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# Connecting Curriculum Content with Community Service: Guidelines for Facilitating Student Reflection

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From theory to practice: Portland State University
Part Three

## Introduction

As faculty embrace community service as part of the teaching/learning process, most often they simultaneously adopt reflection as a critical component of that process. In fact, the most commonly accepted and used approach to facilitate the conceptual connections of service learning is reflection (Stanton 1991). In other words, students must be asked to reflect if we want them to connect the academic content of our courses with the community experience in which they are engaged. Reflection is a process of thoughtful self-analysis directed to the development of awareness and attitudes. It has been used to describe a cognitive process (King and Kirchener 1994) and a structured learning activity (Silcox 1993). In service learning courses, reflection strategies promote and facilitate student processing of their community experiences in connection with the course content. Many faculty and students have found that self-analysis is achieved more easily and significantly more often that the conceptual connections between service and course content. In fact, many faculty have concluded that those connections are difficult to facilitate (Driscoll et al. 1996).

As more faculty connect their courses to community service, there is an accompanying effort to understand the reflection process and to develop reflective pedagogy. This article resulted from such an effort. It describes an analysis of the pedagogy of a course in which students consistently wrote about or discussed the desired conceptual connections between academic content and community service. Examining the teaching and learning components of the

course led to insights about reflexive pedagogy, and from those insights emerged guidelines for reflection in a service-learning course. The course examination blended the perspectives of the faculty instructor and the researcher/observer in a reflective process. This article resulted from their shared reflection. It describes the guidelines that summarize their analysis and provides examples to display the guidelines in practice.

## Service Learning and Reflection

Faculty claims for service-learning outcomes often include curricular relevance, greater understanding of academic content, and positive attitudes toward learning. Those faculty whose planning makes direct connection between subject-matter content and the community experience are especially directed toward such outcomes. For students, however, "the connection between service and course is not always apparent" (Hatcher and Bringle 1996). Students continually comment on the benefits they receive from their community service, but "they often draw a blank when asked to describe how such learning relates to their classroom education" (Stanton 1991). Reflection frequently yields descriptions of personal growth, community awareness, and enthusiasm for service learning, but those outcomes do not satisfy the primary intent of reflection in service-learning courses, that is, the connection between academic content and community service. In that context, Hatcher and Bringle describe reflection quite clearly as "the intentional consideration of the service experience in light of particular learning" (1996).

In this article we describe a course structure and pedagogy that appears to have supported the desired connection between the service and academic content for students. Our description here responds to a current search for effective approaches to reflection. We informally analyze a course in which student reflections consistently demonstrated conceptual connections. From the analysis, we describe guidelines for successful student reflection, that is, reflection that yields connections between the academic content of our courses and the community experience aspect of our courses.

## An Institutional Context for Studying Reflection

At Portland State University (PSU), we are committed to community-based learning courses (service-learning courses) and to reflection as a required component of those courses. We have devoted extensive faculty discussion to the critical reflection and analysis processes for course planning designed by Howard (1995). We realized early in our work that we were learners ourselves when it came to reflection, because many faculty were unfamiliar with that process as a form of pedagogy. We engaged in faculty reflection and collaborative development of student reflection processes and strategies. Throughout these processes we recorded our own reflections and reviewed them for insights. In doing so, we began to learn the lessons that reflection could teach us.

One important source of insights about reflection was the writing of our students. In many of our community-based learning courses, one accessible form of reflection was the thinking of students expressed in journals or papers. Most of those writings fulfilled the function of documenting personal awareness and attitudinal growth, along with myriad other benefits of students' community experience. There was, however, a paucity of reflection on the academic content of their course work. As we searched for reasons for the lack of connection between community experiences and course content, we raised concerns about the possible difficulty of reflecting within the confines of our ten-week quarters: "Perhaps the reflection we are looking for continues well after a course is completed," suggested one of our colleagues. We began exploring the reflection process that both students and faculty experience after the completion of courses. We scheduled a series of reflection seminars for students who had previously completed community-based learning courses and invited faculty to participate.

