



## Reflection: Helping Students Make the Connection

Reflection is the third of what are sometimes called the “Big Three” of service-learning, i.e. the three key elements of an effective service-learning experience: *preparation*, *action*, and *reflection*. It is in reflecting upon their (hopefully well-prepared!) experiences in the field that students can begin to make connections between those experiences and the academic course content. In other words, it is in the reflecting that *service* becomes *service-learning*. The obverse is also true, however: a “service-learning” course which does not explicitly encourage and support student reflection on their experiences in light of the course’s academic content is not really a service-learning course at all.

The following<sup>1</sup> are various techniques which instructors can use both to help students reflect on their experiences and also to assess the level of student learning in a course which employs a service-learning pedagogy. Employing a combination of these methodologies, both in and out of class, can maximize students’ and instructors’ opportunities to relate the service component to course content and thus deepen learning for all involved.

### Discussion/Class-based Techniques

In-class reflections should not be focused on the service aspect of students’ on-site experiences, but rather on the ways in which course concepts relate to those experiences. Discussions offer a forum which encourages students to process and relate what they are studying, doing, and learning, and provide instructors with opportunities to emphasize key concepts, challenge students’ thinking, and pose and address important questions raised by students’ remarks.

**Event reporting:** The instructor—often at the beginning of the class—asks students to share powerful, interesting, or illuminating incidents from their most recent time on-site (see “Critical incident report” below), and then uses these stories to raise questions and/or illustrate points that will be treated in that day’s class.

**Microcosm discussions:** In the classroom, students explore a broad concept or issue through a focused examination its impact on the organizations and communities which they are serving. (This is particularly effective when many or all of the students in the class are connected with the same service site.)

**Example-seeking:** Similar to a microcosm discussion, an instructor asks students to provide real-world examples (drawn from their service experiences) of concepts discussed in lecture or in a reading assignment.

**Question-seeking:** After introducing the day’s topic, the instructor invites students to share questions or concerns related to it which have occurred to them through their interactions on the service site, then presents material as a systematic response to students’ questions.

**Case studies:** Individuals/groups of students prepare a case study of a situation which they have encountered at the service site that illustrates an instructor-assigned topic, including a description of the context, the individuals involved, and a narrative of the controversy or event. These case studies are then read and discussed in class as a way of introducing or illuminating that class session’s material.

**Exit cards:** At the end of each class, students write and turn in a brief reflection on an index card, reflecting on content from the day’s class and explaining how this information relates to their personal service involvement. These provide instructors with a low-effort regular assessment tool for monitoring both students’ understanding of course content and their progress in integrating that content with their service experiences.

(over)

## Writing-based (out-of-class) Techniques

Individual written reflections allow students to process both the academic (course-related) aspects and personal impact of their service experiences. When assigned (and graded) at regular intervals through the semester, such reports can help instructors to monitor individual students' progress (both academically and personally) and offer valuable insights into their ongoing processes of learning and meaning-making. Because of the personal dimension of many of these assignments, instructors sometimes find them hard to grade; use of one of the following structures in combination with a clearly constructed rubric can be extremely helpful in this regard.

**Session Reports (Journaling):** Though one of the most common forms of reflection employed in service-learning classes, session reports or journals are often criticized by instructors as overly subjective and insufficiently academic. The following structures can help students to use their regular reports about their service experiences to more effectively make connections to course content and/or more substantive engagement in the issues raised by their community involvement.

- *Critical incident report:* The following set of prompts asks 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 significant to you? What did you learn from this experience? How will this incident influence your future behavior?
- *Three-part reporting:* Each weekly entry is divided into thirds: description, analysis, and application. In the top section, students describe some aspect of the service experience. In the middle section, they analyze how course content relates to the service experience. Finally, in the application section students comment on how their experience and the course content can be applied to their personal and professional life.
- *Highlighted session reports:* Before students submit their reflective session reports, they reread their entries and, using a highlighter, mark sections of the reports that directly relate to course concepts and terms. This makes it easier for both students and the instructor to identify the academic connections made during the reflection process.
- *Key-phrase reports:* The instructor provides a list of terms and key phrases (drawn from course content) at the beginning of the semester for students to include in their reports throughout the semester. Evaluation is based on the use and demonstrated understanding of the terms.
- *Double-entry reports:* Students keep a notebook/journal in which they describe their personal thoughts and reactions to the service experience on the left page, and write about key issues from class discussions or readings on the right page. Students then draw arrows indicating relationships between their personal experience and course content.
- *Dialogical Reporting:* Students submit session reports (in paper or via email) 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 them to consider during the semester. Dialogue reports can also be read and responded to by a peer.

