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Critical Reflection

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CRITICAL REFLECTION

CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL SERVICE
HIGHER EDUCATION PROJECT DIRECTOR'S MEETING
September 29, 1994

Rick Battistoni and Beverly Roberts

Introduction

In this workshop, we wanted to convey the importance of tying critical reflection activities to the learning objectives of the service experience and/or course. We started by asking participants to define critical reflection and then to list some common learning objectives associated with service-learning courses and co-curricular service. Finally, participants described many of the activities they use with their participants and students. The result is a thorough list of activities that service-learning practitioners find effective in achieving their course objectives.

What is Critical Reflection?

At the beginning of the workshop, we recognized that there are as many definitions for reflection as there are for service learning. We also understood that some in the field distinguish between "plain, brown wrapper reflection" and "critical reflection." This distinction is apparent in the participants' answers to the question: What is critical reflection? Here were some of the more insightful contributions to the discussion of that question.

- cognitive and effective learning
- analyzing and synthesizing life experiences and values
- a guided process that leads to analysis and interpretation
- the integration of theory and context
- putting experience in a larger context; understanding themes or trends in policy, literature, etc.
- an opportunity to develop concrete skills and knowledge
- an opportunity to explore and question policies, laws, trends, theories, etc.
- transform a single activity into further civic involvement and/or broader issue awareness
- an opportunity to develop own definitions of themes or objectives
- reexamining actual service activities with partners
- connecting service experience with specific objectives
- a time for challenging attitudes and/or beliefs (although not necessarily to change them)
- a tool for empowerment (e.g., build self-esteem, produce better teachers)
- a time to look at what you're doing, where you've been, where you're going
- a time for students/participants to take ownership of their experiences
- a time to encourage observation and further inquiry

Learning Objectives

Before you can talk about successful strategies and techniques for critical reflection, you have to think critically about what the learning objectives you have for service participants, in any program, curricular or co-curricular. Reflection cannot be approached in a vacuum, and the techniques on uses must be related to the learning objective one has. For example, if a learning objective for a service-learning course or program is to build community, then a structured writing assignment like a journal, undertaken by each participant as an individual with no dialogue or sharing, may not be the best technique to use to accomplish the objective.

Participants were asked to identify some common learning objectives of service-learning courses and service programs. Individual service-learning programs will also have more specific objectives depending on the service activity or the course for which critical reflection activities should be designed. Workshop participants identified the following objectives:

- present challenges to participants beliefs
- examine why and how to bring about social-change
- relate actions to "bigger picture"
- understand socioeconomic structure that puts students in position of "server"
- closely examine the difference between generosity v. justice
- to examine why there is a need for this particular service?
- team building
- community (re)building
- program improvement
- identify cultural assumptions, learn about different cultures, communities
- question the traditional textbook
- Build specific skills (e.g., communication skills, problem solving skills, oral presentations skills)
- envision larger possibilities
- self-efficacy
- learn how to move from individual interests to community interests (or, learn how the two relate to one another)
- learn social responsibility and civic responsibility
- build an ethic of service
- gain knowledge of community resources and institutions and how to work effectively with them
- insight into specific community issues (e.g., privacy of HIV test results)
- work effectively with a diverse team
- break down stereotypes and barriers between people

Examples of More Specific Learning Objectives
- learn the law and how to teach law to lay people
- convey the benefits of service-learning to future k-12 educators
- Specific career skills (e.g., health-care delivery, teacher education)

Critical Reflection Techniques/Activities

The following critical reflection techniques/activities were offered by many experienced service-learning practitioners. During the workshop, even as these were being listed other participants spoke of drawbacks associated with certain activities. Before using any of the following, it is important to think of how students or community partners will respond to the activity.

General, classroom/discussion

- involve community partners and/or other community members to reflect with students (drawbacks: need for criticism of service provider/agency or service partner's time constraints, etc.)
- discuss topics and broader issues, put service experience in context of literary or historical themes
- use readings as preparation for service activity
- students develop their own objectives and activities
- research an issue or policy and share with the community, possibly implement
- students provide their own definitions for terms or issues associated with course or service and make short presentations
- holding class on site (with or without community agency representatives present)
- *Other things to keep in mind:*
  *present many options that address different learning styles
  *critical reflection can take place in as many areas within the program as possible
  *the setting or environment should be appropriate
  *do not allow themes to become too value laden
  *talk with students/participants about their typical expectations for an academic course as compared with the service-learning course

Writing/reading

- journals (structured with guidelines and questions)
  -document pre and post-experience attitudes
  -use as an program evaluation tool
- written critical incidence/students take notes on a daily basis
- free-write
- dialogue journals (other students, instructor, or community member respond to entries)
- anonymous notecards with answers to questions are distributed in class
- policy papers
- newsletters
- share writing, journals, or research papers in the form of class presentations or small group work
- provide relevant readings that present themes or provide context
- use other reading tools (e.g. a critical letter from a community partner)

Audio visual (art, portfolios)
- class presentations (group or individual)
- team and individual portfolios
- videos/portfolios
   -include structured reflective assignments
   -students add own projects
   -present portfolio to class
   -relate activities to other life interests
   -make activities relevant to gaining career skills
- Role playing
- Art
   -Drawing positive/negative experiences then discuss
   -photography
   -documentary
   -political cartoons
   -music
- Theater (students attend or produce their own shows)
- Mapping
   -power mapping (listing "players" in community)
   -geographic and demographic map of community
- Show films with discussion

Techniques to use with co-curricular service activities
- team leaders/other students develop and lead critical reflection activities
- host issue-focus groups (with pizza party or other incentives)
- show films with discussion
- role playing
- hold reflection session in a classroom to provide "learning" environment
- newsletters
- involve community partners and/or other community members in reflection activities
- hold sessions on site (with or without community agency representatives present)
- journal writing (dialogue journals)

Resources

Books	Organizations

Lasting Lessons
Clifford Knapp
(ERIC Learning House)

Campus Compact
Box 1975
Brown University
Providence, RI 02912
(401) 863-1119
Rethinking Tradition and *Redesigning Curricula:*
Models of Service Learning
(also see complete publication list)

Education for Democracy
Benjamin Barber and Richard Battistoni
(Kendall-Hunt, 1993)

National Youth Leadership Council
1910 W. County Road B
St. Paul, MN 55013
(612) 631-3672
(mainly for K-12; also see complete
publication list)

Combining Service with Learning,
Volumes I, II, & III
National Society for Experiential Learning
(1990)

Maryland Student Service Alliance
200 W. Baltimore St.
Baltimore, MD 21201
(410) 333-2427
(mainly for K-12; also see complete
publication list)

Call to Service
Robert Coles
(Houghton Mifflin, 1993)

The Doris Marshall Institute
64 Charles Street E.
Toronto, Ontario, CANADA M4Y 1T1
415-964-8500

Roles for Higher Education
Corporation for National Service
(1994)

Writing for Change: A Community Reader
Ann Waters/ Marjorie Ford
(McGraw/Hill, 1994)
• comes with teacher's guide

Other•
Syllabi used in conjunction with service-
learning courses

Building Communities from the
Inside Out
John McKnight and John Kretzman
(Northwestern University Press)

Quickening of America
Francis Moore Lappé and Paul Dubois
(Josey Bass, 1994)

A How to Guide to Reflection
Harry Silcox
(Brighton Press, 1993)