



Learning, Serving, Reflecting

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Learning through Service

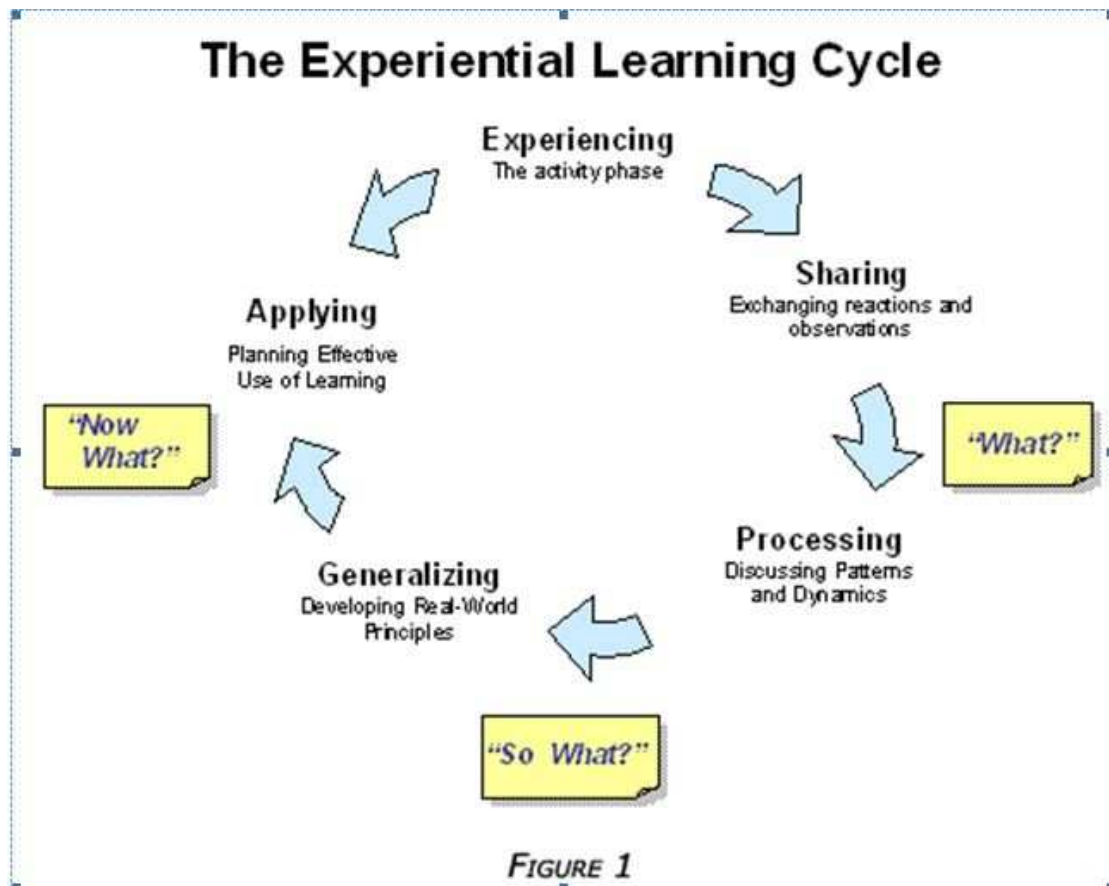
Since the founding, in Bologna in 1088, of what we know as probably the first “university,” the purpose of higher education has been examined, discussed, and debated. Disseminating knowledge, creating new knowledge, and developing cognitive, psychological, and moral aptitude in students, have all been listed as part of the multivariied charge of higher education. Another focus area that has, more recently, been considered as a necessary part of the liberal arts education is helping college students to understand and act upon their social and civic responsibilities [1]. Armed with data espousing the virtues of experiential learning, a growing movement has emerged to call more students into civic engagement [2]. The idea that institutions develop good citizens has gained worldwide popularity both inside and outside the academy. Universities throughout Europe, China, Australia, South Africa, as well as North and South America have woven civic goals into their curricula.

