Using a "Small Moments" Writing Strategy to Help Undergraduate Students Reflect on Their Service-Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This study examines a "small moments" writing strategy to nurture reflection in undergraduate college students participating in a course-based service-learning activity. Using grounded theory methodology to analyze reflection journal entries, the authors identified themes that indicate that, by writing "small moments" reflection journal entries, undergraduate students demonstrate awareness that can build insight, identify discrepancies, increase awareness of community, solve problems, and build confidence. Writing "small moments" reflections allowed the constructivist nature of student learning in a service-learning setting to become visible and evident to both the students and the instructors.

Introduction

*T*his study focuses on teaching reflection, which is the heart of service-learning experiences *(Eyler, 2002; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004; Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, & Neville, 2003)*. The authors share the concerns of a growing number of university educators for the need to nurture students' abilities to write reflections that are meaningful and educational *(Ash & Clayton, 2004; Chin, 2004; Correia & Bleicher, 2008; Eyler, 2000; Felten, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006)*. The setting for this study is a service-learning course in which university students provide tutoring for elementary school children in the children's classroom.

In this article, the university students enrolled in the course are referred to as "students," and the elementary school children they work with as "children." The elementary classroom teachers that the university students work with are referred to as "teacher" or "Mr./Ms." The authors who conducted this study are on-site instructors who observe the classroom experiences, and read and respond to reflection journals that students write each week. The researchers are referred to as "authors" or "instructors," as appropriate to the context.

This study was grounded in the literature on small moments and reflection.

Theoretical Framework

Small Moments

Bruner *(1986, 1997)* argues that language is the most powerful tool for organizing experience. Using language, people convey experiences in the personal stories they tell, locating them in time and place. Stories provide a way to shape human emotions *(Egan & Judson, 2009)*, and personal stories of daily lives connect emotions to a story's characters, events, and content. Such connections, in turn, can change or shape insights into a particular situation. Through stories, humans make sense of the world and of experiences that make up their personal and professional lives *(Barton, 2007; Gee, 2007)*. Stories can both entertain and educate. They can provide an intriguing strategy for learning otherwise obscure concepts *(Hill & Baumgartner, 2009)*, or for expressing feelings and views of the world.

Calkins and Oxenhorn *(2005)* created "small moments," a writing strategy aimed at helping young children think about an experience, and then write a brief story about it. By focusing on a small moment, children are better able to harness their experiences into more manageable units. Research on young children learning to write personal narratives has pointed to the importance of classroom social interactions *(Dyson, 1993; Pantaleo, 2009)*. Several studies have demonstrated the positive effects of personal narrative writing on motivation and achievement in at-risk student populations *(e.g., Wellik & Kazemek, 2008)*. Further, children bring their home experiences to bear on their writing *(Dyson, 2003)*.

The authors believe that the benefits discussed above can also apply to adult writers, and that the "small moments" strategy can work well for undergraduate college students writing about service-learning experiences. Much like younger writers, who are sometimes overwhelmed by the prospect of choosing what to write, college students face similar challenges when asked to write about their field experiences. This study extends Calkins and Oxenhorn's *(2005)* strategy to help university students write reflections that allow them to better understand their service-learning experiences. By focusing on a small moment, students are able to write a story about an event, and then reflect on what they learned from their participation or observation. Henceforth, this article refers to "small moments" as a strategy for teaching reflection that integrates Calkins and Oxenhorn's idea of small moments *with* reflection.

It is perhaps easiest to understand "small moments" as used at the college level by providing an example.

Small Moment: One of the boys in class today, Jason, was extremely rambunctious and goofy, even more so than he usually is. I walked into the classroom probably 30 seconds after they got in there and there were instantly tears. I couldn't even get Jason to tell me what was wrong as he was holding his head while sobbing. I took him over to the door to talk to him to see what happened and he explained that he hit the book shelf, holding his head in agony and the tears pouring from his eyes even harder. I told him that he's so tough and brave and to shake it off and I started shaking my whole body trying to get him to laugh just a little or to even get a smile, but that just made him more upset. I told him I would take him to the nurse's office and get some ice for his head. "I don't need ice," he yelled at me, "I just need a band aid." So I walked him to the nurse's office and explained the situation and she agreed he needed some ice.

Reflection: What we have to remember as teachers is children fall and get bumps all the time. Sometimes it is worse than other times and all children react differently to an accident. However the biggest thing is that children have this imagination, like me when I was little and how an ice cream suddenly fixed my problem. We obviously know the ice cream did not fix anything but it got my mind off what happened and made me happy again. This reminds me that no matter how silly an idea might be, once a child has made up in his/her mind, you have to go along with it. As teachers, we must be as imaginative as our students if not more so. I tried to be silly with getting him to shake the pain away, but he did not like that idea. Obviously, patience and having a heart for a child who is crying is needed on almost a daily basis in the classroom.

The above example is indicative of an incident that occurred during a few minutes of a 3-hour service-learning experience. It showcases one interaction among many that the student observed and participated in that day. The small moment is intended to remind the student of the details of the experience, and to provide a context to help instructors understand the reflection and provide feedback to the student.

Writing a small moment alone, however, does not necessarily lead to writing a good reflection. Conversely, writing a good reflection does not assist the student or the instructor if the context, the small moment, is either missing or not vivid. The "small moments" example below illustrates a good small moment with a weak reflection.

