

Maintaining the Balance Between Service and Learning: The Use of Journals in Promoting Critical Thinking

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Abstract

Service learning curricula in higher education have grown in popularity over the past decade. As students become increasingly vocal in their desire for applicability in their educative experiences and greater real life experiences many instructors have turned to service learning to enhance their teaching pedagogy. However, the challenge for service learning instructors is to ensure that there is balance and connection between the experiences accrued in the field and the learning objectives required in the classroom. This article, drawing upon the experiences of students enrolled in a service-learning based course, introduces the concept of journaling as a way of maintaining this connection between service and learning and highlights how this can help promote critical thinking.

Keywords: service learning, journaling, curriculum design, critical thinking, universities, reflective practices.

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Introduction

The presence of service learning courses has proliferated over the past decade within both the K-12 school and higher education settings. Williams and Lankford (1999) and Ralston and Ellis (1997) both point to the huge growth in service learning on American campuses. For example, Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents that promotes community service and service learning initiatives, saw their membership grow from just four member institutions in 1985 to 748 in 2001. Furthermore recent statistics gathered by Campus Compact show that 87% of these member institutions now offer service-learning courses (Campus Compact, 2002). This growth is consistent with research that suggests students who make connections between what goes on inside and outside the university report a more satisfying college experience (Light, 2001). Additionally the growth of service learning courses addresses one of the

challenges of the Kellogg Presidents' Commission on 21st Century State and Land Grant Universities (1996), that of developing more engaged institutions that are intimately connected to its community. Thus, as students become increasingly vocal in their desire for applicability in their educative experiences and greater real life experiences, and as higher education institutions are encouraged to forge closer links with their community, many instructors are turning to service learning to enhance their pedagogy and become more engaged with the surrounding community.

Although the concept behind service learning remains attractive, implementing it effectively to maintain the balance between service and learning remains a challenge. For example, Berv (1998) points out that many curricula that call themselves service learning usually lack supervised activity, the academic links, and the reflection necessary to engage the learner in a successful service learning experience. Thus, the challenge for many instructors is to ensure that there is balance and connection between the experiences accrued in the field and the learning objectives required in the classroom.

Recent articles by Estes, Wilson and Toupen (2001) and Williams and Lankford (1999) discuss the importance of reflection in service learning based curricula. Indeed, Estes et al. (2001) identify various ways to facilitate reflection. They discuss how student reflection may be enhanced through self-evaluation, personal reflection pieces, reports of accomplishments and letters to class members taking the class in the future.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of reflection, and strategies to encourage reflection and promote critical thinking in a youth development service learning course. The article will present the concept of journaling, a technique developed by the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum (WAC) movement in American colleges, and show how this technique can address the issues of reflection when conducting service learning projects within recreation and leisure studies curricula.

Defining service learning

Often associated with the educational philosophies of John Dewey, service learning applies academic knowledge to meet real community needs (Conrad & Hedin, 1991; Fertman, 1994). A curriculum designed with these underlying principals sets goals to enhance the development of an individual's sense of social responsibility, and of what is learned by contributing to their community. Not only does service learning increase student learning, it also enhances the curriculum and fosters the spirit of caring, sharing and lifetime service. Kendall (1990, p. 20) defines service learning as programs that, "emphasize the accomplishment of tasks which meet human needs in combination with conscious educational growth". These programs combine valued tasks in the community with intentional learning goals, conscious reflection, and critical analysis.

Richards (1986) cites two major rationales behind service learning. The first is the benevolent benefits it can provide to the community, region or society in general. The second is the growth, development and sometimes educational impact it may have on the

server. Often, individuals succeed in expressing compassion for others, enabling a learning style to grow out of service (Richards & Sigmon, 1986). Eberly (1986) lists a number of benefits of service learning programs that include increased self-confidence, career exploration, increased employability, and an increased awareness of the needs of others.

