

Teaching Reflection for Service Learning

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1. Introduction

Service Learning (SL) is a teaching strategy used as a progressive move from traditional teaching to experiential learning, which helps marginalized communities meet needs by allowing student to apply academic knowledge in real life projects. One key component in SL is reflection. Reflection is the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives (Indiana University Bloomington, 2018). The presumption is that community service does not necessarily produce learning as students are just contributing their time in accordance to the demands of community organization. However, with SL, students are required to investigate the community needs and suggest projects to bridge the needs. The component of reflection serves as a platform between the community service activities and academic content as it works to direct the student's attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be analysed and interpreted for deeper understanding (Indiana University Bloomington, 2018). A common challenge in SL is teaching student to produce meaningful reflection, which is a metacognitive component that requires students to introspect. This does not come easy for students, as formal educational settings do not regularly incorporate reflection as a component in learning. This paper will explain a simple framework, which was developed to teach students to reflect. Since employing this framework, student's improvement has been evident, with written reflections that are more meaningful and analytical processes that help them improve their projects, ideas and overall self-growth.

2. Reflection for Service Learning

There are many definitions of reflection. However, for the context of this paper, it will be defined as the activity that *makes meaning of experience* and pushes us to: (1) *reframe* our questions/conclusions in innovative and *effective* terms, (2) *transforms* our values (Mitchell et al., 2015). Reflection provides a framework where students are able to address the uncertainties of a complex situation and make meaning out of these experiences. According to Dewey (as cited in Mitchell et al., 2015), reflection serves to not only help students reframe complex problems but also to challenge them in deliberating their civic values and social responsibility.

Academicians that have tried teaching and assessing reflection can relate that it is not an easy concept to teach, as it is intrinsically linked to metacognition and self-regulation, where there is ample evidence as to their importance to learning (Huang, 2017). Some of the learner resistances that researcher encountered in teaching reflection are:

1. Students are *uncomfortable* talking about themselves and/or are reflecting simply to fulfil an assigned task.
2. Students *overstate* their learning in order to cast a *positive* light on what they got out of a particular experience.
3. Students rarely move beyond the tip of the iceberg; which is to *describe habitual activities*.

Many of these resistances can be addressed if students have a simple and clear framework to follow. This allows students to see experience in an objective way. Many learning resources tend to guide students through a series of questions in which more often than not, students feel compelled to answer. Not all questions posted are relevant to every project. This is precisely the challenge when teaching SL as a general subject or within a large class. Hence, this paper aims to present a teaching framework for reflection that can be used in most SL projects.

3. Framework for Teaching Reflection

A simple teaching framework was developed to assist students in writing meaningful and constructive reflection. This framework consists of two models, (1) Cooper's (1997) three lenses of reflection and (2) Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (1988).

In Cooper's three lenses, introspections are needed because it focuses on how the students' beliefs and values affects their action and views on social issues. Cooper's three lenses of reflection involves the ability to identify and recognise personal strengths and weaknesses (mirror), specific areas of learning (microscope) and understanding of how to transfer these skills to future endeavours (binoculars) (McCarthy, 2013).

Another modality is Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, which proposes that theory and practice enrich each other in a never-ending circle (Finlay, 2008). This model encourages student to think systematically about their experience in a critical manner making them aware of their own actions and better able to adjust and change their behaviour (if needed) (Gibbs, 1988).

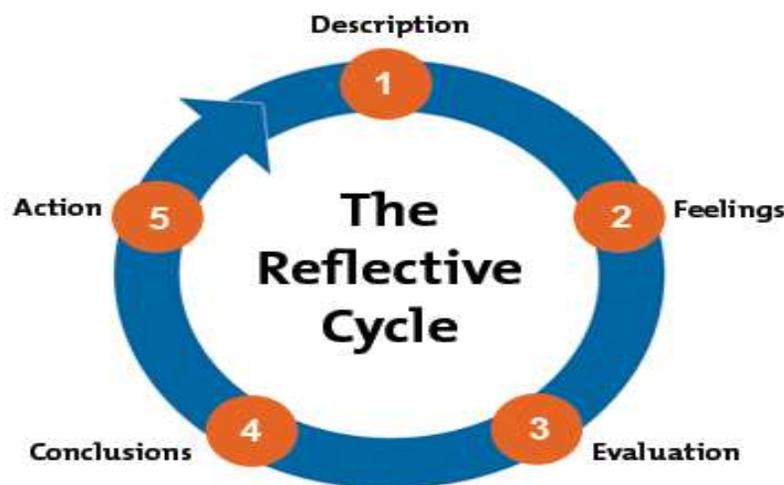


Figure 1: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle

With references to this two models, students are then taught the framework (Figure 2). Students are asked to select and focus in incidents/experiences that made an impact and to describe their feelings about it. Students are encouraged to use a feeling chart to identify their feelings because another challenge that was identified from students reflection is that they tend to choose basic feeling words such as happy, sad, angry which is very general and may not describe their feelings accurately. Being able to identify their feelings accurately helps with the reflection process as they would be able to think more indepth. Once they have accurately identified their feeling, students are asked to think if the feeling derieved from their perception or fact. For example “I was anguished when she decided to end her life”, if this feeling is derived from the fact that he/she believes that all life is precious then it’s a perception. However if the feeling is derived from the reasoning that it is against the law, then it’s a fact.

