic rewards (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). According to Zlotkowski (1999), “reflection, like community service activities, must be approached with considerable sensitivity to course-specific content” (p. 108). Through carefully structured reflection activities, service and course content can compliment, affirm, and extend each other from a “‘bottom-up’ method, in which general lessons and principles are drawn inductively from direct personal experiences and observations” (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993, p. 416). Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee’s (2000) longitudinal study of over 22,000 college students revealed that classroom discussion was the second most significant factor in a positive service learning experience. Both faculty and students indicated that when structured reflection was integrated into service learning courses, whether written or oral, it was the one major teaching strategy that connected the service experience to course content. When students shared their personal experiences in service settings, they informed and reinforced classroom instruction, provided depth and understanding to their readings, made academic assignments more meaningful (Astin et al., 2000; Eyler, 2002), and linked academic coursework with those issues of social concern experienced by citizens on a daily basis as a natural part of community life (Eyler, 2002; Eyler & Giles, 1999). In summary, reflection assignments can be structured to challenge both students and faculty to explore questions about issues of social responsibility, one’s disciplinary approach to knowing, as well as one’s personal and civic development (Zlotkowski, 1999).

Faculty Responsibilities

Although some faculty members wish to promote social change, others want to become more engaged teachers (Kennedy, 2003). How then, given such varied motivations, should faculty approach the design, implementation, and evaluation of reflection activities? Bringle and Hatcher (1995) describe reflection

“as an essential, defining element of service learning” (p. 115) and recommend that faculty development efforts address the definitions of reflection, the benefits of integrating reflection into service learning courses, and the selection of effective reflection activities to meet varied educational outcomes.

Faculty facilitate learning by designing course objectives, structuring course content, selecting readings, developing assignments, and designing assessment criteria (Martin, 2002). To assist faculty with this challenge, Eyler (2002) developed a reflection map to help faculty organize their thinking about the timing and nature of reflection assignments. Students can reflect alone, with classmates, and with community partners. They can reflect

- before the service experience (preflection) through assignments that uncover their assumptions, stereotypes, and past experiences;
- during the service experience using a variety of reflection and debriefing activities; and
- after the service experience through assignments, such as, projects and presentations which include classmates and community partners.

When planning reflection activities, faculty should very carefully consider utilizing a wide range of assignments to enhance student learning. Preflection exercises can help students uncover and articulate their own concerns and expectations for both academic and service requirements. Students tend to voice the same concerns from one semester to the next. The following are some recurring questions students raise early in the semester:

- Will I be successful?
- Am I competent? Will I know what to do?
- Will they like me?
- How will I ever be able to fit service in with all of my coursework responsibilities, my job, my family obligations, and my personal life?
- Who will help me if I do not know what to do?
- What if I make a mistake?
- What do I wear?
- How do I get there? If I drive, where do I park?
- What happens if I am sick or have to miss a day of service?

One way to minimize normal anxiety is to ask a few students who have taken the course in a previous semester to serve as guest speakers, using their own experiences to address the above concerns. Students enjoy learning from each other and often respectfully listen to peers in ways that are not part of typical faculty-student interactions. The experienced students have an opportunity to display their knowledge, the faculty members have an opportunity to witness student learning, and the current class is able to obtain basic, useful, honest information from their peers. Working with community partners to plan and conduct formal orientations is another way to transition students into their service settings before they actually work with service recipients. When students think critically, write about, and then discuss their reactions to or analysis of orientation sessions, they have yet another opportunity to explore collective expectations and identify the variance in individual levels of preparation for various service responsibilities. Additionally, their written reactions provide very helpful feedback to document the effectiveness of orientation sessions in meeting student needs and achieving intended goals.

Reflection can be prompted or directed through reading, writing, doing, and telling (Eyler, Giles & Schmiede, 1996). The following types of reflection assignments and activities are commonly used:

- one-on-one discussions (sometimes called pair and share)
- small group discussions
- whole class discussions
- critical incident reports (oral and written) (See Stanton, 1995 for more detail)

- interview summaries (oral and written)
- formal class presentations
- oral history presentations and story telling
- organizational analysis (oral and written)
- integrative papers
- theory papers
- personal or structured journals
- creative projects (videos, artistic representations, films, vignettes, documentaries)
- role-playing
- group descriptions of service experiences at various organizations (oral and written)
- case study analysis (oral and written)
- self-evaluations

For more detailed information on the above reflection strategies, see Eyler, Giles and Schmiede's (1996) guide on reflection. Martin (2002) describes the qualities of good assessment as it relates to specific reflection assignments, and Campus Compact's website (<http://www.compact.org/disciplines/reflection>) is another source for various definitions of reflection, structuring reflection, and a wide range of reflection strategies.

