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Using Reflexive Agency to Develop Career Readiness and Address Social Inequities

Amanda Nelms, Sally M. Barton-Arwood, and Lauren Lunsford

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to engage students in critical reflection pertaining to critical service-learning as a vehicle to transform beliefs and perspectives regarding equity and social justice in a community. The authors engaged in personal self-formation with an emphasis on reflexive agency to unpack course requirements, critical service-learning requirements, and connection to career readiness. Student responses while engaging in critical service-learning grounded the process of critical reflection. This study can be replicated across universities and has many implications for course development and university-wide implementation of critical service-learning.

Keywords: critical reflection, experiential learning, critical service-learning, reflexive agency

As educators, we are responsible for preparing our students for college. Although many would agree that a key benefit of attending an institution of higher education (IHE) is the education itself, some have argued for a shift from a singular focus on intellectual growth to a more comprehensive focus that involves student whole-person self-formation (Marginson, 2023). In addition to disciplinary knowledge that is gained in the classroom, "inquiry and experience in natural and social relational settings" with "collective reflectivity" have been noted as important elements in supporting personal change (Marginson, 2023, p. 9). Although transformation and personal development are not guaranteed in higher education (Marginson, 2023), in order to prepare students to engage in the lifelong process of whole-person formation, faculty have the opportunity to engage students in reflection that requires students to reorganize experiences through problem-solving application of course content (Dewey, 1938), which leads to converting difficult experiences into knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

In the field of teacher preparation, faculty have embraced and grappled with the vehicle responsibility of transformation in order to prepare future teachers and professionals who champion educational equity and opportunity for all students (Baily et al., 2014). Many teacher candidates (as well as the current teaching force) do not share the demographics and backgrounds of their students. Correspondingly, our future teachers bring limited understanding of, or even resistance to recognizing, the realities of educational inequities (Lee, 2011), such as continued achievement gaps between White students and students from other races, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income families (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Teacher educators have focused on the need to "engage our students . . . in more meaningful dialogue and action on issues related to social injustice in schools" (Baily et al., 2014, p. 249). High quality service-learning with ongoing reflection has been considered a high-impact practice and transformative in providing authentic experiences that support deeper learning about social justice and equity (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2023; Baily et al., 2014). We aimed to utilize service-learning with ongoing reflection with the goal of facilitating whole-person self-formation.

The purpose of this study was to engage students in critical reflection pertaining to critical service-learning as a vehicle to transform

beliefs and perspectives regarding equity and social justice in a community. This ambitious goal required a cyclical process of reflexivity grounded in research. To unpack this multilayered work, this article will present an overview of terms specific to effective critical service-learning, followed by a description of this relevant project that aimed to utilize critical reflection and reflexivity to address issues of equity and social justice.

Defining Critical Service-Learning

Service-learning is an essential dimension of the college experience. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2023) identified service-learning and community-based learning as high-impact practices. AAC&U has also stated that a requisite element of successful service-learning is to ensure that students apply concepts learned in the classroom to a real-world field experience and provide in-class time for reflection. Each of these steps is critical in utilizing service-learning to its full capacity to serve both the community partner and the students participating in the practice.

Service-learning is also a way for students to gain hands-on experience working in their fields before entering the workforce (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019). Smith et al. (2022) recognized that many students enter the work field with the technical and content knowledge to perform a job but are missing the soft skills that employers are seeking. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2022), such soft skills include communication, decision making, problem solving, emotional empathy, and flexibility/adaptability. A reflection process was an opportunity for students to identify the connection between the soft skills that are NACE career readiness competencies and their experiences in the field (Smith et al., 2022). This opportunity to refine alignment between experience, NACE competencies, and course content required intentional field experience, and the authors believed that service-learning has the potential to be a powerful opportunity to support this alignment.

The term "service-learning" varies in implementation across universities (Butin, 2006; Kendall, 1990); however, most instructors would agree that service-learning includes a community-based experience tied to learning outcomes (Jacoby & Associates, 1996). Even when entered with noble intentions, service-learning has the potential to promote a sense of charity instead of an opportunity for critical thinking and problem solving (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Intentional field experience, however, has the potential to shift student experiences from "doing something for someone else with some feeling of pity" (Wade, 1997, p. 64) into an opportunity to engage in critical thinking and problem solving that are aligned to course student learning outcomes (SLOs).

Critical service-learning is the term used as a bridge between the advantages of service-learning and the opportunity for authentic relationships with universities. Rhoads's (1997) foundational work explored students' sense of self during service-learning and argued the pedagogical shift that IHEs engage in may guide students to develop a more caring self. His work around "critical community service" began the discussion about the purpose of service-learning and the opportunity for students to explore an identity of caring individuals as the world around us becomes more fragmented. Rice and Pollack (2000) further defined the term "critical service-learning" to describe service-learning experiences with a focus on social justice.

