Reflection

Reflection uses critical thinking skills to cement the learning that begins with brainstorming and planning a service-learning project. To ensure that students are making cognitive gains, reflection must be incorporated into the entire service-learning experience.

**What?** Reflection is planned, has objectives, and involves all the thinking skills.

**When?** Reflection is ongoing. The brain needs several minutes of reflection time to process all new experiences.

**Where?** Wherever learning is taking place: in the classroom, on a bus, or at the project site.

**Who?** Reflection is for everyone involved with the service-learning effort, not only the students.

**How?** Whether individually, in small group, or as a team, be sure to use many different forms of reflection to reach all the different learning styles. It is especially important to note that youths need to be taught how to reflect, and should be supported as they learn this new technique.

Following are some reflection ideas that address a range of learning styles:

**Write:**
- personal journals
- group journals
- stories
- poems
- essays
- letters to the editor
- informational brochures
- newspapers
- music lyrics

**Read:**
- articles about service
- books related to the project
- prose
- poetry
- journals
- data
- reports about the project

**Tell:**
- class discussions
- “think, pair, share”
- discussions
- debates; songs
- presentations
- skits
- cheers
- dances
- question-and-answer sessions

**Do:**
- collages
- posters
- photo essays
- videos
- service fair displays
- sculptures
- scrapbooks
- interviews
- skits, musical performances
- storyboards
- murals
- doodles
- mobiles
- cartoons
- puzzles

For more information on service-learning, visit NYLC at www.nylc.org, call (651) 631-3672, or write nylcinfo@nylc.org.

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Reflection: Learning from the Service Experience
Rich Willits Cairn
with appreciation to Kate McPherson and Gerry Ouellette

Why Reflection is Critical to Service-Learning:

“To say that experience is a good teacher does not imply that it’s easily or automatically so. If it were, we’d all be a lot wiser than we are. It is true that we can learn from experience. We may also learn nothing. Or we may, like Mark Twain’s cat who learned from sitting on a hot stove lid never to sit again, learn the wrong lesson. The key, as Aldous Huxley explained, is that ‘experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happened to him.’”

Dan Conrad and Diane Hedin, Youth Service: A Guidebook to Developing and Operating Effective Programs

Without adequate provision for structured reflection, much of the potential power of service-learning will be lost. Students may simply go through the motions, providing genuine service, yet coming through the experience somehow unaffected or worse, with ignorance and biases reinforced. Take the example of a student who volunteered as part of a poorly run project at a shelter for the homeless and came away with the impression that, “Just like I thought, they’re a bunch of drunk old men who oughta get a job.”

Many of the outcomes claimed for service-learning depend on a strong component of reflection. (See box.) This is because, while experience provides a rich source of information, thoughts and feelings for students to learn from, the interpretation given this data determines its ultimate impact. Providing a thoughtful context in which students can make enlightened sense of their experiences is the job of reflection. It is a task that prevents reinforcement of preconceived biases and opens the door to real learning.

In the following excerpt, Jane Kendall, former Director of the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, explains how reflection fits within experiential education:

The work of theorists and researchers on human learning — from Piaget to Perry, from Coleman to Kolb, from Dewey to Schon — suggests that we all learn through the combination of thought and action, reflection and practice, theory and application. These complementary elements of learning are part of the larger experiential learning cycle.

Outcomes of Reflection:

- **Effective problem-solving**: By examining experiences, students discover ways to handle real life problems more effectively, both in their service projects and in other areas of their lives.
- **Life-long learning skills**: By learning how to reflect on positive and difficult experiences, students develop a greater ability to learn from experience.
- **Increased sense of personal power**: Through examination, students can clarify their goals and develop a variety of ways to accomplish them.
- **Higher level thinking**: Reflecting on service encourages students to deal with the root causes of complex issues. Students learn to look for the big picture and to analyze and synthesize what they have learned.
- **Academic skills**: In addition to skills needed for the service project itself, reflection can act as a vehicle to link a broad range of academic skills to the students’ direct experience.
- **Celebration**: Thinking about the high points and the benefits enables youth to feel a sense of renewal and accomplishment.
- **Improved service**: As students examine the effects of their behavior, they discover ways to improve the quality and quantity of their service.
- **Improved program**: Both teachers and students receive important feedback on strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Kate McPherson

