

Constructing Meaning in Student Reflection: Mediating Learning with Students in Service-Learning

Adapted from:

Green, P. (2006). Dissertation, *Service-Reflection-Learning: An Action Research Study of the Meaning-Making Processes Occurring Through Reflection in a Service-Learning Course*, Department of Educational Leadership and Organizational Change, Roosevelt University, Chicago.

Abstract of Presentation:

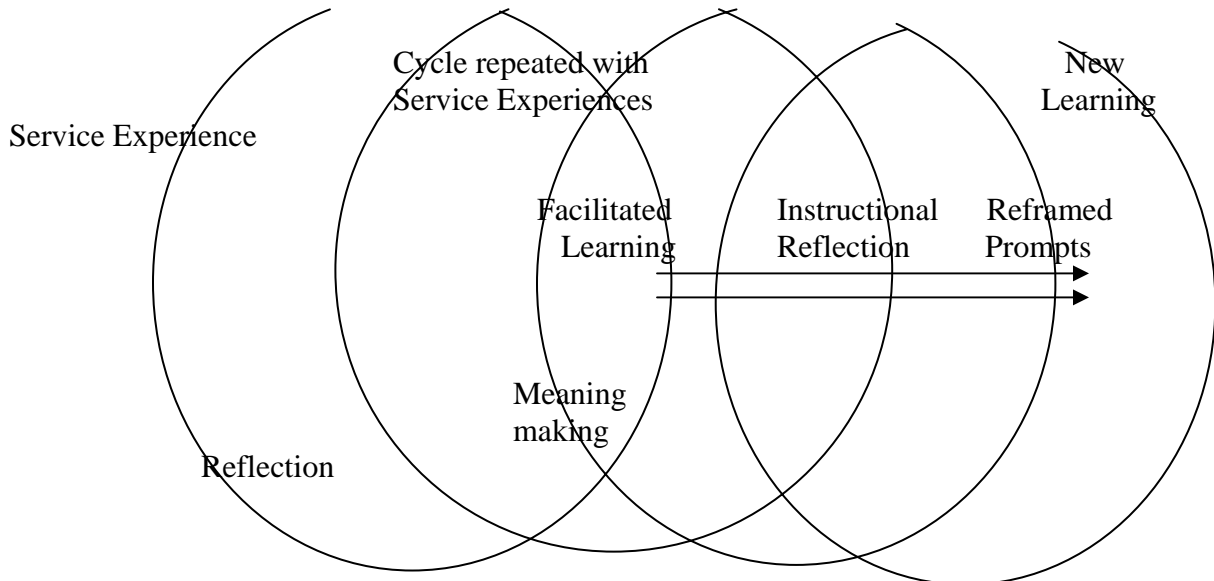
This presentation is based on a recent study conducted that has significant implications for the use of reflection in course-based service-learning. The conclusions of this study are drawn from the analysis of the student reflections and final reflection projects in a world history service-learning course, in which students participated in 20 hours of service in a homeless shelter throughout the semester. The data analysis suggests specific stages occurring within the student reflections in the service-learning course. The Recurring Stages of Student Reflection, which is the core of this topical presentation, have significant implications for any facilitators of reflection in regard to mediating learning through student reflection.

Service-Reflection-Learning Framework:

This study builds a framework for the implementation of a service-learning course and further understanding as to how student reflection connects service experiences to new learning. Some research provides a qualitative analysis of the cognitive processes that occur within the service-learning pedagogy, but leaves a gap for how faculty may guide such cognitive processes and *how* to mediate the student reflections to encourage the new learning processes (Rockquemore and Schaffer, 2003). Through adapting theoretical models from the research (Sheckley and Keeton, 1997; Cone and Harris, 1996), a framework for explaining the meaning-making processes that occur within a service-learning course will provide a necessary conceptual framework for the service-learning course, the context of this study.

Based on the service-learning research, the following framework has been adopted for this study. The service-reflection-learning framework represents the complex processes that occur within service-learning through reflection:

Service-Reflection-Learning Framework



This framework, as the graphic suggests, is complex and represents the multi-faceted approach of the service-learning pedagogy. The following components define the service-reflection-learning framework:

1. *The framework is a cyclic model.* The movement of this model is cyclic, not linear. A student moves from the service experience to reflection, from meaning making and facilitated learning and back to the service experience. After each cycle, it is repeated, and fostered by instructional reflection and reframed questions. In this developmental model, new learning occurs after several cycles.