> **Small Moment:** I have noticed recently the increase in name calling. The children are in kindergarten and you notice them using new words, words that they have no idea what they mean but have heard from their parents or older siblings. This week, one of the boys at my learning center called a girl a "brat." The girl told me about the name calling. Before I could address the boy, she said that she did not know what "brat" meant. Another girl at the table answered immediately by saying, "It means that she was ugly and did not have friends." Another boy said, "A brat is a doll, a really tall doll at the store."

> **Reflection:** What I found most interesting is how offended the girl was at the word, which she did not even understand. The little boy and this girl might not get along, I don't know. I kept it simple, because we were working at the table, and told the other girl that what she said brat meant wasn't true but the boy was correct when he said that there are dolls called Brats. I told all the children that we don't call others names and asked the boy to apologize. I decided very quickly not to give them a definition or any information to encourage them to use the word "brat" again. Besides they had already moved on to a discussion about Chihuahuas, or as one boy called them chiwallas. Kids are great!

The "small moment" example is well-written. The reflection, however, starts off well but is soon interrupted by more small moment details, and thus is not well-developed. The student reverts back to describing the small moment instead of writing a reflection about it. Similarly, a reflection lacking a well-written small moment makes it difficult for both the student and instructor to fully understand what was learned from the service-learning experience.

Writing "small moments" is an important step on the path to making reflections visible to the instructor. Reflection is a key component in helping students attain a course's learning objectives

(Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). The goal is for students to take their inner world of ideas and beliefs, and make sense of new experiences they are having through service-learning *(Correia & Bleicher, 2008; Dyson, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999)*. This type of human activity is often referred to as reflection, and has been the subject of research *(e.g., Dewey, 1938; Polanyi, 1967; Schön, 1983; Sharp, 2003)*.

Reflection

Dewey *(1933)* defined reflective thought as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" *(p. 118)*. Reflection is a mental activity that builds a bridge between the human inner world of ideas, and the outside world of experience *(Hinchey, 2004)*. Service-learning experience becomes educational when reflection guides the student to develop a new understanding of the situation, which, in turn, leads to a change in state of mind and more informed action *(Bringle & Hatcher, 1999)*. The authors posit that the "small moments" strategy helps students move along this trajectory of development.

Learning to reflect on one's own practice is becoming more common in professional settings such as teacher education programs and medical schools *(e.g., Mueller & Skamp, 2003; Levine, Kern, & Wright, 2008)*. As pre-service teachers learn to reflect, they begin to see connections between the theoretical content of university courses, and their visions of future teaching in the classroom *(Gay & Kirkland, 2003)*. A review of research on teacher reflection led Yost, Sentner, and Forlenza-Bailey *(2000)* to conclude that reflection should be developed in undergraduate and graduate pre-service teacher education programs.

Higher-order reflection is not a natural ability in most people *(Schön, 1991)*. The authors believe that it is necessary to move students from novice to more insightful levels of reflection. Students can develop reflection skills only if they are provided opportunities to practice reflection that include guided instruction and peer-sharing *(Romer, 2003)*. Sharing reflections converts a private mental activity to a socially mediated one *(Erlandson, 2005)*, which can support growth in content knowledge, skills, and dispositions *(Kroeger et al., 2004)*.

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Felten et al. *(2006)* define effective reflection as "a process involving the interplay of emotion and cognition in which people intentionally connect service experiences with academic learning objectives" *(p. 42)*. To achieve this effective reflection, it may be helpful to scaffold students' awareness of their emotions *(Egan & Judson, 2009; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005)*. Effective reflection, therefore, may help create what Dewey *(1934)* conceptualizes as a reflective state of mind that leads to learning.

Service-Learning Activities

Service activities can be learning opportunities, which can also further inform the students' service *(Carver, 1997)*. In other words, service-learning activities can become serving to learn, and learning to serve *(Levesque & Prosser, 1996)*. The service-learning activities can also increase motivation, reinforce learning of theoretical approaches to teaching and curriculum, and enhance understanding of "real-world" complexity *(Kolb, 1984; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993)*. In short, service-learning activities can bridge the gap between theory and practice *(Billig, 2000)*.

Context of the Study

This research is set in a service-learning course, EDUC 101—Introduction to Elementary Schooling, a three-unit Liberal Studies required course offered at California State University Channel Islands, which has proven to be successful in terms of meeting the expectations of both the university offering the course and a local school district. It is based on the school district's expressed need to have more instructional time provided for English learners and economically disadvantaged children in two elementary schools. Negotiations by the university and the school district resulted in an agreement that the university-community partnership should meet the needs of the elementary school children as well as help the university students attain the learning outcomes of a course *(Bleicher, Correia, & Buchanan, 2006)*. The course aimed at developing healthy student attitudes toward elementary schooling and social situations that occurred in the service-learning experience.

EDUC 101 involved an intertextual integration *(Varlotta, 2000)*, in which the service and the academic components of the course inform each other. Framed using Varlotta's scheme, the setting for this study is full and narrow, which means that for most of the semester all students in the class serve at the same agency (in this case, an elementary school). The service-learning course

activities are examined through the lens of educational theories about teaching and learning in elementary school settings. According to Varlotta, the advantages of this type of service-learning experience are that students share a common, ongoing experience that lends itself to class discussion. The extended time they serve allows students to develop and maintain relationships with each other and the communities they serve.

