



Reflection in K-12 Service-Learning

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Introduction

In today's world, it is easy for youth to look for instant solutions to complex problems. Reflection in service-learning provides students and teachers with a way to look back at their experiences, evaluate them, and apply what is learned to future experiences. Reflection is an important means by which students integrate prior knowledge and experiences with new experiences to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills.



Theoretical Basis for Reflection in Service-Learning

The theoretical basis for reflection as a practice in education is grounded in the work of John Dewey. Bringle and Hatcher (1999) noted that at the core of Dewey's educational philosophy were three principals:

- Education must lead to personal growth;
- Education must contribute to humane conditions; and
- Education must engage citizens in associate with one another.

Worthwhile educational experiences “do something to prepare a person for later experiences of deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, and reconstruction of experience” (Dewey, 1938, p. 47). The connection between thought, “worthwhile” educational experiences, action, and further learning is the cornerstone of the service-learning reflective process. Dewey saw reflective thinking as a way to discover specific connections between actions and consequences. He believed that reflective thinking would help students learn from experience and improve their problem solving skills.

Stages of the Reflective Process

The components, or stages, of the reflective process in service-learning mirror the higher-order thinking skills process. Reflection occurs in at least three stages in the service-learning process: pre-service, during service, and post-service.

Perry and Albright (1999) summarize the five steps involved in the act of reflection:

1. Remembering and thinking about what was experienced.
2. Relating to current and prior experiences.
3. Representing the experience by actively participating in service-learning.
4. Reaching further into the experience by extending thinking and thinking at higher cognitive levels.
5. Revisiting the experience by looking at the value of the experience and exploring what else can be learned from it.

Outcomes of Reflection in Service-Learning

Service-learning combined with opportunities for reflection offers many benefits to students. Reflection outcomes for students generally fall into three categories:

- **Academic learning outcomes.** Reflection helps students gain a deeper understanding of what they learn, applying what they learn to real life situations, and developing increased problem solving skills (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 173). Students also improve basic skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking, and develop higher level thinking through reflection (Conrad & Hedin, 1987, p. 40).
- **Personal development outcomes.** Opportunities to reflect on service help young people feel more confident in themselves and their accomplishments, connect to others, and link the personal and the academic. Students develop an increased sense of personal power and are better able to clarify and accomplish their goals.
- **Civic engagement outcomes.** Studies by Eyler and Giles (1999) demonstrated that reflection is a predictor of openness to new ideas, ability to see issues in a new way, “increased commitment to use of public policy to achieve social justice, and a more systemic locus of problem causes and solutions” (p. 173). Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) discovered that students engaged in critical reflection are more likely to apply what they learn to understanding and solving social problems.

Best Practices for Reflection

Reflection activities work best when they are designed well, planned in advanced, and implemented thoughtfully. Reflection is a continuous process and activities can occur at any time during the process. Effective reflection incorporates the following best practices:

1. Reflection should occur before the service-learning experience, during the experience, and after the experience.
 2. Reflection activities should clearly link the service-learning experience to academic standards and curriculum objectives.
 3. Frequent opportunities for discussion of service should be provided so students can interact with their peers, mentors, and those they serve.
 4. Reflection activities should challenge students to test assumptions about their values and to explore, clarify, and alter their values.
 5. Students should be included in the planning of reflection activities so that they have ownership of the process.
 6. Reflection activities should incorporate various learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) and experiences to encourage students to think in different ways.
 7. Teachers should provide continual feedback to students so they can improve their critical thinking and analytical skills during the reflective process.
- (Sources: Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Conrad & Hedin, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Toole & Toole, 1995).

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at

www.servicelarning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/reflection/expanded.php

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