2. *The framework is an open-ended helix.* The helix formation of this framework is representative of the continuous and repeated learning occurrences that the students potentially may experience in a forward-moving, developmental model. The repetition of experiences and reflection coupled with facilitated learning lead to meaning making. The instructor mediation, in the form of instructor reflection and reframed questions, lead to new learning. The helix is open to indicate that the learning process is ongoing. Within the pedagogy of service-learning the students are continuously learning and connecting their experiences to the course content. New learning may occur at any point in this framework, and some learning outcomes may be achieved after the repetition of many cycles.

3. *The framework is a developmental process.* The framework is a process connecting the service experiences and learning through several steps:

- a) Reflection, in which students reflect on their service experiences;
- b) Meaning making, in which, through reflection, students create and identify meaning of their experiences;
- c) Facilitated learning, in which the instructor facilitates connections between the service experiences and course content learning through guided reflection questions and discussion;

- d) Instructional reflection, in which the instructor of the course reflects on student reflection responses in accordance with the pedagogical strategies, creating a revised instructional plan;
- e) Reframed prompts, in which, based on instructional reflection, the instructor reframes the questions to further connect the service experience to the course content for students.
- f) New learning, in which the repeated process of the above steps leads to a new understanding or new concepts within the context of the course.

Based on the service-learning research, these elements comprise the framework adopted for this study, which identify how students make meaning of their service-learning experiences through reflection and how instructors may facilitate the meaning-making processes in service-learning course. It is the purpose of this study to explain the implementation of this framework into a service-learning course.

Participants in this Study

This qualitative study focuses on the implementation of service-learning in a world history course through the service-reflection-learning framework. The participants in this study are students from a Midwestern, metropolitan university of about 7,500 students. The student enrollment consists of a majority of non-traditional students, with a traditional age population of about 38%. Each of the students have self-selected into the world history course. Upon entrance to the course, the service-learning course was explained; there was no prior knowledge of service-learning with this course.

Data

The data gathered in this study include observations and reflections of the researcher, and the reflections of students. Stringer (1996) notes that action researchers gain a significant amount of information through participant observation and documents. In this study, I recorded observations and wrote research reflections after each class through the instructional research log. The instructional research log, based on the action research models of Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) and Stringer (1996; 1999; 2004), consists of class field notes, class observations, location of student development, revised instructional strategies, and instructor reflections.

The service-reflection-learning framework guided the student reflection questions on the syllabus. The students were assigned written reflection assignments coupled with their service-learning experiences, which served as documentation for this study. Student reflections consisted of raw, experiential reflections, based on the service experience, and a final reflection research paper served as the informed, cognitive reflections, based on experiences, research, and critical analysis of the topic.

Data Analysis

The data in this study was analyzed through two lenses: 1) analyzing epiphanies, and 2) categorizing and coding. Each of these analytic procedures allows researchers “to accurately and authentically represent people’s lives in non-authoritative, non-colonizing, and non-exploitive ways” (Stringer, 2004, p. 99).

Presentation of the Data

The data was presented in narrative form. Through the analysis of epiphanies and the categorization of data, the results were written into a narrative. The narrative explained the data analysis and the results of this study. Eisner (1998) notes that qualitative studies “are more interpretive and narrative. Their function is to highlight, to explain, to provide directions the reader can take into account” (p. 59). The narrative provided by the data of this study described and explained the dual process of how students make meaning of service through reflection in a service-learning course and how a faculty instructor may facilitate the meaning-making processes through student reflections on service experiences in a service-learning course.

Conclusions of Data Analysis

The presentation of the data provides an overview of the student reflections and final reflection and research projects that suggest specific stages occurring within the student reflection in a service-learning course. The suggested stages are representative of the significant themes identified through the analysis of the data. These stages are framed by the model of pre-reflection, multiple reflections on experiences, and post-reflection utilized in this study. The following graphic represents the developmental stages that students experienced through reflection on their service experiences:

Recurring Stages of Reflection in a Service-Learning Course Model

Emotional Reaction	Personalization	Increased Understanding	Connection to Course Content	Transformational Thinking
-----------------------	-----------------	----------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------

Figure 1. Recurring Stages of Student Reflection in a Service-Learning Course.

