

The Importance of Reflection

How to Offer Teachable Moments via Introspection

How important is reflection?

Reflection is a critical component of service. It is, in fact, what turns volunteer work into a learning opportunity. If the students aren't provided with opportunities to reflect on their experience, they are not making the connection between their work in the classroom and that in the community.

The following list of frequently asked questions about reflection, compiled by National Campus Compact, can help guide you as you incorporate reflection into your project course.

What is structured reflection?

Effective service programs provide opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience. Service projects can be used to reinforce academic course content and to develop a variety of competencies including critical thinking, communication skills, leadership, a sense of civic responsibility and multicultural understanding. Structured reflection can help students make meaningful connections between their service experience and course content, and in the process develop various skills.

The term structured reflection is used to refer to a thoughtfully constructed process that challenges and guides students in (1) examining critical issues related to their service project, (2) connecting the service experience to academic coursework, (3) enhancing the development of civic skills

and values, and (4) assisting students in finding personal relevance in the work.

Why is structured reflection critical to effective service?

Reflection is a critical component of all experience-based pedagogies. However, a well-designed reflection process is particularly important in Service-Learning for the following reasons:

Textbooks and lectures use techniques such as highlighting key points, examples, clarifying common misconceptions, and summaries to facilitate student learning. In contrast, experience provides few explicit guides to learning. Students need to be challenged, encouraged, and supported in reflecting on service projects and in connecting these experiences to coursework.

Experience is unstructured and messy. Real-world projects are not simple applications of concepts and rules learned in the classroom. The tasks of collecting information, framing the problems, identifying alternatives and recommending and justifying solutions appropriate to specific contexts are challenging tasks. Reflection activities such as project logs and journals provide opportunities for students to share project progress and concerns on an ongoing basis. Project effectiveness and student learning can both be enhanced by reviewing student reflection and providing guidance.

The importance of structured reflection is underscored by the realization that a significant portion of the learning experience cannot be observed or controlled by the instructor. Teachers may not be privileged to the complexity of detail in a service project, yet teachers are expected to provide guidance to students in addressing problems. Further, different students/teams can be involved in different project. Thus unlike textbook problems/cases, it may be difficult to integrate discussion of project details in classroom discussion. A carefully structured reflection process can facilitate the exchange of relevant information between students, faculty, and the community in a timely manner.

Reflection is also important because students need a safe space for grappling with the range of emotions that arise from a service experience.

When should reflection occur?

Effective service projects requires more than a report or presentation at the end of the project. Teachers must provide numerous opportunities for reflection before, during, and after the experience. An ongoing process of reflection enhances student faculty communication and provides faculty with a better understanding of student projects, problem-solving efforts, and progress. Such communication can help in improving project effectiveness as well as student learning.

The role of reflection varies according to the stage of the project. Reflection before the project can be used to prepare students for the experiences that await. At this stage, reflection can be used to teach students concepts/theories required for the project, orient them towards the community organization its needs, and offer them problem-solving skills to address

the challenges that will arise in the community setting.

During the project faculty can use reflection to encourage students to learn independently while providing feedback and support as needed to enhance student learning. Reflection not only offers teachers an opportunity to reinforce the connection of course content with the service experience but also allows teachers an opportunity to seize the teachable moments that arise in service experience. Reflection after the service experience has ended can help student evaluate the meaning of the experience, grasp their emotional responses to the experience and think about the integration of knowledge and new information.

