

Title: Reflecting on reflection as a critical component in service learning

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Abstract

Despite the popularity of service learning, it is sometimes criticized for its lack of academic rigor. This piece provides a counterpoint to that argument by describing a LIS service-learning course from the student's perspective. I focus particularly on the role of reflection, a key component in service-learning courses that helps to differentiate service learning from other types of experiential learning. I describe how the structured reflection opportunities in this course acted as an essential learning catalyst, helping to forge not only course-based learning but also learning related to larger LIS theory.

Keywords: service learning, experiential education, reflection, LIS education

Reflecting on Reflection as a Critical Component in Service Learning

Service learning, a type of experiential education that combines credit-earning, course-based learning with community service (Becker, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, Riddle, 2003) has rapidly expanded across college campuses since the 1990s (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). In library and science (LIS) education programs, service learning and similar learning opportunities are representative of library schools' long-standing belief in a combination of classwork and practical work as the best preparation for the profession (Brannon, 2014). However, despite its popularity, Harkavy and Hartley (2010) note that service learning has sometimes been criticized, among other things, for its lack of academic rigor. In this article, I offer a counterpoint to that criticism by describing how a service-learning course led to some of the deepest learning of my library and information science (LIS) education. I will particularly focus on the role that reflection played in effecting such learning.

In the fall of 2013, during my final semester in the Master of Library and Information (MLIS) program at St. Catherine University in Saint Paul, Minnesota, I enrolled in a directed-study elective course called *Literacy and Community Engagement* (LIS7620), which was built on the service-learning model. Experiential learning opportunities, such as service learning, are seen as a way for students to develop their professional identity (O'Brien, et al., 2014). In this spirit, this course sought to teach students how to engage with their future communities around the provision of literacy services, ultimately encouraging the development of students' sense of civic responsibility. As the course title implies, community engagement formed a major component of this course, and was fostered through a service-learning project conducted in partnership with the Minnesota Literacy Council (MLC). The MLC, a non-profit community literacy organization that provides a variety of literacy services around the state of Minnesota

(MLC, 2012), was at that time involved in a state-funded pilot project designed to improve the basic computer skills of unemployed adults, and needed an intern for one of the project's pilot sites. Fulfilling this intern need comprised the "service" component of the course. Over the course of the semester, I provided 40 hours of computer-skills tutoring as well as an additional 20 hours of project-focused work, such as creating an introductory tutorial on using Mac computers.

The "learning" component of the course included weekly assigned readings on course-related subjects (e.g., community engagement and partnerships, service learning conceptualizations, literacy services and community information needs) combined with weekly reflection, which I will discuss in more detail below. Because I took the class as a directed study, there were no formal classroom lectures; instead the professor and I arranged regular in-person meetings and frequently communicated by email. The learning component of the course also included a semester-long community-based research project in which I identified and recommended possible remedies to the digital literacy barriers faced by the community of computer trainees at the pilot site. One of the findings of this community-based research project was that trainees placed a high value on the learning support provided by the tutors. As a result, the MLC agreed to consider my recommendation to increase its tutor recruitment and support efforts.

Next, I will describe how reflection forged the connection between the service and learning components that I described above. Reflection, described as "thoughtful self-examination" (Ball & Schilling, 2006, p. 279) or "introspective and probing self-assessment" (Ball, 2008, p. 73) serves to link the separate service and learning experiences in a service-learning course (Riddle, 2003; Swords & Kiely, 2010). Indeed, Becker (2000) notes that

reflection is the key differentiator between service learning and other types of experiential learning (e.g., internships, practica, volunteerism). Reflection frequently takes the form of written assignments, such as journaling, short reflection pieces or longer research papers, but it may also take other forms, such as in-class or online discussions between the student, classmate(s) and/or the instructor (Becker, 2000; Cuban & Hayes, 2001; Yontz & de la Pena McCook, 2003). In my case, reflection took place as a weekly written reflection submitted electronically to the instructor.

Many of the courses in the MLIS program had required me to *respond* to readings, but reflection in this course required conscious and deliberate consideration of the connections between my service experience and the readings. Though my reflection pieces were generally short, averaging around 1,000 words, they were serious thought pieces in which writing was writing placed within “a discipline, a subject and serious purpose” (Sawyer, 2009, p. 69). Approaching reflection in this way elevated it from being a merely a catalog of my experience to being a true learning catalyst. I will illustrate this with an example that occurred about mid-way through the semester.

During this particular week, I worked with a trainee who had very low computer skills. At the same time, the trainee demonstrated high literacy in other areas, such as the field of work that had been the trainee’s profession for over 30 years. Despite the trainee’s high level of work-related literacy, the trainee’s inability to use a computer to confirm compliance with these safety protocols had cost the learner their job. My instructional skills were severely challenged in working with this trainee. Most trainees I had worked with to this point had at least some computer experience and were familiar with basic concepts such as using a mouse and keyboard. That week I floundered as I struggled to explain foundational concepts that I previously took for

granted as common knowledge. The instructional challenges I experienced that week were certainly rife for self-assessment and could have been the focus of my reflection. However, Swords and Kiely (2010) call for reflection to be “critical,” in which students move beyond self-discovery in favor of questions around power relations, ideology and social structures.

One of the assigned readings for that week had been a chapter from Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), which discussed the different economic value and outcomes of various literacies. I found the reading powerful but it only affected me in an abstract way until I later sat down to write my reflection and considered that week’s service experience in light of Brandt’s words. The trainee I worked with that week was clearly highly literate - just not in the *right* literacies. This had not only cost the trainee their job, but also rendered them effectively illiterate and unable to regain access to the economy. I had been previously exposed to digital divide issues during my LIS education but now I comprehended the power of literacy as an economic resource (Brandt, 2001) in a way that was not possible in the classroom alone.

This is but one example of how reflection enhanced my understanding of key concepts in this service-learning course. However, my learning in this course also transcended course concepts, serving to crystallize much of the theoretical knowledge I gained during my LIS education. For example, early courses in the MLIS program introduced me to LIS ethical mandates regarding equity of access. Given my own relatively privileged experience, I did not have the frame of reference to comprehend the everyday implications of such inequities, but here I was confronted with people who were in serious economic peril because of low digital literacy. Similarly, my LIS education had introduced me to libraries’ social justice and advocacy roles. I recognized the need for such activism, but felt thwarted by my own personal inhibitions as well as a lack of knowledge about how to engage with communities. This course not only provided

me with this knowledge also mobilized me, because I saw that my efforts could have an effect. As a result, I initiated and circulated an online petition about inequity of access to the Gmail webmail service that has garnered over 500 signatures to date. In so doing, I was able to reimagine myself as not just a librarian but as an activist, which was not only a key step in the development of my professional identity (O'Brien, et al., 2014) but also resulted in truly the most powerful learning experience of my LIS education.

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