

Shedding Light on the Shadow-Side of Reflection in Service-Learning

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Abstract

Developmental and cultural factors may inadvertently play a contributing role in the discomfort that occurs during service-learning experiences. Ironically, reflection exercises may actually exacerbate the emotional and cognitive dissonance that occurs in these experiences. Both students and faculty require an understanding of what it means to “squirm and learn” in these circumstances as well as reflection strategies that allow students to process what is characterized as the “shadow-side” of reflection. This essay recounts one professor’s own experiences with this challenge and provides insight into the developmental and cultural aspects of the shadow-side of reflection, concluding with a description of reflection strategies for consideration.

Years ago out of desperation I came to a faculty workshop on conducting reflection within service-learning. Overall, my first attempt at teaching service-learning had been a successful experience despite feeling a little dubious about reflection. I had heard from colleagues and students how reflection had enhanced the learning experience. But going into service-learning, reflection struck me as a touchy-feely, group hug. That was not my initial experience however. Instead, my students provided perfunctory and succinct “Dear Diary” entries consisting of little more than two or three sentences lacking richness and depth. I was both frustrated and disappointed. So, I came to the workshop to find out what I was doing wrong and to learn some strategies.

While some shared my experience, some faculty and student life staff at the workshop described how deep their students’ reflection discussions and written journals were. This confirmed to me that depth was, indeed, possible. However, I was quite taken aback when I heard another workshop participant share his concern about the angst his students were experiencing and expressing in their reflection discussions and journal entries. He emphatically noted that he was an economist teaching a course on the issues of poverty and not a social worker. He wanted to learn how to help his students find their way out of the darkness their deep learning encounters had cast. He clarified he was not trying to avoid or minimize these passionate and profound discoveries. He still wanted them to “go deep,” but he also wanted to know more about what was going on and what he could do to facilitate the reflection process. Similarly, I soon realized that other colleagues within student life who oversee programs such as Alternative Spring Break or staff in Campus Ministry who sponsor service projects or immersion trips as engaged learning also encounter this dynamic.

This was my introduction with what I call the shadow-side of reflection, and it was certainly not my last. In time, I encountered the same depth and darkness that the economics

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professor described. What students shared revealed some significant cognitive dissonance at times. These dark responses were not the “touchy-feely” aspect I was originally worried about or what scholars perceive as irrational emotions. Their statements were emotional but in the sense of deep searching and critical questioning that shook their assumptions and perceptions about themselves and the world around them. It became clearly evident that neither my students nor I were adequately prepared for, let alone equipped to deal with this depth of reflection. Since then, as I have taken on the role of director for college service-learning centers, I have come to recognize the importance and necessity of preparing both faculty and students for this type of experience so that they are not blindsided the way my colleague from economics and I were.

The good news and sidebar story in all of this is that I had, indeed, managed to learn how to create courses that pushed students beyond mere accumulation and regurgitation of factoids to earn a grade. But the downside of these rare and poignant moments was that neither my students nor I was necessarily prepared for this experience, especially the self-discovery that often takes place through engaged learning with authentic experiences. This type of deep encounter and discovery is unsettling. Students are exposed to new ideas about their sense of self, their world, and what it means to “learn.” Over time, I have come to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon from both a developmental and cultural perspective shedding light on how to accompany students when they enter into the shadow-side of reflection.

Developmental Explanations

Developmentally, college students are on the cusp of a curious and sometimes scary transition as young adults. Developmental psychologists have a number of models that present phases individuals go through (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986); Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1999; Perry, 1970). But most faculty members are not developmental psychologists. We are scholars in our field and disciplines. We generally do not know anything about these phases or remember our own experience as we went through them. The models are many and they vary in detail or specificity. The common factor in these developmental models is that young adults, typically at the age of college students, are having encounters in almost every aspect of their lives that make them question who they are and how the world is. Up until now, they are self-centered. Pointing out their ego-centric perspective is not a condemnation or judgment on our students. It is simply a statement of how and where they are in their lives. Many are just now discovering that there are others in the world with other experiences. As a result, they are figuring out that they are no longer the center of the universe. This realization can and does “rock their world.” The good news is this phase also nudges them to transcend their own interests, wants, and needs to consider the interests, wants, and needs of others. As wonderful as this is, it is equally confusing and at times frightening. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1954) captures this sense:

Moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy perplexity, everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes, and the new which no one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent I believe that almost all of our sadness are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living. Because we are alone with the alien thing that has entered our self; because everything intimate and accustomed is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing. (p. 64)

Developmental psychologist Jack Mezirow aptly characterizes this experience as a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1999). Students are essentially caught off guard and therefore often assume something is “wrong” because their disconcerting experience is not how they conceptualize learning. Part of the shadowside of reflection is to reassure our students that something is “right” as they are now gaining insight into something new and previously unseen. One student of mine committed to the issues of homelessness had created and coordinated an intensive weekend immersion for her peers. However, during a classroom reflection, she had a sudden epiphany. The tears began to flow as she confronted her own unknown stereotypes and prejudices that unexpectedly surfaced. This is not merely accumulating facts, getting the right answer, or earning a grade. This is called learning.