Although service-learning is widely regarded as an important practice by IHEs, it is important to note that there is not a consensus on the meaning of the term "service-learning" across universities. Further, most experiences labeled "service-learning" lack discussions about social injustices (Mitchell, 2008). Kincey et al. (2022) noted that in IHEs each instructor brings their own perceptions of the terms "diversity," "equity," and "inclusion" to classrooms. Although their application is always well intentioned, these differing perceptions and levels of expertise can sometimes lead to subgroups of students feeling isolated or targeted, instead of the original goal of fostering a sense of belonging. Multiple studies have been conducted pertaining to service-learning, and their mixed results related to student impact (Alt & Medrich, 1994; Billig, 2000) may be due to the differing definitions of what constitutes "service-learning" (Eyler & Giles, 1999). These mixed results reflect the need for instructors to consider their personal perceptions when creating opportunities for authentic experiences in communities to ensure their perceptions do not impact the experiences of the students. Regardless, these experiences should be coupled with reflection that pushes students to think critically about their assumptions and how they interact with the world (Baily et al., 2014).

Critical Reflection, Self-Formation, and Reflexivity

Creating impactful, transformative experiences for students is essential to students' experience in higher education, and an important pathway for that experience is critical reflection. Berger (2004) identified transformational reflection as a vehicle to "move outside the form of current understanding and into a new place" (p. 338). These experiences must be intentional and coupled with a model for reflection.

Kolb's (1984) foundational work pertaining to experiential learning set the stage for the progression of experiences leading to the formation of knowledge. The experiential learning cycle included the four stages of (a) concrete experience, or the experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, or learning from the experience, and (d) active experimentation, or trying out what you have learned. Kolb proposed that effective learning takes place as an individual progresses through the stages, which can lead to complex "mental models" of the content the learner is learning about. This cycle also suggests that a participant can begin the cycle at any stage but must complete all four stages in order to gain an abstract understanding of the content.

Throughout the decades, the reflective observation stage in Kolb's model has expanded to allow educators to engage in rich conversations to lead toward critical reflection. Eyler and Giles (1999) proposed not only that service-learning allows students to gain a deeper understanding of social inequities present in our communities, but that reflection is key to this deeper cognitive development within service-learning. Eyler (2002) reminded us that this opportunity for cognitive development must be paired with authentic, intentional placements, where students are asked to contribute to engaged and thoughtful citizenship as well as having an opportunity to engage in planned, structured reflection. Eyler stated that "reflection is the key to strengthening the power of service-learning" (p. 519).

Eyler (2002) highlighted that the simple placement of students in service-learning experiences with some reflection prompts does not require students to make connections to the academic content taught in the course or to move toward the mindset of engaged citizens. She cautioned that reflection, even when course time is allowed for it, can sometimes be superficial and lack the connection to community partners. Eyler (2001) suggested a progression including reflecting alone, then with classmates, and finally with community partners to truly shift thinking about how service-learning impacts the student.

Critical Service-Learning, Social Justice, and Career Readiness

Shiller (2022) observed that students who are engaged in service-learning are often White and are serving historically marginalized individuals, leading to a scenario where students perceive communities as not having the power to bring about change for themselves. Likewise, conversations and reflections about systemic racism often live in isolation in courses designed for service-learning. Conversations related to systemic racism are not only relevant for service-learning courses, but provide skills that are integral to career readiness.

NACE (2024) career readiness competencies are those abilities that prepare students to enter the workforce as lifelong learners who are active community members striving to be engaged citizens. Researchers have suggested that service-learning can help students gain the soft skills needed to enter the workforce (Smith et al., 2022). Contextualizing efforts of service-learning with explicit conversations about social justice and equity is a necessary precursor to maximizing the self-formative impact of service-learning for university students. Additional research pertaining to the impact of critical service-learning on the student experience will help instructors build authentic experiential learning opportunities.

Methodology

Designing the Project

The purpose of this study was to engage students in critical reflection pertaining to critical service-learning as a vehicle to transform beliefs and perspectives regarding equity and social justice in our community. The term "our community" can hold many meanings. For this study, the term "our community" included "an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location" (Merriam-Webster, 2024, "Community"). The community in this study included the county where the university resides.

The research team included three faculty who shared a common interest in designing course content and experiential learning experiences to transform our students and the community. We also shared a common interest in student whole-person formation. Prior to beginning this study, the authors gained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After IRB approval and to prepare for this research, we explored the process of our own self-formation, with an emphasis on reflexive agency (Marginson, 2023), to unpack our current beliefs and understanding of critical reflection and service-learning. Each member of the research team brought current course practices pertaining to critical reflection as well as course expectations during service-learning along with the goal of improving their students' critical reflections and growth. The researchers discussed common practices and opportunities for shifts in curriculum pertaining to critical service-learning.

