

Steps to Reflection

Reflection is the third stage of the service-learning experience. The process of intentional reflection enables students to make sense out of their experiences. Without reflection, the ability to discuss and think about an experience stays at a superficial, primarily descriptive level, or worse, students take misconceptions with them or have their stereotypes confirmed.

Consider the example of an environmental restoration project. Without reflection, it is a cleaning and planting project. With reflection students are encouraged to consider the following questions: How did the environment become degraded? Who bears responsibility for its restoration? What are alternative strategies for restoration? What are the political, economic, social, and environmental aspects of environmental degradation and restoration? Reflection is critical to the educational success of the service learning experience.

There are six steps to reflection:

1. Experience

The first step is the experience itself. Reflection ideally takes place throughout the service learning experience. Each experience along the way is an opportunity for reflection.

2. Description of the Experience

Most of us are able to leave an experience and be able to describe it to another person or group of people. *"We cleaned away debris and planted native prairie grasses."* Some questions to ask at this level:

- Describe what you saw. What happened? What did you do?
- Describe the details of the day.
- With whom did you work? Describe their work.
- Tell me about the organization. How would you describe it?
- What did you accomplish? Was it challenging work or easy work?

3. Interpretation of the Experience

We are starting to draw meaning from the experience when we ask students to interpret or make sense of the experience. *"How did the area become so degraded? Who is responsible?"* Some questions might include:

- How did you feel about the service project itself?
- Why did this problem come into existence and how might it be eliminated?
- Why do you think this work needs to be done?
- What insights did you gain about working with other people?
- Whose responsibility is it to do this work?
- Is the work that this organization performs important? What struck you about the work of this organization? Why did this organization perform the work in this way?

4. Generalizing from the Experience

We start to ask students to look at the bigger picture when we ask them to generalize. *“Why do you think people would let this area become so degraded?”* Some questions:

- To what would I compare or contrast this experience?
- Are there any general social principles operating here?
- How does this experience reflect trends in society?
- Do other groups of people experience similar problems?
- Did I have stereotypes or conceptions that were confirmed or changed?

5. Applying the Experience

By asking students to apply the experience, we are asking them to integrate the new skills and knowledge. Another aspect of application is evaluative: How did we do? Some other application questions:

- What lessons did I learn? What new skills did I gain?
- How did this experience change my outlook on life? myself? society?
- What new knowledge did I acquire?
- How have I changed as a person? How could I make things better? What additional steps might I take based on this experience?
- How would I do things differently if I had the chance? Are there any other ways to solve this problem?
- Did you apply insights from this class or another one to your work on the project?

6. Presentation of the Experience

The final stage of reflection is the presentation. We ask students to demonstrate their learning through a variety of forms of presentation that can take place within the classroom, school, or in the community.