

# Academic Service-Learning: The Reflection Concept

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## Definition

The National and Community Service Trust Act defines service-learning as a method:

- A. Under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community;
- B. That is integrated into the student's academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the actual activity;
- C. That provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and
- D. That enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.

The Reflection concept of service-learning is incorporated into the above definition (Point B). Reflection is a tool of service-learning that deliberately incorporates creative and critical thinking by the student in an effort to understand and evaluate what they did, what they learned, how it affected them personally, and how their services affected society on a broader scale. This briefing paper looks at the ways to complete reflection in service-learning and why it is important.

## Historic Roots

The history of service-learning and reflection in education dates back as far as Thomas Jefferson, who believed that every person had an ethical duty to contribute to society through service. He also promoted reflection as a key element in effective education. Jefferson believed that both community service and an element of reflection should be instilled in children with the hope that these values would remain with them throughout their lives (Carter, 22).

The foundation was laid for service-learning and reflection as it exists in U.S. education today by John Dewey, the most pervasive educational philosopher and reformer of the early Twentieth Century. Dewey believed that education should be interactive, and should incorporate real life experiences that students are interested in and can apply to the world outside of their school (Carter, 29).

Dewey emphasized in his writing the unquestionable necessity of reflection in education to improve the process of learning. Dewey described reflection as “an intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result” (Carter, 28). Even with the concepts put forth by Dewey in the first half of the 1900s, service learning was not widely implemented until the education reform movement of the 1980s.

The 1980s educational reform movement emphasized the necessity of a collaborative effort in education between schools, the business community and community-based organizations to create a larger and more socially applicable system for schools (Carter, 31). The research of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, led by President Ernest Boyer, laid out many of the elements of service-learning as it is applied today, including an emphasis on reflection. The implementation of service-learning finally came to fruition when President Bush Sr. signed the National and Community Service Act in 1990, a bipartisan bill that allocated funds to each state for service learning. This was done through the program, Serve America. In 1993, President Clinton broadened Bush’s commitment and signed the National and Community Service Act, which not only continued funding students’ volunteer activities, but also ensured a connection with community agencies. These legislative actions allowed state education agencies the money and involvement to turn community service and student volunteering into service learning, meaningful service with an element of reflection and a tie to the curriculum (Carter, 54). Community service is voluntary service without formal ties to the curriculum. Service learning ties service to curriculum and adds an element of reflection.

## Importance

Hatcher and Bringle “believe that effective reflection activities (a) link experience to learning objectives, (b) are guided, (c) occur regularly, (d) allow feedback and assessment, and (e) include the clarification of values” (157). Students who participate in reflection with these elements better appreciate education as it ties to the world outside their classroom. They also find this type of reflection experience more enriching and are more likely to become lifelong community servants.

In understanding the importance of reflection, it is essential to look at the tools used in effective reflection. Speaking, writing, various activities and multimedia/ performing arts are methods used for reflection in service learning. They are known as the “options for reflection.” The National Youth Leadership Council, in *Learning by Giving*, (1993) offers the following options for reflection:

**Speaking:**

- One-on-one conferences with teacher/leader
- Class/group discussions
- Small group discussion
- Oral reports to group
- Discussions with community members or experts on an issue
- Public speaking on project
- Teach material to younger student

**Writing:**

- Essay, expert paper, research paper, final paper
- Project report
- Learning log - kept daily, weekly or after each service experience
- Guide for future volunteers/ participants
- Self-evaluation or evaluation of program
- Newspaper, magazine and other published article

**Activities:**

- Analysis and problem solving
- Information gathering needed to serve or understand project
- Planning new future projects
- Allocating program budget
- Recruiting peers to serve
- Recognition and celebration programs
- Simulation or role-playing games
- Training other students and/or program leaders

**Multimedia/ Performing Arts:**

- Photo, slide show
- Scrapbook
- Interactive computers
- Paintings, drawings, collages, etc.
- Dance, music or theater presentations

For these reflection options to be successful it is vital for the teacher/facilitator to stimulate creative and constructive dialogue and thought. Harry C. Silcox (1993) believes that teachers should keep a list of reflective questions that motivate student thought and foster the reflective process.

## Ties to the Philanthropic Sector

Reflection is a vital component to service-learning because it incites thinking that ties school, self, and community together, and it promotes and gives value to civic duty. Therefore, reflection and service-learning both greatly impact the philanthropic sector. Through service-learning projects, nonprofit organizations all over the country receive hard-working volunteers who simultaneously learn through education and community,

while they actively reflect on their service. This gives them a better understanding of both. These activities also prepare future candidates who are educated and have experience in the field for work in the nonprofit sector.

Reflection and service-learning, as noted earlier, help to promote civic responsibility, which builds a stronger foundation of social capital, fostering the growth of people willing to help in the problem areas of society. Service-learning also creates acceptance and builds diversity by exposing students to parts of the community that they may not have been familiar with in the past.

## **Key Related Ideas**

Key ideas related to reflection are the other elements of service-learning: preparation, action, and celebration. Preparation occurs when students and the teacher/facilitator discuss what service projects are, what projects they can do, what goals need to be set, and what skills are needed to accomplish the projects. Action is the doing of the service project. Celebration is completed to help students understand the importance of what they accomplished and as an aid to wrapping up the project.