The two elementary schools are in close proximity to the university. Students were placed with teachers to allow for rich opportunities to develop teaching competencies. The teachers have deep knowledge, both theoretical and practical. They can recognize behavior patterns in their students that lead to effective actions *(Berliner, 2004)*. Students build their own knowledge base and conceptual understanding by working with the teachers *(Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000)*. This learning becomes visible in their "small moments" written reflections.

The service-learning course in this study included (1) service activities to help meet important community needs, and (2) structured educational components to challenge students to think critically about, and learn from, their experiences *(Wade, 1997)*. The service-learning activity involved students working in classrooms in pairs one day a week for 3 hours over a 13-week period. After students completed their service in the classroom, they met with their course instructor (one of the authors) for an hour-long seminar at the school site. Each semester, approximately 20 students served at one elementary school and 20 students served at another school with each of the two authors serving as the instructor at the respective school.

Assessment Methods

The goal of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the "small moments" writing strategy in nurturing reflection in students. To achieve this, the authors used an exploratory interpretive research design *(Erickson, 2006)* in which they entered the study with a broad focus, and then narrowed their focus during the data collection and analysis stages.

The Researchers

The researchers, authors of this article, were the course instructors in EDUC 101. The authors assumed the roles of participant observers. They kept field notes while strategically positioned in the field in their natural roles as course instructors and on-site

service-learning supervisors. This provided the access required for making firsthand field observations in the most unobtrusive manner. The authors obtained authorization from the university's Institutional Review Board to conduct the study. The authors' biases included a desire to see evidence of reflection in their students. The impact of this on the findings was minimized by prolonged engagement in the field and open discussions with one another about emerging themes in the analysis.

The Study Participants

Participants included 130 undergraduate Liberal Studies majors who enrolled in one of two sections of EDUC 101 over three consecutive academic semesters between the years 2009 and 2010. About 75% of the participants were freshmen and sophomores. Over 80% were female. This was their first service-learning course at college, and reflection activities were new for all but a few. This was a convenience sample that involved all the students enrolled in the courses.

Students signed consent forms to participate in this study, and all aspects of the research were explained. Participation was voluntary. All student names used in this article are pseudonyms to further protect participant identity.

Data Collection Sources

Following the weekly service-learning experience, students went online and wrote their "small moments" electronically on Blackboard (a commercial web-based course management system employed in many U.S. colleges and universities, http://www.blackboard.com/About-Bb/Company.aspx). Instructors were able to access these "small moments," and could also post comments and provide immediate feedback to the students.

Each student made a total of nine journal entries during the semester. For the first two weeks, students followed four prompts (i.e., today I observed, today I participated, today I learned, when I have my own classroom) to acclimatize them to the concept of reflection and writing journals. Initial instructor feedback for the first two reflections was intended to facilitate the nuts and bolts of writing reflections, including expected length and what constituted description versus reflection on observations and actions performed during service work. Instructors also introduced students to the concept of making connections to their own personal beliefs and previous coursework to build their reflections.

This teaching strategy built on previous research the instructors had conducted to help students understand reflection and how to write better reflections *(Correia & Bleicher, 2008)*. By the third reflection assignment, more than 95% of the 130 students understood the basic elements of making connections as well as the differences between description and reflection in journal entries. The data for this study included 780 "small moments" reflection journal entries of the 1,170 written for the nine reflection assignments students were asked to complete.

Data Analysis

The research question was, "What do the 'small moments' reflection journal entries reveal about learning outcomes for the students doing a service-learning activity in EDUC 101?" Using grounded theory *(Corbin & Strauss, 2007)* techniques, the authors analyzed journals for emergent themes about what students were learning. The authors were interested in how students were perceiving their own growth and learning in the service-learning activity. The focus of the study was entirely on the service-learning aspects of the course.

To prepare the "small moments" reflection journal entries for analysis, the authors gathered all journal entries into one document. They independently read through the journal entries and looked for patterns in the "small moments." The first pattern they noticed was that students were writing reflections about particular children involved in an activity with other children. Students noted various types of classroom interactions, such as child-to-child, child-to-teacher, and child-to-student (i.e., university student tutor). Using this as a lens, the authors re-read the journal entries and developed deeper themes within these interactions. These deeper themes tended to be related to conflict, curriculum, or cultural aspects of the children. Discussions between the two authors of prevalent themes were recorded as analytic memos *(Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995)*. Five overarching themes emerged from the data. These themes are discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Findings

The study found that students were able to effectively use "small moments" as a strategy for understanding and reflecting upon their service-learning experience. Five overarching themes emerged from the data.

1. Building insight

2. Identifying discrepancies

3. Increasing awareness of community

4. Solving problems

5. Nurturing confidence

The "small moments" examples provided in this section were selected as most illustrative of the identified themes *(Lesnick, 2006)*. The authors also connect their findings to those from other studies in hopes that the findings from this single study will advance collective evidence of the impact of service-learning upon student learning.

This study provides evidence that the participants wrote reflection journal entries that indicate self-awareness of their learning within the five themes. There is overlap in the themes; the authors found that any one reflection journal entry example could often indicate growth in more than one theme.

Building Insight

"Small moments" helped students build insights into how classrooms are complex learning environments that involve not only curriculum and instruction, but also children's backgrounds and sensitivities. Two students' journal entries illustrate this finding. Student 1, Calvin, reflects on his surprise on learning that so many children at this school came from a military background.

