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Building Reflection Into Community-Based Learning Classes

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Dr. Karina Vazquez, director of community-based learning for Latin American, Latino, and Iberian Studies meets with her students at University of Richmond Museums. Photograph by Jamie Betts

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Recommeded Citation

Cover: Photograph by Jamie Betts.

Introduction

Reflection is the critical element of community-based learning (CBL) courses at the University of Richmond. Faculty who teach CBL courses design reflection assignments that weave academic content with community experiences, helping students discover their own assumptions and deepen their understanding.

This workbook is meant to be a practical introduction to designing reflection assignments through the modes of community-based learning utilized in University of Richmond courses. The Bonner Center for Civic Engagement offers a robust Course Support Grant program to assist faculty with the many needs arising in CBL classes and a requirement of the grant is to describe the reflection activity in the class. We offer this introduction to CBL reflection to assist your design of reflection assignments, but no part of it is required. Use what makes sense within your own course design. We are also happy to meet and brainstorm if that would be helpful, before the beginning of the class or after the class is over, with student reflection responses to feed an assessment of how well it worked. Reflection assignments can evolve with repeated iterations of the class. This guide can give you a place to start, and we look forward to accompanying you in your community-based learning experiences.

Critical reflection assignments are essential for students to guide them in processing some of the complexities and challenging circumstances they may encounter through their community-based experiences.

From *Service Learning Courses IU Indianapolis High-Impact Practice Taxonomy*, 2024

Reflection Assignments FAQ

Why is a required reflection assignment necessary to receive a community-based learning course through the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement?

Rather than employ narrow definitions of community-based learning (CBL), we opt instead to support faculty's efforts to connect their courses to the community in a variety of ways. Each course is unique, but what CBL courses share in common is the intention for students to better learn course content through experiences, and the research on experiential learning has demonstrated that a reflection assignment is key to deeper learning.

How do I design a reflection assignment?

A simple definition of reflection is "making meaning of experience in light of learning goals." The first step is to identify the learning goal you have in mind for students who will have the experience you are planning. What will students know or be able to do because of the experience? What level do you believe your students will have before the experiential learning? A good reflection assignment will meet them where they are and guide them to make meaning during and after the experience.

Do reflection assignments have to be written?

No. Reflection can happen in many modalities, including non-written assignments such as an oral discussion or a visual representation with photos or drawings.

Should I require the reflection assignment and assign a grade?

If you assign an experience, but do not assign reflection, then we would not consider your course eligible for a Course Support Grant. However, the question of grading is up to the instructor. Professors have a wide variety of grading systems that align with their course content and teaching philosophy.

Are reflection assignments about feelings? I don't want to grade my students on their feelings or for saying what they think I want to hear.

A well-designed reflection assignment, aligning with your learning goals and teaching philosophy, can address these issues. Feelings and beliefs are often a part of learning – sometimes as barriers and sometimes as catalyzers. Reflection assignments can help students become aware of their feelings as well as their assumptions and what role each plays in their evolving understanding. The principles of good practice for community-based learning state that "grades are given for learning, not for service." As instructor, you determine what feedback you give to shape reflective work and determine how that work counts toward the grade in the class.

RESOURCE

Clayton, P., Kniffen, L. *Designing critical reflection for service-learning.* The Loop. Retrieved August 6, 2024, from https://blogs.k-state.edu/leadership/2024/04/26/designing-critical-reflection-for-service-learning

Reflection Frameworks

BEFORE-DURING-AFTER FRAMEWORK
useful for reflection with guest speakers, study trips, and any stand-alone experience

BEFORE
Assign informal pre-writing that will surface any assumptions students have.
Example prompt:
What do you expect you will see/hear during our trip tomorrow? What do you think the speaker will say tomorrow?

DURING
Give students a prompt to consider during the experience, perhaps a way to notice a particular element. Use a class learning goal to focus observations.
Example:
With the learning goal "students will be able to identify characteristics of healthy and unhealthy trees," assign students to take photos of trees in a part of the city where they are doing temperature readings for a citizen science database.

AFTER
Ask students to review their pre-writing. Ask what they see differently now, what surprised them, what questions they have based on the observations they made during the activity. Ask them to consider what connection they can make to a class reading.

CRITICAL REFLECTION: DEAL
useful in ongoing observations in service, projects, internships, etc.

Critical reflection generates, deepens, and documents learning in order to improve the quality of practice, partnerships and inquiry.

Describe the experience objectively and in a timely way. For example, a weekly journal entry, written within 24 hours of service.

Examine the experience in light of the learning goals. This can be done weekly, and/or in a final essay, project, or exam.