The projects' authors were faculty members in the College of Education that focused on teacher preparation in a midsized private Christian liberal arts college. The primary partner for this work was an area nonprofit that provided a food pantry and English language classes to the area, which included a very diverse immigrant population. An additional partner was a neighboring elementary school that also served a diverse immigrant population. The university's student population was predominantly female (66%), predominantly White (78%), and mostly affluent, so the potential growth for these students in interacting and working with a diverse immigrant population was very promising.

Because the authors were in the College of Education and taught courses in their teacher preparation program, the student participants in each of the authors' courses were primarily preservice teachers. Service-learning has been found particularly effective in helping preservice teachers see themselves as agents of change and in helping improve their attitudes toward diversity (Root et al., 2002). Because of this close alignment between our goals as teacher educators and the potential impact of service-learning activities and critical reflection, the authors worked very closely with the director of career and professional development at their university. The director of career and professional development helped the authors navigate an in-depth study of the university-defined career readiness competencies and provided guidance about course implementation. These conversations guided the researchers' process of reflexivity to align course learning outcomes, career readiness competencies (NACE, 2024), and the importance of critical reflection.

The positive impact of the collaboration with the director of career readiness allowed the project to expand beyond the role of preservice teachers and explore the impact of these practices on young professionals and on individual self-formation as a whole. Under the guidance of the Office of Career Readiness, the authors were able to approach their SLOs and reflective activities in a more global manner. Doing so was particularly relevant because the university has identified whole-person formation as a key priority and central to its mission and vision.

The process of reflexivity and career readiness skill alignment were coupled with a narrative literature review. A narrative review was utilized with the purpose of "combining quite different kinds of evidence to formulate a broad theoretical formulation" (Baumeister, 2013, p. 120). A critical literature review was not used for this study as the authors were focused on examining key findings from multiple types of studies to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact of critical reflection on critical service-learning. The review included a search of the following areas: (a) service-learning, experiential learning, critical engagement; (b) critical reflection to transform mindsets; (c) service-learning course development; and (d) Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle.

Participants

All student participants in this study were enrolled in an undergraduate program at a private liberal arts university in the southern United States mentioned earlier. The participants of this study included two groups of undergraduate students with various experiences. The first group included students enrolled in the Education courses Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners (n = 25), Human Development (n = 22), or Introduction to English Learners (n = 11). Each course has distinct critical service-learning outcomes, and these courses are taken throughout students' program of study within either a teaching licensure program or education minor (see Table 1). For example, two of the courses are foundational courses within the Education program

Table 1. Education Courses Learning Outcomes

Course	Program of study	Field experience learning outcomes
Diverse Learners	Sophomore year	Exposure to working with students with disabilities • Building relationships • Overcoming fears • Recognizing bias and misperceptions
English Learners	Any time throughout program	Exposure to working with multilingual students • Understand MLs academic and personal characteristics • Identify and describe personal biases aligned with interpretation of MLs academic performance
Human Development	Freshman year	Exposure to classroom experiences, both in person and virtual • Examine the learning processes that take place in classroom environments. • Analyze key developmental factors at play for students as they engage in learning activities

of study, meaning a student takes these courses early in their program of study, whereas one course can be taken at any time. The program of studies encompasses courses required to be taken in a specific order to meet graduation and teacher licensure requirements. Participants within the Education pathway have a prescribed program of study that does not allow for many alternatives to the progression of courses or additional electives due to teacher licensure requirements.

The second group of participants included undergraduate students from across disciplines who volunteered through a university-wide service-learning volunteer platform (n = 7). Students signed up to work with an adult English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) program at a community nonprofit. Demographic data related to major and classification were not collected to maintain students' anonymity.

Critical Service-Learning Placements

Participants enrolled in Education courses were partnered with multiple public schools and community placements. The local school district where the authors' university resides is located in a large urban area. University students were assigned to (a) Education field experience or (b) a community-based nonprofit. The field placements included a pre-K through 12th grade public school or a community partner. Education students with a field experience were assigned to a school where they were partnered with one teacher and worked with a group of students who were either (a) students with disabilities (i.e., learning disabilities and emotional disturbance), (b) active English learners, or (c) at risk for school failure. Within the Diverse Learners course, students had field experiences with children and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities outside the traditional school day. The placement included a course requirement of 20 hours of field experience.

In addition to the Education field experience, an opportunity to work with a nonprofit in the community was utilized. The nonprofit agency provides many services, such as food assistance, but the student volunteers for this study served as English conversation partners within the adult ESOL classes. As conversation partners, university students performed such activities as asking adult ESOL students about their backgrounds, engaging in mock interviews, and engaging in healthcare simulations, such as expectations in a doctor's office.

Faculty Reflexivity and Course Amendments

This study began with the aim of examining how critical reflection can transform mindsets of students. The cyclical process of faculty agency of reflexivity and the literature review informed the researchers to examine their own assumptions and beliefs about the term "transformation." Originally, we had used the terms "transformation" and "whole-person formation" interchangeably;

yet, as we explored these terms, we realized that our original self-study was missing the complexity to move our mindsets from transformation to self-formation (Marginson, 2023). As true self-formation is an ongoing process, the authors decided that as faculty we should engage in the process of our own reflexivity as a model for our students. The process of this reflexivity was critical to the early-stage assessment of the project and the course amendments during the project.