From this movement, a teaching method called service-learning has emerged combining and integrating community service with academic study [3]. Through service-learning, students learn and apply course material, make an impact on community identified needs, and develop civic skills. Bringle and Hatcher describe service-learning with three critical components: 1) students engage in a credit bearing academic course with learning objectives; 2) as part of that course, students participate in an organized service activity that meets community-identified needs; and 3) during the course, students reflect on that service experience in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation for the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility [4].

Reflections on Reflection

The process of reflection is a core component of service-learning. Practitioners and researchers alike have concluded that the most effective service-learning experiences are those that provide “structured opportunities” for learners to critically reflect upon their service experience [5]. These structured opportunities for reflection can enable learners to form, examine, and question their beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices related to an experience. Reflection promotes a deeper understanding of oneself and fosters meaning and significance to future actions [6]. It enables people working in groups or classes to learn from and about each other. When executed properly, good reflection exercises will help students make connections and help them understand where and how to engage with the civic world [5]. Perhaps most importantly, students can learn why what they are doing matters for their education and to the greater society.

Service-learning, and its core component reflection, were born out of the experiential education theories advanced by John Dewey, Donald Shon, and David Kolb. These scholars outline the importance of combining individual experience, action, and engagement with reflective thinking to help develop greater understanding of the content being studied. Dewey theorizes that experience cannot be separated from education and that the two move together hand-in-hand. Dewey also connects theory to practice and by doing so makes a strong case for the power of action-based learning and its curricular reflection [7]. Shon explains how learning is not simply an individual endeavor— that learning could and should occur as a social activity while one is in the process of doing, succeeding, failing, and reflecting [8]. Kolb provides a scientific interpretation of the educative value of reflection. He illustrates the process of reflection what he calls the “Experiential Learning Cycle” (Figure 1). The process begins when students define **What?** is going on by citing the details of their experience. Students then answer the question **So What?**, or what does this experience mean to me, as an individual, or to my community. Finally, students think and discuss **Now What?**, or now that this experience has been acknowledged, what is required of me, my neighbors, and my community in terms of next steps, problem solving, or advancement. As students move to answer these questions regarding their service—the what, so what, and now what—they begin to form a more comprehensive, integrated cognitive discovery [9]. In short, they learn.



Strategies for fostering reflection

Good teaching requires effective strategies that will yield good results. Eyler and Giles delineate four elements that make the reflective process effective. First, the reflection should be *continuous*—maintained throughout the academic course and before, during, and after the service experience. Second, the reflection should help students *connect* between the service and the course objectives. The service is integrated into the course and not an “add-on” activity. Third, the reflection activity *challenges* the students to cognitively migrate beyond the obvious pieces of the experience toward deeper understandings of what they have felt and witnessed. Finally, the reflection activities should *contextualize* the service activities, the course content, and the broader topics, in a meaningful and accessible manner. Students should be able to explain why the service experience was important to the course and to their lives in a community [5].

There are several reflective strategies that can be used in a service-learning course. These include journaling, presentations, and story-telling [10]. The civic reflection exercise, discussed by Davis and Lynn, is highly effective with college students in a classroom setting and is discussed below [11].

Civic Reflection as an Innovative Method

Civic reflection provides students an opportunity to examine, refine, and regenerate the beliefs and assumptions prior to, during, or after their service. It is a strategy that can assist students to think and speak about complex issues and feelings. At the same time, civic reflection can help classmates understand each other more deeply, foster solidarity or collegiality, and add to the communicative capacity of a class or group [12]. Civic reflection can also improve the impact of the actual service activity and foster more life-long, habitual civic engagement in students [3].

It is important for faculty members to understand that the civic reflection exercise is not a workshop or training meant to impart specific knowledge or disseminate data, facts, or information; rather it is a conversation meant to establish understanding of one’s values and beliefs, connect with others, and question one’s commitments and daily choices. Faculty must move from what King calls “the sage on the stage” to “guide on the side,” and let the conversations flow somewhat naturally, with only gentle nudging, toward the larger themes of the course [13].