Figure 1 graphically represents the Recurring Stages of Student Reflection in a service-learning course as a single helix. This figure visually demonstrates the multiple stages and the movement that students may experience potentially through reflection on service experiences connected to course content. Although the stages are presented in a linear format, the stages are actually recurring and cyclic as students move back and forth between stages.

It is within these stages of reflection in a service-learning course that students experience the meaning-making process. By humanizing and personalizing the issue, students were more likely to think abstractly about multiple causes and to think conceptually about connections between past and present. By journeying through these stages, students create meaningful service experiences in which they connect the service-learning experiences to the course content and objectives. In the end, the potential for transformational thinking and social action is increased. The Recurring Stages of Student Reflection have significant implications for faculty instructors facilitating a service-learning course and mediating learning through reflection.

Emotional Reaction: Students revealed a number of emotions in the early stage of the service work. In the initial reflection, students expressed guilt as well as discomfort with the unfamiliarity of the situation. After the first service experience, student emotions varied from sadness and guilt to shock, from fear to anxiety, and from anger to expressing gratitude for the student's living situation. The emotional reaction was the most common theme among the students during the initial service-experiences. In the Recurring Stages of Student Reflection, the emotional reaction is the beginning of this meaning-making process.

Personalization: Once the students interacted with the volunteers and especially the guests of the homeless shelter, they began to understand the different issues surrounding homeless. This process of personalization, relating to an issue through talking with and learning from the stories of individuals, allowed students to understand the multiple dimensions of the homeless situation. As students observed and talked with the individuals in a homeless situation, they humanized the individuals and related to them on a personal level. This is indicative of the need for service-learning experiences to include direct contact with people in order to engage students in personalization.

It is particularly in this stage that students expressed the most significant challenge to their stereotypes of homeless people. Students began with initial images of homeless people as bums, alcoholics/drug addicts, uneducated and incommunicable, violent street people. After initial service experiences, students *broke away from these initial impressions (stereotypes)*, as they began to recognize that they could communicate with the homeless individuals as people. Words such as *normal, friendly, and everyday people* became descriptors for some of the homeless people. Although some issues of addiction and mental health were clearly present in some interactions, students identified these issues and interacted with a variety of individuals through conversation, games, dinner, and group discussions. After multiple experiences, students began to listen to and *relate to* the personal stories of the individuals. Student reflections focused on the re-telling of multiple stories of people, which further allowed students to shatter stereotypes of the homeless drunk. In the final reflections, their view of the homeless shifted from a distanced view to a *personalized view*, in which they included themselves as directly impacted by homelessness, by phrases such as *this could happen to anyone of us* and that they were *people more like us than not*. In sum, this shift from a stereotypical perspective occurred through 1) breaking bread with them, 2) thereby, relating to them individually, 3) and breaking from initial impressions, and 4) forming a personalized perspective on the issue. Their experiences allowed students to see some homeless as educated, skilled people with working experiences, the direct opposite of their initial impression and stereotype. The issue of homelessness was contextualized, and the guests became people in a situation, rather than a generalized population. In the process, they also began to discuss homelessness as an issue, as well as intermediate variables impacting homelessness, more directly in their reflections.

Increased Understanding: Through interacting with the individuals, students were able to identify a number of issues related to homelessness. They were able to articulate social structures (e.g., health care systems, wage structures, housing and rent systems) that contributed to homeless situations of individuals. In the process, students expressed an increased understanding of the multiple layers of homeless, the multiple causality of this issue, and the complexity of the situation. This occurred after multiple service

experiences and several interactions with people at the service site. This stage results in the increased awareness of the issue and an improved comprehension of the complexity of the issue.

Connection to Course Content: Once students began to understand the complexity of the issue, they began to see connections to the content of the course. This stage allowed students to make direct connections between past and present, to identify direct connections between industrialization and the present social structures impacting homelessness. Student made direct and indirect connections between homelessness, social structures that impact homelessness, and the social, economic, and structural impact of the industrial revolution. In effect, the result of this stage is increased empathy and a more sophisticated thinking in which students achieve the learning objectives of the service-learning course.

