Reflection

Reflection is the use of creative and critical thinking skills to help prepare for, succeed in, and learn from service experience, and to examine the larger picture and context in which service occurs. (source: Jim and Pam Toole, Compass Institute)

Reflection can be meaningful, harmful, or meaningless. Its impact depends on how it is presented, when it is done, and what is done with the insights and thoughts.

When carefully and thoughtfully structured, reflection can be a powerful tool that turns service experiences into learning experiences.

Reflection allows for:

- on-going education and learning experiences
- discussion, exploration, and resolution of difficult or challenging circumstances
- understanding the larger scope of issues and impact of service
- self-examination and thoughtfulness
- thinking about the future
- problem-solving with peers
- team and community building
- reality checks on inaccurate assumptions and biases
Modes of Reflection

There are many different activities through which students can reflect on their service and classroom experiences. When choosing an activity, think about what you want students to learn. If you want students to individually consider their responses and growth due to particular events, choose journal entries. If you want students to share their impressions about their individual experiences and discuss different approaches or solve problems, choose a group discussion.

Allowing for different ways of processing experiences helps ensure that all students can engage in thoughtful consideration of their activities and roles. While some may be more comfortable writing, others may have the most significant things to say through music, a collage, or presentation.

Reflection can occur through:

♦ WRITING
  — journals
  — writing in response to readings
  — newspaper articles
  — research papers

♦ SPEAKING
  — public presentations
  — oral report to class
  — group discussion

♦ ACTIVITIES
  — role playing
  — planning new or follow-up project
  — teaching others what they learned or did

♦ MULTI-MEDIA
  — slide shows
  — Web page or document
  — video

Service learning activities often place students in challenging and complex situations.

Reflection is their opportunity to process and come to an understanding about their thoughts and experiences.
Levels of reflection

Mark Cooper at Florida International University identifies three levels of reflection for journal writing. The levels act as guides for all modes of reflection, helping students, teachers, and community partners shape their thoughts and make sense of the service experience. Consider the questions under each level as guides for reflection responses in any form—writing, speaking and discussion, multi-media, and activities.

The Mirror: The Self Becomes Clearer
Reflection as a mirror helps you understand yourself, your values. It helps you begin to see how the service experience has helped you learn more about these aspects of yourself.

- What have I learned about myself from this service experience?
- How has the experience affected my understanding of the group I’m working with? of the community? of my own role in the community?
- How has this experience challenged my assumptions or biases?
- How has it challenged me physically?
- How will these experiences change the way I act or think in the future?

The Microscope: A Small Experience Becomes Larger
Reflection as a microscope helps you understand the impact of individual activities on the people or community served, on yourself, and on the project as a whole. It allows you to reflect on events that occurred, your role in them, and their impact.

- What happened today?
- What would I change about the situation if I were in charge, and why?
- What have I learned about the people I work with?
- Were there moments of failure, success, indecision, humor, happiness, sadness?
- Do I feel my actions had an impact? On whom?
- Does my experience complement or contrast to what I’m learning class?
Has the learning I’ve gained from this experience taught me more, less, or the same as in class? In what ways?

**The Binoculars: The Distant Becomes Closer**

Reflections as binoculars helps you identify larger issues that surround the service project in which you’re engaged. It can expand your vision and understanding of causes, effects, and impacts, and help you envision future developments.

- Are there underlying or over-arching issues that influence the problem or need our service project is addressing?
- What are they? How did I identify them?
- What could be done to change the situation?
- How will this realization change my future behaviors and decisions?
- How have others in the community addressed and impacted these issues at larger levels (politically or socially)?
- What does the future hold? What can be done?
Reflection Before, During, and After Service

Reflection doesn’t have to happen only at the end of a service project. In fact, it shouldn’t. For students to optimize their learning and to get the most out of the service project, reflection should occur before, during and after service. We can use Cooper’s three levels to help write or plan reflection guidelines or prompts.

**Before Service**

Pre-assessment surveys or inventories help prepare students for the coming project. After the project has been completed, they provide an important reference point for the student and teacher that shows how the student has developed, progressed, and changed.

Consider these questions to guide reflections in any form:

♦ What role do you want to have? (self)
♦ What preconceived notions do you have about the project and the people involved? (self)
♦ What do you need to do in order to prepare and implement the project? (self, microscope)
♦ What in the community needs to be done? (microscope)
♦ What do you anticipate will happen? (microscope)
♦ Why does this problem exist? (binoculars)

**During Service**

Practicums or organized group discussions are excellent ways to structure student reflection during a service-learning project. Together they can discuss what is happening, what problems have arisen, and how they want to solve those problems as a group. Facilitate these discussions so that students can respond to each other and productively deviate from the original question. Asking probing questions can help students reach beyond their initial thoughts and immediate impressions to get at deeper issues.

Consider these questions to guide reflections in any form:

♦ What role are you taking? (self)
♦ Is this role what you anticipated? (self)
♦ Is the project unfolding the way you thought it would? (self, microscope)
What’s happening? (microscope)

What issues have arisen, and what are some ways of addressing them? (microscope)

Does the project need to be changed? Why? (microscope)

How is the project connecting with what’s happening in the classroom? (microscope, binoculars)

Is your view of the problem changing? How? (binoculars)

**After Service**

With the entire project to think back on, students can produce significant reflective projects such as oral presentations, reports, and multi-media impressions of their service experience.

Have students fill out a post-service assessment that has them rate their experience, knowledge of a topic, interest in the community, etc. Comparing this against the pre-service assessment will help them see how they have developed.

Consider some of these questions to guide student reflections in any form:

- What did you learn? (self, microscope)
- What did you learn about yourself? Your peers? The community? (self, microscope)
- Where can you apply this knowledge in other parts of your life? (self)
- Did things turn out the way you anticipated? (self, microscope)
- What was different and why? (self, microscope)
- Would you do anything differently? (self, microscope)
- What happened during the project? (microscope)
- What difference have you really made? (microscope)
- What are your views on the subject/issue now? How have they changed? (binoculars)
Assessing Reflective Responses

Assessing reflective responses can be challenging, even difficult, but being able to do so separates effective and quality reflection from simple responses. Student reflections are manifestations of their learning and development—what students say, write, and otherwise show in their reflections demonstrates what they have learned and how effectively they have applied it to classroom work and real-life.

The following rubric was developed by Marilyn Olson at the Lane County Educational Service District in Oregon. It lists possible traits of student reflections on service projects by instructional areas (content, reasoning, etc.). High quality reflections will show many of these traits.

Content (factual/inferential)
- general observations
- specific examples
- criteria comparisons
- positive/negative observations
- problem-solving

Reasoning (analytic/evaluative)
- meaning/usefulness
- adjustments for future
- comparisons to prior work
- reasons for decisions, choices
- generalized meaning

Generative (creative/productive)
- new methods
- new topics
- new treatments
- new skills
- new meaning

Expression (language control)
- vocabulary
- fluency
- mechanics