Articulate **L**earning: Use the following prompts to invite students into reflection: "I learned that _____." "I learned this when _____." "This learning matters because _____."

Civic Learning & Action Goals

These goals, prepared by the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement in collaboration with community members, staff, faculty, and students, are reference points for impactful civic engagement. Each goal set contains three domains of learning: **building awareness, cultivating capacity, and taking action**.

SELF

Learners will grow in ways that enhance their positive impact on the world around them. Specifically, learners will build their capacities for:

Perspective Taking
Analyzing the origins, strengths, and limitations of one's own and others' worldviews

Cultural Humility
Evaluating and, as appropriate, modifying one's assumptions and biases that contribute to inequity

Civic Commitment
Developing one's commitment to and effectiveness in participation in public processes

SOCIETY

Learners will engage responsibly with others to address community challenges and advance the public good. Specifically, learners will build their capacities for:

Strengths Orientation
Analyzing the positive contributions people's knowledge, skills, and resources might make within communities

Change Agency
Evaluating and, as appropriate, modifying one's use of co-creative approaches to community and environmental change

Collaboration
Developing one's commitment to and effectiveness in working with others

SYSTEMS

Learners will understand the networked factors that nurture and impede the flourishing of individuals and communities, and will act accordingly to promote positive change. Specifically, learners will build their capacities for:

Holistic Analysis
Analyzing the broad, complex, and interrelated factors that contribute to systemic challenges

Power Analysis
Evaluating and, as appropriate, modifying dynamics that contribute to inequity

Sustainable Action
Developing one's commitment to and effectiveness in advancing future systems that encourage the flourishing of individuals, communities, and the environment

Designing Reflection Assignments

Course Title

Experiential elements (speaker? trip? project? volunteering?)

Where are your students "starting?" What assumptions might they have? What prior knowledge from earlier courses might they have?

Learning goals (consider Bloom's Taxonomies to structure your goals) related to experience(s)
"After [activity assignment] students will know/be able to . . . "

How will you know how well students have achieved the goal(s)? What will you observe?

How will students get formative feedback on the knowledge, skills, etc. that they are developing? (Example: instructor comments on first of five journal prompts to indicate clear vs. vague observations)

Will there be a final learning product (writing, discussion, quiz, final essay...) that draws from the activity? How will it be graded?

What are common pitfalls you anticipate students might encounter? Can you shape the written instructions to help them avoid the pitfalls? (Example: you fear they will just say what you want to hear. In you instructions, ask students to quote their own written observations and give evidence for how their thinking has changed.) What instructions will you give students for each and all the pieces of the experiential learning process?

Example Reflection Assignment Design Based on Modes of Community-Based Learning

Following are assignment strategies based on the mode of CBL you are designing. They are meant to help you apply the ideas of critical service learning in your own context. They are only beginnings, meant to prompt your own design ideas.

MODES OF COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING

- **Service learning** is volunteerism that connects back to classroom learning.

- **Collaborative projects with community partners** include data analysis and research projects, producing community-engaged creative works (such as documentaries, murals, or exhibitions), organizational studies and consulting, and sharing course materials.

- **Internships, student teaching, or clinical education** is completed with a community partner, usually (but not always) for the duration of a semester.

- **Guest speakers** from the community come to class, usually to share their expertise and experience in a subject.

- **Study trips** include field trips, service trips, and participant observation and shadowing.

GUEST SPEAKER

Before
Possible Prompts
- What do you predict this speaker will say about [content]?
- What question do you want to ask the speaker related to his/her experiences?
- What do you want our speaker to know about our class and/or your previous experiences? (this can be collected and given to speaker ahead of time)

During
Possible Activities
- Observational note taking: one or more students are assigned to take notes for the group about the speaker and class interactions

- Question askers: one or more students gather questions from classmates and read them aloud to speaker
- Student Ambassadors: students who meet the speaker at parking area and walk to class, chatting; also walk speaker back to car, or maybe to coffee or lunch after class

After
Possible Prompts
- Re-read the prediction you made before the speaker's visit. Write a reflection: How were you surprised? What assumptions do you see in your predictions? What do you now see?
- Write or discuss: how did the speaker's remarks align with or contradict the class reading (or another speaker)
- Write down what you want to remember from the experience with the guest speaker that you might want to include in your final class paper
- What new questions do you have? Ask and then research an answer to one new question.

STUDY TRIP

Before
Possible Prompts
- What do you predict you will see at [destination]?
- What former experience do you have at a place similar to [destination] ?
- Form a question you think this site visit might help you answer. Write it down/ share it with classmate.