**Directed writing:** Directed writing assignments ask students to explicitly consider the service experience within the framework of course content. The instructor identifies a section from the assigned readings or class topic (e.g. quotes, statistics, key concepts) and structures a question that draws on students' understanding of the material and their service experiences. These questions can be included in the syllabus. Students answer the question in 1-2 pages.

**Online discussion forum:** Students use the discussion forum feature on Blackboard, a class list-serv, or a student blog site to post, read, and respond to one another's regular written reflections (of any of the sorts discussed above). This allows for greater peer-to-peer interaction, challenge, and support in processing both service experiences and academic content. Instructors can also participate in the online conversation to answer questions, challenge biases, and suggest new directions for reflection.

**Weekly log:** A weekly log is a simple listing of activities completed each week at the service site. This is a very basic way to monitor student work. When incorporated into a portfolio or similar final project, it can provide students with an overview of the contribution they have made on the site during the semester.

## **Project/Paper-based Techniques**

Final papers, presentations, or other projects are one of the best ways for students to reflect upon the synthesis of their service experiences and the course's academic content, especially when used in combination with other, ongoing forms of reflection (either in- or out-of-class). Such final, summary assessments can be prepared by individuals or by groups, and can also be presented in class and/or at students' community agencies (allowing students to incorporate audio/video material) if appropriate.

**Analytical Paper (Presentation):** Analytical papers focus on the students' experience of serving in the community, and then relate that experience to course content in a systematic way. Such papers might include descriptions of the work students did on site, analyses of the agency where they worked and its response strategy to the social issues/communities with which it deals, evaluations of students' personal service and the strengths and weaknesses of the agency, changes/improvements which the students would suggest for the agency's operations, and an integration section in which students address how their service experience related to or conflicted with course concepts and affected their understanding of course materials, demonstrated the relevance/irrelevance of their studies in application to concrete situations in the community, and prepared them for further academic or professional engagement in course topics.

**Experiential Research Paper (Presentation):** An experiential research paper focuses on an aspect of the course content highlighted by students' service experience, then relates students' research on that topic back to those experiences in a pragmatic way. Students identify an underlying course-related issue which they have encountered in their service placement, then research and write a major paper about this issue (incorporating material from their on-site experiences as illustrations, etc.). Such papers may also include an applications section, in which students make recommendations to their agency and/or policy makers for future action based on their research.

**Portfolio:** 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 agreement, weekly log, session reports, directed writings, photographic or other documentary material, products completed during the service project, etc. Students conclude the portfolio with an evaluative essay providing a self-assessment of how effectively they met the learning and service objectives of the course. A portfolio can also be done in electronic (web- or PowerPoint-based) form.

**Scrapbook:** A service-learning scrapbook is a final portfolio (see above) which also incorporates research (e.g. articles, abstracts, photos, annotated bibliographic citations) and documentation related to relevant current events into topics or issues raised by students' service experiences and related to course content. Web-based formats are particularly effective media for service-learning scrapbook presentation.

**Community Presentation/Product:** Students demonstrate their mastery of course content by teaching or presenting it to community members at their service site in an appropriate format. Alternatively, they may use their knowledge/expertise/research to prepare a resource that can be used by their agency in its ongoing work in the community.

**Capstone Project:** Capstone projects (which are often associated with specifically-designated capstone courses) generally designed for majors and minors in a given discipline and are offered almost exclusively to students in their final year. Students must draw upon the knowledge they have obtained throughout their course work and combine it with relevant service work in the community. The goal of capstone courses is usually either exploring a new topic or synthesizing students' understanding of their discipline. Such projects offer an excellent way to help students transition from the world of theory to the world of practice by helping them make professional contacts and gather personal experience.

---

<sup>i</sup> Adapted from Bobbi Timberlake, "Service Learning Faculty Handbook," Marquette University, August 2007, with additional material from the Service-Learning Center at Virginia Tech and Indiana Campus Compact.