> **Small Moment:** The teacher asked the kids to raise their hands if they had a mom or dad who was away in military service. I would say that about half of them raised their hands. One of the boys said that his dad had been away about two years.

> **Reflection:** It was shocking to me to see how many kids come from military backgrounds. It opened my eyes to the fact that you never know where your kids come from. Everyone has different family structures and sometimes not everyone is as fortunate as you.

In expressing that this "opened my eyes," Calvin indicates that his prior beliefs about children in classrooms might need re-examination. Implicit in this examination is an aspect of understanding

classrooms in terms of the diversity of children's backgrounds. Understanding that students may come from a different background than the teacher is central to modern theories of multicultural education *(Nieto, 1999)*.

In stating that "not everyone is as fortunate as you," Calvin is expressing insight about his self-perceived privileged familial structure. He is building insight into understanding the implications of knowing that a child he is tutoring is from a background different from his. This reflection illustrates the importance of considering background differences between university students and the people (in this case, schoolchildren) they might interact with in the service-learning setting.

Student 2, Louise, reflects on children's sensitivities.

> **Small Moment:** Today, I worked with Erik who has a problem with the times tables of two. Erik knows the times tables in order but if you ask him the times tables in a disorderly form he won't be able to give you the answer. Erik and I started to practice the times tables of two. As time went by, Erik got nervous and he started stressing out. He continued having the same problem with the times tables and toward the end of the session, he started to cry. At this point, I decided to end the session to give Erik time to calm down.

> **Reflection:** From this experience I learned two very important things. First, we should not put too much pressure on students because it can make them nervous and stressed. I believe that the best solution to help a student that has problems with the times tables is to relate it to something that the student likes, and practice the material in sections. The second thing I learned today is that, as a teacher, you need to have lots of patience with the students that have difficulty learning any material as fast as other students. If as a teacher you don't have patience with these types of children you may build a negative perspective toward educating children.

Louise is describing an all too typical situation of working with a child who is struggling to learn and is getting emotional. She demonstrates insight in judging when Erik has had enough stress in the learning situation and takes appropriate action. Louise's insight is an example of Krashen's *(1982)* theory of affective filter.

Louise also demonstrated insight about effective teacher characteristics required to achieve student learning. This is important because it is building insight into creating a successful learning environment for the child. In order to achieve this, Louise takes into consideration the content, emotional state of the child, and teacher characteristics she feels are required to effectively teach this child.

While Calvin considered differences between his own background and the child's, Louise reflects on what it takes to be an effective teacher. Through their reflections, students often demonstrated insights that either validated their current beliefs or caused them to modify those beliefs based on their personal experiences. This is akin to the Piagetian concepts of assimilation and accommodation *(Powell & Kalina, 2009)*. The authors conjectured that "small moments" would connect to one another across the service-learning experience. The final result could be that students either confirm their current insights, or they go on to generate new insights based on their reflections and observations.

In Calvin and Louise's cases, they were gaining new insight by considering either children's backgrounds or sensitivities vis-à-vis their observations or interactions with the children. Such observations can lead to validating the student's current thinking. It is particularly important for service-learning instructors to help students become aware of and shape their insights. On the other hand, changing current thinking can be accelerated by observations that do not fit in with current expectations, often referred to as discrepancies. When expectations are different than expected in a situation, identifying discrepancies becomes more evident.

Identifying Discrepancies

Many "small moments" focused on students' identifying discrepancies between their observations of events in the service-learning setting and their own personal expectations or current thinking about a given educational concept. Identifying discrepancies afforded opportunities for reflection. Student 3, Cathy, observed "out of the ordinary" behavior.

> **Small Moment:** As I was giving instructions, I noticed Katie had taken the scissors and was cutting bits of her hair. All the kids had a big reaction to this, and I asked Katie to put it away. After the activity, I notified Ms. R. She spoke to Katie for a few minutes. She asked her why she cut it, and Katie had no response. Tears began to

well up in Katie's eyes as she realized what she did was wrong. Ms. R told her that if she couldn't use scissors properly, she would not be able to use them at all.

Reflection: I thought this incident was not an easy one for Ms. R to deal with. I really thought Ms. R handled the situation perfectly since what Katie had done was already over. She then learned the consequences of her action and I am almost positive this will not happen again! This moment caught my attention because it was something out of the ordinary, as I have always seen the students in Ms. R's class very well behaved. I felt bad that Katie did this, but I appreciated being able to watch how Ms. R handled it.

Cathy is starting to see the routine of daily activity in the service-learning experience. With this comes the expectation of how things should ordinarily operate. When something challenges expectations, such as Katie's haircutting incident, Cathy notes it as an "out of the ordinary" event. This catches her attention and leads her to focus, which supports reflection *(Bleicher, Correia, & Buchanan, 2006; Dewey, 1933)*. When students notice such events, they are able to form their own theories and draw their own conclusions about why things did not run smoothly. When experienced educators observe a smooth-running classroom, they know that a great deal of planning and energy went into it. To the casual observer a smooth-running classroom might look easy to accomplish. Cathy's noting a classroom event as out of the ordinary is akin to the notion of "breaking the culture." Breaking the culture is a well-researched classroom phenomenon in which a classroom routine has been broken and the disturbance is easily observed *(Dixon & Green, 2009)*. The literature on classroom research would recognize Cathy's insight as a window of opportunity—an opportunity of chaos *(Cazden, 2001)*. She saw it, recognized it, and capitalized on the opportunity for learning by reflecting on it.