Williams and Lankford (1999) pinpoint three principles that should be present in student's active learning experience. These consist of the student's service experience being related to the academic matter, the service learning approach allows students to make positive contributions to individuals in the community and finally, there is a definitive reflective process built into the service learning curriculum.

Problems and issues related to service learning courses

With the infusion of service learning in higher education, subsequent issues and criticism have been levied at various programs. One of these issues has been the disconnect between service and learning. As Kraft (1996) points out, if this disconnect exists and components such as academic content and reflection are missing then the program is not service learning but more apt to be described as community-based learning or volunteerism.

The lack of academic content and reflective practices has resulted in some service learning programs being criticized for possessing inherent contradictions and dilemmas. Often, despite good intentions, service learning without an academic, reflective process merely supports values of civic responsibility without a deeper understanding of social issues. Thus, as Kahne and Westheimer (1996) point out, these programs are more apt to be called charity. Herzberg (1997) shares this concern. He observes that service learning can be a poor and superficial educational experience if courses are not structured to raise questions that result in critical analysis of issues.

Therefore, the notion of learning can get lost if it is tied behind service, leaving some critics to suggest that we may be better served if we emphasized learning as the primary goal and "service", as we commonly perceive it, as not involved at all (Cruz, 1990).

Journaling: An invaluable tool to promote critical thinking and reflection

How does the learning aspect of service learning courses get emphasized? Proponents of service learning are unanimous in their belief that an integral part of the service learning experience is the aspect of critical thinking and guided reflection (Adler- Kassner, Crooks, & Watters, 1997; Cleary, 1998; Deans, 2000; Dunlap, 1998; Estes et al., 2001; Kraft, 1996; Warren, 1998; Williams & Lankford, 1999).

Service learning theory values reflection to maintain the balance between learning and service. Often this is because reflection encourages an interchange between observation and intellectual analysis incorporating and applying academic concepts to con-

texts beyond the classroom (Anson, 1997). Dewey identified this relationship between action and reflection, stating that it is a critical component for educational and personal growth. For Dewey, active experimentation and reflective thought was critical. Thus, how one learns is inherently connected to what one learns (Deans, 2000).

Introducing a service component to a course increases the complexity of the learning environment (Anson, 1997). For example, the structure of the “typical” university course – readings, lecture, class discussions, and library research is enhanced with daily out of class experiences. Because of this, Anson (1997) proposes that journals are an ideal tool to address the issues that students face: that of being placed in a physically different setting where they are forced to negotiate complex roles and behaviors and define themselves in relation to others. In this instance journals offer a rhetorical space for students to critically write about these experiences.

Addler-Kassner et al. (1997) identified two primary benefits to combining service learning with writing assignments such as journaling. First, they found that both faculty and students were more motivated because both students and instructors felt a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their work. Writing further reinforced the benefits of this purpose and meaning. Second, they found that writing assignments facilitated connections between different aspects of the course. This encouraged students to think and write about their experiences which in turn enhanced their connections between readings, service experiences and class-based discussions. However, it is important to place some parameters around journals otherwise they may be perceived as lacking rigor or they may fail to achieve what they set out to do.

The use of guiding questions within journals is often a critical aspect in maintaining this balance between learning and service. As Deans (2000) observes, when students are provided with no direction, their reflection often focuses on the personal and emotive aspects rather than on social and conceptual dimensions or the implications of the experience. While both reflective pieces are valuable, our job as instructors, should be to help students connect their experiences with what they are learning.

The importance of the guided reflective piece of the service learning experience cannot be underestimated. Heilker (1997) points out that if no attempt is made to guide reflective practices then the service and learning aspects may remain disconnected activities. Furthermore, the absence of any guiding questions may result in providing students with a forum to simply describe their actual experience. The use of guiding questions helps get beyond the danger of student’s producing journals that become little more than superficial descriptions of their experiences.

The following case study discusses the use of journals to help maintain the balance between service and learning in the context of a youth development service learning based course.

