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Reflection in Service Learning: Making Meaning of Experience

by Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher

Traditional methods of instruction based on lectures and textbook readings can be effective in some instances and for some types of learning, yet many educators seek methods to enhance traditional student learning and to expand educational objectives beyond knowledge acquisition. Two related issues illustrate the limitations of traditional methods. The first is context-specific learning. Students are taught a particular module of content, they are provided examples of how to solve particular types of problems, and then they practice solving these types of problems. However, when the nature of the problem is varied, or when similar problems are encountered in different contexts, students fail to generalize prior learning to these new circumstances or situations. The second issue that frustrates educators is the shallow nature of the content learned through traditional instruction and the degree to which it does not promote personal understanding. That is, although students may demonstrate rote learning of a particular educational module, that new information does not always enlighten understanding of their own lives and the world outside the classroom. When knowledge acquisition is viewed as the most important goal of education, the educational system fails to develop intellectual habits that foster the desire and capacity for lifelong learning and the skills needed for active participation in a democracy.¹

Recognizing these limits to traditional instructional methods, a Task Group on General Education, appointed by the American Association of Colleges in 1994, recommended that college instructors focus more attention on active learning strategies. Several types of active learning strategies identified in the report address these challenges (i.e., context-specific learning, personally relevant learning) and successfully expand the educational agenda beyond the acquisition of knowledge. Recommended active learning strategies include using electronic and interactive media; promot-



Reflection activities are a critical component of effective service learning because they connect the service activities to the course content, extending the educational agenda beyond rote learning.

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ing undergraduate research; structuring collaborative learning experiences; and developing problem-based learning.² The benefits of these active learning strategies include the promise that students are more engaged in the learning process. As a result, students are more satisfied with the learning experience, which in turn fosters academic persistence and success. In addition, educational outcomes are enriched, deepened, and expanded when student learning is more engaged, active, and relevant. Another type of active learning that holds similar promise is service learning.

Service Learning

Service learning is defined as a "course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility."³ According to this definition, service learning is an academic enterprise. Although other forms of community service (e.g., volunteering) can have educational benefits, service learning deliberately integrates community service activities with educational objectives. This means that not every community service activity is appropriate for a service learning class. Community service activities need to be selected for and coordinated with the educational objectives of the course. Furthermore, the community service should be meaningful not only for the student's educational outcomes but also to the community. Thus, well-executed service learning represents a coordinated partnership between the campus and the community, with the instructor tailoring the service experience to the educational agenda and community representatives ensuring that the students' community service is consistent with their goals.⁴ Thus, high-quality service learning classes demonstrate *reciprocity* between the campus and the community, with each giving and receiving.

The definition of service learning also highlights the importance of *reflection*. Reflection is the "intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives."⁵ The presumption is that community service does not necessarily, in and of itself, produce learning. Reflection activities provide the bridge between the community service activities and the educational content of the course. Reflection activities direct the student's attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be studied and interpreted,

much as a text is read and studied for deeper understanding.

Philosophical Basis for Reflection

The extensive work of John Dewey offers a philosophical foundation for the role that reflection assumes in the learning process as a bridge between experience and theory. Indeed, personal experiences, such as those gained through community service, allow theory to take on meaning when reflection supports an analysis and critical examination of the experience. Dewey contends that experience is as important as theory.

An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is *only in experience* that any theory has vital and verifiable significance. An experience, a very humble experience, is capable of generating and carrying any amount of theory (or intellectual content), but a theory apart from an experience cannot be definitely grasped even as theory. It tends to become a mere verbal formula, a set of catchwords used to render thinking.⁶

Too often, the presentation of a theory by an instructor or in a textbook is viewed by students as an empty, pedantic venture. It is through active learning and the interplay between abstract, remote content and personal, palatable experiences that student learning is deepened and strengthened.

