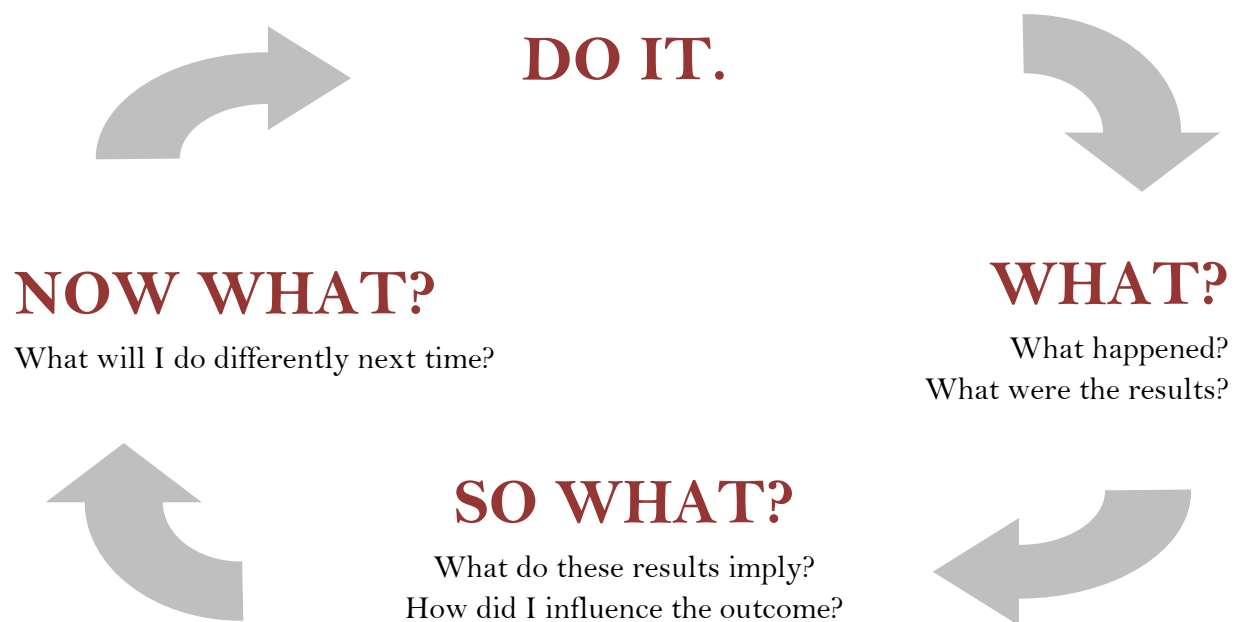


## Service Learning Reflection: Guidelines and Strategies

### The Service learning Cycle

At the root of service learning theory lies a basic process. The learner performs an action, reflects on the outcome of that action, making observations and developing explanations, and finally, the learner repeats the action phase, this time testing the observations or explanations developed during reflection. The result is a cyclical process. **Each cycle of reflection expands the learner's worldview based on observations from the previous action phase.**



Effective critical reflection is **continuous** in time frame, **connected** to the big picture information provided by academic pursuits, **challenging** to assumptions and complacency, and **contextualized** in terms of design and setting.

### Continuous Reflection

Service learning reflection should maintain a **coherent continuity over the course of each event or experience**. Continuous reflection includes reflection before the experience, during the experience, and after the experience. Many students agree that reflective preparation for an

experience is just as critical as getting the most out of the experience itself. Most reflection occurring during the experience should be geared toward problem-solving and proposing immediate action to enhance the effectiveness of the experience. Reflection after the experience should focus on evaluating the meaning of the service, integrating new understandings into previous knowledge, and planning future action.

### *Example Questions:*

- **Before:** What is your initial perception about the population you will be serving? What expectations are you bringing to this project?
- **During:** What problems do you see at your agency? Can you imagine solutions?
- **After:** What have you learned about yourself? Were your expectations realized?

## **Connected Reflection**

Connected reflection **links service to the intellectual and academic pursuits** of the students. Many faculty members assume students will automatically make the connection between service learning activities and course content, but research shows that this rarely happens without intentional guidance from professors. Service experiences illustrate theories and concepts, bringing statistics to life and making academics real and vivid. Through classroom work, in turn, students begin to develop conceptual frameworks that explain service experiences. Academic pursuits add a big picture context to the personal encounters of each isolated service experience and help students search for causes and solutions to social problems. The synthesis of action and thought results from connected reflection. The result of connected reflection is not only more effective service and more effective learning, but also a sense of empowerment and personal growth that inspires in many students a commitment to both their current and continued service involvement.

### *Example Questions:*

- How do the stories of battered women at the Metropolitan Center for Women and Children show evidence of Bancroft's cost-benefit theory?
- Based on your work mapping bike routes with the NolaCycle Bike Map Project, how can you expand Bachelard's associations between phenomenology and architecture in *The Poetics of Space* to include urban form and design?