Youth Development Services and Organizations: A case study

The Youth Development Services and Organizations course consisted of students who were interested in working with youth in a variety of settings. Throughout the semester students identified community and personal issues youth face in growing up and examined what institutional and programmatic supports are available to assist youth, as well as leadership, administrative, financial, and marketing tools necessary to develop successful youth programs and services. As part of a 16 week semester course, students engaged with a youth serving agency and met with that agency and their participants on average two hours per week. Most of the students exceeded the minimum amount of hours required. The students were also required to complete a final service project, the nature of which was designed in discussions with their particular agency. Examples of some of these projects included an inclusionary urban adventure program to Boston for middle school students, a sledding trip for academically challenged middle school students, and a physical education and weight training curriculum for high school girls enrolled in an alternative high school program. At the end of the semester, students presented the results of this project through a public poster session which all the agencies attended. They also completed a guided reflection paper that required them to analyze the different aspects of their experience. Figure 1 highlights the overriding philosophy behind the design of the course.

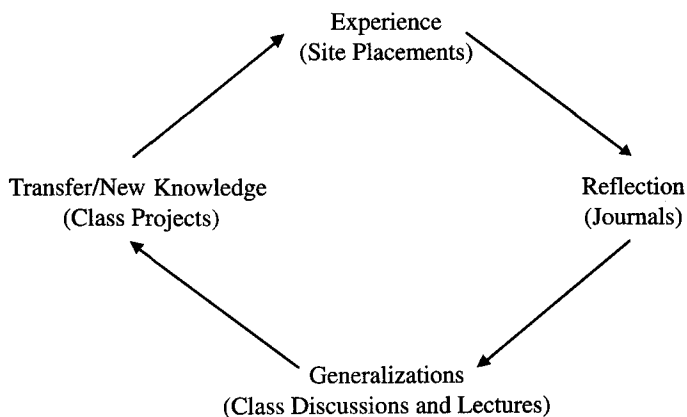


Figure 1: Kolb's experiential learning cycle and its application to the class

Over the course of the semester, students periodically completed four journal assignments which required them to critically think and write about their experiences at their site (see Table 1). They were required to tie some of these experiences in with the assigned readings and class discussions. Questions were posted twice weekly on a web page to guide their reading and to facilitate the connection between the readings, class discussion and their service experiences. Figure 2 highlights some examples of ques-

tions that helped facilitate discussions and bridge this gap. It became apparent that the structure of using journals as a means to reflect upon their service experiences addressed one of the main concerns of service learning curriculum; that of providing a forum for guided reflection.

Questions related to mentoring and relationship based programs

1. ° *Morrow and Styles describe how adults who work with kids have three types of styles when they work with kids. Think about what style defines you? Are there times when your style changes? Is there one style that is more effective than another one?*

2. ° *Merita Irby and Milbrey McLaughlin's article (that is an abridged version of their thought provoking book and longitudinal research) discusses some of the key elements of successful neighborhood organizations. ° Do you agree with some of the themes they discuss or do you find them missing some other key elements? How do any of these articles and/or the points brought up relate to any of the issues you have experienced in your sites?*

Questions related to Youth input/Youth voice, summits and councils

1. ° *The youth development movement really advocates allowing youth to have a strong input and voice in the designing and running of programs. They believe that this will give them more ownership and empowerment. ° Although this sounds great in principle, the reality is..... well what is the reality??? Is it possible? Think about this in terms of some of the kids you work with or have worked with? Can this be achieved? Or is it just a dream? Have you managed to achieve youth input in any programs you've worked in? What has happened?*

2. ° *What were some of the issues that Thome discusses in his article about learning from kids and getting youth input?*

Questions related to the developmental assets and protective factors

1. *Look at the protective factors and developmental assets article. As a youth development professional do you feel that either the developmental assets model or protective factors model (or both) will be useful for you? Why? Why not?*

