Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) Resource
for
Community Service-Learning (CSL) Courses

Dr. Alison Dunwoody
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What is CSL?

As a form of experiential learning, CSL provides students the opportunity to volunteer with local non-profit community organizations as part of their learning experiences. CSL can help students broaden and deepen their academic knowledge; compare theory with practice (as different forms of knowledge); develop many essential skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration, and leadership); and enhance their social awareness and civic engagement.

Some courses require all students to participate in CSL while others make such participation optional. The nature of CSL placements also varies from course to course and even within a given course. For example, some placements are project-based and require students to carry out research and/or produce deliverables such as written reports, training resources, or program materials. Other placements involve direct service and require students to perform front-line work for their organizations.

For CSL to be successful, the service-learning must connect with the learning objectives of the course. Likewise, the course should serve as a means through which the work of the community organization is supported and reinforced.

Additional Resources:

Community Service-Learning at the University of Alberta

An Introduction to Service-Learning and Community Engagement as Co-Inquiry (Center for Engaged Learning, Elon University)

Graduate Student Network of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning & Community Engagement (IARSLCE)

The Role of GTAs in CSL Courses

Depending on the course and instructor, GTAs may be asked to fulfill a variety of responsibilities associated with the preparation, delivery, and administration of CSL courses, including:
- assisting instructors with the design of CSL courses
- developing learning objectives connecting the course and CSL projects/placements
- assigning students to placements
- liaising with the CSL partnership coordinator staff to build into the instructor's eClass the administrative steps for students to follow
- checking in and/or debriefing with students and community partners

- facilitating class discussions
- designing and/or assessing reflective assignments
- liaising with the CSL Evaluation Coordinator to promote the online evaluation

The Importance of Reflection in CSL Courses

Reflection is what transforms experience into learning. As such, reflection serves as the critical link between community service and learning. Moreover, reflection provides an excellent opportunity to document and to evaluate students' learning.

Students need structured opportunities to engage in reflection. Specifically, they require the opportunity to critically examine their values, beliefs, and assumptions; identify and explain patterns in their experiences; create meaning; synthesize ideas; and solve problems.

Additional Resources:

[Reflection in Service Learning: Making Meaning of Experience (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999)](#)

How Reflection Works

Reflection must be understood as a process rather than an event. Although reflection can take many different forms, to be effective, it must be a continuous iterative process that occurs before, during, and after the service-learning experience. Furthermore, reflection should be systematic, intentional, and guided. Without a proper guiding structure, students' reflections risk being limited to descriptive accounts of their placement experiences or discussions of their feelings related to those experiences. Reflective assignments must also explicitly connect with the course learning objectives and, in fact, they should be designed with these objectives in mind.

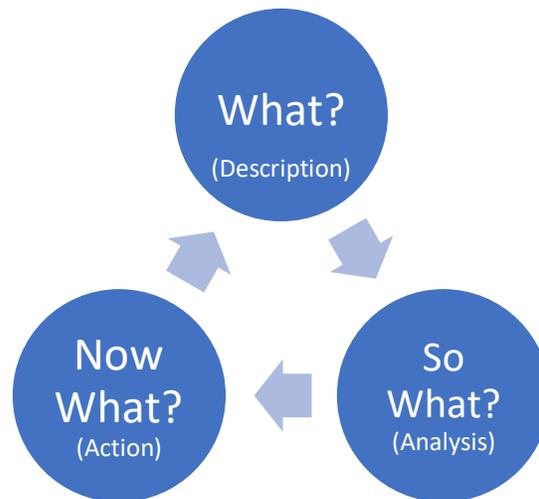Opportunities for reflection can take diverse forms, including:
- reflective journals
- reflective papers
- in-class/community presentations
- artistic pieces
- multimedia products
- case studies
- group discussion/debate
- group projects
- role playing/simulations

[Sample Reflective Journal Assignment and Rubric for an Optional CSL Course](#)

Frameworks/Models for Reflection

The following are some of the frameworks or models used to help structure and guide students' reflective processes. While highly variable with respect to the concepts or terminology used, these frameworks are all characterized by their scaffolding and developmental approach. Each level of reflection builds upon the previous one as students transition from description to engaged and critical reflection.

