Reflection as a Service-Learning Assessment Strategy

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Abstract

The author reviews key purposes of service-learning, identifies two critical assessment challenges, and invites consideration of "student reflection" both as an assessment strategy and as a source of assessment data. The article posits a relationship between student reflection as a student development and instructional strategy, and student reflection as a service-learning assessment strategy.

Assessment can be enhanced by deliberately conceptualizing and utilizing student reflection as an authentic assessment strategy. This approach can provide insights about the personal meaning of the student's lived experience, and can generate useful data about the efficacy of service-learning as a student development strategy.

Alternative ideas about reflection techniques, timing, and strategy hold promise for improving the reflection that students do, and for smoothing the way to viewing reflection as an authentic assessment strategy and as data useful to administrators and policymakers concerned with accountability and with improving student learning.

Introduction

The literature suggests two functions typically attributed to "reflection" as an activity associated with service-learning: it can help students integrate their service experience with the academic curriculum; and artifacts such as the logs and journals in which student reflections are recorded can serve as "indicators" of non-traditional and difficult-to-assess learning outcomes such as an enhanced sense of social responsibility, or a heightened commitment to civic engagement. This article explores the proposition that there is a relationship between student reflection as a student development and instructional strategy, and student reflection as a service-learning assessment strategy.

Deliberately conceptualizing and utilizing student reflection as an authentic assessment strategy can concurrently stimulate student learning and provide teachers with guidance to improve subsequent instruction. Student reflections represent assessment

data useful to service-learning planners and administrative policy-makers concerned both with improving student learning and providing an accounting to university administrators and funding partners interested in the efficacy of service-learning as an instructional practice.

The author reviews key purposes of service-learning as a student development and instructional strategy, identifies two challenges to assessing important but non-traditional (non-academic) outcomes of service-learning, and invites consideration of the use of student reflection as an assessment strategy and as assessment data.

Key Purposes of Service-Learning

Service-learning is both a student development and an instructional strategy. The National Service-Learning and Assessment Study Group offers a comprehensive definition of service-learning:

> Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that combines the principles of experiential learning with service to the community. Through service-learning, students develop as citizens, learn problem-solving skills, and experience a sense of social responsibility by engaging in thoughtful action to help their communities. Students involved in service-learning deepen and reinforce their newly acquired content knowledge and skills by using them to address real community needs. They experience themselves—and are perceived by others—as competent, contributing members of the community. *(1999, 1–2)*

As an example of contextual teaching and learning, service-learning embodies a philosophy that "assumes the educator's role is to help students find meaning in their education by making connections between what they are learning in the classroom and ways in which that knowledge can be applied in the world" (*Owens and Smith 2000, 1*). A key role of the teacher, therefore, is to help students make connections between what they are studying at a formal level (the academic curriculum) and what they are doing at an applied level (the service-learning activity).

Student's reflections on what they are learning, typically taking the form of student journals or logs, are intended to help students

make these connections. The recorded student reflections then typically are relied upon as "evidence" of student learning, such as having developed a sense of civic responsibility or a commitment to contributing to one's community. While not the only or necessarily the primary goal in every case, developing an increased capacity for civic engagement is frequently a central concern of service-learning. Such goals are reflected, for example, in Anderson's *(2000,1–2)* summary of the essential components of service-learning:

- Reflection to integrate service experiences with the academic curriculum
- Civic responsibility to promote a sense of caring for others and a commitment to contribute to the community
- Student voice in choosing, planning, implementing, and evaluating service-learning activities
- Collaboration among all service-learning partners
- Evaluation of progress toward service and learning goals
- High-quality service focused on actual, recognized community need
- Integrated learning connecting service activities to academic goals.

A key purpose of service-learning is to involve the student in high-quality service that concurrently addresses a real and important community problem, stimulates a sense of caring for others and a commitment to contribute to the community, and results in authentic and robust learning wherein the student gains an experientially grounded understanding of the connections between concepts in the academic curriculum and real problems and activities in the community in which one lives. The expressed aim of service-learning frequently includes non-traditional (non-academic) learning outcomes in addition to goals associated with academic and cognitive development.

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Two Challenges of Current Assessment Practices

Increasing numbers of higher education institutions are investing significant resources in developing the student's capacity to engage in learning-through-service to the broader communities within which universities and colleges are situated. Service-learning, as a student development and instructional strategy, requires that students become actively engaged in service projects in their local communities. How well does this approach to learning work, and to what degree is the goal of increased capacity for civic engagement among students achieved? These are legitimate concerns whether one's interest is improved learning or accountability.

