

Reflection: It's easier than you think!

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Reflection is one of the most important elements of service-learning, but it is often the element that teachers who are new to service-learning struggle with most often. Reflection does not have to be a struggle!

It is important that students are given an opportunity to reflect before, during and after a service-learning project, so that they may shape the course of their service-learning project and handle problems as they arise. Reflection prior to the service experience is especially important if the students will be visiting an environment such as a nursing home where they will deal with a geriatric population, some of which may be very ill.

Other environments that require pre-reflection activities are hospitals, hospices, animal shelters, homeless shelters and soup kitchens. All of these places can bring students face-to-face with an aspect of life that may be new, and perhaps, frightening to them. One way to ensure that students are properly prepared to enter an emotionally charged community setting would be to invite a representative of the agency to come to the classroom prior to the project and introduce the students to some of the issues and realities of the population they will encounter during the project.

The most popular form of reflection is that old stand-by, the journal. While there is nothing wrong with utilizing journals to reflect, students tend to get bored with frequent exercises that only involve traditional journal writing exercises. To enhance journal writing, try either of these alternative journal activities:

#1: The Classroom Journal

In this exercise, students reflect upon their classmates' and teacher's journal entries. Prompt your students by writing the first entry. Then, each day, have a different student take the journal home and write an entry that reflects upon the most recent contribution before their own.

#2: The Community Journal

A community journal is one that the students share with the community agency staff or community members during a service-learning project. At the agency or work site, students ask community members to add an entry to the journal about their project experience or work at the agency. To get the ball rolling, you should prompt the community members with journaling ideas. Try to collect as many community entries as there are students in your class. After the service-learning project is over, assign students different community entries upon which to reflect and respond.

Classroom discussions can be one of the most stimulating forms of reflection for service-learning. Discussing real-world issues and themes that are relevant to the service-learning project provides students with an opportunity to explore critical thinking skills, communication skills and current events with their peers. Here are a few suggestions for making your classroom discussions more exciting and productive:

1. Invite a community representative to lead the discussion.
2. Have each student take a turn at leading the discussion.
3. Cut out articles from the newspaper that relate to the service-learning project and have the students discuss the broader issues that are involved.
4. Videotape each discussion and make a reflective video at the end of the project, so that students remember the issues discussed and the results of each discussion.
5. Have each student bring an object related to the service-learning project (tool, photograph,

etc.) to the discussion and share the relevance of the object to their service-learning experience.

Using the visual arts is another way to introduce reflection into your classroom in a more creative way. Paint and paper or digital media can be very compelling mediums for both younger and older students to express their thoughts about their service-learning experiences. Any of these ideas can help get you started:

#1: Photographic Journal

Instead of having students simply write in journals, have them take photographs of the service-learning project and write journal entries in response to the photographs they've taken.

#2: Project Website

Many students have a real knack for website design. As your project progresses, have the students create a website so that their service-learning project can be shared in cyberspace with parents, students, community members and project partners.

#3: Bulletin Boards

School bulletin boards that are in public areas of the school can be a great way for students to share their service-learning project with the student body, teachers and school administration. Have your class adopt one of the school's bulletin boards and keep everyone updated about what is going on with service-learning. Students can take pictures of the project and post them, as well as post other literature related to the project, such as thank-you letters from community members written in response to the project.