Reflection in Community Based Learning

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July 12, 2018

Reflection is an integral element of successful community-based learning (CBL). Indeed, it is through academically rigorous and personally relevant reflection that students hone their critical thinking skills, make connections between course readings and community experiences, and develop a stronger understanding of their personal goals and values. In the context of CBL, reflection has been described as "the use of creative and critical thinking skills to help prepare for, succeed in, and learn from the service experience, and to examine the larger picture and context in which service occurs".[1] Depending on the context and course structure, reflection can take many forms, including group discussions, individual journal entries, critical essays, peer presentations, or artistic creations. Regardless of the specific form reflection takes, it is most effective when it is ongoing throughout the semester and when it helps students directly link their academic and community work. Ultimately, reflection asks students to move beyond summarizing an experience in order to make meaning out of their experience and, ideally, consider how they will use the experience going forward.

Despite the importance of reflection to student learning, it is frequently treated as an afterthought or dismissed as lacking in rigor. To some extent, this portrayal of reflection is understandable, if unfortunate. Certainly, it is true that without appropriate structure, students often end up rambling or, in the case of CBL, venting subjective feelings. Well-designed reflection assignments are, however, able guide students so that they move beyond superficial or entirely subjective digressions into something deeper and more meaningful. This resource guide is designed to help faculty members with an interest in developing effective reflection assignments. The first section of the guide briefly outlines why reflection is important and what it can help students accomplish. The second section offers examples of different reflection techniques, as well as suggestions for contexts in which the models might be particularly valuable. The third section offers some brief notes on effective assessment practices. The fourth and final section offers suggestions for further readings and a list of resources.

Why reflection?

The educational philosopher John Dewey (1938) argued that we don't learn from experience, but rather from reflecting on experience.[2] This might seem obvious, or we may take it for granted that this is true, but our busy schedules may simultaneously conspire against taking a break from experience. Just as this is true in our own lives, it is certainly the case for students as well. Students are often asked to move rapidly from

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[1] Toole J. and Toole, P. (1995). Reflection as a tool for turning service experiences into learning experiences. *Compass Institute and the University of Minnesota, St. Paul*. www.compassinstitute.org.
[2] Dewey, J. (1938). Experience and Education. New York: Touchstone.

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experience to experience, to supply answers, and demonstrate mastery in order to prove that they've learned some piece of information or skill. Yet they may never be asked to consider how they've personally changed as the result of experience, be challenged to synthesize material in complex ways, or make connections across experiences with an eye toward helping them use their past experiences to help inform their future choices. By creating a type of pause in the cycle of experience, well-structured reflection helps students do all of these. Moreover, by supporting the elements that are essential for motivation, including autonomy, a sense of competence, and a capacity to relate to others, reflection is also critical for helping students stay motivated in the classroom.

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<u>Key purposes of reflection</u>

- Provide the structure for students to make connections:
    - Across experiences, contexts, and classes;
    - Between readings/theories and experiences;
    - With one another.
- Help students identify, explore, and refine their own social position, values, and ethical commitments.
- Guide students through processing and making meaning of difficult experiences and concepts.
- Develop the ability of students to recognize complexity and challenge simplistic conclusions.
- Provide students with an opportunity to recognize their own learning, growth, and development – and encourage them to set intentions for their future learning.

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It is essential to recognize that the perspective undergirding reflective assignments is that learning is a continuous as opposed to an episodic practice[3]. Students should be continually seeking out new information, changing their perspective, rewriting their stories, and revising their answers. Reflective assignments help show them that you value this interactive, continuous collaborative approach to learning – that it's not simply a matter or memorizing material and then repeating it back.

Models for Reflection

This section offers examples of different reflection techniques, as well as suggestions for when they might be particularly valuable or appropriate.

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[3] For a useful model of learning as a continuous process, see Kolb's widely cited 1984 book <u>Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development</u>.