During those seminars, we learned a number of lessons from the students, but their reflections primarily taught us about how to better accommodate students in our community-based learning courses. Those post-course student reflections included more documentation of personal awareness, descriptions of ongoing relationships with other students and with faculty, and commitments to future courses with a community-service component. There was, however, little mention of a connection between academic content and community experiences (Driscoll et al. 1996). Since the literature credits reflection as a process to assure that this connection occurs, it became clear that we had much to learn.

We continued to study student writing and to listen to students. In the midst of our study process, we discovered one set of student writings in which there were many consistent connections between course content and community experiences. Some examples of their writings follow:

- The community experience helped with making what we were talking about in class real. I could see a lot of the issues we were talking about (in class) played out in the classroom. For example, teacher expectations affecting what was learned: tracking and gender issues.
- It was very interesting to see some of the concepts and ideas that we discussed in class be put in practice. The community experience . . . exposed us to how children think and behave and the important role that teachers play in their daily lives. Overall the material learned in class was brought into perspective in the field (community).
- While working in the migrant education program, the experience allowed me to put faces of real children on the minority children we read so many articles about. Obviously working in the community made the realities of teaching more understandable.

- It was great for me to see examples of teaching methods that worked and apply them to my own experience. It was helpful for me to have this 'theory/methodology' class and then have a place to practice its applicability.

Those examples from students' writings and most of the writings of their peers exemplified the seldom-found connection between course content and community experiences that many of our faculty had been seeking. What happened in this class to support those student connections between community experience and course content? With that query we began an informal process of course analysis in order to learn more about how to promote student reflection.

## Course Analysis

We began to study the particular course which generated the writing examples to learn how best to facilitate such effective student reflection. The course was titled "Introduction to Education." Students in this course represented various undergraduate and graduate majors. The instructor was Dr. Dilafruz Williams and she had taught the course for several years. In her syllabus, she described her overall goal as "the development of critical ways of thinking about schooling as an institution and as a means of cultural transmission and transformation." Specifically, students were encouraged to examine their personal and social values for relevance to questions of educational policy and practice. Through essays, poems, research studies, theoretical arguments, videotapes, and community work, Dr. Williams sought to stimulate students to discuss issues of race, class, gender, and handicapping conditions.

A 30-hour community-service component was a mandatory part of this course. Students were placed in a variety of settings in urban elementary and secondary classrooms. The students in these classrooms were recent immigrants or spoke English as a second language. Many of these sites were inner-city schools with non-white majorities.

With the help of graduate assistants, we collected classroom observation data with the intent of identifying the class processes that appeared to stimulate or support our desired student reflections. From there, the faculty member, Dilafruz Williams, and the observer/researcher engaged in a collaborative process of analysis and reflection. That shared process of reflection resulted in a report that does not follow the traditional norms of writing. Through our informal but intensive study of the "Introduction to Education" class we found distinctive components in the pedagogy and course structure that appeared to be linked to students' reflections. We will describe those components and draw inferences from our analysis in the form of guidelines.

## Pedagogy and Course Structure: Components Supporting Reflection

*Ongoing Reflection.* The first and most obvious feature of the course was the presence of ongoing reflection, that is, consistent and regular requirements and opportunities for reflection. Students were required to keep weekly journals of their community experiences. The assignment was used to stimulate participation of students in that the instructor asked them to draw upon examples from their journals during weekly class discussions. In addition, at the beginning of every class session, students turned in a two-page reflection paper. In the papers, they were required to respond to a set of readings and to connect the readings with their experiences in the community. Some examples of the instructor's directions for responding to the readings were:

> Compare the approaches to education presented in your readings to your picture of schools as you have found them in your community experience.
> What are your observations of classroom experiences in the school where you are placed with respect to race and gender stereotypes or the portrayal of non-whites or women in response to the writings of AAUW (1992), Hilliard III (1992), Oritz (1988)?

