



Linking academic learning to community priorities

SERVICE LEARNING
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Service Learning (SL) is a form of experiential learning that links classroom teaching and course readings with meaningful voluntary experiences, critical reflective practices, and civic engagement. Meaningful voluntary experiences are activities and projects that meet community-identified priorities and provide students with opportunities to apply the knowledge and skills they are building through their academic studies.

Student Tip Sheet:

Using Critical Reflection to Get the Most from Your Service Learning Experience

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection brings together reflective practice with critical thinking, encouraging people to deepen their analysis by being critical about their experiences. Reflective practice involves reflecting on and making meaning of one's experiences, thoughts, and beliefs. Critical thinking means actively engaging with and questioning information to identify issues, assumptions, concepts, evidence, alternative viewpoints, and frames of reference.

Why is critical reflection important in Service Learning?

1. Reflect to learn - In Service Learning, reflection acts as the 'bridge' or 'link' between academic concepts and real world experiences. Reflective practice can help you make meaning of and extract learning from your experiences – a foundational step for both theorizing and continuous learning.

2. Reflect to see progress - Your thinking and understanding develops over the course of a semester. Reflection provides a mirror for seeing these changes.

3. Reflect to transform - Critical reflection has the potential to spark personal and social change as people come to see how their realities are connected to broader political, social, economic, and historical forces. Paul Freire, a Brazilian educator, coined the term 'critical consciousness' to describe this process of increasing people's awareness of how larger forces shape and constrain people's lives. Freire believed that increased awareness of these broader forces should be linked with action in the real world.

How do I get the most from my reflective practice?

All too frequently, people's reflection simply describes what happened. You need to dig deeper to get the most out of your reflection. The following tips will enhance your reflection (not to mention your grades!):

Tip 1 – Draw on the disciplinary framework of your program and/or course

Reflection in Service Learning should not happen in a vacuum: It is important that the meaning you make of your experience is related to your course material. Review your course outline to identify the key academic concepts and themes. Explore and critique academic concepts, examining where theory and evidence fit with your experience and where there are gaps.

Tip 2 - Three key questions to take you beyond description: What? So what? Now what?

What?: Start by describing and examining what happened during your voluntary experience. This includes observations about your own and other people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

So what?: Make meaning of 'what' happened. Move the solutions that are found. Explore how theory can be used to improve practice. Explore how practice can be used to improve theory. your thinking from description to analysis and interpretation. Explore how the academic concepts you are learning in your lectures and readings relate to your experiences.

Now what?: Identify how what you have learned can be used in the real world. Explore how one's understanding of a social issue affects the solutions that are found. Explore how theory can be used to improve practice. Explore how practice can be used to improve theory.

Tip 3: Broaden your view by moving from Portrait to Landscape Thinking

Similar to photography, how you frame an issue affects what you see and the solutions you seek. **Portrait frames** explore issues by focusing primarily on people or events in a particular moment in time, while ignoring contextual information. Portrait frames lead people to focus on personal responsibility for social issues. **Landscape frames**, on the other hand, take a broader view to examining an issue: people's lives and events are examined in relation to the policies, institutions, and larger social, political, economic, and historical forces that surround them. Landscape frames lead to an understanding of the shared responsibility of individuals and society for social issues.

Tip 4: Dig deeper by asking 'why?' at least three times!

A simple strategy for deepening your analysis is to question your answers by asking "why?" at least three times. This encourages you to look beyond what is immediately evident and get closer to root issues.

Tip 5: Know yourself

You will be more effective in your work if you are both self-aware (i.e., knowing who you are, what you bring to the project, and how you want to grow) and socially aware (i.e., understanding complex social issues).

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