Questions related to gender and youth

1. ° *Gender differences in youth work can be an important consideration in program design and implementation. However often it is not based on any rational, and decisions can be very ad hoc. From some of the readings from Henderson, Pipher and Pollock, summarize some of the main developmental issues facing boys and girls in terms of differences and similarities?*

2. ° *What are some of the implications of this in terms of program design and implementation? Does any of this relate to your own experiences and/or interactions you are currently seeing/observing?*

Figure 2: Examples of journal questions

At the end of the semester, all of the 20 students enrolled in the course were invited to submit their journals for possible use in a study designed to analyze ways that students' service learning experiences could be maximized. Their confidentiality and anonymity was ensured and their participation or refusal to participate would in no means influence their course grade. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. All of the students gave their informed consent to have their journals included in the study. The author used a content analysis method to examine common themes. Content analysis procedures are regarded as an excellent method of studying forms of communication (Babbie, 1998) and documenting and understanding experiences through exploring themes, issues and recurring motifs within the descriptions of these experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An analysis of the journals revealed some common themes in relation to promoting critical thinking and balancing service with learning. These included facilitation of student centered learning, connecting academic content with service experiences, a chance to reflect upon the student's own development across the semester, and the use of writing as a powerful learning experience.

TABLE 1
Types of Journal Entries

<i>Type of Entry</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Diary Entries</i>	<i>Spontaneous reactions to the course or something in your own life that you perceive as relevant.</i>
<i>Notebook Entries</i>	<i>Reflective critical response to course readings or class, etc.</i>
<i>Integrative Entries</i>	<i>Synthesizing personal and academic knowledge (may be self-initiated or guided by questions that refer to the readings).</i>
<i>Evaluative Entries</i>	<i>Periodic self-assessment and/or course assessment.</i>
<i>Dialogue Entries</i>	<i>Entries where you may invite inter-personal dialogue or request specific feedback.</i>

Facilitation of student centered learning

It was interesting to see how the journals helped avoid what Friere (1973) calls the "banking concept of education." The journals allowed the instructor to change the content of the class and use actual student issues that occurred in their sites instead of having the instructor simply "depositing" personal philosophy and experiences without student

input. As Friere (1973) points out, the success of the educational experience is maximized when students have ownership in the learning process. Thus, the journals were a useful tool to find out what was occurring in the sites which in turn allowed the formal classes to be structured in a way to address these issues to make the class more lively, engaged and relevant.

For example, part of the course addressed the issue of conflict in youth programs and ways to address issues that emerge. As part of the students' reflections and along with their assigned readings, they were asked to think about whether there were any "right" ways to address conflict so that we can provide trainings, or whether trainings were a waste of time because each situation is so specific. When conflict issues emerged at their sites, they began to critically observe and analyze how the conflict was addressed.

I wanted to write about an issue that occurred today at [Agency]. The bus arrived and as the kids were getting on board, one of the boys started yelling and cussing. Someone had stolen his history project. He began yelling and getting really upset as a staff member tried to calm him down. Another staff member came out with his project which had been thrown down a toilet. He told the boy that he would dry it off and it would be no big deal because it wasn't in bad shape. My only concern was that this did not appease the child. For him the conflict had gone unresolved. The staff member told me that this is not uncommon behavior but I want to know what could have been done differently. The situation was that the kid was on his way home, there was a rush to get the kids home and so there was no time to discuss it. However, I think that all we did was to infuriate the situation more by not acknowledging this.

This journal entry provided a concrete example to use as a frame of reference for the next class discussion. The discussion was lively, students were engaged and offered suggestions and added their own input about what could have been done and what some of their own limitations were when faced with similar situations.

A similar issue occurred when the class discussed certain issues facing youth. These included issues related to youth and race, youth and gender and youth and sexual orientation. In all cases inherent biases and prejudices were discussed as well as how values are formed. Youth from the community came into the class to discuss the issues they faced and students were asked to examine how their values and prejudices manifest themselves in the programming they do. One of the students found that this was an extremely problematic area. He was doing his service learning site with the Catholic church whose programming has to abide by the religious practices and beliefs of Catholicism. The student wrote this reflective piece the day after three young homosexual women addressed the class on the difficulties they have faced in finding safe, supportive adults as they dealt with issues related to their sexual orientation.