At the end of the semester, debriefing sessions, integrative projects, and presentations for community partners enable students to make public their learning and to participate in the planning process for the next semester. When students actively participate in preparing formal, constructive feedback, they experience a sense of purpose. They have an opportunity to witness community partner reactions to recommendations and learn that their work is part of a long-term effort that moves forward and evolves from one semester to the next.

Because service learning is labor intensive and requires that long-term partnerships with community organizations be maintained, it is critical that institutional support, technical assistance, and resources be made available. It is also crucial that faculty, students, and community partners receive appropriate recognition for their individual and collective roles in supporting engaged teaching through learning opportunities in town-gown partnerships that address important social issues. For this to occur, the goals of service learning courses must support the mission and goals of the university.

The Role of Service Learning Program Staff in Supplementing Reflection Activities

Over the past eight years, Montclair State University's Service Learning Program has developed partnerships with community organizations in six issue areas: literacy, the digital divide, substance abuse prevention, aging, conflict resolution, and at-risk youth. The service learning program staff has worked with faculty to create and conduct several yearlong faculty development programs (Faculty Fellows Program) that address a variety of areas, one of which is developing reflection activities. Program staff also supplement opportunities for student reflection by

- conducting focus groups;
- meeting with students individually and in classes;
- providing opportunities for students to write articles for campus publications; and
- providing opportunities for students to participate in panel discussions, prepare poster sessions, and give presentations at on-campus events and conferences about service learning and community engagement.

My Involvement in Teaching Service Learning Courses

My own involvement in service learning began in 1994 when three colleagues and I formed an ad hoc committee that resulted in the creation of Montclair State University's Service Learning Program. (For a detailed description of how to develop a university-wide service learning program, refer to Henry, Brook,

and Lazarus' 2002 article, "Building a Service Learning Program: A View From Inside," published in *Kappa Omicron Nu FORUM*, Vol. 13, No. 1).

My particular focus has been on two of the previously mentioned issue areas: aging and literacy. Since 1996 I have taught three different service learning courses, Challenge of Aging, Field Experiences in Family and Child Services, and Volunteer in the Community. Structured prelection, reflection, and debriefing exercises (oral and written) are used in each of these classes to engage students in their own learning process, enabling them to reflect on larger social issues and the role of active citizenship in creating institutional, community, and societal change as well as to help them understand how to interact with diverse populations with whom they may have had little or no previous experience.

Why Integrate Service and Reflection into Courses on Gerontology?

Many students have had little exposure to the frail, isolated, or institutionalized elderly unless they have had such contact with family members who fit these categories. In our age-graded society, young people do not often or regularly interact with well community-dwelling older adults. Thus, their personal experience with the varied needs of elders is quite limited. Service can provide the context in which the academic content in a course on aging comes to life. It enables students to learn firsthand how older persons' social worlds can shrink when they live in an institutional setting, are homebound, or reside in a long-term care facility. Service experiences enable students to meet with and talk with elders who share their varied life experiences and provide perspectives on life that have emerged as the result of living through the events and history of the past century. Service allows students to witness public policy in action and to participate in the delivery of services that improve the quality of life for an increasingly older population. Shared experiences from working side by side with older adult volunteers enable students to learn about the gifts and talents our elders bring to the day-to-day life and work of communities. Students have opportunities to participate in the social, intellectual, and recreational activities enjoyed by the well, frail, and institutionalized elderly. Not only do the experiences reinforce classroom learning, they also provide the context in which students can share with classmates their insights, feelings, and "learnings" from their service work. Through regular and sustained contacts with older adults, students are able to replace the myths they have acquired over time with the realities they have actually encountered through direct interactions with elderly residents in the local community.

Integrating Reflection into One Gerontology Course: A Personal Perspective

Challenge of Aging is a junior/senior level course taken by human ecology majors who have concentrations in family and child studies-family services, family and child studies-gerontology, and consumer affairs. It meets a general education requirement and is thus taken by non-majors as well. The course seeks to explore change over the adult lifespan as it affects family interactions and resources in various subcultures as well as the implications for social policy and institutions relative to an increasingly aging population. The course exposes students to scholarly literature, theories, and professional practices in gerontology. It enables students to understand micro issues, macro issues, and challenges faced by individuals and families as they provide for the needs of elders at various stages across the life cycle. In other words, it addresses the social, economic, legal, medical, ethical, political, and public policy concerns of older adults, their families, kin, friends, and neighbors.

