

## Designing Meaningful Reflection

Using reflection in leadership experiences is an essential step in connecting what youth are experiencing to their larger community or role in life. Reflection activities emphasize the learning that comes from thinking about the things in which one has participated in, rather than simply doing the activity. According to the Indiana Department of Education, Service Learning Program, research shows that reflection has some positive impact on the attitudes of volunteers regarding their service projects. The lack of reflection has been shown to have a strong negative impact on the volunteer's attitudes about service and the service activity.

Extrapolating beyond service activities to other leadership development efforts, it is reasonable to state that participants in leadership education experiences and immersions will also gain positive aspects by reflecting upon these experiences. Reflection, in general, allows individuals to look back on, think critically about, and learn from their experiences. It may include acknowledging and/or sharing reactions, feelings, observations, and ideas about anything regarding the activity.

Information gleaned from "Learning from Service" by Kate McPherson, and "Possible Outcomes of Service Learning", from the National Youth Leadership Council, identify the following as benefits of reflection:

- Gives meaning to the experience
- Provides an opportunity to establish expectations (individually and as a team)
- Can help volunteers understand the limitations and opportunities of the service site or community organization
- Relieves tension and provides re-energizing and renewal (especially important when the experience is emotionally challenging)
- Can create a sense of accomplishment that is crucial, especially where there are limited external rewards
- Can create a habit of appreciating ourselves
- Helps integrate service into the rest of one's life – developing a sense of civic-mindedness
- Improved service – as volunteers examine the effects of their behavior, they discover ways to improve the quality and quantity of their service
- Create a sense of closure, especially important after a long service period, project, or emotional experience.
- Fosters Personal and Team Development:
  - a. Life-learning skills – develops an ability to learn from positive and negative experience
  - b. "Reality Check" – guards against reinforcing inaccurate perceptions/biases

- c. Gain broader perspective of other's experience
- d. Builds community among the volunteers
- e. Personal problem solving increases personal empowerment, confidence
- f. Group problem solving creates shared understandings, open communication, and better teamwork
- g. Clarifies values as individuals confront new situations
- h. Provides practice clarifying goals and making choices to accomplish these goals
- i. Encourages individuals to do higher level thinking as they look for root causes of complex issues
- j. Acknowledges gained skills gained builds confidence

Although reference is made to service projects, reflection has equal impact in leadership experiences. Integrating a leadership experience or activity into the rest of one's life through reflection helps participants understand their role as a citizen leader. Similarly, leadership skills are improved as participants look at their own behavior and explore ways to improve their leadership role with others. They may reevaluate their activities outside their leadership role and determine that there is incongruence, causing others to doubt their word or skills as a leader. This can reduce respect for the individual and thus, the impact that individual will have within their team.

## **TECHNIQUES**

Reflection can happen through a variety of methods – writing, speaking, listening, reading, drawing, acting, etc. Specific actions to promote reflection include keeping journals, writing reflective essays, creating service contracts and logs, email discussion groups, developing service-learning (or leadership) portfolios, and photo reflections.

The Northwest Service Academy of Portland, Oregon has created a practical toolkit of activities for facilitators of reflective activities. Their collection is separated on the list by the amount of time required so that facilitators have a series of activities to be used at any time, whether time is limited or ample. The toolkit also identifies the following tips for creating successful reflection activities.

- An effective reflection activity should:
  - Have an outcome in mind (i.e. leadership, team building, improved critical thinking, acknowledgement)
  - Be appropriate for the team (age, culture, dynamics, etc.)
  - Happen before, during, and as soon after the experience as possible
  - Be directly linked to the experience

- Dispel stereotypes, address negative experiences, increase appreciation for community needs, increase commitment to service
- Be varied for different learning styles, ages, etc.
- For service projects, actively involved the service recipients for a compelling reflection session
- Be facilitated well for maximum participation, creativity, and learning

(Page 3, Service Reflection Toolkit)

Facilitating reflection activities requires skill as a group facilitator, so to enhance your comfort with this, explore any of the resources available for leading group activities. In general, facilitators should design reflection activities in a purposeful manner so that they avoid overlooking this important learning element in the process. In addition, deliberate planning efforts prevent running out of time just at the point where reflection should be engaged for the benefit of participant learning, application, and processing.

Reed and Koliba identify two significant points to remember with regard to conducting effective reflection:

1. **Demonstrate the Importance of Reflection:** Emphasize the value of reflection by making it a regularly scheduled part of the experience. Make sure that everyone participates, including group leaders and others who were in attendance (faculty, community members, etc.). In situations in which facilitators should not engage in the reflection (for example, when they are guiding the discussion), they should reflect in some other way, such as by journaling. The importance of reflection can also be demonstrated by including it in literature and presentations about the group's activities.
2. **Capitalize on "teachable moments":** Be prepared to facilitate reflection when situations arise involve significant issues or experiences that are unplanned for or unexpected. This involves training in facilitation and familiarity with the resources available on a variety of topics. Naturally, it helps the facilitator to have experienced the situations, or to otherwise be accessible to the group in order to learn about it. Facilitators should maintain contact with participants and try to take part in their informal gatherings (as appropriate).

*("Getting Started" in Facilitating Reflection: A Manual For Leaders and Educators by Julie Reed and Christopher Koliba)*

One model to use with youth leaders when conducting reflection activities is to identify four primary steps in the reflection:

***Naming the Experience, Critical Reflection, Dialogue, and Action/Vision***

More specifically, these steps are as follows:

1. Naming the Experience:

- a. Who was involved?
- b. What is the history of the experience or relevant historical perspective and other pertinent information?
- c. Subjective descriptions
- d. Objective descriptions

2. Critical Reflection – What happened?

- a. Feelings before, during, and after the experience. Is this a high/low point for you? Why or why not?
- b. Were there any turning points in the experience?