I began thinking about the issues that the girls faced about being gay. They talked about needing a support system. Even though I felt sympathetic, I know I would be going against my organization if I were seen to be helping them in any way. If I was in that situation where one of them asked me to help them I'd want to help but I'd feel awkward. What do you do? What would you do? What do you do when your values and beliefs conflict with the organization you work for? How should you try and resolve this?

Although the issue of conflicting beliefs and values came up in the context of sexual orientation, discussions led to the class addressing it more generally. This resulted in a powerful discussion that resulted in the students examining the issue of values and beliefs in our programs and how they manifest themselves both overtly and subtly. The discussion had depth, was punctuated by real life experiences related to their current placements and was linked to professional ethics and dilemmas that lay ahead.

Connecting academic content with service experiences

The journals were often a critical supplement to the service experience and academic course content in fostering critical consciousness. Herzberg (1994, p.315) refutes the notion that service learning alone can achieve this. As he points out, "the service experience doesn't bring an epiphany of critical consciousness." Thus, the service experience must be connected to a larger project of sustained and critical reading, dialogue, analysis, and inquiry.

Many students wrote about how the journaling aspect of the class was a necessity in helping them make this connection. For example, one student noted the following in her journal:

I think that in a class like this journaling is necessary in being able to tie in class lectures, readings, personal issues and service learning experiences. I feel that in any kind of service learning it is important to reflect upon situations as they occur. Through writing in our journals we are able to hear our own voices instead of silencing them within the confines of our intellect.

Thus the journals provided a medium to address Herzberg's valid concerns. As another student noted, "The journals were a great way for me to take the time to really reflect on my experiences and comment on concerns or issues that I noticed in my site. It also serves as a platform to react on topics discussed in class and my opinions about them." Thus students found the concept of journaling a safe and viable way to connect between their service experiences and academic course content.

A chance to reflect upon their own development and growth

Greenstein and Daniell (1999) found that their students were able to use their journals as a record of how they had grown and developed over the course of the semester.

This was certainly true of many of the students in the class. They were able to track their growth by reflecting upon their experiences and critically analyzing what they had learned. For example, one particular student spent her time working in a secure care facility for adolescent boys. As her first journal entry indicates, she initially found the experience to be an overwhelming experience:

Today was my first day on my site and I think they hate me! The staff introduced me and one boy looked at me and said, "Great, another rich white chick here to work with us. And I bet you think you can solve all my problems too don't you." I wanted to say, "No I don't give a shit about your problems' and then run back down the steps!" Instead I smiled and said I was here to help in any way I could.

Over the course of the semester she began to reflect upon why the boys might act in this way. Particularly relevant were course readings centered on youth poverty and definitions of youth poverty (Wilson, 1996), relationship development (Morrow & Styles, 1995), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) and some of the research related to protective factors and developmental assets.

I began to think about how deficient some of these boys were in relation to the assets in their lives. When I hear their stories about how many people come in and out of their lives I realize how hard it must be to trust someone when they know they are going to leave.

This student began to notice breakthroughs with her relationships with these boys and the journals gave her an opportunity to reflect upon her fears and her growth over the course of the semester. She enjoyed looking back on her experiences through the journal.

I have to be honest and say I am kind of sad to leave my site. I think they've seen how much I've learned and I think they know what a great experience it has been for me. I think I gained a world of things. I gained a new perspective on my own life as well as gaining experience working with kids. I think in many ways I took more than I gave. This became more than something I had to do for class...I was asked when my last day was going to be and I kept pushing it back because I love being with those kids.