While Cathy identified a discrepancy through something happening out of the ordinary routine of the classroom, Student 4, Sue, observed a discrepancy between what she observed in the classroom and what she expected based her own experience as an elementary school child.

Small Moment: Ms. T announced that she needed to talk to students. She was holding half of a crayon box

in her hand. It had coloring all on the inside of it. She told the students that the crayons they had in their classroom were the only ones they had left and that they needed to be taken care of because if they got destroyed, they wouldn't be able to replace them. The children were all very quiet as she spoke. . . . She then told them to take care of the school supplies, and then she dismissed them for recess. At the start of the day, she had mentioned to me that there was a lack of pencils and they didn't have any more replacements because of the school's budget, so she informed me that I'd probably need to ask the students to use their own pencils from their desk.

Reflection: I think Ms. T handled this issue very well. She was kind throughout her whole speech, but firm enough so that her point would get across to her students. She understood that the budget made it difficult to provide the much-needed school supplies for the class, so she needed her students to know that they should take better care of the supplies. I was surprised when she told me that the pencils they had in the supply boxes were the only ones they had left because of the budget. I had taken notice of the poor shape of the crayons and the boxes they came in a few weeks ago, but I had no idea those were the only supplies they had left. It was sad to see how many crayons were broken in half or missing their covers. When I was in elementary school, I don't ever remember having a lack of pencils or school supplies. I always had tons of pencils, and the school did as well. However, my elementary school teachers would also inform their students about taking good care of the school supplies. I remember they would always ask us to return the supplies after we were done using them.

Sue's observation catches her attention because she is surprised about the lack of supplies at this school. This is because she has expectations about what supplies *should be* in a classroom. Those expectations were based on her connecting to her own experiences as a child in elementary school. She recalls that there were always adequate supplies of basics like pencils and crayons. This is an example of making a personal connection in a reflection *(Correia & Bleicher, 2008).*

Cathy and Sue demonstrated aptitude for identifying discrepancies. This allows students to make a clear comparison between their expectations and what actually happens in a specific situation. This dynamic leads to understanding a specific situation in a broader sense. Students advance in reflection by building insight and developing their ability to identify discrepancies. The next theme involves application of the first two themes to the broader community.

Increasing Awareness of Community

Understanding the importance of community is another theme that was prevalent in students' "small moments" reflection journal entries. In the following examples, students reflect on community from two different viewpoints. Student 5, Cindy, reflects on the importance of building community inside the classroom in the hope that this sense of community will extend beyond the classroom. She reflects on what the teacher does with the children in order to build community.

> **Small Moment:** One thing that stuck out in my mind today is how Ms. L always calls her class "friend" or "amigo." This is nothing new but given today's journal, I started thinking about this phrase deeper than just face value. First of all, the class was kind of hyper today. Off in the corner, one of the students, Joel, was imitating Ms. L. He was saying the word amigo both as a question and as a statement.

> **Reflection:** As I sit here and do my reflection, I am thinking of how Ms. L was modeling a desirable behavior (addressing the class as friend or amigo) and the class was picking up on it. She was calling her students friend (or amigo) so as not to create a further dividing line between herself and them. If this behavior is carried out onto the playground she will have a bunch of students whose first instinct is to call someone friend rather than something else. I don't even know if this is her reasoning for calling her class "friends" but I think the application of that gesture will be greater than she will ever know!

A simple classroom practice such as having children call one another "friend" provided an opportunity for reflection. Cindy wondered if this practice could be applied to other settings such as

the playground during recess. In pondering this, she is led to make her assumptions and expectations visible in her reflection.

Cindy's reflection indicates her own beliefs about the benefits of building community in the classroom. Ultimately, she is implying that she believes children's addressing one another as "friend" would result in their playing better together with less conflict. This reflection demonstrates Cindy's ability to conceptualize her knowledge in ways that facilitate transfer to new settings. This is an example of what Tobias *(2010)* refers to as generative learning theory.

Student 6, Jose, reflects on how his knowledge of community beyond the classroom can impact the community inside the classroom.

> **Small Moment:** One of the students came in crying from the playground and kept announcing "I'm upset" over and over again. She later came up to me and (me knowing the student from outside the classroom) asked me if I remembered that her dad was coming back this past weekend. I told her I did remember and the tears immediately started flowing, she began telling me that her mom was hoping things would be better when he got back because they had been rocky, but that since her dad got back her parents have just been fighting and she said, "having an autistic brother doesn't help either." This immediately told me what was wrong. I made sure to tell Ms. M what she had told me just to keep an eye on how she acted today.

> **Reflection:** Today I learned that everyone can have a bad day and sometimes it may all be on the same day or it can fall on different days but just because you're having a good day, does not mean everyone else is. You have to be patient and understanding of what could potentially be going on in a child's life outside the classroom or at home. I also learned how important it is to make sure to keep your eyes open and pay attention to the different maturity levels and learning levels of children.

Jose is beginning to see that there is a complexity involved in the school community that goes beyond the immediately observable. He has an inside personal knowledge of the child's family

situation, which has been developed outside the classroom. He demonstrates sensitivity to the variation in children's feelings. He discusses the importance of understanding that there might be outside-the-classroom influences impacting a child's feelings in the classroom. While this might seem obvious to educators familiar with elementary classrooms, it is a new understanding for this service-learning student who had little experience in elementary classroom settings.