During
Possible Activities
- Observational note-taking: one or more students assigned to take notes in a Google doc for the group during the trip. After, other students fill in the skeleton of the notes with their own observations.
- Observational photos: take a photo of something at the site that surprises you or that you think relates to the article you read before the trip

After
Possible Prompts
- Re-read the prediction you made before the trip. Write a reflection: How were you surprised?
What assumptions do you see in your predictions? What do you now see?
- Write or discuss: how did observations on the trip align with or contradict the class reading
(or another speaker). Post a photo you took and explain why it is relevant.

SERVICE LEARNING/COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Students should collect their observations at regular intervals during an extended project.

For example, you can require a short observation journal entry within 24 hours of any site visit.
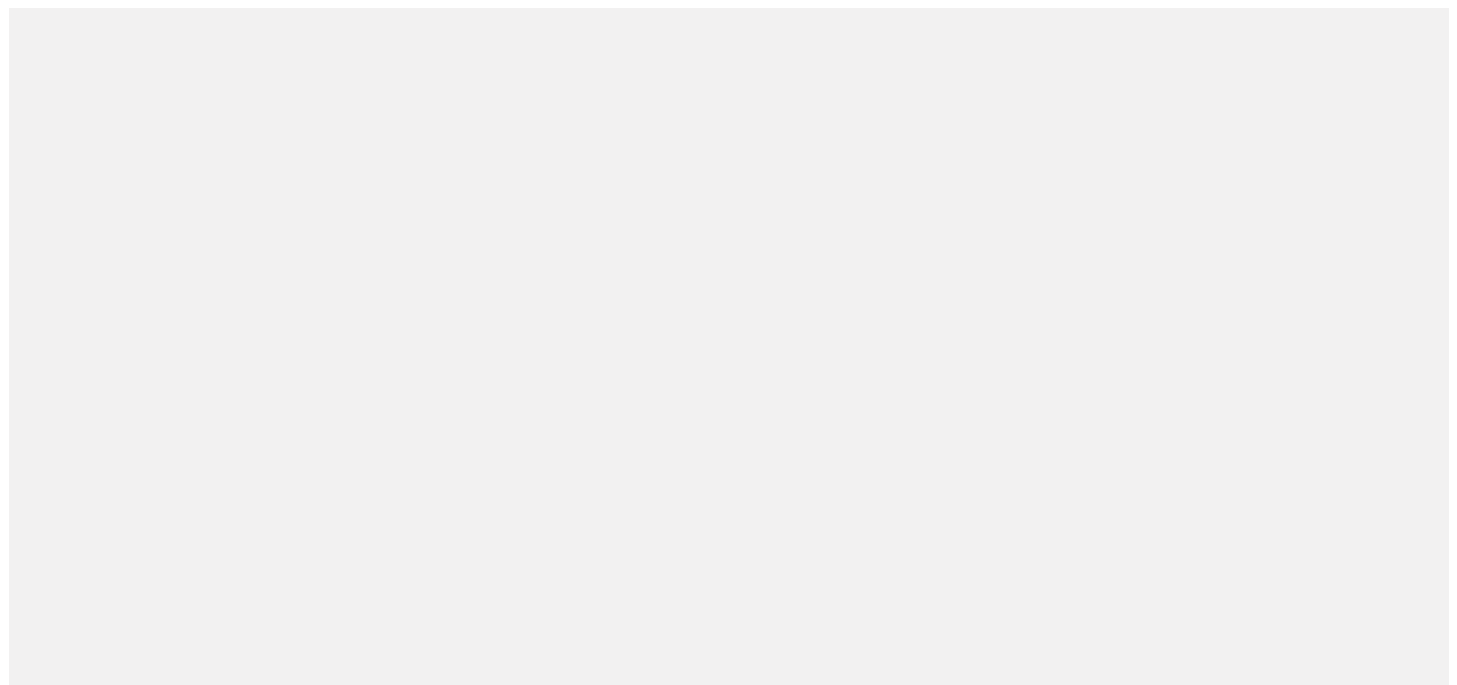
Helpful Tips

▶ **Guide students to make observations** based on the methods of your discipline or in light of a learning goal related to the project.

▶ **Give students formative feedback** on their observations early in the process.

▶ **Design an assignment that comes at the end of project work/site visits** which utilizes the 3 steps of the DEAL method (Describe-Explain-Articulate Learning).

For the **Describe** element, students should write objective observations.

During **Explain** and **Articulate Learning** phases, they can quote their own observations recorded during the semester and then expand on those observations by:

- raising new questions.
- noting changes in their understanding.
- noting resonance with a text or discussion from the class.
- imagining future solutions to problems they observe.

NOTES