Faculty, parents, community partners, and students, as well as administrators, have an important stake in establishing that learning activities intended to foster higher levels of student civic engagement are indeed effective in achieving this goal. Further, as Gelmon *(1997)* notes, interest in assessment is increasing due to regulatory requirements, public demands for greater accountability, and administrative concerns about resource utilization. Funding agencies and accrediting bodies are demanding assessment data, and many faculty want evidence to support their belief that service-learning has a rightful place in the academy.

> *"Service-learning, as a student development and instructional strategy, requires that students become actively engaged in service projects in their local communities."*

However, conventional assessment approaches within the academy simply do not work very well for assessing many of the non-traditional (non-academic) goals associated with service-learning. Conventional assessment approaches have two basic limitations. One is that the student learning or growth to be assessed often does not lend itself to measurement by a paper-and-pencil test. Another is that students may feel too personally vulnerable to report fully what they have learned about themselves, others, or the world more generally through their service-learning experience.

Regarding the first limitation, survey questionnaires and statistical analysis of quantifiable data can be effective tools to find out what a student learned, at a cognitive level, in a particular course: can a student conjugate irregular verbs in Spanish, recall the

elements on a periodic table, properly identify architectural styles, or describe new knowledge, feelings, and attitudes associated with what one has learned about particular social phenomena (poverty, equity, social justice, or caring, for example) in connection with one's participation in a service-learning effort? Such strategies also can gauge a student's satisfaction with the curriculum, the service-learning experience itself, a particular instructional strategy, or an individual professor. Nevertheless, these aren't the most salient learning goals or concerns sought in the assessment of service-learning outcomes.

McPhearson, Campbell, and Schuman *(1995)*, in their discussion of challenges related to assessing service-learning goals and strategies, draw from the work of Conrad and Hedin *(1986)* in identifying five different areas of growth in a student's academic skills and knowledge that might be assessed. Note that four of these five areas deal with learning goals that are non-academic in nature:

1. Personal Development
   - Self-image
   - Internal locus of control
2. Social and Interpersonal Development
   - Social Comfort
   - Group-work skills
   - Social sensitivity
   - Intergenerational connectedness
3. Values Development
   - Team responsibility
   - Social responsibility
4. Academic and Cognitive Development
   - Basic academic skills
   - Specific subject matter knowledge
   - Critical thinking skills
   - Engaged learner
5. Career Development
   - Career exploration
   - Job-related skills

As illustrated in these five areas, there is a range of potential student growth and development goals beyond the two traditional areas of academic skills and subject-area knowledge.

While there have been a few efforts to make more relevant the assessment tools used to measure a goal like capacity for civic engagement *(Campus Compact 2000; Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, and Kerrigan 2001; Magruder, McManis, and Young 1997, for example)*, such initiatives do not appear to be widespread. Furthermore, despite such efforts to increase the goal-relevance and robustness of assessment data through the collection and inclusion of qualitative data from focus group interviews, critical incident reports, and reviews of student reflective journals, even these approaches to assessment do not fully capture the rich, compelling stories of personal development and learning by students, community partners, or those served through such programs.

While some institutions encourage faculty to use strategies that involve student journals, student self-assessment, and student-led classroom discussions as ways to assess student learning, current practice in many institutions fails to encourage the use of assessment methods capable of capturing compelling data such as that revealed in student-centered accounts of personal meaning. Efforts by higher education policymakers and instructors to develop more adequate assessments of student learning are laudable, and it is a direction in which the author believes there is much potential for developing more effective assessments of learning as well as more authentic assessments, from the learner's perspective.

> *"[Even] qualitative data from focus group interviews, critical incident reports, and reviews of student reflective journals . . . do not fully capture the rich, compelling stories of personal development."*

Regarding the second limitation, related to students' feeling of personal vulnerability that may limit their willingness to be fully open, Stewart and Richardson's *(2000)* study of reflection as an instructional practice reveals important insights about asking students to share their personal observations regarding their growth and learning. As these authors observed:

A major factor was that students were being asked to look at issues that were very personal [emphasis not in the original]. If they attempted any degree of honesty in the assignment they felt it made them very vulnerable:

> Something so personal about yourself and the fact that you know it is going to be marked . . . (Year 1 student)

> For some people it's quite hard to be entirely honest when it's not someone you know very well. (Year 1 student)

> I felt quite wary about actually putting it down in black and white and then handing it in. You feel quite vulnerable. (Year 1 student)

> . . . making you look at yourself and who you are and how you do things . . . and you're thinking—why are they asking me to do this? (Year 2 student)

An obvious challenge to using student reflection as an instructional strategy, as a student development strategy, or as an authentic assessment strategy, is that students may be reluctant for a variety of reasons to share insights about themselves and what they learned. Deep learning, which is how the author would characterize much of the learning associated with the values, self-image, and social development goals of much of service-learning, is highly personal learning, and therefore it is understandable that students might hesitate to tell the full story of what they have learned and how they have developed or grown as a result of their service-learning experience. Yet it is exactly this deep learning that service-learning (and reflection) can foster so well. Using better reflection techniques and developing and using authentic, student-centered assessment offer potential for more fully understanding what students learn through service-learning.

