

## **C**ontinuous Reflection

The most effective reflection is Continuous on two critical levels. First and most important, students commented that critical reflection must be an ongoing part of a learner's education and service involvement over the course of his or her educational career. Facilitating this process may not be as difficult as one might think, however — early short term direct service experiences often led to later, more intense service involvement.

Continuous reflection allows the student to continue formulating new ways to view the world, using four or more years' worth of service-learning experience as material for observation, reflection and experimentation — following the Kolb Cycle with a commitment to long-term reflective action and a growing awareness and experience that leads to more complex service as well.

On another level, reflection should maintain an especially coherent continuity over the course of each event or experience. Continuous reflection includes reflection *before* the experience, *during* the experience and *after* the experience.

Student interviewees often mentioned reflective preparation for an experience as critical to getting the most out of each experience. Most reflection occurring during the experience was geared toward problem-solving and proposing immediate action to enhance the effectiveness of the experience. Reflection after the service tended to focus on evaluating the meaning of the service, integrating new understandings into previous knowledge, and planning future action.

*“I think the main thing that helps is that all of us in the organization, we sit down and talk about the different problems — and also, you can't find the solutions to problems in books, you can get a basic understanding, maybe - but until you deal with the problem and have to focus on it, you don't know how to respond to that. So, a lot of times it helps to sit down in a group. We do it every Sunday... sit down and talk about the different things.”*

— Bentley College student

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## Connected Reflection

Connected reflection links service to the intellectual and academic pursuits of the students. As illustrated in Chapter 2, this connectedness should operate on two levels. 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. And intensive service-learning experiences can also serve as capstone courses to integrate concepts across the curriculum. Academic pursuits add a “big picture” context to the personal encounters of each isolated service experience and help students to search for causes and solutions to social problems.

The synthesis of action and thought results from connected reflection. Interviewees repeatedly expressed the importance of integrating what they were doing in their service with what they were studying. As Jennifer’s speech cited at the beginning of the Introduction illustrates, 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 inspired in many students a commitment to both their current service and continued service involvement.

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individually again, that could eradicate that problem. So, we constantly take real life situations and apply it to what’s in the book so that we can intermingle the two and come up with solid conclusions for problems that are relevant.”

— Clark Atlanta University Student

“Basically what she does is she opens the arena for discussion. What we basically do is we take a particular problem and we relate it to information from the text. For example, the Wednesday past, we talked about class management. There’s a lady in the class that seemed to be having a problem with a student that constantly wanted to disrupt the class. So, what we did was we looked at the chapter in our text which dealt with classroom management and we figured out that maybe if she was to give that student more work, maybe then that problem would subside. Or maybe if she pulled that student aside and worked with him

## Challenging Reflection

One of the most critical components of effective reflection is also one that some service-learning practitioners find most difficult to implement: the practice of challenging students to engage issues in a more critical way. Challenging reflection requires intervention on the part of a teacher or colleague who is prepared to pose questions and propose unfamiliar or even uncomfortable ideas for consideration by the learner.

Our students reported that challenging reflection pushed 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” — where learners feel confident that their contributions, backgrounds and feelings will be respected and appreciated — be maintained between facilitator and learner, and within any reflection group.

In this way, students reported, 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 the *challenging* reflection that students said produces new understanding, raises new questions, and moves towards new frameworks for problem solving.

“One of my teachers made me or forced me to do a... directed kind of study... I wrote a paper for a class on the homeless and she wasn’t an expert on the homeless but as a good teacher, she asked the right questions and she said, I need more research, I need more research and have you thought about this? So it was just those little red marks on a paper that made me go back and find an article and then, you know, that really makes sense. So I think it was the process of researching a paper that I learned more.”

— University of Tennessee student

“... She asked the right questions and she said, I need more research, I need more research and have you thought about this?...”

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## 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.

One key element of context is degree of formality involved in any given reflection activity. A service-learning course will generally lend itself to structured assignments and fairly formal discussion, whereas a service-learning experience that takes place outside of any academic setting ends well with an informal reflection circle. If the reflection setting feels too formalized for the context, it runs the risk of being experienced, as one student put it, “too much like school”.

In addition, the proximity of the reflection session to the community in which students are working lends a strong flavor to any reflection session. 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. Other topics of consideration — theoretical concepts, or personal frustrations with events or individuals, for example — can be better served by some distance from the community.

Many students mentioned the same reflection questions being used but presented in oral or written modes, their format depending on the context of the issue and the situation. Many of the students recalled details of both the context and the mode of their most helpful reflection experiences.

“I firmly believe that when you apply what you're learning that's the way you really learn it. A perfect example is of learning another language. You can go to class and you can learn the verbs and the subjunctives and all those technical things, but if you don't practice it, you're not going to learn it. And the only way to learn another language is to practice it and ideally go to the other country and spend some time there to really apply it. But that's where the learning takes place. That's why I believe so strongly in this. Because everybody is benefiting from this service, whether it be the agency... [or] the student.”

— University of San Diego student

## CONCLUSION

Over the course of this study, certain themes have appeared repeatedly as critical factors in effective reflective activity. The best 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. These 4 C's form the foundation of any meaningful reflective experience; as you use this guide to develop reflection activities, we suggest that you ask how you can make sure that the 4 C's are implemented in adapting the techniques and lessons illustrated in this guide.

## CHAPTER 1 REFERENCES

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