Throughout these experiences, the student participants took part in conversations related to critical service-learning. As the faculty engaged in reflexivity, they amended in-class discussion prompts, reflection prompts, and course materials to address program practices that prepare teachers to engage in reflection pertaining to structures in society that perpetuate social injustice (Table 2). Findings related to faculty reflexivity are presented later.

Although student volunteers were not engaged in a course that intentionally implemented discussing practices that can perpetuate social injustice, the students did engage in a 30-minute training before working with families. This training included information about perceiving service-learning less as "helping" neighbors and more as serving as a mutual neighbor (Remen, 1999). The student volunteers were encouraged to always engage in conversations with the mindset of working with our neighbors, and not to focus on "fixing" the person.

Design and Implementation of Critical Reflection Process

Student reflections were collected as part of the critical reflection process through a common survey. The students who were engaged in Education courses completed the consent form and reflection prompts in class at the end of the semester. The consent form was read aloud in class. The student volunteers, who were not engaged in an Education course, were provided a link to the survey the day they volunteered. The survey link included the consent form and reflection questions. Volunteers were asked to complete the survey while at the nonprofit.

Due to the nature of this study, a case study method (Pan, 2003) was adopted to capture critical reflection in the moment. To standardize the questions that led students to critical reflection, students were provided Eyler's (2002) reflection prompts. The authors coupled this protocol with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle to gain a deeper understanding of the progression of student thinking. Eyler's reflection protocol was selected due to its rich history of being adopted by many IHEs' teaching centers (SOURCE, n.d.) and identified as a "well-used and successful model" in connection between experiential learning and critical reflection (Jacoby, 2019, para. 1). Kolb's experiential learning cycle was utilized as a progression of critical thinking within the experience. For example, students engaged in Eyler's reflection protocol after engaging in critical service-learning. When analyzing the results of the student responses, the authors consulted Kolb's experiential learning cycle to gain a deeper understanding of students' progression of thinking compared to the experience and, eventually, the students' program of study.

Participants engaged in questions that fell into the categories of "What?", "So what?", and "Now what?" The category of "What?" includes questions related to the student's experience in the field, "So what?" includes

Table 2. Course Topics: Social Injustice

Topics	Education course discussion
Asset vs. deficit mindset	• Identify asset vs. deficit mindset • Use of asset vs. deficit language
Data	• Data that represents opportunity gaps • Differences and outcomes of different demographics of pre-K–12th grade students
Systemic structures	• Opportunity gaps • Policies and practices that impact differences
Case study analysis	• Bridge research theory to practice gap • Connections to field experience

questions related to why the student thinks these experiences have been important, and "Now what?" includes questions about how the student will use and apply new learning.

The subcategory of questions under each category slightly differed based on the learning outcomes and student engagement in the field. For example, students enrolled in Education courses were asked additional subcategory questions, such as "How will this field experience contribute to your effectiveness as a future teacher?" whereas volunteer students were not asked questions related to teacher preparation.

Data Analysis

This study began with the philosophical approach of epistemology, or how do we know what we know (Woleński, 2004)? For this study, qualitative data were intentionally collected to capture the voices of the participants in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of how knowledge was formed during critical service-learning. The authors recognized that their own experiences impact their interpretation of student responses and did not attempt to make judgment through analysis. Qualitative analysis, including epistemology, can sometimes seem generic and linear, leaving terms, such as coding, unexplained (Lichtman, 2013). Lichtman suggested a detailed approach to "sift and sort" qualitative data to allow the researchers more time to dig into the data to explore the complex nature of explaining the human condition (Bernauer et al., 2013). Lichtman's (2023) three Cs of data analysis (codes, categories, concept) were utilized to analyze student reflections by first sifting through responses to identify common codes, negotiating if these codes truly represented the participants' responses, then spending time in these codes to sort responses into common categories, which led to a common concept. The common concept was analyzed with the original responses to ensure that participant voices were present in the common concept.

Each researcher independently read student reflections from the course they taught. Next, they identified common responses from taught courses, including direct quotes, and analyzed the common responses to create common codes throughout all service-learning opportunities. The researchers reviewed the common codes to identify the two common categories. These categories were shared with the research team to identify a common concept.

The researchers completed the analysis multiple times to triangulate methods throughout the study. The researchers first met to establish interrater reliability of the critical reflection prompts. They discussed the essential questions and expectations of student results within the reflection prompts. Next, researchers read the student reflections independently and met as a group to discuss codes. When common categories for all participants were present in the categories of "What?", "So what?", and "Now what?", the researchers reread the responses and annotated responses independently. The researchers met again to discuss the annotation to reinforce the categories identified in the first analysis.