In response to these directions, students wrote:

- Where I have seen the most prejudice at LeMoyne School (pseudonym) was in the most surprising places — it was in the public teachers' lunchroom. During one very short lunch break, one of the upper grade teachers told me that girls cannot do math. She said that their brains are different than boys' brains and that they simply are not as good at math and science as the boys are.
- During my community experience I have heard foreign language teachers discussing the presence of Hispanic students in their Spanish classes. I was disappointed to witness their lack of sensitivity toward these students. I became particularly aware of the items discussed in the article. The teachers were discussing how little grammar their Hispanic students knew and then moved to discussing the students themselves.
- After reading about prejudices in education against minorities, I was not really convinced that it actually happened so blatantly. But in my school I saw it happen. It convinced me that it is easy to fall into a rut. Teachers judged kids on presumptions. Participating in schools allowed me to witness the process of transmission of culture. For example, I heard a substitute teacher tell a boy not to cry, to stop crying. She was passing on the notion that boys

are expected to be tough, to suppress their emotions. Thus, gender issues read about in our class were reflected here.

In our observations we saw the instructor direct classroom discussions to connections between the course readings, videotapes, and other relevant curricular materials, and experiences in the community-service work. Silcox (1993) suggested that a journal is less effective than directed writings to facilitate student application of knowledge to real problems or issues, so in our analysis of the class, we predicted that the directed writings and discussions contributed to the connections we saw in student writings. The student journal assignments may have also contributed to students' ability to make connections in that they provided a more personal way for some students to express themselves. Thus, students were reflecting on a weekly basis and we think that the ongoing quality of those reflections may support students' ability to connect course content and community experiences.

*Multiple Forms of Reflection.* When we studied the instructor's weekly reflection approaches, we noted a second feature of the course, that is, diverse forms of reflection were used in the course. Students were able to reflect differently in journals from the way they reflected in discussions and from the way they reflected in a formal paper. That feature responded to the diversity of learners in a class of 30 students and may have accommodated different learning styles. Some students write well and enjoy writing; others excel at expressing their thoughts in a discussion format. Journal writing may be a less-stressful writing format for students who lack confidence in writing. Even in the class discussions, varied formats supported student diversity. Some discussions were whole-class forums, some were conducted in pairs, and some were debates. Both verbal and written reflections responded to the diversity of students and different communication preferences with multiple forms of expressing reflection.

*Exam Questions.* The third component of the class was the inclusion of questions asking students to connect their community experiences with course content on the mid-term and final exams. In our analysis of this course, we were struck by the inclusion of those types of questions: We think they may have communicated a value to students. We have all experienced the persistent question, "Is this going to be on the exam?" and must acknowledge that inclusion on a test communicates a priority to our students. Research on effective teaching (Fisher et al. 1978) confirmed that when teaching communicates a valuing of subject matter, students achieve more. This may be the case in this course and may help explain why the students were skilled at making the conceptual connections of service learning. An example of one of the exam questions posed to students was:

> We will teach what democracy really means by living democratically within our own classrooms. What classroom practices would enhance such democratic living? Provide two examples from your readings and videos that exemplify such democratic practices in education. Give a rationale for your selection. Provide two examples or scenarios from your community placement that support or contradict such democratic practices.

Students' responses to the exam question provided many examples:

> • In my community experience I have noticed examples both contradicting and supporting democracy. The classroom is run by the teacher who gives assignments and lays down the rules. Conversely, I have also seen students feel comfortable to openly and freely ask questions as well as being given the opportunity at times to choose their activity. In social aspects of the classroom, the newcomers center is quite authoritarian. Students are instructed and constantly reminded about where to sit and when. On the other hand, I have seen her give students a choice in selection of tasks such as practicing English on computers or with flash cards. She has created an atmosphere of comfort when sharing materials.
>
> • My experience in the community provided exposure to democratic and non-democratic practices. The ideals of democracy, where each student is encouraged to find his or her own voice is supported by the role of modeling of the tutors. As tutors when working one-on-one with a student, we have a tremendous opportunity to share the joys and challenges of learning. With the individualized attention they get, students are shown that they each have a voice. And tutors don't have to provide answers — (they don't) have to know all the answers themselves.

At two significant points in the course schedule — at the time of the mid-term exam and the final exam — the importance of connecting the community experience with the course content was emphasized. The inclusion of exam questions directly asking for the connections was seen as communicating to students that such connections were an important outcome of the course.