## **Challenging Reflection**

Challenging reflection poses questions and proposes unfamiliar or even uncomfortable ideas for consideration by the learner. Students report that **challenging reflection pushes them to think in new ways**, to develop alternative explanations for experiences and observations, and to question their original perceptions of events and issues. The role of the teacher or facilitator in implementing challenging reflection, however, requires that he or she balance the process of

challenging the learner while simultaneously offering support. It is crucial that a “safe space” – in which learners feel confident that their contributions, backgrounds, and feelings will be respected and appreciated – be maintained between facilitator and learner, within any reflection group. In this way, the nurturing and affirming aspects of reflection, which engender personal growth, also create an environment in which a teacher, a peer, or a community partner can pose challenging reflection that produces new understanding, raises new questions, and moves toward new frameworks for problem solving.

### *Example Questions:*

- How did your experience at your partner agency reveal your prejudices toward the population you were serving?
- Can you think of examples when service learning might harm a community more than it helps? How can this be avoided?
- Legal scholar John Powell once said, “The slick thing about whiteness is that you can reap all the benefits of a racist society without personally being racist.” What’s the difference between assigning blame and acknowledging racial inequities or advantages?

## **Contextualized Reflection**

Contextualized reflection is appropriate for the setting and context of a particular service learning course or program; the environment and method of reflection corresponds in a meaningful way to the topics and experiences that form the material for reflection. **Immersion in an authentic community experience provides a rich context for learning, adding relevance to academic exploration.** Reflection, when it is purposefully implemented in an appropriate and meaningful context, adds to the richness of the synthesis between thinking and doing. The proximity of the reflection session to the community in which students are working lends a strong flavor to any reflection session. For example, a discussion of relations between a college campus and its surrounding community might gain depth and vitality if conducted off campus with community members participating as well.

## **Types of Service Learning Students**

Service learning practitioners have identified **four basic types of service learning students**, each of which responds differently to different reflection exercises. When planning service learning reflection, it is important to offer reflection activities geared to each type of student.

**Activists:**

- Oriented toward action.
- Acts first, considers the consequences later.
- Engages in activities fully and without bias.
- Focuses on the present.
- Tackles problems by brainstorming.
- Thrives on challenge, bored by implementation.

**Theorists:**

- Approaches problems using step-by-step approach.
- Pulls together disparate facts into cogent theories.
- Seeks perfection.
- Prizes rationality and logic.
- Dislikes uninformed decision-making.

**Reflectors:**

- Ponders experiences and observes.
- Seeks data and considers thoroughly.
- Postpones decision-making until data is available.
- Watches and listens before offering own opinions.
- Acts within a larger framework and after considering all angles.

**Pragmatists:**

- Tries and tests ideas, theories, and techniques.
- Acts quickly and confidently to implement ideas.
- Dislikes ruminating and open-ended discussions.
- Displays practical problem-solving and decision-making skills.
- Sees problems as opportunities.

**Planning Service Learning Reflection**

Each of the four following basic types of reflection exercises tends to meet the needs of certain learning styles better than others. An effective service learning reflection program incorporates a variety of the following reflection techniques.

**Doing-Oriented Reflections: Projects and Activities**

**Activists** tend to learn by involving themselves actively in a particular project or exercise. Many reflection projects use the strengths of all learning styles.

**Examples:**

- Simulations
- Conducting interviews
- Visual art journals
- Role play exercises
- Presentations involving dance, music, or theatrics
- Planning public relations events for partner agency

**Guidelines for effective reflection:**

1. Provide or have students establish goals for each activity.
2. Engage students in reflection throughout the various stages of the activity.
3. Encourage use of various learning strategies and styles.
4. Provide constructive feedback.
5. Debrief each activity.
6. Refer students to community experts for technical assistance on projects.

**Reading-Oriented Reflection: Literature and Written Materials**

**Theorists**, who tend to learn best through abstract conceptualization, tend to read literature and written materials as a learning strategy. These readings usually provide rational and logical models and theories which help students make sense of their experience.

**Examples:**

- Case studies
- Books about social issues
- Government documents
- Professional journals
- Classic literature

**Guidelines for effective reflection:**

1. Use a variety of sources.
2. If possible, have students create their own reading lists.
3. Debrief readings orally or in writing.
4. Draw clear links between the reading and the service experience.

**Writing-Oriented Reflection: Written Exercises**

**Theorists** and **Reflectors** tend to use writing as a way to reflect on experiences and integrate experiences with models and theories. **Pragmatists** will use writing to propose practical ideas or projects which evolved out of learning.

### Examples:

- Journals and blogs
- Reflection essays
- Self-evaluation essays
- Portfolios
- Analysis papers
- Case studies
- Grant proposals
- Press releases
- Drafting legislation
- Letters to self, other students, politicians, newspaper editors
- Agency training/orientation manuals

### Guidelines for effective reflection:

1. Assign a combination of structured analytical writing and unstructured narrative writing.
2. Provide extensive feedback on content and style.
3. Allow students to reflect on feedback they receive.
4. Ensure confidentiality of journals.
5. Consider assigning some writing that will not be evaluated for a grade.
6. Design writing projects to produce actual products community groups can use.

### Telling-Oriented Reflection: Oral Exercises

**Activists** tend to reflect and learn through speaking and oral presentations in order to effect change and impact a particular group of people.

### Examples:

- Focus groups
- Informal discussions
- Formal class discussions
- Oral presentations
- Story telling

### Guidelines for effective reflection:

1. Provide constructive feedback.
2. Videotape formal presentations, when possible, for eventual feedback.
3. Provide clear instructions for group dialogue.