Project Impact

The purpose of this study was to engage students in critical reflection pertaining to critical service-learning as a vehicle to transform beliefs and perspectives regarding equity and social justice in our community. In this section, we discuss the results of the student surveys and outline steps in the development of this project.

Faculty Reflexivity and Course Amendments

The first finding from this study related to the whole-person formation of the authors themselves. While this study began with students as the main participants, we, as faculty engaging in our reflexivity, realized a need for our own shift in mindset from transformation to self-formation (Marginson, 2023). This ongoing process was essential for the authors but also served as a model for students.

The second finding of this study included the need for our students to not only begin to engage in the ongoing process of agency of reflexivity, but also to be able to see the connection between this process and skills that can be used postgraduation. The authors' discussion with the director of career readiness helped us to begin to implement specific career readiness competencies within our courses: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology (NACE, 2024). As faculty, we assumed that students would see the clear connection between the critical experience and future career goals, but we learned quickly that students require an explicit connection. The authors asked the director of career readiness to visit classrooms and hold events for our students. Through

the reflexivity process, the authors realized that the responsibility of this work should gradually migrate from being held solely in the Office of Career Readiness and begin to be implemented across courses. As a result, the authors have begun to highlight the NACE key competencies in syllabi and coursework.

The third common finding through the authors' process of reflexivity was the need for a common definition of critical service-learning. This finding was aligned with previous research that suggested faculty often bring their experience and understanding of service-learning into a course, but these experiences may be different between faculty (Jacoby, 2014). As each faculty member engaged in separate literature reviews and shared findings from their studies, a common definition and expectation of critical service-learning, as opposed to traditional service-learning, emerged. These findings aided the faculty in creating course amendments.

The fourth key finding that led to course amendments was the need for a common instrument, common expectations pertaining to critical reflection, and common expectations about critical engagement opportunities. To address the need for a common instrument, the researchers engaged in a literature review to identify current instruments and the benefits of each instrument. This review led the researchers to utilize a common critical reflection tool: Eyler's (2002) "What?", "So what?", "Now what?" protocol.

In addition to the need for a key instrument, the authors noticed a need for common expectations pertaining to the implementation of the reflection questions. The research team discussed current practices pertaining to reflection and discovered a need for the same protocol. For example, one researcher was assigning a written reflection at the end of the course, whereas another researcher was engaging the students in class discussion at the middle and end of the course. Previous research (Wang et al., 2019) guided the researchers to engage students in conversations throughout the course. Due to the timing of this reflection, the common protocol was conducted in all three courses only at the end of the semester, but the researchers see this as an opportunity for the future of this study.

The fifth finding that emerged from the faculty discussion about course requirements was the need for common topics discussed in class. Table 2 includes topics that were discussed in all three Education courses, yet the way the content was introduced and the depth of content covered differed in each course. The researchers decided to ensure that each Education course included the topics and classroom discussion, but each faculty member would align the time and readings to the learning outcomes of the course. This discussion was also aligned to the need to embed these topics in all courses. Previous research suggested that a standalone service-learning course helped students discuss barriers to service-learning, such as the historical context that can lead to service-learning being perceived as "fixing" individuals who are historically marginalized (Schiller, 2022). The researchers discussed the concern that students may perceive conversations intended to address the intricate issue of social injustices as silos limited to community engagement. These conversations could perpetuate many of the biases associated with community engagement.

A separate standalone course also silos the conversation about career readiness competencies and how the reflection process is essential postgraduation. Our sixth finding, from both the discussions with the director of career readiness and student responses, was that students benefit from the explicit connection between career readiness competencies, critical reflection, critical service-learning, and the workforce.

These course amendments were embedded in each of the three Education courses. The students who volunteered at the nonprofit were not able to engage in these course-embedded experiences. Findings related to the analysis of students who engaged in Education courses and students who did not engage in Education courses are discussed later.

Reflexivity and Student Responses

Students engaged in critical service-learning were asked to reflect upon their experiences as critical service-learning experiences. The authors utilized Eyler's (2002) "What?", "So what?", "Now what?" protocol as a common instrument to collect student responses. For the purposes of this article, student responses were condensed to eliminate identifying information and avoid repetition (Table 3). The authors utilized Lichtman's (2023) three Cs of data analysis with raw student responses to identify common codes, categories, and a common concept.