The next section introduces basic ideas about the concept of authentic assessment. A grasp of this concept is critical to understanding the relationship between student reflection as a student development and instructional strategy, and student reflection as an authentic assessment strategy for service-learning. The author's goal is a fuller appreciation and better understanding of the potential connections between these two ideas.

Student Reflections as Authentic Assessment Strategy and Data

The basic argument here is that efforts to assess the efficacy of service-learning can be enhanced to the extent that they incorporate student reflection as an authentic assessment strategy. While there are many helpful discussions of the idea of authentic

assessment, the author draws primarily on the works of Smith *(2000)*, the National Service-Learning and Assessment Study Group *(1999)*, Angelo *(1999)*, and Lankard *(1996)*.

There is a rich tradition of contextual teaching and learning. Service-learning, as an experiential learning approach, mirrors this authentic learning philosophy and pedagogical strategy. Authentic learning and assessment are inextricably intertwined. Smith *(2000, 7)* captures the key idea:

> Authenticity in learning is based on the premise that its demonstration must be through experiences with, and performance in the real world. That is, to have personal value, generate interest and produce functional knowledge and skills, the act of learning must be in the context of, and directly relevant to the knowledge, skills, and performances expected by the community at-large. Authenticity is part of the underlying foundation of contextual teaching and learning, particularly as to how learning is assessed. Authentic assessment is an indivisible element of the contextual teaching and learning process (*cf., Sears & Hersh 1998*). Thus, to authentically gauge one's performance is to examine the process of learning itself through ongoing mutual and self-analysis, reflection feedback and redirection of performance.

Authentic assessment has a formative impact on both teaching and learning. Among other qualities noted by Smith, two are particularly germane. Authentic assessment:

• Includes multiple opportunities for students to learn and practice desired outcomes, along with multiple opportunities for feedback and reflection;
• Draws upon multiple sources of information over time and in multiple contexts, employing reflective use of journals, reflective essay writing, portfolios, applied performance exhibits, work samples, peer mentoring, action research, case studies, criterion checklists and the like *(cf., Terry & Pantle 1994) (Smith 2000, 2)*.

In short, as Smith notes, authentic assessment involves learners in assessing what they themselves have learned. Furthermore, authentic assessment informs teaching as well as learning.

Earlier efforts by the National Service-Learning and Assessment Study Group *(1999)* reflect similar perspectives in noting

that not only does assessment drive teaching practices, but assessment as feedback can help students learn. In their Field Guide they propose that service-learning itself can be an assessment, and that "much of the evidence of student learning is demonstrated in the act of performing the service itself" *(1999, 2–7)*. As they point out, "One challenge with service-learning is that some demonstration of learning occurs 'in the field' and may therefore be harder to capture. To address this, teachers need to establish processes to capture this learning" *(1999, 2–7)*. So, the problem is not new. The challenge for administrators, policymakers, and service-learning instructors is finding ways to capture this learning.

The author argues that this learning can be captured by broadening the concept of student reflection to include authentic assessment as a purpose, along with its traditional functions of fostering student development and providing instructors with feedback to be used to guide subsequent instruction. The strength of the proposed strategy, however, hinges on improving and expanding the manner by which, and the stages at which, students engage in reflection.

Most discussions of student reflection as a strategy are limited to the idea that students will think about their service-learning experience and capture what they have learned by writing their reflections in a log or journal, to be reviewed periodically by the instructor. This approach erroneously assumes both that (1) students will overcome their feelings of vulnerability and fully share the personal meanings they associate with the service-learning experience, and (2) they already have the skills and knowledge needed to effectively be reflective about their learning experiences.

Improving Reflection Techniques

There are a number of ideas about reflection techniques, timing, and strategy that, if adopted, hold promise for improving the reflection that students do, and for smoothing the way to viewing reflection as an authentic assessment strategy and as data useful to administrators and policymakers concerned with accountability and with improving student learning. The ideas described here are drawn primarily from a chapter contributed by Harry C. Silcox to the Peer Consultant Initiative Handbook *(1995)*, edited by Toole, Gorak, and Warnes. This publication has a number of very useful ideas related to service-learning, and is particularly illuminating regarding reflection and assessment.