*Modeling by the Instructor.* The fourth feature of the course that may promote reflection is the modeling of connections by the course

instructor. She acknowledged that she deliberately made community-example connections in the content of her lecture or during a discussion. In one class session alone, we heard at least seven references to the school settings in which students were placed. At the very start of the class session the instructor informed the class:

> Today's class will cover multi-culturalism and inclusion. I want you to think of this in terms of your community experience. The point of your placements is for you to get experience with the different cultures.

As various topics were introduced in this class session, the instructor renewed the connection between the content and the community experience. For example, when discussing the changing demographics of the U.S. and Portland, she asked, "What kinds of demographic changes are you noticing in your school setting?" When the discussion centered on possible unwritten curriculum — the communication of values — she encouraged, "In your school setting, notice what is being taught and what is not being taught," and asked, "What was taught during the Columbus Day celebration?" At another point, she reminded students, "Next time you are in your school, look at the books students are reading and look at the images that are being presented." Her reminder referred to a class activity in which the students were examining children's literature for the communication of cultural values. This class ended with a reminder to students to look for evidence in their classroom placements of what was discussed in class.

*Explicit Requests for Connections.* The fifth feature of this class that promoted reflection was one that has already been suggested by Silcox (1993). If we want students to make connections, we need to ask or provide directions that clearly and directly guide them to do so. In most of the assignment directions in the syllabus, and in the exam questions, students were clearly and explicitly directed to make connections. As we collaboratively analyzed the classroom observation data, we noted again that the instructor consistently modeled those same explicit connections. This feature reminds us of the importance of giving directions that inform students of exactly what is expected. In other courses, when we listened to faculty instructions, the directions were vague and ambiguous: "Reflect on your experiences within the community," or "Describe what the service learning experience means to you." In contrast, students in this "Introduction to Education" course responded to the instructor's explicit direction to connect the community-service experience to the course content.

*Climate of Interaction, Participation and Respect.* A sixth and final feature of the course that promoted reflection emerged from our observations of the classroom. The recorded narratives of what was said in class by both the instructor and by students revealed

patterns of teacher/student and student/student interactions. We heard in those narratives a clear communication that everyone's ideas were to be respected. In the data we observed that interactions dominated the class structure rather than "teacher talk." The narratives had patterns of students operating as both "learners and teachers" and the instructor as both "teacher and learner." Student participation was expected, and control of content was shared between the instructor and the students. We concluded that it was indeed a "learning community" in which there was mutual respect for ideas and expertise.

## Guidelines for Reflections

At the conclusion of our analysis of the course, we developed guidelines for both class structure and pedagogy in service-learning courses. Our observations of class sessions and the instructor's participation in the analysis process provided strong support for the guidelines. We pose them as starting points for facilitating conceptual connections in service-learning courses. Those guidelines are:

1. Reflection directed to connecting the course content with community experiences must be ongoing, weekly if possible or in every class session, from the beginning of a course until the final class.
2. Reflection must respond to the diversity of communication styles of students with opportunities for multiple forms of written reflection, and oral reflection in varied formats — in pairs, and in large and small groups.
3. Reflection must be included in the assessment component of a course in order to communicate to students that connections between content and community service are valued.
4. Reflection that connects academic content of a course and the community service activities must be modeled by instructors as an aspect of their pedagogy.
5. When asked to reflect on their community service, students must be asked explicitly to connect the service to the course content.
6. Reflection that connects community service with course content must be supported by a classroom context characterized by high levels of interaction, student participation, and a respectful sharing of teacher and learner roles.

We plan to use those guidelines in our faculty development work and to continue monitoring the student reflections in our classes. The guidelines will assist faculty in planning their courses and making decisions about pedagogical approaches that promote and support reflection. We can now provide specific suggestions for ways to take students beyond self analyses to conceptual connections between content and community service.

In addition to gaining insights about reflection, we learned that the process of analyzing our courses is a valuable one. As we share

the information about reflection, we encourage faculty to engage in a similar process of studying their teaching. Our experience of collaborative study that integrated the voice of the instructor and the voice of the researcher was an enriched form of reflection. The result was a shared understanding of pedagogy and philosophy. We predict that future analyses of courses will continue to expand our knowledge base and improve our practices.

## Notes


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