Table 3. Common Student Responses by Categories

	What?	So what?	Now what?
Diverse Learners	Change to experiences Connected to key course content: • Universal Design for Learning • High leverage practices • Social emotional learning • Individualized education programs • Inclusion • Collaboration • Scaffolding • Accommodations & modifications	• Confirmed & questioned career choice (teaching) • Connected relationships with asset-based perspective & learning • Reinforced concept of neurodiversity (path to the end goal may look different) • Understood teacher Impact with use of effective practices • Focused on appropriate accommodations • Concluded that disabilities don't define • Identified challenges with pull-out services & importance of gen-ed classroom	• "Opened my eyes" • Increased knowledge, confidence, effectiveness, patience • Advocate for students & families (can't advocate for themselves) • Collaborate with families
English Language Learner	• Field placement-majority active English learners • Differentiating a lesson for students with different L1s (not just Spanish) • Theory to practice moving lang. progressions • Implemented strategies for classroom management with multiple L1s	• Asset mindset • English language teachers are essential to student success • Multilingualism is part of the culture (the norm) instead of the exception	• Advocacy through parent–teacher conferences and throughout school (working with other teachers, school events, etc.). • School board member (future plans) • Strengthen relationship with parents • Advocate in jobs because see individuals as people

Table continued on next page

Table 3. Continued

	What?	So what?	Now what?
Human Development	• Sunshine High School • Conversation partners with nonprofit	• Confirmed commitment to teaching; provided new perspective for many; discussed dev. perspective of teachers as well as students • Different perspectives; importance of moderator/ teacher's role • Discussed development across lifespan more	• Confirmed career choice • Helped understand others in the world better • Shifted perspective of teaching as a field Challenges and rewards of teaching • Decision not to teach; want to help students, not as a teacher
Nonprofit	• Interview help • Conversation partners	• Majority of clients lived in community for a long time • Clients were professionals in home country • Different perspectives • Impact of barriers; blessing to work with clients • Barriers due to food insecurities and finances but at nonprofit everyone treated equally • Attending a predominantly White institution, have witnessed biases	• Longevity of program and additional programs to support jobs • Being voice for the voiceless (due to language barriers) • Awareness to community about struggles and barriers • Better understanding of what families are going through • Continue work of advocacy • Consider nonprofit work in future • Future profession (cultural awareness)

`*Note.* Categories are based on "Reflection: Linking service and learning—Linking students and communities," by J. Eyler, 2002, *Journal of Social Issues, 58*(3).
L1 = first language.

When analyzing student responses, we noticed inconsistent student understanding and application of certain terms. For example, the majority of students utilized terms such as "equity and inclusion" and "asset and deficit mindset" in their responses, yet the application in the reflection was not at the level of critical thinking the authors were hoping. In contrast, a second, smaller group of student responses suggested that students were implementing the topics in the course, and their reflections indicated a deep level of reflection. The finding is aligned with previous research recognizing that many individuals have different definitions of these terms, even though the terms are widely used (Kincey et al., 2022). This finding was essential for the authors and will inform future steps with course amendments.

Common Codes

Throughout the analysis, the researchers began with the common code of the categories utilized to collect data. The researchers coded the responses based on the headings "What?", "So what?", and "Now what?" The headings helped the researchers see a progression of learning based on the type of question asked. The researchers found overlapping codes among the headings and noted that the lower level thinking responses mostly appeared in the "What?" and "So what?" categories. The codes reinforced Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which suggested that individuals engage in a progression of thinking to eventually make connections between new learning and an experience. The findings related to the "What?" questions also aligned to the concept of ladder of inference (Argyris, 1982), which suggests that individuals go through a process, often without realizing it, to get from fact to decision or action. For example, participants first interacted with the "What?" questions that led to answers grounded in observable data. With these answers, students could discuss their experiences and invite listeners to ask questions without judgment about their experience. Setting this foundation in the conversation enabled the groups to reflect upon the "So what?" and "Now what?" questions that are designed for critical thinking, as well as moving up the rungs of the ladder of inference to engage with action or shift in beliefs. Although there was a progression of answers across headings, the authors identified the common codes of deeper understanding of course content, collaboration, career choice, and societal structures that lead to disparities.

The first common code we identified was deeper understanding of course content. Student responses that were related to the code of deeper understanding of the content varied from specifically stating the connection between theorists discussed in class, such as Bronfenbrenner (1979), Piaget (1971), and Vygotsky (1978), to application of content discussed in class, such as classroom application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL; CAST, 2018), high leverage practices (McLeskey et al., 2017), and classroom management (e.g., Evertson & Emmer, 2017). Deeper understanding of course content is an important code, as experiential learning could stop at this level of reflection and remain at the lowest level of the ladder of inference (Argyris, 1982) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. While recognizing it as a lower level response related to self-formation, we still acknowledged this response as an important aspect of refining one's practice. The authors brought these responses back to the research team to further grapple with ways to encourage our students to engage in reflection that leads to a connection between actions and beliefs (Senge, 2006).

The authors identified the next code as collaboration, with various stakeholders being considered. The most common response among students included collaboration with parents, such as one student's response: "Advocacy through parent teacher conferences and throughout school (working with other teachers, school events, etc.)." Another form of collaboration presented by students pertained to opportunities to collaborate in a societal setting, such as "future plans to become a member of the school board" or "consider non-profit work in the future." These responses indicated that the students came to consider their impact on society in light of their experiences; however, the authors noticed the response had varying levels of "saving" versus working alongside community members. For example, one student saw collaborating with families as a path to better instruction; another student saw in it an opportunity to become a voice for the voiceless. Although both responses are essential to the process of self-formation, the authors noticed this finding is important for future course amendments.