Reflective teaching techniques described by Silcox go well beyond the common but mistaken beliefs that reflection is easily done without particular guidance, that it involves using just journaling as a technique, and that it is accomplished simply by asking students to describe how they feel about service or to describe and discuss what they have learned in the course of their service-learning experience. Silcox advises that much care must be exercised in deciding what types of reflection to use in as much as different student outcomes are associated with different types of reflection activities. Conrad and Hedin *(1987)* list different learning goals and types of outcomes:

Academic Learning
  • Improved basic skills
  • Better learning of subject matter
  • Higher level of thinking and problem solving
  • Learning to learn from experience

Personal Development
  • Awareness of change in oneself
  • A sense of community
  • Taking charge of life

Program Improvement
  • Improved performance of the service
  • Improved service program

(Conrad and Hedin 1987 in Silcox 1995, Q–3)

Silcox notes that the timing of reflection is a strategic decision and can include individual conferences, brief daily meetings, weekly group meetings, and periodic workshops. He further suggests the advisability of organizing the reflective component of service-learning into three phases, and offers specific suggestions for each: preparation for working in the field; processing day-to-day experience with students and helping them realize the potential for learning from the experience; and generating a product to bring closure and to summarize and integrate previous work. Finally, Silcox *(1995)* identifies eleven different forms of reflection, noting that particular techniques are better suited to specific learning outcomes:

1. *Random Reading:* Readers select anything they might enjoy reading and are asked to be prepared to share their thoughts about what they read.

2. *Directed Reading:* Selected reading that will enrich or help support an experience.
3. *Journal Writing:* Writing of personal beliefs, attitudes, experiences; how they interact with attitudes and values of the individual; must remain private.
4. *Directed Writing:* Writing to fill a specific request to support a reflective session.
5. *Oral Description*: Tell what was done and how one felt about it.
6. *Oral Expert:* Informed by much experience and directed reading assignments, the student acts as an expert to pass along the information to a learner.
7. *Oral Facilitator/Commentator:* Acts as a facilitator to keep a conversation alive; acts as a commentator who listens and can stop the action to focus the group on the cognitive activities of the reflective session.
8. *Object Reflection:* Use an object as a vehicle for getting the story behind the story.
9. *Structured Activity:* Whatever a group can do that has built within it a mutual experience.
10. *Creative Activity:* Generating a creative activity like a video, or a puppet show, creates reflective opportunity both for the presenter and the audience.
11. *Pre-Reflection:* Helping students anticipate the service experience and thereby setting up a reference point for reflection on the actual experience.

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Each of these techniques can be used to structure reflection in a particular way suited to gaining a specific learning outcome. There is great potential through the use of these techniques (each is explained more fully by Silcox) to foster student development aimed at particular learning outcomes. The use of these techniques

has the potential to result in more robust portraits of student learning. Treating such reflections as authentic assessment data can enable administrators and policymakers as well as service-learning instructors to develop a better understanding of what students are learning, and of how service-learning might be improved to enhance student learning.

Why Bother with Reflection as an Authentic Assessment Strategy?

Employing different reflection techniques can facilitate the development and assessment of different student learning outcomes. Students enter classes at very different stages of development and readiness for civic engagement and community involvement, and they have wide ranges in life experiences, ages, gender, social class, maturity levels, and experience in the community. They start at various points and develop in very different ways. Some students get very attached to the community work that they are doing and continue on even after the term is over. Others can't wait to discuss a meaningful exchange they had with a homeless person while working in the community.

Students often tell personally significant stories of courage and compassion. These include casual and unsolicited but very personally significant reports such as comments about: Thanksgiving meals where students felt compelled to stop a relative or friend from telling a racist joke now that they personally know someone from that ethnic group; newly found empathy for teachers walking the picket line because students now understand how dedicated teachers are to their work; or the significance of their experiences of lobbying the city's transportation department to try to get free bus passes for people living with AIDS because students now comprehend the need for these citizens, like others, to be able get around in the community.

Other stories are less dramatic, but no less significant if one considers where a student might have begun his/her journey of civic engagement. For some students, registering and actually voting for the first time may be a monumental step, while for others, developing a meaningful relationship with someone who is terminally ill in a hospice center might radically change their worldview.

Students can read about and discuss issues such as social class, racism, sexism, the destruction of the environment, poverty, homelessness, pollution, refugee trauma, the effects of illiteracy, the challenges of living with disabilities, of hunger, and so on, but

until they come face to face with some of these issues, their effects as well as their causes, they won't really understand the whole picture. Without direct involvement with some of these issues, students may lack relevant experiences that contribute to the development of leaders, activists, or engaged citizens who come up with solutions to these concerns and problems. The assessment challenge is to understand the significance and meaning of these lived experiences for students.

Assessing this learning when it does occur is important and can be facilitated through careful use of different reflection techniques. Recognizing that the reflections that students engage in do constitute examples of authentic assessment can open up many opportunities for gathering information about student service-learning experiences. A well-conceived and completed student reflection can, therefore, provide very useful and authentic assessment data. The author believes this approach can provide not only insights about the personal meaning of a student's lived experience, but also useful data about the efficacy of service-learning as a student development strategy.

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