

SECTION 1: REFLECTION DEFINED

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Reflection is a key component of service learning, and is that component which distinguishes service learning from volunteerism. Reflection provides faculty the means to assess the experiential learning that occurs when students participate in service activities outside the classroom. Reflection also allows students to synthesize the observed data gleaned from service activities and connect the new knowledge with the formal knowledge obtained from classroom activities and materials.

To reflect in service learning means to think critically about and analyze emotional responses to service activities in the context of course content and the learning objectives of a particular course or curriculum. Several activities encourage reflection to occur and will be discussed in this guide (see section 3).

Faculty and community partners play key roles in facilitating reflection by creating a safe environment for discussion, setting guidelines for the activities, connecting the reflection to learning, challenging students to think beyond their present reality, and providing feedback and assessment of students' newly gained knowledge. Through faculty guided reflection activities, students can expand their knowledge beyond concrete facts, reach a new understanding of social problems, interpret real-life situations, compare formal and informal knowledge, propose practical and meaningful solutions to societal problems, and take informed action.

Reflection activities vary and can be both formal and informal in nature. Designing effective reflection activities often depends on the nature of the course material and the stated learning objectives of the course. Effective reflection activities with well-defined criteria for evaluation may be included in the course syllabus. Effective reflection:

- links service to course objectives and fosters civic responsibility
- occurs throughout the course and not just at the end
- is structured, guided, purposeful, with well-defined criteria for evaluation
- challenges current realities, perhaps creating cognitive dissonance and/or conflict; see “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom” (Warren, <http://bokcenter.fas.harvard.edu/docs/hotmoments.html>) or “Facilitating Reflection” (Reed and Koliba, http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/reflection_manual/)
- goes beyond the descriptive nature of the experience and asks students to interpret and evaluate the relevance of their experience in relation to classroom knowledge with real-life service experience
- asks students to apply new information to real-life problems and situations

Bringle and Hatcher (1999) posit that reflection activities should (a) clearly link the service experience to the course content and learning objectives; (b) be structured in terms of description, expectations, and the criteria for assessing the activity; (c) occur regularly during the semester so that students can develop the capacity to engage in deeper and broader examination of issues; (d) provide feedback from the instructor so that students learn how to improve their critical analysis and reflective practice; and (e) include the opportunity for students to explore, clarify, and alter their personal values.