The reaffirmation of career choice or connection between the critical service-learning experience and career choice are

aligned with the findings of Mitchell and Rost-Banik (2019), who suggested that an alum who engaged in service-learning during their time at a university connected to exploring career choices and more opportunities within community service.

The final code, societal structures that lead to disparities, was a code the authors felt had the greatest impact on the process of self-formation and changing mindsets from "helping" to engaging in an experience where both parties benefit from the experience. For example, one student wrote, "One thing I found surprising while volunteering at nonprofit was how many of the ESOL students were high-level professionals in their home countries." Other students wrote about the instructional services that students with disabilities were receiving in school, identifying challenges with pull-out services for these students and recognizing the importance of general education classrooms. These statements document the students' progression of self-formation and creating new categories of learning based on their experience (Dewey, 1938). Recognizing these societal structures also presents an opportunity for the faculty to consider course amendments, such as offering an opportunity for in-class conversations about how societal structures can lead to disparities.

Within the reflections pertaining to career readiness responses, participants affirmed their career choice or made confident decisions to change career paths. For example, one student reported, "This has taught me that there is nothing else I would rather do than teach," whereas another student responded, "I've learned that I do want to stay in the Education field and help students one day, but that teaching in a high school or school in general is not my path." Our findings were aligned with the findings that service-learning can affirm students' career paths (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019). Enabling students to affirm their career paths is essential within the field of education, which often faces teacher shortages and barriers to teacher retention. Affirming their career choices early in their program of study will prevent students from entering a career path they are unprepared for.

Common Categories

Throughout the discussion about individual coding of responses, two categories emerged: career readiness and experience progression. Although it received fewer responses, the authors identified career readiness as an essential category to capture student progression in programs, connections to the future, and gaining a deeper understanding of student application connected to Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. This finding suggested that students who were further along in their program of study (or near graduation) were more likely to identify career readiness as an important aspect of the experience. The category experience progression combines Argyris's (1982) ladder of inference with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle. The category experience progression addressed participants' ability to advance through the rungs of the inference ladder as students "touched the bases" or engaged in each of the four stages of Kolb's learning cycle. For example, participants who made quick conclusions often lacked the opportunity to engage in active experimentation. The authors noted the importance of each student response and recognized how the responses are aligned with the progression of learning. No responses were considered "wrong" or not appropriate; rather, each was treated as an opportunity to engage in making new categories of learning through experiences.

Common Concept

This analysis led the authors to derive self-formation as the common concept that all responses were related to. At the time of the analysis, the authors were using our own reflexivity to grapple with understanding whole-person formation or self-formation. We came to realize that student responses from which we analyzed the common codes and common categories were aligned with the complexities, and lifelong process, of self-formation. From this we came to appreciate the necessity of expanding the common concept of self-formation across programs, disciplines, and universities.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the impact of critical reflection as a vehicle to transform mindsets and prepare students for the workforce postgraduation. The authors present general learning from this study as well as future steps to sustain this project.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The authors' first lesson learned from this study was the need to engage in the reflexivity process before engaging our students. Practicing reflexivity was complex work that

required us to be vulnerable. This experience helped us refine our personal attitudes and beliefs and make amendments to our courses. It was important that the authors engaged in this process before leading students through critical service-learning and critical reflection.

The authors engaged in a literature review coupled with their personal reflexivity. During this process, the authors noticed that many of the previous studies addressing critical reflection as transformational mindset neglected the connection to career readiness. Through engaging in reflexivity with the director of career readiness, the authors' mindsets shifted away from the director of career readiness as holding all the responsibility of career readiness. One lesson learned throughout this study is that career readiness needs to be embedded in each of our courses. By expecting the director of career readiness to facilitate all conversations, students perceived the competencies as an isolated topic that lacked connection to the workforce. The authors plan to align the career readiness competencies to course learning outcomes, state the connection in syllabi, and include the connection through course descriptions.

Likewise, a lesson learned was the concern that students would isolate conversations about systemic oppression to a standalone course about service-learning. Previous studies often highlighted the transformation of student mindset in a standalone course, such as a service-learning course (Shiller, 2022). Although this approach is intentional and meaningful, the authors found that many of the participants represented in the study have prescribed programs of studies, meaning courses must be taken in a specific order with limited options to choose electives. This led the authors to examine current structures within the university to engage students in critical reflection.

Although this foundational work was informative for both students and faculty, the authors learned that performing such work is necessary across the entire program of study (Marginson, 2023). Each course required 20 hours of field experience, which was enough time for students to observe and begin to work with community members, but it was limited time to use their reflections to refine practices. This lesson was reaffirmed based on participants' progression within their program. Two of the three Education courses were introductory courses. Students in these courses are learning theory and the "basics" of the education system while also being asked to reflect on mindset. One of the three Education courses is available to students at any point in their program of study. The authors found that students further along in their programs, or nearing graduation, were more likely to appreciate the connection to future goals, the necessity of understanding content for the "real world," and the importance of their own readiness for and compatibility with the workplace. This lesson learned includes an explicit connection across an entire program of study to build two specific career competencies: career and self-development and critical thinking (NACE, 2024).