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Available from the NYLC Resource Center at www.nycl.org.
Excerpted from “Growing Hope: A Sourcebook on Integrating Youth Service into the School Curriculum” Copyright © 1995 National Youth Leadership Council. All Rights Reserved.
Growing Hope: A Sourcebook on Integrating Youth Service into the School Curriculum

The recent research of David Kolb is particularly helpful in explaining the role of reflection and service in learning. This concept of the experiential learning cycle, slightly adapted by the author, is as follows:

Concrete experience & observation

▲

Testing of concepts in new situations

▼

Considered reflection

▼

Synthesis and abstract conceptualization

- Jane Kendall, former Executive Director of the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, "From Youth Service to Service Learning", in Lewis, Facts and Faith: A Status Report on Youth Service.

Kolb's work suggests that complete learning is a four-part cycle:
• concrete experience and observation through service activities;
• considered reflection on that experience;
• synthesis and abstract conceptualization of thoughts, information and feelings gained through experience and reflection; and
• testing of these concepts in new situations, including future service experiences and observation — and so on.

Facilitating Reflection:

Note: In addition to the following discussion on means of facilitating reflection, please check the Index for a list of reflection exercises in Growing Hope.

The content of ongoing reflection cannot be taught. It can only be guided through wise and caring direction. Since what reflection does is to help the process of self-discovery and guide the synthesis of information and feelings unique to the experience of each individual, it is not necessary so much to "teach" in an experiential setting as to guide learning. Carefully selected placements or settings for the learning experience will ensure the quality of experience. The task then, is to enable the learner to make the most of what has taken place by drawing the essence of the experience back time and again for nurturing and growth.

Gerry Ouellette, The Marshall School, Duluth, Minnesota

Many educators beginning service-learning programs quickly decide that organizing the service projects themselves is relatively easy. The development of a structured program to bring that experience back into the classroom is the key to their programs; something most of them have little direct experience doing.

Fortunately, teachers are familiar with the tools of reflection, for they are the same tools used to facilitate learning of much classroom material: discussion, writing, multi-media presentations, a range of student-developed projects, and so on. A major purpose of school-based service-learning is, in fact, to connect real world experiences gained through service to the rest of the material covered in school. Any way that academic material can be brought to bear to help students make sense of a service experience is going to reinforce both the importance of that experience and the depth of learning of the material.
Whether reflection takes place in class discussions, through journaling or other written work, or through a variety of other media (See Options for Reflection in side box.), certain principles hold across the board:

**Elements of Quality Reflection:**

**Clear objectives:** "Reflection need not take so much a specific form as it needs to arrive at a specific goal. Good reflection will build upon the individual emphasis and help make the most of that which each learner needs to attain." - Gerry Ouellette (see the list of possible outcomes for reflection in the side box).

**Effective structure:** Quality reflection must be well planned and organized — not left to chance. Program leaders must be trained. Methods chosen must be appropriate to the situation and to the participants. While many of the best opportunities for reflection will arise in the midst of the action, preparation and flexibility by leaders are necessary to capitalize on these "learning moments".

**Engaging, ongoing process:** Reflection must be interactive and interesting, it ought to be a two-way street, and it ought to be integrated throughout the service experience — not just at the end. What students do and learn should shape future activities and learning. Students should be involved in planning service and reflection. Orientation and training also present excellent opportunities for reflection, as when students discuss issues relevant to their service with experts in the field or with members of a community being served.

**Curriculum connections:** In curriculum-based, and extra-curricular programs, reflection may be integrated throughout course work. The use of academic material to improve service and the application to academic material of lessons learned in field activities ought to be an interactive process. (For a list of projects related to various areas of the curriculum, see the list in the Sample Program Materials.)