Understanding community provides students with a better knowledge of the children with whom they are working. This can equip them with a more sensitive approach to solving problems in the classroom. The next theme illustrates how students solve problems within their classroom community.

Solving Problems

Understanding how to solve a problem clears the path for learning to occur and provides input for building insight *(Bransford et al., 2000)*. In the following examples, students reflect on problem solving in the classroom. Student 7, Beth, reflects on her observation of the classroom teacher solving a problem.

> **Small Moment:** Ms. T first called on Rod to come up to the whiteboard and solve a problem using the expanded style of addition. Let's say the problem was 45 + 43. Instead of solving in the expanded style, Rod began solving in the vertical column style, even after Ms. T reminded him to do the other. Instead of writing 40 + 40, Rod just wrote an '8' below where he had written the problem. I wasn't sure what Ms. T was going to do; I didn't know if she would help him and give him the answer or how she would tell him that he was wrong without embarrassing him. Rather than giving Rod the answer Ms. T made him responsible for finding the answer. She asked him to pick another student to help him solve the problem. Rod picked Johanna. After Johanna stood up at the whiteboard and studied the problem for a minute she was able to solve the problem in the expanded form. After seeing Johanna's answer, Rod began to try to explain why he had not gotten the problem correct; why he had just written one 8 rather than expanding the answer to 80 + 8.

Reflection: Rather than telling him he had the wrong answer, or telling him to sit down and then select another student to complete the problem correctly, Ms. T made Rod a part of the solution. By letting him "pick a friend to help him find the solution," Ms. T still left the problem solving up to Rod, just in a different way. I think that Ms. T's solution to this problem with Rod helped to enforce the idea of the class as a community, rather than pitting the students against one another.

Beth's case highlights how service-learning students can learn about problem solving by observing an expert (the teacher) helping children solve problems. The teacher helped a child use multiple resources to sort out the problem he was trying to solve *(Bleicher & Buchanan, 2004)*. A resource could be the teacher or another child. In this case, it was another child. Vygotsky *(1978)* refers to this social interaction as the zone of proximal development, where individuals learn from more capable peers. In essence, the child is solving two problems. He resolved the problem of finding a resource (another child) and, together, they solved the math problem. What Beth is learning about problem solving is that the teacher recognizes the importance of not hand-feeding children. Instead, the teacher uses the classroom community as a resource. Beth learns that it is sometimes necessary to seek other resources to solve a problem. She also comes to understand the importance of community in the classroom and the implication of a strong classroom community as it relates to teaching and learning.

Beth's learning is parallel to the child's in that both required others to arrive at an answer. Beth's reflection exemplifies how she developed new understandings *(Bringle & Hatcher, 1999)*. Beth grew in her understanding that the class can be a community resource, not just a group of children who sometimes interact with one another *(Romer, 2003)*. This learning strengthened her understanding of community and facilitated her building of insight. Beth learned the importance of making children resourceful, and of exploring ways to take control of their own learning.

In contrast to Beth, Student 8, Gloria, reflects on how she solved a problem in a classroom on her own.

Small Moment: Today in class we did an activity called "teddy bear toast," using toast and cookie cutters. Students were going crazy. They were all so anxious to eat the toast, "Can I eat it now?" was the question of

the day. One little girl insisted on doing the cookie cutter herself without anyone's assistance. So what happens? The head is torn off. She was so upset, the tears welling up in her eyes. I had the idea of a "butter band aid." I gave her the plastic knife and she buttered the head and body. That really didn't work, but she felt better.

Reflection: Crisis averted. I learned that with a little creativity any situation could be turned around for the better. I would like to think they are learning life lessons. In this case a little more sympathy was in order. With a little patience and creativity, many more catastrophes can be derailed.

Gloria's example illustrates the importance of patience, flexibility, and creativity in solving problems. Gloria was able to contextualize the learning, and put it into perspective. Gloria saw her role as one of guiding children into safe and pleasant learning experiences. This guidance often requires a teacher's ability to solve problems so that learning may occur. She realized that her job was to prepare students for life as well as for particular academic learning outcomes. Hence, in this example the goal was not so much creating the "perfect bear toast" as finding a creative strategy to mend a broken one.

Beth and Gloria are representative of how students learn to solve problems that they encounter in their service-learning experiences and how they reflect on different strategies. As they move along in their learning, they build more confidence in how to act more effectively with others in the service-learning setting. In a sense, they are progressing in much the same way as novice learners becoming more expert in their thinking and actions *(Berliner, 2004)*. When students begin to solve problems, understand community, identify discrepancies, and build insight, the natural consequence is to nurture confidence in working in the service-learning setting *(Bleicher, 2007).*

> *"When students begin to solve problems, understand community, identify discrepancies, and build insight, the natural consequence is to nurture confidence in working in the service-learning setting ."*

Nurturing Confidence

Confidence is a necessary ingredient for working with children in a service-learning experience *(Bandura, 2000)*. The following examples illustrate this finding. Student 9, Alex, reflects on her belief that she handled a difficult situation well.

> **Small Moment:** Today Zelda told me, "I have staples in my head." I laughed and said "What do you mean you have staples in your head?" I didn't take her literally. She told me that her little brother was mad at her. Her brother picked up a hammer that was laying on the table and hit her in the back of the head twice. The doctor had to stop the bleeding and put staples in her head. I felt really bad that I didn't take her literally at first. After Zelda explained all this to me, another little girl named Doris shouted out "Gee Zelda you don't have to tell everybody!" Doris was angry at Zelda, there was so much anger in her voice. I told Doris nicely that I really wanted to hear Zelda's story and I was really glad she told me.