In addition to the need for critical reflection to transform mindsets across Education courses, the authors noticed a need to expand this work across the entire university. Foundational examination of reflections led to the authors' understanding that embedding conversations about systemic oppression into courses will help all students gain a deeper understanding of equity and inclusion (NACE, 2024). The authors learned that the need to find an opportunity for buy-in across campus is essential to the success of this project as well as any future projects.

Future of the Project and Future Research

The authors of this study learned many lessons about the implementation of critical reflection as a vehicle to engage in critical service-learning. Future studies will aid the authors in a deeper understanding of this process and help students leave the university career ready.

We ascertained that our first step to reach this goal was to move our students to transformation that includes self-regulation skills that enable them to apply concepts learned in the moment, which is one important component of self-regulation. For us as faculty, this was a shift in thinking. We had significant experiences in self-study and reflection, but we needed to expand our concept of curriculum to include strategies that support learning self-regulation; that is, strategies that require students to eventually take ownership of concepts they gain in class or experience and apply these same structures postgraduation.

The authors are also interested in exploring the connection between students' program of study and Kolb's experiential learning cycle.

We noticed a disconnect between the sense of urgency of incoming students (mostly sophomores) and students about to engage in their culminating clinical experience of student teaching. This connection could also be aligned with developmentally appropriate practices based on student age. The authors would like to explore this area more in future studies, as in the future it may aid universities in a framework for implementation of general education requirements.

An additional area we would like to include in the future of this study is to collect reflections from the mentors or directors of the nonprofit. Our current study collected only the student perspective. We believe that adding the mentor perspective will provide us with a better understanding of the student implementation and reflection. We are also interested in engaging mentors in the reflexivity process.

Implementation

This study presented many important findings to help support IHEs around the world. Lessons learned will help the authors and other faculty implement critical reflection through the complex journey of self-formation. One lesson learned from this phase of implementation is to be more intentional in learning outcomes and the "why" for the field experience. The authors noticed mixed reflection results related to students' response to asset and deficit mindset. After discussion as a research team, we realized that some courses spent more time defining mindset, and this was evident in the reflections. One quick strategy to implement in the classroom is to explicitly state the purpose of the field experience and give students an opportunity to respond. Students could participate through class discussion or a quick online resource, such as Mentimeter or Google JamBoard.

The authors have also learned to be more explicit about their expectations for experiential learning. For example, the authors noticed mixed results related to students drawing conclusions based on their own experiences leading to a deficit mindset about the experience. This finding connects with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Marginson's (2023) reflexivity. For example, students engaged in their first experiences tend to include responses aligned with the notion of a volunteer "saving" the individual they are working with. When beginning this study, the authors thought that a shift from deficit to asset mindset would be part of the transformation of utilizing critical reflection, but after the authors' critical reflection, they realized this connection must be explicitly stated to students. If a course allows enough time, students could explore this topic through structured discussion, such as the class reflecting on their experiences with service-learning. The instructor would then make clear connections to how this experience will push their thinking in a different direction.

An additional lesson learned is to meet the students where they are in their program of study and urgency to enter the workforce. In hindsight, this seems obvious. The authors noticed that certain students seemed to engage in higher levels of critical thinking; however, when analyzing the reflections, we realized that these students may be manifesting compliance rather than active participation. Students could benefit from embedding career readiness competencies in courses from Day 1. Even in introductory courses, an awareness of career readiness competencies prepares students to see the connection between experiential learning and their future plans.

This study sets the foundation for work pertaining to critical reflection and self-formation utilizing critical service-learning as an opportunity for students to apply new learning, engage in critical thinking, and recognize the potential of members of the community. These career readiness competencies are essential for students to acquire during the college experience.

Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amanda Nelms, Belmont University. Email: Amanda.nelms@belmont.edu.

Declaration of Interest

The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

About the Authors

Amanda Nelms *is an assistant professor of education at Belmont University. Her research interests include teacher preparation with an emphasis on literacy, culture, and language as well as community-based research related to experiential learning. She received her EdD in learning organizations and strategic change from Lipscomb University.*

Sally M. Barton-Arwood *is a professor of education at Belmont University. Her research interests focus on teacher preparation with an emphasis on special education, career readiness, and service-learning. Dr. Barton-Arwood received her PhD in special education from Vanderbilt University.*

Lauren Lunsford *is a professor of education at Belmont University. Her research interests include teacher preparation and areas of literacy, including adolescent literacy and individuals with dyslexia. Experiential education is a critical part of both her research and teaching. She received her PhD in special education from Vanderbilt University.*

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