3. Dialogue (Seeking out other points of view):

- a. What insights do your leadership readings or leadership philosophy provide?
- b. What resources do you draw on when dealing with a situation like this?
- c. Is there an image, symbol, color, phrase, poem, etc. that describes what the experience was like for you? If so, what insights they contribute?
- d. Any insight provided by society, culture, history, etc.?

4. Action/Vision:

- a. What might you do the same again? Differently?
- b. What have you learned? How has this experience challenge the way you see yourself? Others? Your organization? The World?
- c. What are the core issues that were raised by the incident...the questions that make this situation challenging or problematic?
- d. Where were you in this experience? (What feelings, thoughts, contributions, etc.?)
- e. What principles, values, or beliefs were guiding your action?
- f. Are there ways of acting in relation to this situation that seemed appropriate but that were hard for you to do?
- g. What are the principles upon which a resolution was achieved or might be achieved?

- h. What sort of process could help to lead toward resolution?
- i. What have you learned here that will provide useful direction for you in the future?

(Adapted from material from the Northeast Leadership Development Program, previously hosted by Rutgers University, <http://neld.rutgers.edu>)

## **JOURNALING**

Journaling is one of the best reflection tools. Ideally, the program or project would allow for a ten to fifteen minute period every day for the volunteers to journal; preferably at the end of the day or during/after debriefing. It is helpful if staff or the project leader provides substantial structure to insure quality, conscientious journaling, and even more helpful if the person leading the reflection activity is journaling himself or herself! Regardless of the time allotted, it is important to encourage participants to write whatever comes to mind, and to not worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. This entails a commitment to confidentiality, that nobody will ever share what they have written unless they want to. You also want to be definite and clear about the time allotted, (five to fifteen minutes) and let them know when it is almost finished.

### **Journaling Methods:**

**Clusters:** Have people shout out words or phrases that describe the day. Ask each person to take two minutes to write five or six words in random spaces on their journaling page. Give a short speech about the interconnectedness of everything, the web of life, Quantum Physics, or whatever and ask them to do a free write focusing on those five or six items and how they are related. The

**Critical Incident:** Choose an incident that involved the entire team and give them a couple of minutes to think about the incident. Then ask them to write a detailed, factual report of what happened, making sure to answer the four "W" questions, "who, what, where, when." You can then have participants share their stories to see how they differ from another.

**Dialogue:** A good one for developing observation and communication skills. Ask participants in the morning to pay special attention to conversations they hear throughout the day, including light conversations between staff and volunteers, volunteers and sponsors or stakeholders, etc. Ask them to pay special attention to mannerisms, accents, and the tone of the conversation. Later, have the participants pick a dialogue and duplicate as closely as possible

how it went. This should be done in a light-hearted manner on a light-hearted day to avoid a "bashing" session. This is an exercise that gets better with time, as their observation and retention skills improve.

**Different Perspectives:** A great one for developing empathy skills. Ask participants to recall a specific occurrence from the day that involved some degree of conflict. Ask them to assume the viewpoint opposite that which they actually held during this conflict (or the viewpoint they were the least empathetic with) and write a description of the conflict from this perspective. This can include what happened, their role in it, what they want, what they envision as the ideal solution. Good debrief questions are, "How did it feel to do this writing, how were you able to get in their shoes or how was it difficult, what is one thing you realized through this writing."

**The Fly on the Wall:** Ask participants to take a couple moments to reflect on the day (where they've been, what they've done, whom they've worked with, tools they've used). Then ask them to pretend they were a "fly on the wall" observing but not participating in the scene, and write a short descriptive passage based on their observations. You can also use any animal or plant or person that was near the project site.

**Guided Imagery:** Encourage participants to relax, close their eyes, get comfortable, notice their breathing, etc. and read a guided imagery. Then, ask the participants to free-write about what they experienced.

**The Free Write:** The easiest and perhaps most effective journaling method, wherein people that think they "can't write" or "have nothing to say" realize how much and how well they can write. For a predetermined amount of time participants engage in continuous writing by keeping their pens moving ... even if only to write, "I don't know what to write." It is helpful to trigger the free-write with an open-ended sentence such as "I don't think I'll ever forget..." or "If I could do one thing differently, I would..." or make up your own! Let participants know when they are nearing the end of the write time, and then ask them how it went.

**The Letter:** Have participants write a letter to themselves, a relative, a historical figure, a political figure, etc. describing the project and what it means to them, or ask for some piece of advice, etc.

(The above information on Journaling is excerpted from a more comprehensive collection of materials from the *Service Learning Toolkit of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory* found at

[http://www.nwrel.org/ecc/amicorps/resources/reflect\\_toolkit/toolkit2.html](http://www.nwrel.org/ecc/amicorps/resources/reflect_toolkit/toolkit2.html))

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

A very brief collection of resources to explore more fully the concepts of reflection and journaling include the following.

**Websites/Organizations (accurate as of September 2011):**

John Dewey Project on Progressive Education <http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/>

EnCorps Reflection Toolkit

[http://encorps.nationalservicerresources.org/resources/reflection/reflection\\_toolkit.php?search\\_term=reflection](http://encorps.nationalservicerresources.org/resources/reflection/reflection_toolkit.php?search_term=reflection)

The Freechild Project <http://freechild.org/Firestarter/reflection1.htm>

**Books/Materials:**

Facilitating Reflection: A Manual for Leaders and Educators by Julie Reed and Christopher Koliba

[http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/reflection\\_manual](http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/reflection_manual)

Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service by Jane C. Kendall

Journal Reflection: A Resource Guide for Community Service Leaders and Educators Engaged in Service Learning  
by Suzanne Goldsmith

By Mariam G. MacGregor

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