Chapter 8

Composing Cognition: The Role of Written Reflections in Service-Learning

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Abstract

‘“Composing Cognition: The Role of Written Reflections in Service-Learning”’ offers insight derived from the authors' work as faculty who have developed structured written reflection assignments and activities, and university service-learning directors who have helped other faculty do so. In the first section, Marshall Welch explores the concept of reflection, examining its history and meaning for students and instructors; in the second section, Jim Dubinsky discusses the shift from “thinking to reflective thought,” focusing on the use of ePortfolios as a means to both gather data and assess its relevance and long-term value; in the third section, Adrian Wurr applies these concepts to reading and writing about printed and living texts to enhance students’ understanding of both while reflecting more critically on their own values and experiences. The strategies discussed are flexible enough to be used across disciplines and in different educational contexts. The chapter will be relevant to new and experienced service-learning scholars alike, to anyone struggling at the hyphen — at that space between doing and learning, between thinking and knowing.

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In 1967, Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey coined the term “service-learning” to describe a project in East Tennessee with Oak Ridge Associated Universities that linked students and faculty with external organizations (Seitsinger, 2005). As the terms and practices associated with it spread over the next two decades, practitioners and scholars struggled to define it (Kendall, 1990). However, the past 20 years have brought some consensus among scholars and practitioners leading to a recent definition of service-learning as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2011).

Equally important, in the past two decades, service-learning has gone international, leading to another recent definition as a pedagogy that links academic study with the practical experience of volunteer community service to make the study immediate, applicable, and relevant through knowledge, analysis, and reflection (International Partnerships for Service-Learning and Leadership, 2011). International service-learning provides unique learning opportunities that are not afforded during domestic experiences, which include use of a foreign language, and cross-cultural experiences that transcend typical tourism (Bringle & Tonkin, 2004).

From the array of definitions and understandings, Jacoby (2003) noted, “service-learning is based on the pedagogical principle that learning and development do not necessarily occur as a result of experience itself but as a result of reflection explicitly designed to foster learning and development” (p. 4). Whether in domestic or international contexts, the educational content and community service are bridged through intentional and properly designed reflection as students are empowered to make meaning of their experience (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). Intentional and careful reflection promotes meaningful learning as it “provides the transformative link between the action of serving and the ideas and understanding of learning (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996, p. 14). As such, reflection plays a critical role in service-learning. Yet, while there is much agreement as to the role reflection plays, there remains much variance as to what reflection actually is and how teachers can encourage or facilitate reflection that will serve as that “transformative link.” The word “reflection” itself conjures different meanings, purposes, and formats that range from philosophical ponderings to “warm fuzzy testimonials” to “dear diary entries,” to “technical reports.” Many students and instructors assume reflection is primarily an external process to document what has been assimilated or applied. And while that is certainly an important aspect of reflection in service-learning, it is also a personal and introspective process that sheds light on one’s personal, civic, political, and at times even spiritual development, which is often new or rare in academic contexts. Therefore, our goal in this chapter is to provide clarity and consensus on our understanding and process of reflection to avoid confusion and frustration.

To address some of the uncertainty about reflection and its use, each of the chapter’s authors offers some insight derived from our work as faculty who have developed structured written reflection assignments and activities and university service-learning directors who have helped other faculty do so. In the first section, Marshall Welch explores the concept of reflection, examining its history and meaning.