1) What? So What? Now What?

This framework, originally developed by Borton (1970), consists of three key questions that guide students' reflective processes. These increasingly analytical questions encourage students to move through different phases of the reflective process: from description (What?) to interpretation/analysis (So What?) to action (Now What?):

What? – Students objectively describe the nature of their experience or observation to establish context

So What? – Students explore the relevance or the significance of their experience/observation
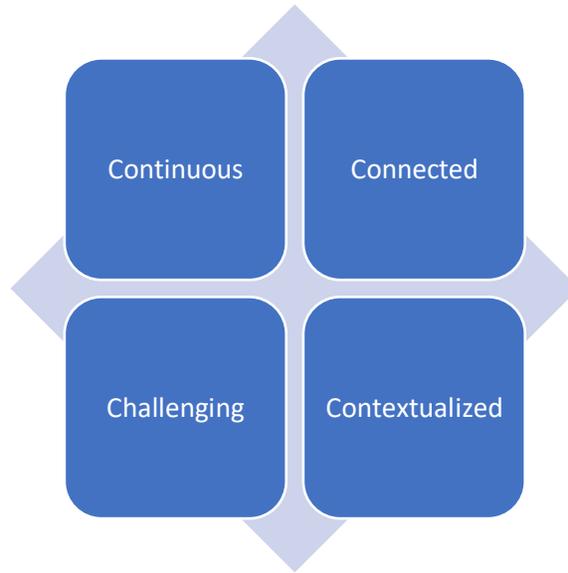
Now What? – Students discuss the impact of this experience/observation on their future actions and thoughts

Sample Reflective Paper Assignment and Rubric

Additional Resources:

University of Connecticut Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

2) <u>4 Cs of Reflection</u>

Based on their research, Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) identified four conditions that must exist for reflection to be effective:

Continuous – Reflection must be an ongoing part of the learning process; it must occur before, during, and after the service-learning experience to allow students to meaningfully engage with that experience

Connected – Reflection activities must be explicitly connected to course objectives; there must be a clear link between the service and the academic or intellectual dimensions of the course which results in a connection between action and thought
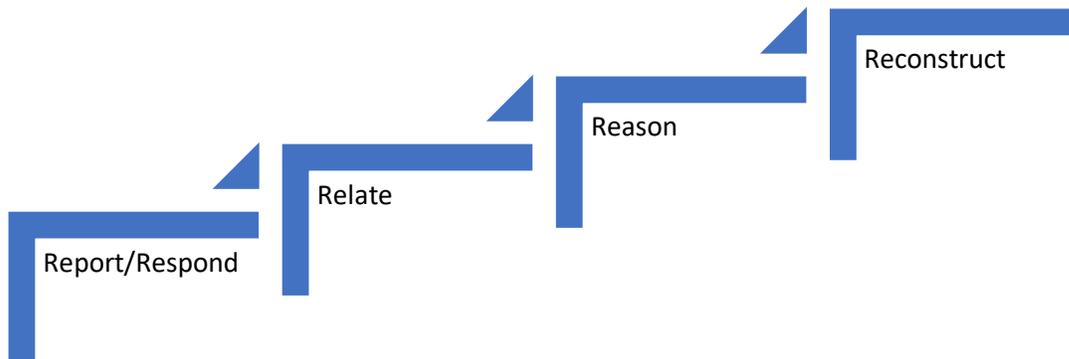
Challenging – Reflection requires students to think in new ways and to engage critically with their experiences and their understandings of those experiences

Contextualized – Reflection must be appropriate to the setting and context of the service-learning

Additional Resources:

[Indiana University Center for Service & Learning](#)