**Varied methods:** A variety of methods are required to capture the possibilities of students' experiences and to match their many ways of learning.

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**Options for Reflection**

**Speaking:**
- one-on-one conferences with teacher/leader
- class/group discussion
- small group discussion
- oral reports to group
- discussions with community members or experts on an issue
- public speaking on project
- teach material to younger students
- testimony before policymaking bodies such as school boards

**Writing:**
- essay, expert paper, research paper or final paper
- journal or log – kept daily, weekly or after each service experience
- case study, history
- special project report
- narrative for a video, film or slide show guide for future volunteers/participants
- self-evaluation or evaluation of program
- newspaper, magazine and other published articles

**Multimedia:**
- photo, slide or video essay
- paintings, drawings, collages, etc.
- dance, music or theater presentations

**Activities:**
- analysis and problem solving
- training, information gathering needed to serve
- planning future projects
- allocating program budget
- recruiting peers to serve
- recognition and celebration programs
- simulation or role playing games
- surveys or field based research
- conference or workshop presentations
- training other students, program leader
Growing Hope: A Sourcebook on Integrating Youth Service into the School Curriculum

Many experiential educators organize their thinking on reflection with reference to the “three Ps”:

- **Preparation**: Learning activities conducted prior to a student’s volunteer work;
- **Processing**: Assisting students during their service placement to understand the setting, their feelings, and to solve problems that arise; and
- **Product**: Activities designed to achieve closure and pull together the strands of experience.

(For elaboration on the “three Ps”, see Conrad and Hedin, Youth Service: A Guidebook for Developing and Operating Effective Programs, Independent Sector, 1987.)

It is important also for educators to remember that much of the most valuable reflection will occur beyond their knowledge or reach: on the way to or from a volunteer site, at home, in the halls, at parties, etc. On-site supervisors often serve as mentors to students, encouraging meaningful reflection. It is important to acknowledge and encourage this informal learning, while at the same time sticking to principles by grading students who fail to complete assigned projects accordingly.

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**Group Discussion:**

**A Case in Point:**

One of the most common methods of reflection is group discussion, before or after service projects. Students may meet regularly to review experience, share problems and feelings and to learn skills and background information that will apply to the service setting. Many of the open-ended questions used for journaling are also useful in getting group discussions going.

Teachers need to practice their non-directive small group discussion techniques for this kind of meeting. For example, most adults tend to avoid or fill in the silences that accompany genuine reflection. As a result, students do not learn to voice their complex experiences. Instead, they give the superficial responses they think the teacher wants to hear.

Discussions on-site at an agency or elsewhere in the community will have a character markedly different from that of a classroom. This sort of discussion especially should have the tone of a staff training or staff meeting. “Both setting and format must convey that these sessions are serious, significant, and a continuation of the students’ important roles in the community.” (Conrad and Hedin, Youth Service: A Guidebook for Developing and Operating Effective Programs. See Bibliography.)
Reflection

Encourage children to reflect on their involvement in service-learning. Reflection fosters respect among peers and provides many opportunities for higher level thinking in young children.

Reflection is done throughout a service experience. Children are encouraged to share feelings about their involvement in each step of service. Children might share their ideas, concerns, and personal reactions at any time within their service.

Many people think writing and talking are the only way to reflect, but there are other creative ways to express thoughts such as painting and acting. Children learn best in different modalities, so vary your choice of reflection throughout the service-learning process.

Reflection at the end of a service experience allows children closure as they examine how they feel and perceive the service in which they participate. Reflection is possible at any age, if it is tailored to match the level of the students.

Reflection will be new to many young children. Keep in mind that even four-year-olds are able to reflect on an experience. Initially, reflection by children ages 4-8 may be brief and may seem superficial. With encouragement, children will become comfortable expanding on their ideas. Often having a young child explain a portion of their service to another person will provide insight into their reflections.