Since I began teaching this course almost two decades ago, it has been evident that students lack basic knowledge of the aging process and have little direct experience interacting with older adults. Even though students conducted interviews with older adults, visited programs of service for elders, and participated in various discussion groups as part of their class assignments, their learning remained informational and abstract. However, once community service and reflection were fully integrated into the course, student learning became grounded. Students were able to witness how older people experience aging in different ways. Although students still have readings, term projects, homework, and class work, just as they have in a traditional course, they also have a weekly service requirement (usually two hours because this works for the partner agencies). At the beginning of the semester they work with service

learning program staff to identify their service placement with one of the university's community partner organizations that provides services to the well, frail, or institutionalized elderly. Students generally select placements based on their schedules, academic interests, and personal goals. (See Table 1 for a summary of student placements.)

Table 1 - Aging Issues: Student Placements With Community Partners, Spring 1998–Spring 2003

	S98	F98	S99	F99	S00	F00	S01	F01	S02	F02	S03
Mobile Meals of Essex	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
First Montclair House									X	X	X
Community Health Law Project								X	X		
American Red Cross				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Life Management		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Van Dyk Manor	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Senior Care and Activities Center	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
YWCA	X	X		X	X	X					
YMCA							X	X	X	X	X
Montclair Inn						X	X		X	X	X
Charles Bierman Home						X	X		X	X	X

Over the course of the semester there is a predictable ebb and flow of emotion and a continual building of competence as students move away from the initial stage of being curious and anxious to a phase where they become comfortable, engaged learners. Each semester students complete reflection assignments and participate in formal or informal preservice orientations conducted at their service sites. Each week students explore their own feelings, concerns, and insights about aging through structured, written reflection exercises. They then share their insights from their reflections, readings, service, and various assignments via regularly scheduled class discussions (one-on-one, small group, and/or large group discussions). Over time they connect theory to practice in ways that truly enhance learning and make complex and meaningful connections across their personal, family, academic, and professional lives.

Through firsthand accounts, they learn how various life events affect a person's life course and influence the "roads taken" and missed opportunities. They begin to explore current public policy issues affecting older Americans and their families and learn about proposed programs and policies that may influence their own futures.

Toward the end of the semester, students feel competent, exhibit mastery, use informed judgments, and move towards taking action as they prepare for debriefing sessions, focus groups, and final presentations. Students generally have a transformative experience as they provide service in unfamiliar territories working with diverse populations and with people who may be different from themselves and their families. Then, too, teaching and learning becomes an active process in which students and faculty are co-educators, challenging and stretching each other's capabilities. Because many types of reflection assignments produce a written record of student thought, they can be used to document experience for use in formal end of semester in-class presentations and in debriefing sessions with community partners/service learning program staff. Students can also review their reflection assignments at a future date to determine if their views, perceptions, and reactions have changed over time. For specific examples of reflection assignments, see Appendix A and B.

Incorporating service and reflection into my classes has provided me with a powerful educational tool to broaden and deepen student learning. Students routinely remark on how previously-studied theories become real and make sense once these theories are grounded in the context of community service work. They make connections with faculty and classmates that are often deeper and more rewarding than those formed in traditional classrooms. They have an enthusiasm for learning that is respectful of each other's opinions in ways that motivate me to work harder at the craft of teaching. Through reflection, I have had opportunities to view the world through students' eyes and have become a more responsive teacher. Integrating service learning and reflection into courses is not for everyone. This pedagogical approach requires substantial work on the part of all involved. However, the academic, personal, and professional rewards are substantial.

Summary

Integrating service learning and reflection into academic courses provides a vehicle for integrating theory with thoughtful practice. It reduces the isolation of traditional classroom learning while providing opportunities for students to gain skills needed to analyze complex societal problems (Eyler, 2002) and to understand the range of community assets available (or not available) to individuals and families. When students complete varied reflection assignments, they have ongoing opportunities to make meaningful and enduring connections between their coursework and their "learnings" from service. They reinforce their academic study through first hand experience in community settings and increase their understanding of and perspectives on larger social issues inherent in community life. The work of Astin et al. (2000) confirmed that one form of reflection, classroom discussions of service experiences, was the second most powerful predictor of positive service-learning experiences. Findings from their national study also revealed that when service was performed as part of a course, there were positive effects on academic performance, values, and career choice.