Transformational Thinking: The students in this stage may express a transformation of their thinking, such as how their perspectives on homelessness have changed. As students synthesize their learning, students also voiced criticisms of the organization, possible solutions, and began articulating strategies for change. The transformational thinking often leads to more involvement with issue, including volunteering at the organization or working on community solutions to solve the issue. This active engagement is a direct result of the learning process and transformational thinking involved in service-learning.

It is within these stages of reflection in a service-learning course that students experience the meaning-making process. Ehrlich (2005) notes the importance of this meaning-making process:

Community service that is integrated into an undergraduate curriculum enables students to connect thought and feeling, creating a context in which students can explore how they feel about what they are thinking and what they think about how they feel. It offers students opportunities to consider what is important to them—and why—in ways they too rarely experience otherwise (p. 2)

It is essential to provide the space for students to express their feelings and articulate their thinking about the topic or issue. Once students moved through their emotional reaction, students advanced to the stages of Increased Awareness, Connection to Course Content, and Transformational Thinking through their interactions with people and personal stories, specifically the process of personalization. The stage of personalization served as the core of the meaning-making process for students, which challenged the students' stereotypes and propelled students into the stages of advanced learning.

This stage of personalization serves as the vital link in the meaning-making process of reflection in a service-learning course. The extent to which students built relationships with individuals through direct contact provided the necessary connection to the issue of homelessness. By humanizing the issue, students were more likely to think abstractly about multiple causes and to think conceptually about connections between past and present. By journeying through these stages, students create meaningful service experiences in which they connect the service-learning experiences to the course content and objectives. In the end, the potential for transformational thinking is increased. The implications of these stages, especially the degree to which the stage of personalization created the vital connection to meaning-making in reflection, establish several potent

considerations for faculty instructors mediating student learning in a service-learning course, including the need for direct contact with individuals on the service site, for fostering meaningful relationships, and for mediating connections through personal interaction.