The Civic Reflection Process

In a civic reflection exercise, students meet in a comfortable space. The faculty member relinquishes her professorial role and becomes a “facilitator.” That is to say, because the reflection is designed around the experience of the students, the professor is no longer the resident “expert” in the room. The discussion itself revolves around a short, thought-provoking, pre-selected reading (e.g., essay, poem, song) or a resonant object (e.g., photograph, painting, brief video, sculpted work). Beginning with a very directed, specific set of questions about details of the reading or object, the facilitator can slowly open up the discussion into larger questions regarding aspects of civic engagement [14]. Facilitators must attend to three specific areas as they prepare to convene the reflection: 1) identifying the large civic issues that need exploration (e.g., leadership, justice, association, giving); 2) choosing an appropriate reading or object to serve as the tool or anchor for the reflection; and 3) designing the right questions that will initiate and advance the reflection and yield success. Each of these duties is addressed below.

The facilitator must consider the larger issues that the class needs to explore. These themes are part of our daily lives and can arise when we consider why we choose to pick up a piece of rubbish on the street or pick up a hitchhiker on the highway or choose to do one of these things, but not the other, or choose to do neither. Large issues are enduring in that they can follow us from our childhood fear of strangers to our college semesters abroad where we surround ourselves with strangers and voluntarily live among difference. Other large questions regarding what defines community; what makes a good gift and who decides; what gaps exist between the server and the served; what is leadership and who gets to lead; often percolate beneath the surface of our daily lives and activities. Good facilitation will unearth these issues.

The reading or object itself should be chosen carefully in order to build a reflection that will address the desired larger questions. As Davis advises, texts and objects should help students talk openly about a theme—in that way it is a tool to reach a goal. For success, the tool must be rich with imagery that requires further exploration and explanation. They must be accessible to the group; the text should not contain complicated language or be too long to read in a reasonable amount of time. It is quite prudent to consider the tastes, temperments, cultural backgrounds, and abilities of the students. Discomfort should be invited, but carefully managed. Texts and objects should resonate with the group, but not settle disagreements or controversial parts by themselves. Open-ended readings that invite multiple interpretations are among the best choices. Pieces that close off discussion by yielding too much agreement or group-thinking should be avoided. Facilitators should look for provocative and challenging texts or objects that are accessible to any student who is willing to read with care and think about it with patience. There should never be an indication to the students that there is a “correct” way to interpret the text or object. Once the tool has been chosen, the facilitator moves to crafting guiding questions.

Framing the discussion requires a patient and deliberate evolution from initial questions about what the text says, to probing questions regarding what the text means, to broad overarching questions regarding why those meanings matter. Davis delineates three types of questions to use with the group—clarifying, interpreting, and implying [14]. Clarification questions are specific to the text or object. These questions are simple and easy. They can be answered by anyone in the group. For example: What does it say? What colors has the artist used? What is going on in this story? The next set of questions are interpretation questions—ones that get at meaning. For example: What do you make of the the narrator’s request at the end? Why does the author wait to tell us that the woman is blind? Where do you suppose the people, described in the second paragraph, will sleep tonight? Quite often, at this point in the reflection, students will begin discussing their own experiences. Finally, questions should move toward those of implication: After having read this poem about fences, where to you see fences, symbolic or real, in your life? What does this essay say about your service? Where in your life do you see leadership challenged? What role does diversity play in your life?

Conclusion

As faculty members facilitate students through the civic reflection exercise, they will note that it is rarely easy. That said, many will find it helpful and rewarding. The traditional triumvirate charge of a faculty member is to engage in teaching, scholarship, and service. Civic reflection allows faculty members to innovate and rejuvenate all of these professional activities. It can enhance classroom teaching and learning. Evaluative data regarding the service and reflection experiences are ripe for scholarly exploration and publication. And, faculty will often find themselves engaged in the world outside of the academy through community partners and student engagement. By helping students learn about themselves, their choices, their classmates, and the communities they inhabit, faculty members can find much satisfaction with this experience. For themselves, faculty can gain sharper skills in critical thinking and communication. In the end, our classes, our colleges, our entire world benefits when we learn more completely, serve more readily, and reflect more deeply.

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