Distinguishing facts from perceptions is important because it determines which modality of reflection to use.

- (1) If it’s a perception, then students would use Coopers three lense model because this allows them to introspect on why they have that perception (whether it is due to their upbringing, religious beliefs, etc), how it impacts their action when it comes to that issue and how their action affets the issue as a whole. Then students can reflect further as to think if they need to change that perception if there are different circumstances.
- (2) On the other hand, if the feeling was derived from a fact, student can use a more critical approach which is Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle. This model is suitable for factual feeling because it allows students to challenge the facts under different scenarios such as: Should abortion be legal if the pregnancy were caused by an unlawful act in the first place (rape)?



Figure 2: Process of Reflection

4. Results and Discussion

The differences of reflection before and after the use of framework will be discussed. It is clear with the framework, student's reflective journals are more meaningful and they act in accordance to their findings such as:

1. Less sanctimonious statement. Before the framework, students reflective journal tend to show sanctimonious statements just because they conducted services. This shows that student are not able to analyse their experience. After the framework, student's reflective journal shows improvement, as there were less sanctimonious statement and even if there were, students were able to relate it to their personal experience and constructive thoughts.

“Remind yourself of how fortunate you are, because not everyone possesses the luxury in perfect meals and comfy homes. I learn to be grateful to my parents that they are able to provide me with food and shelter. From now on I will always give money to people less fortunate because I am privilege” Student A, Street Feeding, before framework

“Hasan has taught me that through loss and pain emerges a determined and strong person, we cannot make change until we make change to ourselves. To change our mindset and perspective to fit the reality of this world, living in a nation where people can overthrow corrupt government, I believe together we can make this country more acceptable to the refugee plight.” Student B, Working with refugee, after framework

2. Students are more willing to write about negative experiences. Before using the framework, students overstate their learning to cast a positive light on their experiences. This may be due to misconception that marks will be awarded when learning is positive or students do not really know how to think (analyse) their experience. This framework then helps prompt them into thinking and analysing the experience.

“Working with a soup kitchen for the past few weeks has made me realize that people often assume that soup kitchen is a bad idea because they are creating dependency, however upon observation, I realize this is wrong as Kechara does extensive background check before beneficiaries are approved for food subsidy. The reason people have this misconception can be explained using privilege theory, where the idea that oppression works through a series of unearned advantage. The society who has the privilege of not worrying about food, does not realize the difficulty some have to go through just to eat.” Student C, Soup Kitchen, after framework

3. Students are more willing to disclose and discuss their thoughts and values. Most Asian culture focuses on extrinsic learning and unsurprisingly, students are *uncomfortable* talking about themselves. When they are finally required to write about their experiences, they also tend to focus on external issues, omitting in-depth analyses from a personal stance (e.g. personal role to issue). However, the framework focuses on students' opinions and thoughts, directly encouraging them to introspect.

“I have learned the MOST important thing in a patient, is his/her decision. One of the MAKNA patients that I met said he gave up on his Chemotherapy because it was too harsh for him. I agree on him giving up because who are we to judge what he wants? In the 1 month with my grandmother, we did not respect her decision of “giving up”, and we decided to let her go through one month of suffering (operations and tons of medication) just for the sake of saving her. But in the end, she suffered more and the end result was the same. That was the most regretful thing in my entire life, which is not respecting her decision because we were “selfish” and just wanted her to be alive, while she, herself has already declared her being 93 and there is nil chance of survival” - Student C, Health, after framework

4. Students analyse situations that they do not agree with and suggest alternative ways of handling the situation. When they join a certain organisation and learn about the inner workings and procedures, many students are able to critically analyse the efficiency of those procedures based on theories they have learned in their classes. With the cumulative and ongoing knowledge, they were able to suggest different methods to improve the procedures.

The reason this framework is effective is that it gives students a clear structure to follow. While providing specific criteria, the terms on this framework is also general enough to be used in many different areas. There is still some limitation to prove whether this framework is completely reliable. For instance, this is not a longitudinal study, so the improvement of meaningful reflection may not be due to the framework itself but the individual differences (e.g. thinking) between cohorts of students. However, this framework was taught in the same year hence, differences due to maturity/level of thinking might not contribute to the lack of reliability as they are all of the same age.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the development of this framework has helped with teaching students the concept of reflection, allowing them to have meaningful analysis of their experiences, which is crucial for the learning component of SL. Without the use of reflection, services conducted may be for the sake of completing a course and there is no real takeback from the students. This framework can be replicated in other institutions that is teaching SL. However, future studies are needed to further improve on the framework and to check the reliability of this framework.

Keywords: Service Learning, Teaching, Reflection

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