> **Reflection:** I believe I handled a very negative situation in a very positive way. By telling Doris I wanted to hear Zelda's story, I made Zelda feel important because I wanted to know about her. At the same time I didn't scold Doris for being disrespectful and shouting out. I was very nice. I think I was very understanding and caring when I was listening to Zelda's story. I was quick to think and react to the situation before any feelings were hurt. I believe this situation is something that will occur a lot in the future. I learned how to solve this problem by redirecting it. I am pretty confident in what I did today.

This example illustrates how all four themes previously discussed help develop the fifth theme of nurturing confidence. Identifying discrepancies is illustrated by Alex's showing insight into the importance of not dismissing what children say, regardless of how unrealistic their statements may seem. Alex realizes that as a teacher she needs to weigh information to determine its authenticity.

Alex was learning to solve problems. This is clearly indicated when she wrote, "I learned how to solve this problem by redirecting it." This reflection connects back to Cindy's example of demonstrating the ability to transfer learning from one setting to another *(Wittrock, 2010)*. In Alex's example, this transfer goes further to building a better understanding of the classroom community. She realizes that building community is a crucial element in establishing effective learning environments. Alex is integrating her new understandings about building community with her personal theories about social interactions involved in learning *(Vygotsky, 1978)*.

Student 10, Carmen, reflects on a gratifying moment in the classroom, which did not involve a difficult situation but bolstered her confidence nonetheless.

> **Small Moment:** Ms. D gave me the opportunity to read *There was an old lady who swallowed a bat!* to the children. All the children quickly sat down on the rug and I sat down on the yellow chair. They didn't know I was going to read to them. I grabbed the book and told them a little about the book and began. They were all paying very close attention it seemed they were under a spell. They were all sitting down criss cross applesauce on the rug and looked at all the beautiful illustrations on each page. The book rhymed and it was funny. They enjoyed the book so much that when I said the end they looked at Ms. D and asked if I could please read another one. Luis asked me if all bats sucked blood and Ms. D explained to him that there is one type of bat that sucks blood, but only from animals. Luis was relieved he had seen too many vampire movies that he thought all bats were after his blood.

> **Reflection:** As I reflect on having the opportunity to read to Ms. D's first grade class I didn't feel that I was a stranger coming in and reading to them. I felt I was their teacher in some way. I felt comfortable reading to a group of 20 first graders. I really enjoyed reading to them because I had their undivided attention throughout both books. That is very impressive considering their attention span is extremely short!

In the role of instructor, one of the authors noted that Carmen was a little shy and began her service-learning experience working

in the classroom in a quiet manner, helping students one-on-one for the most part. Given this beginning, she describes a significant milepost for her in terms of confidence building. The most telling part of her reflection is perhaps her patting herself on the back with her statement, "that is very impressive."

As students deepen their insights and apply them to practical situations, their confidence increases through their service-learning experience. In Alex's example, this is explicit when she stated, "I believed I handled a very negative situation in a very positive way," and "I am pretty confident in what I did today." Carmen expressed it as, "I felt that I was their teacher in some way. I felt comfortable reading." Confidence is a feeling based on deeply held self-efficacy beliefs *(Bandura, 2000; Bleicher, 2007)*. This is one of the most critical growth areas for students who participate in service-learning activities *(Wang & Jackson, 2005)*. Service-learning instructors also hope to see students develop a more general sense of self-efficacy as learners and as members of a democratic society *(Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008)*.

Conclusion

This study examined a "small moments" writing strategy to nurture reflection in undergraduate college students participating in a service-learning course. Using grounded theory methodology to analyze reflection journal entries, the authors identified themes that indicate that, by writing "small moments" reflection journal entries, undergraduate students demonstrate awareness that they can build insight, identify discrepancies, increase awareness of community, solve problems, and build confidence.

"Small Moments" Strategy Enhances a Regular Reflection Journal Entry

When teaching reflection, it is important to provide a framework that allows students to make their reflections visible in writing for themselves and the instructor *(Correia & Bleicher, 2008)*. Another important function of reflection is to provide a mechanism to look back and describe one's learning *(Chin, 2004)*. "Small moments" illustrates one pathway by which reflection leads to new learning *(Dewey, 1933; Eyler & Giles, 1999)*. Written reflections provide a permanent record that students can revisit for further reflection. This reiterative process allows students to increase their metacognition and strengthen their ability to think about what they have learned *(Ash et al., 2005; Hatcher et al., 2004)*. From such metacognition,

students increase in their ability to plan a task, notice patterns, generate reasonable explanations, and draw analogies to other problems. All of this adds up to developing a deeper foundation of factual and procedural knowledge in a specific service-learning experience setting. This is prerequisite to nurturing confidence in students that they can engage effectively with other people in the service-learning experience. Looking forward, students can be expected to learn to reorganize their knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application to new situations *(Tobias, 2010)*.

"Small moments" focus students' attention and learning on a particular event so they have the potential mental space to engage in reflection. Reflection is a fleeting state of mind. Focus provides the time to allow our minds to dwell in a state of reflection *(Dewey, 1933)*. This study promotes the idea that engaging in reflection can allow for insight into how students modify their actions to engage more effectively in a service-learning setting. Students using "small moments" developed a deeper appreciation and understanding of their service-learning experience. This is analogous to the rapid development of writing ability that elementary teachers using Calkins & Oxenhorn's *(2005)* small moments strategy find in their young writers.