3) The 4 Rs Model

Reconstruct

Reason

Relate

Report/Respond

Bain and collaborators (2002) developed this model to encourage students to reflect on their ongoing learning from a number of standpoints (practical, cognitive, affective, as well as, those based on personal values and beliefs). The model is designed to help students to move through four elements of reflection:

Report/Respond – Students report or describe the key elements of an issue, event, or experience and discuss its relevance; students then respond by making observations, expressing opinions, and asking questions

Relate – Students begin to analyze the issue, event, or experience by drawing connections between it and their own knowledge, skills, or previous experiences; students ask themselves such questions as "have I seen this before?", "was it similar or different last time?" and "do I have the knowledge and skills to deal with this?"

Reason – Students explore the relationship between theory and practice and search for a deeper understanding of the issue, incident, or experience; they engage with the literature to help them make sense of that issue, event, or experience and they consider different perspectives as they do so

Reconstruct – Students reframe or reconstruct their understanding and action/practice by drawing again on the relevant literature or theories to explain what they will do in the future, including how they might further develop their knowledge and skills
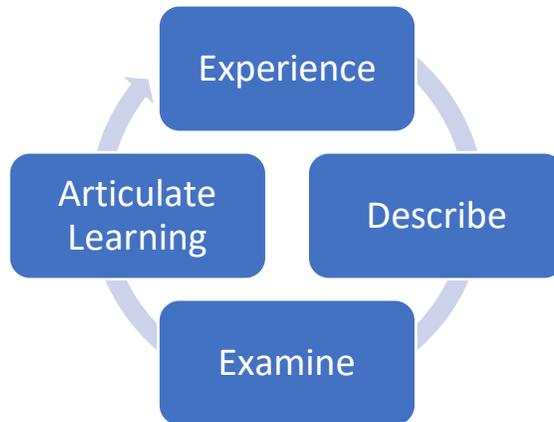
Sample Reflection

Sample Rubric

Additional Resources:

The 4 Rs Model

4) The DEAL Model

Developed by Ash and Clayton (2009), this model frames experiential learning as a three-stage cyclical process:

Describe – Students describe an experience objectively and in detail by highlighting key elements that relate to learning outcomes (e.g., by focusing on the who, what, when, where, and how of the experience)

Examine – Students examine the experience from different perspectives and through different lenses (e.g., academic, personal, and civic engagement perspectives)

Articulate Learning – Based on their discussion in the previous two stages, students summarize their learning as a consequence of their reflections on that experience; students also establish goals for future learning and how they can apply to future experiences

Sample Reflection Assignments (University of Western Ontario)

Reflection Template (University of South Florida)

Additional Resources:

University of Toronto Experiential Learning Hub

The Assessment of Students' Reflective Work

Approaches to grading, as both an assessment of students' work, as well as, the means by which they receive feedback, vary considerably across disciplines, instructors, and course levels. Despite this variability, maximizing student learning and achievement requires:

- the development of clear grading criteria
- the communication of these criteria to students
- the provision of constructive feedback to students

Distinguishing between formative assessment and summative assessment is especially important in the context of CSL. Formative assessment is designed to provide continuous feedback to students and to identify opportunities for improvement. In contrast, summative assessment is designed to assess students' mastery of course material. While both have an important role to play in the assessment of students, formative assessment is essential to evaluating students' reflective work. When accompanied by quality feedback, formative assessment allows students to evaluate their progress and actively manage their approaches in order to improve the quality of their learning. To be effective in promoting learning, feedback must be concrete, specific, objective, and timely.

[Sample Assessment of Student Work](#)

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References:

Ash, S. L. & Clayton, P. H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education 1*, 25-48.

Bain, J.D., Ballantyne, R., Mills, C. & Lester, N.C. (2002). *Reflecting on practice: Student teachers' perspectives.* Flaxton, Qld, Australia: Post Pressed.

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Eyler, J., Giles, Jr., D. E., & Schmiede, A. (1996). *A practitioner's guide to reflection in service-learning: Student voices and reflections*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University.