Cultural Explanations

There are aspects of our popular culture, as well as our academic culture, that also contribute to students’ encounter with the shadow side of service-learning. From a sociological and anthropological context, Americans live in a culture of happy endings and instant information. Popular culture depicts life in television shows and movies as “the good guys” always winning and everyone living happily ever after. Likewise, many students expect these engaged learning experiences to reflect the “warm fuzzies” they often experienced during service projects in which they participated through church groups or other organizations such as Scouts. For example, a student of mine with extensive experience through short-term service projects encountered the harsh realities associated with immigration as she conversed with families on the other side of “the fence” at the Mexican border. Instead of the feel-good rush of “helping these people,” she literally came face-to-face with the plight of real human beings. She had not anticipated what she saw, did, and felt, turning to me saying, “You didn’t protect me from this!” And while many students do (and rightly so) take satisfaction in their accomplishments in serving others, they often come to realize that their efforts may have short-term impact. Despite seeing tangible results of their work, students may also discover the complexities of the issues with which they are dealing and wonder if what they do really matters.

Similarly, our technology-based culture fools many students into thinking that nearly all of our questions and problems can be solved with the right information or tool. Commercials urge viewers to “ask your doctor” if this prescription medicine is right for you. Take a magic pill and voila, you’re well. If you want or need to know a fact or piece of information, just “Google it” and presto, you have “the answer.” For example, one student in a course of mine focusing on poverty was the classic overachiever destined for law school who had never “failed” anything she had done. At the end of a 15-week semester, she tearfully lamented how she had not “succeeded” at eliminating poverty. At first blush, that remark sounds absurd, but it was sincere and heartfelt. She was reassessing who she thought she was and what she could or could not do. This provided a marvelous teaching moment to explore her motivation to service. It allowed her to grapple with complex realities in which the lesson learned was that technology is not necessarily the magic pill and that life is not a two-hour movie with happy endings where the good guys always win. No one likes to confront that possibility. Even harder was when she was able to confront her own motivation for serving, questioning if she was doing this to help or merely pad her résumé. That was a lesson that is typically not on the syllabus as a learning objective, but a powerful one nonetheless. The key here was to be “with” that student in a non-judgmental way to support her.

Conversely, some students assume their instructors or advisors will provide the answers or solutions along the way. The dilemma for educators is that while we may know about matters

of our discipline, we cannot possibly know how or why students make meaning or purpose of that information that matters to them as human beings. But here is the part that is difficult for both students and educators to grasp because it is counter-cultural. Service-learning and service projects do not always provide “the answers”—at least in the way we often construe what that might be. Service-learning and other forms of engaged learning may, in fact, create more questions than answers. Students can feel lost if not betrayed when they do not come away from the experience with the right answer or the “right feeling.” Furthermore, our job as educators is not necessarily to supply them with answers either. Instead, we can help our students by accompanying them in ways that provide insights to illuminate the darkness they have encountered. The goal is not to “get it right” or get the “right grade” but to derive some sense of meaning from the experience in a safe space. But, how does one accomplish this?

Accompanying Students on the Journey

The colleague attending the workshop had it right—we are not social workers and it is not our job to “make it all better.” At the same time, we bear some responsibility of accompanying our students on a journey on which we took them. During a conference keynote in 2007, Robert Kegan described higher education as a bridge to help young adults as they engage in becoming their authentic selves (Kegan, 2007). As teachers, we have a broader life experience and have essentially already crossed the bridge Kegan describes. We tend to forget our students are still on the other side of that bridge. Our task is to wait patiently for them and be *with* them as they venture forward. But how?

First and most importantly, we overtly and intentionally forewarn students of the potential shadows they will encounter. We tell them the experience may be messy at best and even a little scary. At the same time, we give them permission to feel anxious. Be advised, they often will not internalize or even remember this warning until they come crashing into the shadows of their experience. I know firsthand how I spent six to seven weeks prior to going to post-Katrina New Orleans attempting to prepare my students for what they might see, hear, and feel. Despite my best efforts, none of us were fully prepared for the emotional discoveries that unfolded.