Writing as a powerful learning experience

One of the interesting aspects that emerged throughout the semester was how the student perceptions of writing changed. Prior to the semester many students feared the writing requirements outlined in the course. Many talked about how they were "bad" writers or that they did not like writing because they were not good at it. However, their view changed and consistent with previous research (e.g., Greenstein & Daniell, 1999; Hirt, 1999; Light, 2001) many felt that their learning was enhanced through their writing.

As one student noted, "I usually hate writing. I'd sit down and start writing and before I know it I had written 20 pages. It was a lot more fun than I thought it would be

and it made me read and think about the articles we had to read.” Indeed Light (2001) found that students’ level of engagement was significantly higher in courses that required a greater amount of writing. As another student noted,

Through the journal entries I could analyze my thoughts and voice my opinions and concerns. I have strong opinions about what is occurring in my site and about some of the readings but I hate participating in classes and so for me this was a way I could state my feelings and explain my opinions and get feedback in another way.

Thus for other students it was another avenue to communicate with the instructor and for students to become more active in the learning process especially when actual class time did not allow for all the issues to be discussed in sufficient depth.

The writing aspect of their journals also gave a further “legitimacy” to their service experience and made them feel more than “just a volunteer.” One student noted the following:

The journals were a great chance to record our immediate thoughts and feeling about the site and how we were handling things. The journals were also a key element to the class and helped me feel as a true student working within the class, instead of just a volunteer that gave two hours a week and forgot about the kids. Having to write and think about the entries kept the kids in mind all week long and made me feel closer to the program.

Thus, the journals helped many of the students address Kraft’s (1996) concern that reflective practices exist to distinguish between volunteerism and a true learning experience.

Conclusion

Russell Crescimanno (1991) discussed how education needs to move away from “well-schooled” individuals who come to class with a passive, passenger-like mentality. He asserts that these students end up as, “irrelevant and useless to others and themselves” (p. 17). It is why he challenges educators to weave critical thinking skills into the fabric of our courses and curricula.

Service learning courses have been one way of addressing this and are being more widely used and have become increasingly popular both in the recreation field and on campuses in general. However, it is important to recognize that providing meaningful opportunities for students to serve in their community does not necessarily imply service learning. Opportunities to maximize learning is critical in the design of supplementary exercises that help promote reflection on student’s experiences so that they are able to critically think about what they have both experienced and learned and how that might apply to their experiences in the future. As another student reflected in her final entry:

I guess being the white girl who has spent her entire life in New Hampshire, I've been sheltered from interacting with kids from different races. While reading the articles it opened my eyes to new things. Preparing us for the future...I guess this is stuff from the BIG picture that I hadn't taken into consideration. Now I hope to move out of New Hampshire and work in [other] neighborhoods so that I can get a broader understanding of the youth of America.

Thus the use of journals can be a powerful pedagogical tool that helps students and teachers advance writing and learning as well as provide opportunities for reflective thinking related to civic and community engagement. They are not simply a diary or chronological notebook but a means for students to put their observations and opinions into context, for them to make connections between what they are learning, reading and experiencing. However, it is important that there is some thought placed in the structure and purpose behind journals otherwise the intent for which they were assigned will be lost. For example, Stroud (cited in Herzberg, 1997) voiced her concern at service learning efforts that are not structured to raise questions that result in critical analysis. Thus, the danger of writing simply about the actual experience of working in a particular environment minimizes the educational opportunity and potential for students to understand the process.

Designing questions needs careful thought and deliberation to help coax students into thinking about the material more deeply. It is this deeper thinking that is at the heart of what many service learning advocates are trying to achieve. Furthermore, since the journals are such an integral part of the students' grade (and thus their key to doing well in the course), it is imperative that they realize early on the importance of thinking about the questions at this deeper level. The instructor's initial feedback and comments on early journal entries are critical to guiding the students and honing this focus. Although this feedback is time consuming and must be specific to each journal, an instructor's ability to bring journal content into the class discussion heightens their importance in addition to contributing to the students' sense of being heard and active contributors to the content of the course.

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