There is never a wrong thought when it comes to reflection. Children need their sense of dignity reinforced routinely. Statements to help a child to reflect more spontaneously may include: “Thank you for sharing. I like your ideas. I’m glad you told us about that.” Sometimes questions are needed to prompt young children to verbalize their reflections. “How did you like making that book? What did you like best about growing the flowers?”

Sharing reflections is another way of keeping families informed about classroom activities.

Available from the NYLC Resource Center at www.nylc.org.

Excerpted from “Teaching Young Children Through Service: A Practical Guide for Understanding and Practicing Service-Learning With Children Ages 4 Through 8”

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Effective and Practical Methods of Reflection

Discussions: When an adult leads the discussion about a project by asking prompting questions, children are able to express their thoughts and ideas. These discussions are an opportunity to introduce students to higher level thinking and to reinforce good listening skills. Another way to reflect is to have children share their experiences with a partner.

Photos: Take pictures throughout the service-learning project. Children may be able to help with this step. Put the photos up in a prominent place in the classroom. You will find your students proudly referring to the photos throughout the year. Display them for viewing at open houses or on parent-teacher conference day.

Photos also make great discussion-sparklers.

Once the service is completed, place the photos in an album on the classroom bookshelf where it will become a meaningful hands-on reflection item. Children can help write a letter or a story to accompany the photo album. It can then be rotated among families and other classrooms in the school.

Children might recite their sentences on tape and help make a "read-along" book to accompany the photos.

Illustrations: Young children might illustrate their favorite part of service-learning and share it with the class. These illustrations can be compiled into a class book to be shared by students and families.

Young children love to create murals depicting their service-learning experience. Display murals in common areas for others to enjoy.

Interviews: Teachers, volunteers, or students ages 10 and older, might interview children ages 4-8 to gather reflections on their service. These interviews could be written or spoken orally and possibly taped for other children to hear or to send to the recipient of the service.

Creative Dramatics: Children love to act out stories. Reflecting involvement in service-learning offers meaningful opportunities for creative dramatics. Puppet shows are another method of reflection for young students.

A practical guide for understanding and practicing service-learning with children ages 4-8.
Questions for Reflection

Reflection transforms service into service-learning, so it’s important that participants take time to process their experiences. The following questions serve as a guide through the layers of reflection, from observation to synthesis. Many of the questions are written in past tense, which is useful for reflecting after the project; participants can change the verbs to present and future tenses for reflection before and during the project.

What? (Observation)
- What are your observations from this project?
- What did you learn from this experience?
- What skills did you use?

So What? (Analysis)
- How did you feel about the service project?
- How was the project similar to what you expected? How was it different?
- Was this an educational experience? Was it similar to other educational activities? How was it different?
- What did you learn about the task you were doing?
- What did you learn about the people you were helping?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- What significant knowledge did this project teach you?

Now What? (New or Additional Applications)
- If, in the future, you decided to do a similar project, what preparation do you think the students and service recipients should have?
- How has your perspective changed since this experience? Have you formed any new opinions?
- What thoughts does this experience give you about the issues it addressed (e.g., homelessness, hunger, diversity)?
- What are you going to do now as a result of your experience? How are you going to apply your new understanding?

Closing (Synthesis)
- If you could file away one photograph in your mind from this service activity, what would it be?
- What will you remember most about this experience?
- What one word describes your thoughts about your involvement in this project?

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Reflection Questions

Journalistic Questions

- Who was involved in the project? What were their roles?
- What was the issue addressed? How did you decide to address this issue?
- When did the service-learning project take place?
- Where were the service-learning project sites?
- Why was this issue critical to the community?
- Why did you choose to address this issue?
- How did you address the issue?

Questions that Encourage Critical Thinking

- What did you see, hear, read, or notice on-site?
- How is what you observed similar or different from your pre-service assumptions?
- Do any of these assumptions seem to belong together? Why?
- Could some of these assumptions belong in more than one category?
- How do you explain what is going on?
- What did you see or hear that agrees with this explanation?
- Is there any evidence that refutes this explanation?