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│              Key reminders about structuring reflection        │
│                                                                 │
│   •  Be purposeful about how and what reflection will help your │
│      students learn – and tell them!                            │
│   •  Align your learning goals with the form of reflection.     │
│   •  Stress the importance of depth of thinking. Frame reflection as │
│      purposeful, challenging work.                              │
│   •  Make reflection continuous/ongoing.                        │
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DEAL Model

This model, developed by Ash, S. and Clayton, P. (2009), is highly adaptable and can be done either orally or in writing.[4] Regardless of the form, the model is based on three separate, sequential steps:

1) **D**escribe the experience "objectively" and in a detailed way
2) **E**xamine the experiences in light of a specific learning goal or objective
3) **A**rticulate **L**earning, including goals for future action that can be taken forward into the next experience

Although the model might, at first glance, appear quite simple, it can actually be surprisingly challenging for students. Because students often want to jump straight into interpretation, they may initially struggle to slow down and take the time to identify the most relevant elements of an experience. The second stage of the reflection process can also be challenging for students, as it is fundamentally about making meaning of the CBL activity or experience. In this stage, the instructor needs to be certain to provide students with a specific learning goal or objective against which they can examine their experience. For example, if your learning goal is for students to explore the dynamics of social change, a sample prompt might be, "In taking the action I did, was my focus on symptoms of problems or causes of problems?" The third stage, which requires students to develop their own learning instead of reproducing what their instructors have taught them, is also counter-normative for students. In this stage, the instructor may also want to provide students with a specific prompt, such as, "How did the assumptions or expectations I brought to this situation affect what I thought, felt, decided? To what extent did they prove true? If they did not prove true, why was there a discrepancy?"

Journals

In the context of reflection, the term "journal" may be the first image that comes to mind, for better or for worse. While journals may conjure images of doodles, run-on sentences, and opinions, they are highly valuable for their ability to be structured in ways that encourage students to be continually reflective throughout the CBL experience. Journals can be particularly useful in CBL projects that are ongoing and highly independent. A few ways of framing journals are:

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[4] Ash, S. and Clayton, P. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. Journal of applied learning in higher education, Vol 1. (Fall 2009), pp. 25-48.

1. Three part journal:

   > In this model, each page of the weekly journal entry is divided into thirds: description, analysis, and application. In the middle section, students analyze how course content relates to the community experience. In the application section, students comment on how the experience and course content can be applied to their personal or professional life.

2. Critical incident journal:

   > In this model, students describe a significant event that they experienced in their CBL site and reflect on the following questions: Why was this event significant to you? What did you learn from this experience? How will this incident influence your future behavior? What new actions or steps will you take next time? This model requires students to consider their thoughts and reactions, then articulate the action they plan to take in the future.

Photo reflection

As the name suggests, this technique uses photos rather than written questions to prompt student reflection. This can be a particularly effective tool in study abroad contexts, where students may be taking a lot of photos and may find that photos more readily and fully conjure the richness of their study abroad experience. As with the aforementioned reflection techniques, photo reflection should be carefully structured so that students are not simply responding to a photo in a stream-of-consciousness way. Some ideas for specific questions related to CBL are:

- Which photo best captures a social or cultural issue that you are now more aware of as a result of this international CBL experience?
- Why did you come back to this particular photo that you took during this experience? What was it about this photo that made it more important than the rest?
- What does this photo bring up for you? Write about why it resonates.

Learning process reflection

Regardless of how well structured a reflection assignment is, students may still fall back on summarizing their experience rather than making meaning of it. By requiring students to explicitly consider the learning process, a learning process (or meta-cognitive) reflection can be an effective way of getting students to think about the personal growth and transformation that CBL is ultimately meant to produce in students. For students who are not accustomed to acknowledging that the way they began an experience may not have been right, this can be a challenging technique. Questions to consider when creating a learning process reflection are:

- What did you learn?
- How did you learn it?
- Why did it stand out?
- How does this change what you thought before?
- How will you use your observations going forward?

Complexity Map

Fundamental to the philosophy behind CBL is the idea that because the world is complex, students should deliver not just "right" answers, but instead demonstrate an understanding of this complexity and the ability to reason. Moreover, difficult issues and topics involve not just complexity, but contradictions. In this framework, cognitive dissonance is not a bad thing for students to experience but rather exactly where student learning takes place. This exercise is really good at helping students draw out – and work through – contradictions.

This technique also yields some practical benefits for students engaged in social change work, in particular. Because they can get overwhelmed by the thought of a huge, complex social problem like pollution, students can have a hard time identifying a specific area of an issue that they want to focus on. This map can help them identify component parts, see where they fit in, and prevent them from getting overwhelmed. Additionally, complexity makes can help students identify which people they may need to connect with and identify commonalities across issues.