Students sometimes report that they do not have new observations or that they are doing the same things and routines after about the fifth week of a 15-week-semester course. They tend to focus on what is the same, not what is different. The "small moments" strategy gives students a tool to focus on what is different. There are many differences, of course, but sometimes only the elementary school classroom teacher or university instructors, as more experienced observers, can see this. The authors discuss this with students and refer to it as establishing a local context that is familiar so that the extraordinary is more visible *(McDermott & Hall, 2007; Siegel, 2008)*. The authors are teaching students to see the ordinary so they can more easily see the extraordinary. The extraordinary nurtures reflection, as students naturally want to know why something is different *(Dewey, 1933)*. Making "small moments" reflections nurtures this skill set.

Using "Small Moments" Enhances Student Development

In this research, the authors have found that a wealth of insight about students can be gleaned from reflection journals when reading them for more than content. Learning to write reflections

(so instructors may respond) is an important and practical method in the process of learning to engage in reflection. The authors are certain that when students' ability to express their reflections improves, they are well along the path to making better sense of their service-learning experience, attaining course learning objectives, and becoming more confident. Nurturing the skill of writing reflections makes the internal mental process visible—visible to the student, other students, and the instructor. Making a reflection visible to others means that others can learn what you learned. It allows students to form their own interpretations and build their own insights. Students can also learn what others think about their reflection. This adds a socially mediated element to subsequent reflection writing that builds on this social experience of sharing writing *(Bleicher, Correia, & Buchanan, 2010; Dyson, 1997; Erlandson, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991)*. It is good for the student, for other students, and for instructors of reflection.

Findings from This Study Have Resulted in Course Modifications

The authors conclude that writing "small moments" reflections allowed the constructivist nature of student learning in a service-learning setting to become visible and evident to both the students and the instructors.

The "small moments" presented in this article guide us, as service-learning instructors, in teaching reflection. Dewey's *(1933)* notion of reflective thought as active and persistent leads to the conception of the ability to remember an experience as stimulus for the reflection process. "Small moments" inherently build upon one another to create a natural pathway to stimulate a metareflection *(Correia & Bleicher, 2008)*. Students are building a lexicon of reflection markers as they build their "small moments" repertoire. A reflection marker is a word or short phrase that introduces or "marks" the beginning of a reflective thought *(Correia & Bleicher, 2008)*.

Using "small moments," the instructors learned more about how students were developing in their ability to reflect. In addition, they gained insight as teacher educators into students' development toward a teaching career. In order to express their reflections within the "small moments" framework, students were required to provide a detailed context. In that context, instructors were able to glean their understandings in many areas of teacher development, such as home connections to school, learning, and

teaching; and managing student behavior. These areas act as typical guideposts in the trajectory of effective teacher education and development. Understanding these guideposts is critical in developing along the teacher career path. The authors are confident that achieving discipline-specific learning outcomes is generalizable to service-learning in other disciplines as well. Service-learning instructors in other disciplines would also be able to gain analogous insights into their students' career trajectories.

The five themes that emerged in this study are important learning outcomes for all service-learning students. Although they were not explicitly stated as learning outcomes in previous courses, the instructors have now included them for future courses. Previously, the authors had focused on delineating student learning outcomes related to teacher preparation content areas. In many ways, they had underestimated the ability of students to learn about such content directly from the service-learning experience.

The instructors argue that "small moments" is an effective strategy for teaching students how to write their reflections. It allows for easy sharing in group seminar that generates rich discussion because it is based on the students' own insights and experiences in the service-learning setting. This teaching approach puts Dewey's concept of interest into action and works well to enliven student participation. The instructors found that they were able to build on this natural student interest to develop content areas in which they had previously found it difficult to engage students. Even if some content areas remain less developed, as in previous coursework, the authors feel that more pervasive learning outcomes such as building insight and nurturing confidence have transferability to the next learning experience provided in subsequent courses and life experiences.

Tacit Strategies for Service-Learning Course Instructors

The immediate utility of this study is in offering a methodology through which service-learning educators can nurture students to produce more reflections, especially in writing *(Schaak-Distad & Brownstein, 2004)*. It also has implications for extending our understanding of the role of reflection in student learning.

Based on this study, the five steps listed below are recommended to guide the teaching of reflection to service-learning students in most settings.

1. Provide a safe environment to allow students to practice writing their reflections at least twice (i.e., provide feedback but do not "grade" their first attempts).

2. Introduce "small moments" to students using a simple example illustrating a brief small moment narrative and then a reflection. Be sure to allow students the space to choose something that really captures their interest and attention.

3. For the first "small moments" attempt, provide individual written feedback about the mechanics as well as the substance of writing a *small moment*.

4. Ask permission, and then share anonymous exemplary "small moments" in class discussions. This offers an opportunity to explore content areas specific to the service-learning setting and student learning outcomes.

5. A note of caution to service-learning instructors wishing to use "small moments": attention needs to be given to developing students' abilities to write both good "small moments" and good reflections. Each component requires a different skill.

In summary, having undergraduate students write "small moments" can be an effective way to extend learning through reflection, especially in service-learning-based courses.

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