Second, we need to know how to accompany our students in the shadows so they can find meaning of their experience. Accompanying is not the same thing as coddling. A few strategies seem to provide the support with enough flexibility that helps students make meaning of their experience. One is “pre-flection,” in which students are asked to look ahead and anticipate what they are not only looking forward to, but what they are nervous or anxious about as well. These can be written out anonymously on scraps of paper that are put into a pile. Students randomly draw a slip of paper and read it aloud. This process “names” the fear and puts it “out there” in a safe environment. Students often discover that others share their similar thoughts, fears, and concerns so they are not alone. During or following a profound service experience, these can be revisited and discussed, reminding students of the realities they might encounter.

Another strategy is the tried and true reflection rubric described by Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles in their landmark book, *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?*, created by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (C.O.O.L.) known as “What? So What? Now What?” (Eyler & Giles, 1999). This triadic framework allows students to name or describe WHAT they are experiencing. They can begin to make meaning of the experience by exploring SO WHAT? Finally, students can then explore and articulate what they will do NOW that they have had this experience and opportunity to reflect on it.

Eyler and Giles’s (1999) technique can be illustrated by students in my class who probed the darkness of their post-Katrina service experience asking aloud if by gutting houses

we were simply contributing to the re-establishment of the same class-ist and racist system that existed prior to the hurricane. Good question. They were experiencing complex social, cultural, and political issues and putting a face on the experience as they were interacting with the people we were helping. We seriously probed what meaningful difference we could make to the larger issues at hand in only one week and wondered if it really mattered—the “so what?” What emerged were insights into similar issues we faced back home in our own community. The students identified steps they could take as individuals and collectively in their personal, professional, and civic lives after graduating. Clearly, the act of gutting houses was not the only objective. The service was merely a catalyst for critical reflection on “now what?” do we do to make sure this type of tragedy does not happen again and in our own community. *This* is where and how we make meaning of what we have experienced and learned.

A third approach is the ABCs of Reflection (Welch, 1999), which can be combined with pre-reflection using the ABCs as a “pre/post” reflection exercise. The “A” stands for affect that literally allows a space for students to articulate and share what they are feeling. They are encouraged to describe their emotions along with why they are experiencing them. But the process does not stop there. Students are then encouraged to reflect on past behaviors, current behaviors, and possible behaviors for the future as the “B” of the rubric. Finally, students make cognitive connections about what is being learned during the “C” component. In this way, critical reflection tied to intellectual and academic experiences also acknowledges the emotional and affective dimensions.

The ABCs can be illustrated in the example of when a student reflected on his aversion to individuals with physical disabilities as he prepared for his semester-long experience in an introduction to a special education course. Initially, he was fearful but had the courage to articulate that feeling in his journal entry. He noted how he used to avert his eyes or avoid the disabled when he encountered them in public. However, through the course and his service-learning experience, he soon realized how much he had in common with people who seemed “different.” As a result, not only did he change his behaviors, but also he eventually changed his major to pursue a career in this field.

The beauty of these approaches is twofold. One, students are allowed, encouraged, and empowered to make personal meaning of their learning experience. It is they who take responsibility in “learning” something that transcends the “right answer” to get a grade. Two, educators are also empowered to accompany their students during what can be an intimidating and unnering experience without imposing their ideas or suppositions. As professionals we give our students permission to “squirm and learn.” This intentional process and transparent discussion helps create a safe space for students.

Above I alluded to a student of mine who had a sudden epiphany in class when she tearfully and publicly questioned the motives of her service. I was touched and pleased when her classmates deeply listened to her in silence. They offered no solutions, solace, or criticism. Instead, the students simply accompanied a peer into the shadows when she needed that experience the most. After a period of silence, one brave member of the class tenuously asked and proposed if our weekly reflection journal entry incorporating the ABCs could be a personal reflection and response to the brave and candid confession of this student. All eyes turned to her, eliciting a response. She said, “Yeah, sure, if you think it will help.” In hindsight, these were some of the most honest and profoundly personal journal entries I have ever read. All students reflected on what they had felt, experienced, and learned as the beneficiaries of their friend. I share this only to illustrate the safe space that can be created when we allow and provide students with opportunities to reflect authentically on their experience without fear of getting the wrong grade.

Conclusion

Do all service experiences and reflection opportunities cast students into the shadows? No. But it can be a scary venture when it does occur for both the student and instructor. And while it can be easy to focus on the shadows during reflection, we must remember that the shadow is cast by illumination and that is an equal part of the experience. We cannot have one without the other. We emerge from those shadows seeing new things that have come to light.

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