Reflection can take place before, during, and after the service experience. Students can reflect alone, with classmates, and with community partners (Eyler, 2002). Developing effective reflection strategies and assignments is a course specific task for faculty, who may receive supplemental assistance from service learning program staff at some universities. Through service learning partnerships, faculty, community partners, service learning program staff, students, and service recipients are able to work together to accomplish what they cannot achieve alone. Purposeful, sustained service-learning partnerships provide a vehicle for all parties to reflect together on ways to support the common good.

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APPENDIX A

SAMPLE REFLECTION ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE FIRST FEW WEEKS OF THE SEMESTER – BEFORE STUDENTS BEGIN THEIR SERVICE

The *purpose* of the following two reflection assignments is to facilitate an examination of myths, stereotypes, and definitions of aging and to introduce many factors that influence quality of life for older adults. Since most students rarely think of themselves becoming elderly, these assignments enable them to personalize the aging process, to confront attitudes and beliefs about being old and to think about those who serve as their role models. (The students' role models are often grandparents, relatives, or neighbors.)

Note: It is important that students have background information on confidentiality before they prepare reflection assignments.

Sample 1

This assignment is due for the second class of the semester. Students are asked to write their responses to the following questions:

1. When is one old?
2. What do you look forward to as you age?
3. What are your concerns and fears (if any) about your own aging?

At some point during the class, students will share their answers to the above in small groups. Afterwards, they will report on their discussions to the class. As they work on this exercise, students create a natural context for the examination of course content (myths, stereotypes, and definitions of aging). Additionally, it may be important for students to consider their concerns and fears before they select their service placement with a community partner.

Sample 2

During the second or third week of the semester, students are asked to consider the many factors that influence the quality of life for older adults, such as, family, housing, income, assets, employment, recreation, socialization, and health. This assignment requires students to examine previous knowledge and introduces the topics to be covered over the course of the semester. Students are asked to speculate on their own aging and respond to the following:

The goal of this assignment is to prompt you to think about your own old age and to write about certain life circumstances that you see yourself encountering as you grow into your later life.

1. Think about and describe your life circumstances when you reach age 60, 75, and 90. Include a discussion of each of the following items in your narrative:
 - a) your family life and marital situation
 - b) your housing situation
 - c) your economic situation (include sources of income, assets, and expenses)
 - d) your work situation
 - e) your leisure and volunteer activities
 - f) your health status
2. On what basis have you made the above claims about the circumstances you anticipate in your later years?

As they discuss the above assignment with classmates, students often describe their goals, values and dreams from a life course perspective. They are often very engaged in reflecting on each part of the assignment even though they know that it is purely conjecture on their part. Just as they did in the previous assignment, the students create the context for the examination of course content.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE REFLECTION ASSIGNMENTS – COMPLETED AFTER THE STUDENTS BEGIN THEIR SERVICE

The purpose of the following reflection assignments is to facilitate learning about the variety in service positions and responsibilities held by the students in the class, the diverse knowledge and experience the students have with older adults, as well as, any challenges students encountered while providing service. In samples 1 and 2 students have the opportunity to learn about the differences in the daily routines of older adults who: live independently in the community, reside in congregate housing, reside in supportive housing/assisted living facilities or who live in long term care facilities.

Note: It is important that students have background information on confidentiality before they prepare reflection assignments.

Sample 1

After students have been at their service site for three weeks or so they are asked to complete the following assignment:

Describe:

1. what you did at your service site this week.
2. the specific tasks you worked on at your service site with clients, staff and other Montclair State University students.
3. any classes or experiences you have had that helped you prepare for your service position.
4. any challenges or dilemmas you have encountered and how you handled them.

Since students are often assigned to service sites on different days of the week and at different times of the day, it is useful to have students meet in small groups arranged by service site to discuss the similarities and differences in their experiences. They learn that they can have different experiences at the same site depending on their service responsibilities and the staff and clients/residents they are assigned to work with. In order to complete item 4 above, students may require information about preparing a critical incident journal. (See Stanton, 1995, p. 58-60 for more information.)

Sample 2

After students have become familiar with the older adults they are working with (about six weeks into their service experience), they are asked to complete the following assignment:

Interview a client/resident about a typical day in his/her life. Include:

1. what is done from the time of getting up in the morning until going to bed at night.
2. meal patterns and dietary considerations.
3. who she/he usually interacts with during the day.

The items in the above assignment can be varied according to course content, course objectives, or student interests. This exercise enables students to draw upon, integrate, reflect on, and connect course content with service experiences.