According to Dewey, reflection is an "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supported form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it."⁷ Reflection consists of "turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive considerations."⁸ Dewey acknowledges that experience by itself does not necessarily result in learning; experiences can be either "miseducative" or "educative." Experience becomes educative when critical reflective thought creates new meaning and leads to growth and the ability to take informed actions. In contrast, experiences are miseducative when they fail to stimulate critical thought and they more deeply entrench existing schemata. Dewey notes that communication, particularly face-to-face discourse, is a key to creating educative experiences. Communication with others leads not only to educational growth but also to social and moral development. Gouinlock is clear in identifying the moral dimensions of Dewey's educational philosophy. He notes, "The values, aims, and expected response of others play a critical role in stimulating revised interest in each participant. Accordingly, in a community where full and open communication

quent action. For example, in order to complete this assignment, students might be asked at mid-semester to identify and describe a perplexing, frustrating, or confusing experience at the service site. Students then identify an important social issue that may be underly-

Table 1
Types of Reflective Journals

Key Phrase Journal: Students are asked to integrate an identified list of terms and key phrases into their journal entries as they describe and discuss their community service activities. Students may be asked to underline or highlight the key phrases in order to identify their use.

Double-entry Journal: For this journal, students use a spiral notebook. On the left side of the journal students describe their service experiences, personal thoughts, and reactions to their service activities. On the right side of the journal, they discuss how the first set of entries relates to key concepts, class presentations, and readings. Students may be asked to draw arrows indicating the relationships between their personal experiences and the formal course content.

Critical Incident Journal: Students focus on a specific event that occurred at the service site. Students are then asked to respond to prompts designed to explore their thoughts, reactions, future action, and information from the course that might be relevant to the incident. For example,

Describe an incident or situation that created a dilemma for you because you did not know how to act or what to say.

Why was it such a confusing event?

How did you, or others around the event, feel about it?

What did you do, or what was the first thing that you considered doing?

List three actions that you might have taken, and evaluate each one.

How does the course material relate to this issue, help you analyze the choices, and suggest a course of action that might be advisable?

Three Part Journal: Students are asked to respond to three separate issues in each of their journal entries: (a) Describe what happened in the service experience, including what you accomplished, some of the events that puzzled or confused you, interactions you had, decisions you made, and plans you developed. (b) Analyze how the course content relates to the service experience, including key concepts that can be used to understand events and guide future behavior. (c) Apply the course materials and the service experience to you and your personal life, including your goals, values, attitudes, beliefs, and philosophy.

Directed Writings: Students are asked to consider how a particular aspect of course content from the readings or class presentations, including theories, concepts, quotes, statistics, and research findings, relate to their service experiences. Students write a journal entry based on key issues encountered at the service site.

ing this circumstance (e.g., health care to homeless youth, eating disorders among adolescent girls, volunteer recruitment strategies). They identify the multiple perspectives from which the issue can be analyzed and

how it might be the basis for making recommendations to influence community agency operations, policies, or procedures. Students then locate articles in professional journals and other relevant sources to provide a conceptual framework for the issue. During the second half of the semester, students use this research to write a formal paper that analyzes the social issue and includes recommendations.

Ethical Case Study: At the service site students frequently encounter events that raise not only intellectual and practical, but also moral and ethical, issues. In this reflection activity, students are asked to write case studies of an ethical dilemma they confronted at the service site, including a description of the context, the individuals involved, and the controversy or dilemma they observed. Case studies can be written to include course content, as appropriate. Once the case studies are developed, they can provide the bases for formal papers, class presentations, or structured group discussions. These case studies are particularly well suited to an exploration and clarification of values because their diverse perspectives allow students to discuss the issue from alternative points of view. Lisman's seven-step method for discussing case studies can be adapted to service learning classes.¹⁸

Directed Readings: Some textbooks might not adequately challenge students to consider how knowledge within a discipline can be applied to the service site. This may particularly be the case for civic, moral, or systemic issues that students encounter. Additional readings that effectively probe these issues and prompt consideration of the relevance and limitations of course content can be assigned. The directed readings might come from the discipline. Alternatively, books that contain selected readings or chapters might be appropriate, including *Service-learning Reader: Reflections and Perspectives on Service, Education for Democracy, The Call of Service, and Common Fire*.¹⁹ Students can be asked to write a two-page summary of the reading and its relevance to their service experience.

Class Presentations: Students can share experiences, service accomplishments, or products created during their service in classroom presentations that use videos, PowerPoint, bulletin boards, panel discussions, or speeches. These presentations provide excellent opportunities for students to organize their experiences, develop creative displays, and publicly celebrate their accomplishments. Community agency personnel can be invited to these presentations.