Questions that Encourage Symbolic Thinking

- What object would you use as a symbol of this experience?
- Why would you choose this symbol?
- How does what you are doing make you feel like a garden (or a book, a river, etc.)?
- How are parts of your experience like parts of the garden (book, river, etc.) and why?

Sources


Reflection Activities

- Journal-writing, creative writing, personal essay, or op ed article
- Article for newsletter
- Podcast or public service announcement
- Online discussion groups
- Summaries of group learnings
- Presentations during or alter the project, which may include video, computer slide shows, bulletin boards, panel discussions, websites, or persuasive speeches
- Directed reading on complementary topics
- Library research individually or in teams
- Research projects in which students analyze an issue and make recommendations for change
- Creative writing projects
- Discussion in pairs or small groups
- Murals, collages, banners, or musical displays
- Individual or small-group presentations of objects that symbolize the service-learning project
- Poster ad or PSA using a symbol to bring awareness to the issue
- Essay presenting the issue from several points of view
- Visual representations of the issue and the emotions it elicits: cartoons, collage, photos
- Interviews of community partners and beneficiaries of services
- Skit or dance that explains perceptions
- Dialogue journals, in which students are paired and discuss their experiences

Questions to Help Process Emotions

- What bothers you about the issue?
- What do you think about the people or things involved?
- Are your thoughts about the issue facts or opinions?
- Why do you have the opinion that you do?
- What other ways can you view the issue?
- What other facts and opinions might be important to consider?
- How would the issue change if viewed from another perspective?

Extension Questions

- What does this service-learning project mean to me?
- What does this service-learning project mean in terms of other people my age? Why should people my age be concerned with the issues that arise from this project?
- What does this service-learning project mean to my community? How do the ideas that arise from this service-learning project affect both my community and other communities?
- What does this service-learning project mean in terms of my country?
Progression of Questions for Reflection

The progression of questions for reflection is based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, a ranking of our different levels of thinking — from knowledge and comprehension (lower) to synthesis and evaluation (higher).

When reflecting before, during, and after a service-learning project, it’s useful for participants to ask themselves questions that make them think on more than one of these levels. This will deepen the participants’ understanding and involvement. Progressing through the questions in order, moving from lower-level to higher-level thinking, helps participants address the increasing complexity thoughtfully and completely.

Descriptions and Sample Questions
Below (listed from lowest to highest) are descriptions of how each level of thinking applies to service-learning, along with sample questions based on a project with a homeless shelter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressing opinions, and naming known facts.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What were your first impressions of the homeless shelter?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many homeless shelters exist in your community?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions Associated With This Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>telling, listing, finding</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecting a participant’s previous understanding with what he or she learns from the project. Interpreting facts and finding meaning in them.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>How was this shelter similar to or different from what you expected? Why does your community need the number of shelters it has?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions Associated With This Level</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>explaining, interpreting, distinguishing</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using understanding to act.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can you use your service experience at the shelter to address the issue of homelessness? How can you relate on a personal level to the people served at the shelter?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions Associated With This Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>solving, examining, classifying</td>
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</table>
Progression of Questions for Reflection (continued)

Analysis
Explaining why something happened. Recognizing patterns, actions, and reactions.

Sample Questions
What parts of the experience have been most challenging to you? Why is one shelter open 24 hours a day and the other one only at night?

Actions Associated
comparing, contrasting, investigating

Synthesis
Using understanding to create new ideas.

Sample Questions
If you were in charge of planning meals for the shelter, how would you balance the importance of serving high-quality healthy food with your limited budget? How would you raise funds to fix the shelter’s roof?

Actions Associated
inventing, predicting, imagining

Evaluation
Making recommendations, critiquing, and assessing.

Sample Questions
What changes would you recommend in how the shelter operates? What would you recommend to people who might volunteer there in the future?

Actions Associated
choosing, debating, verifying