The three stages of completing a complexity map are:

- Have each student select a topic that is salient for her (e.g., environmental injustice, school truancy, abuse of opioids).
- Using words and/or images, have the student draw a concept map. What are the factors that play a role in this issue? (Ask students to draw up readings and course discussions to complete this map.)
- Have the students share their maps with their classmates. Are there any areas of overlap or any commonalities across their maps? How might they identify ways to collaborate and work together?

Assessing reflection

Among the most challenging aspects of effective reflection is developing and implementing appropriate assessment strategies. Just as a student's performance on a CBL project should be assessed based on what the student produces rather than mere participation or self-reported satisfaction (e.g., a paper rather the completion of a certain number of hours), so too should reflection be assessed based on the quality of the student work rather than the act of completing a reflection exercise. To that end, ensure that assessment is grounded in the extent to which a student demonstrates understanding and progress toward learning goals, such as an enhanced ability to make critical connections

between course content and community experience, as well as adherence to standard notions of quality in writing, such as clarity and grammar. Key elements to look for in reflections include: analysis (moving beyond description in order to make meaning); thoughtful and meaningful connections between concepts, readings, and/or experiences; critical thinking; and clarity. Depending on the nature of the reflection, it may also be appropriate – or even essential – to assess a student's self-disclosure or self-criticism, in which a student openly examines their own beliefs, growth, and learning.

<u>Key reminders about assessing reflection</u>

- Give frequent, meaningful feedback.
- Assess content and quality – not completion.
- Offer feedback that aligns with critical thinking standards, including clarity, accuracy, and significance

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Because students may not have had significant experience with completing reflection assignments, and because reflection should ideally help faculty members better understand a student's experience in a CBL placement or project, assessment – just like reflection – should be ongoing and frequent. Indeed, it is only through frequent practice and feedback that students can develop and hone critical reflection skills.[5] While reading 30 journal entries every day would, of course, quickly become overwhelming, it is nonetheless important to find ways to give students frequent feedback. Peer-led reflection sessions, in-class oral reflection, and grading rubrics that are tightly connected to the reflection model or technique can help faculty members manage this critical stage of the process.

Additional resources

There is a wealth of practical information and guidance about reflection in CBL available online. Some valuable resources are below:

- Available on the University of Vermont website, the guide <u>Facilitating Reflection: A Manual for Leaders and Education</u> is a rich resource containing tips for facilitating meaningful reflection, common challenges, and examples of activities. Although developed in 1995, the manual remains highly relevant and valuable. http://www.uvm.edu/%7Edewey/reflection_manual/index.html

- While some of the resources available on the Portland state University CBL webpage are specific to the Portland area, the reflection ideas and examples could be useful across contexts: https://liftingbridges.weebly.com/reflection-tools.html

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[5] For a helpful discussion of the importance of practice, see the 2010 article "Assessing learning in service-learning courses through critical reflection" by Molee, L., Henry, M., Sessa, V., and McKinney-Prupis, E.

- The Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning is a national, peer-reviewed journal that publishes contemporary, high-quality scholarship on CBL, including practical articles on topics such as structuring and evaluating reflection: https://ginsberg.umich.edu/mijournal

Further reading

In addition to the pragmatic resources outlined above, there is also a strong body of scholarship on reflection in CBL contexts. A few particularly useful articles are as follows.

Anson, C. (1997). On reflection: The role of logs and journals in service-learning courses. In: Adler-Kassner, L, Crooks, R., and Watters, A. (Eds). Writing the community: Concepts and models for service-learning in composition. Washington, DC: American Association of Higher Education/NCTE.

Bringle, R. and Hatcher, J. (1999). Reflection in service-learning: Making meaning of experience. Educational HORIZONS, pp. 179-185.

Clayton, P. and Ash, S. (2004). Shifts in perspective: Capitalizing on the counter-normative nature of service-learning. Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning. Spring 2004, pp. 59-70.

Eyler, J., Giles, D. E., & Schmiede, A. (1996). A practitioner's guide to reflection in service-learning: Student voices and reflections. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt.

Hatcher, J. A., Bringle, R. G., & Muthiah, R. (2004). Designing effective reflection: What matters to service-learning? Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 11(1), 38-46.

Mitchell, T. et al. (2015). Reflective practice that persists: Connections between reflection in service-learning programs and in current life. Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning. Spring 2015, pp. 49-63.

Pagano, M. and Roselle, L. (2009). Beyond reflection through an academic lens: Refraction and international experiential education. Frontiers: The interdisciplinary journal of study abroad. Pp. 217-229.