Electronic Reflection: Reflective exercises and dialogue interactions can occur through various means. Service learning practitioners are currently exploring the man-

other independent variables.

There may be other benefits for the learner who engages in reflection in addition to course-specific learning outcomes. Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, and Glaser's experimental study manipulated whether college students wrote on four consecutive days about either traumatic experiences or superficial topics. Those who wrote about the traumatic event, compared to the other group, had more favorable immune-system responses, less-frequent health-center visits, and higher subjective well-being.²⁴ Similar effects have been found in other studies conducted by Pennebaker and colleagues.

Writing about emotional upheavals has been found to improve the physical and mental health of grade-school children and nursing home residents, arthritis sufferers, medical school students, maximum-security prisoners, new mothers, and rape victims. Not only are there benefits to health, but writing about emotional topics has been found to reduce anxiety and depression, improve grades in college, and . . . aid people in securing new jobs.²⁵

Pennebaker also reports on analyses of the essay's content to determine if characteristics of the narratives were related to the writer's subsequent health and well-being. The most important factor that differentiated persons showing health improvements from those who did not was the improved ability to include causal

Creating a classroom climate of trust and respect is an essential element in fostering reflective practice among students; students who are more skeptical of the process can be supported in taking personal risks in the learning process.

thinking, insight, and self-reflection in their stories. Thus, reflection activities that promote personally meaningful as well as academically meaningful explorations of experiences encountered in service settings may yield health as well as intellectual benefits to students.

However, the instructors should keep in mind the risks associated with structured, ongoing reflection activities in a service learning course. Batson, Fultz, Schoenrade, and Paduano conducted studies that examined the effects that critical self-reflection can

have on the perceived motives of someone who has helped others. Critical self-reflection is an honest attempt to answer the question, "Why *really* am I doing good?" Batson and his colleagues found that critical self-reflection caused a self-deprecating bias that eroded the attribution that helping was done for altruistic reasons.²⁶ The effect was particularly strong for individuals who valued honest self-knowledge and those who were cognizant of the personal gain they would receive by helping others. It is interesting that all three of these conditions—reflection on motives, promoting self-knowledge, and personal gains for helping (e.g., course credit)—can exist in service learning courses.

Conclusion

Higher education has experienced a tremendous growth in service learning courses during the 1990s. This growth has been supported by funds and technical assistance provided by the Corporation for National Service and Campus Compact to promote service learning. Through "Learn and Serve America: Higher Education" grants, the corporation has stimulated the creation of thousands of service-learning courses. Similarly, Campus Compact estimates that 11,800 service-learning courses are available to students on its member campuses. As service learning becomes a more integral part of the curriculum, the manner in which it can improve educational goals needs better understanding.

Altman describes three distinct types of knowledge: content knowledge (i.e., rote learning of content), process knowledge (e.g., skills), and socially relevant knowledge.²⁷ Traditional instructional methods may effectively produce content knowledge and possibly process knowledge. However, service learning can promote both content and process knowledge,²⁸ and it is particularly well-suited for developing socially relevant knowledge in students. How reflection activities are designed plays an important role in their capacity to yield learning, support personal growth, provide insight, develop skills, and promote civic responsibility.

Trosset found that students often view discussions with peers, particularly discussion about race, gender, and sexual preference, as primarily forums for advocacy and persuading others to accept new viewpoints on controversial issues.²⁹ Discussions were not viewed by students as ways to explore differences through dialogue. Droge and Heiss, however, found a contrasting picture: students endorsed discussions with peers as opportunities to learn from others, to have their views challenged, and to use materials other than their personal experiences to inform and change their views.³⁰ These contrasting cases in higher education should alert

educators to the different assumptions that students may bring to experiential and educational activities. Differences such as these will be present among service learning students. Creating a classroom climate of trust and respect is an essential element in fostering reflective practice among students; students who are more skeptical of the process can be supported in taking personal risks in the learning process.

These differences also highlight how the structure of a reflection activity can influence the results of a service experience: whether they will be educative and lead to new ways of thinking and acting, or miseducative and reinforce existing schemata and stereotypes. For service learning to educate students toward a more active role in community, careful attention must be given to reflection. Reflection activities must allow students to discover the value of dialogue, embrace the importance of perplexity in the learning process, and develop the ability to make meaning of personal experience. **eh**

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