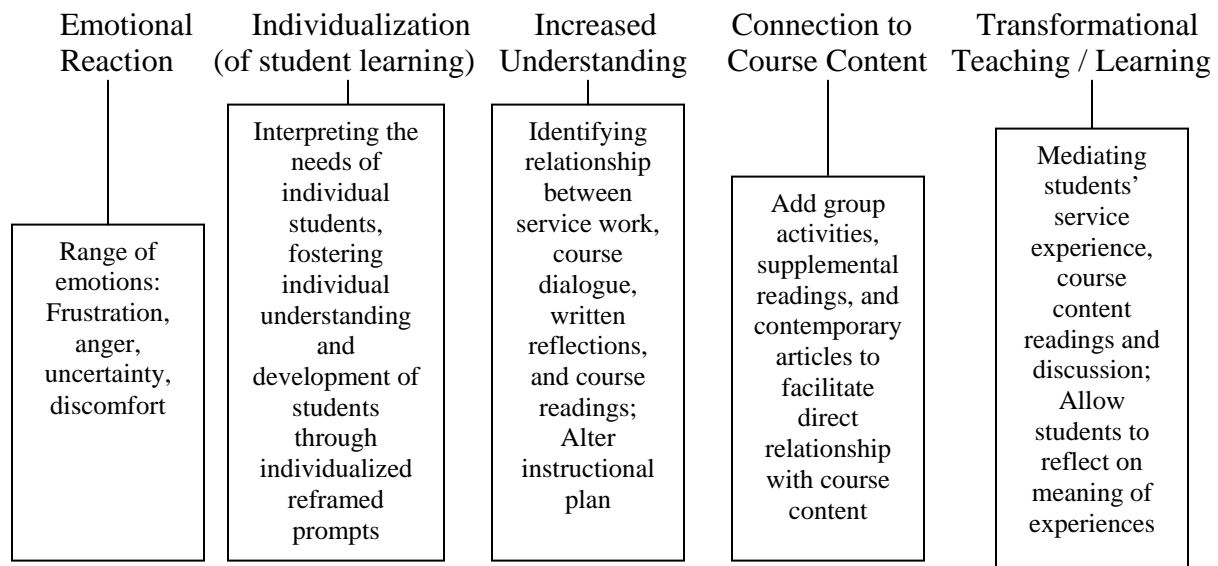
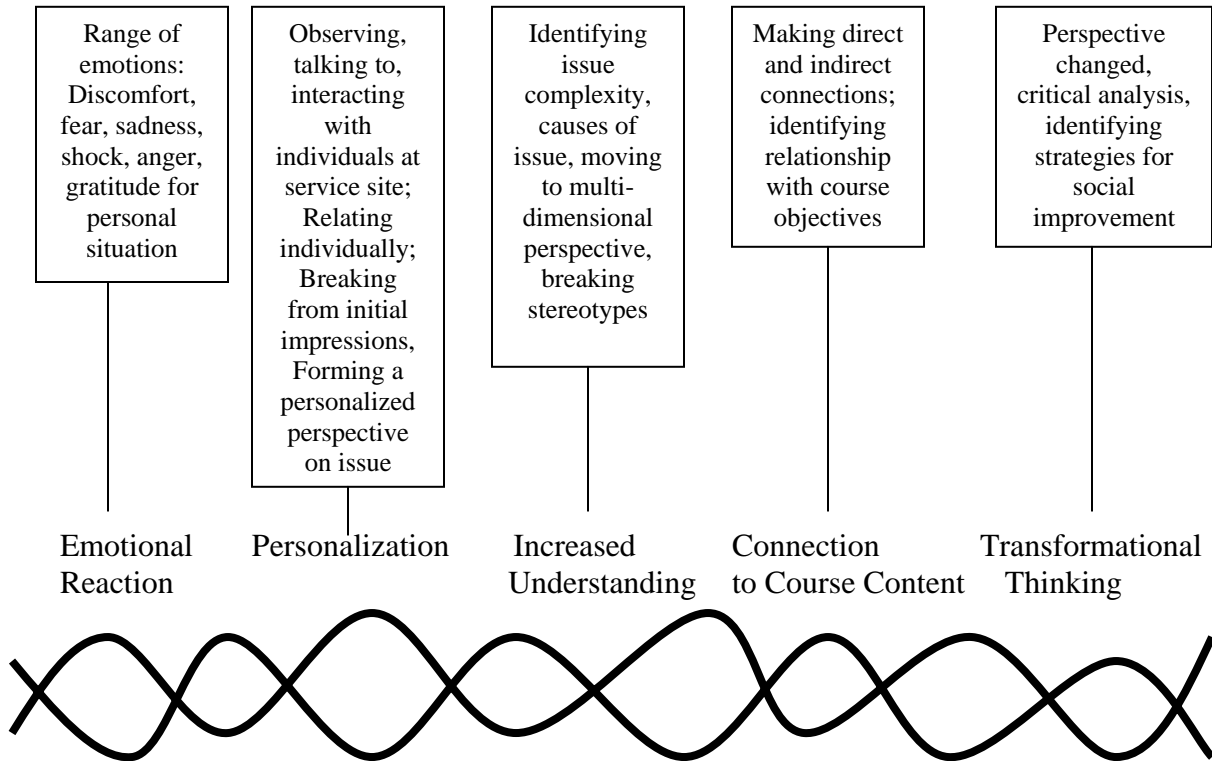
References

- Cone, D. & Harris, S. (1996, Fall). Service-learning practice: Developing a theoretical framework. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 3, 31-43.
- Ehrlich, T. (July, 2005) *Carnegie Perspectives: Service-Learning in Undergraduate Education: Where Is It Going?* Retrieved 8/9/05 at <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/perspectives2005.July.htm>
- Eisner, E. W. (1998). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (2000). Participatory action research. In N.K. Denzin, & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 567-606). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, Inc.
- Rockquomore, K. A. and Schaffer, R. H. (2003). Theory of engagement: A cognitive mapping of service-learning experiences. In *Introduction to service-learning toolkit: Readings and resources for faculty* (pp. 41-52). Providence, RI: Campus Compact.
- Sheckley, B. G. & Keeton, M. T. (1997). Service learning: A theoretical model. In J. Schine (Ed.), *Service learning: Ninety-sixth yearbook of the national society for the study of education* (pp. 33-40). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stringer, E.T. (1996). *Action research: A handbook for practitioners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, Inc.
- Stringer, E.T. (1999). *Action research: A handbook for practitioners*. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishing, Inc.
- Stringer, E.T. (2004). *Action research in education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Appendix K

Parallel Processes of Meaning-Making

Recurring Stages of Student Reflection in a Service-Learning Course



Stages of Instructor Reflection in a Service-Learning Course