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Service Learning in Undergraduate Nursing Education: Strategies to Facilitate Meaningful Reflection

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SERVICE LEARNING IN UNDERGRADUATE NURSING EDUCATION: STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE MEANINGFUL REFLECTION

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Service learning is recognized as a valuable pedagogy involving experiential learning, reflection, and reciprocal learning. Students develop critical thinking and social awareness by using the crucial activity of reflecting upon their experiential learning with community partners. The purpose of this paper is to demystify the process of reflection by identifying best practices to enhance reflection and offering suggestions for grading. By understanding “the what” and “the how” of reflection, educators can implement service learning experiences designed to include the essential component of reflection. Strategies for facilitating meaningful reflection are described including descriptions of what students should reflect upon and how to initiate reflection through writing, reading, doing, and telling. Grading rubrics are suggested to facilitate evaluation of student reflection. When properly implemented, service learning encourages students to be good citizens of the world. By using best practices associated with reflection, students can be challenged to think critically about the world and how their service can achieve community goals. (Index words: Service learning; Reflection; Undergraduate; Nursing education) *J Prof Nurs 32:100–106, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.*

NURSE EDUCATORS ARE charged with creating strategies that engage undergraduate nursing students in critical thinking and service to achieve community goals. One approach often used by educators to meet this charge is service learning. Service learning is defined as, “a structured learning experience that combines community service with explicit learning objectives, preparation, and reflection” (Seifer, 1998, p. 274). Reflection, a critical component of service learning, is used to “enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2011, p. 1).

Originating in the early 1900s, Dewey (1938) proposed three essential elements distinguishing service learning from other learning experiences: (a) experiential learning, (b) reflection, and (c) reciprocal learning. According to Dewey, it is critical that educational strategies include experiential learning that connects students to the realities of society. To address social concerns, he

advocated active engagement rather than traditional teaching strategies, such as lectures, that tend to promote passivity on the part of students. Through service learning, students come to understand the world around them by reflecting about social justice and one's responsibility to others. Educators design service learning experiences by linking educational objectives with service designed to meet community needs. This results in reciprocal learning for both students and community members through collaborative partnerships (Champagne, 2006; The International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership; National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2011).

Evidence shows that student learning is enhanced through service learning (Seifer, 1998; Stallwood & Groh, 2011) and that students demonstrate enhanced critical thinking and problem solving abilities (Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, & Neville, 2005; Simoni & McKinney, 1998) following a service learning experience. They also can achieve a heightened sense of civic responsibility (Casey & Murphy, 2008; Groh, Stallwood, & Daniels, 2011; Hunt, 2007; Simoni & McKinney, 1998) and an increased willingness to volunteer in the future (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Champagne, 2006). Student attitudes and perceptions have been positively altered by increasing

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caring, leadership, and professionalism (Foli, Braswell, Kirkpatrick, & Lim, 2014; Hwang, Wang, Tu, Chen, & Chang, 2014; Jarosinski & Heinrich, 2010), reducing stigma associated with mental health and substance abuse (Brown, 2009), and heightening sensitivity to cultural diversity (Amerson, 2010; Casey & Murphy, 2008; Curtin, Martins, Schwartz-Barcott, DiMaria, & Ogando, 2013; Jarosinski & Heinrich, 2010). For example, in a community clinic, Chen, McAdams-Jones, Tay, and Packer (2012) compared cultural competence of nursing students who participated in a service learning project, which included reflection, to students who did not. They found that students in the experimental group improved their cultural competence “from cultural awareness” to “being culturally competent” throughout the service learning project (p. 8). Service learning has been shown to positively affect the interpersonal, spiritual, and moral development of students (Bassi, 2011; Hester, Daniels, & Adonis, 2005) as well as professional values (Fowler, 2013). Harris (2005) showed that reflection, through the use of journaling, empowered students and promoted self-direction.

Faculty, academic institutions, community organizations, and community members also benefit from service learning (Seifer, 1998). When service learning strategies are used, faculty reported stronger relationships among students and faculty and increased satisfaction with the quality of student learning (Champagne, 2006). The visibility and reputation of academic institutions are enhanced and collaboration opportunities are enriched (Champagne; Seifer). For example, a service learning opportunity involving an elementary school resulted in the school being given a recognition award from the state, and subsequently the faculty member became an advisory board member (Bassi, Cray, & Caldrello, 2008). Service learning projects help community organizations reach more people and offer more services (Bassi et al.; Brown, 2009; Champagne, 2006; Hwang et al., 2014; Jarosinski & Heinrich, 2010). Service learning has the potential to improve clients' perceptions of quality of care. For example, Hwang et al. found that patients perceived

students to be more caring when they were involved in a service learning project. In addition, research shows that community members benefit from behavior changes, encouraged during a service learning project, that resulted in improved health outcomes (Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006).

Despite the abundance of literature about service learning in undergraduate nursing, Brown and Schmidt (2015) note that not all descriptions are consistent with the pedagogy of service learning because details about reflection are often omitted. There are several possible explanations for the lack of attention to reflection. One possible explanation is that authors choose to focus on other aspects of the service learning experience. Journal page limitations could also discourage authors from providing adequate descriptions of reflection. Another explanation is that reflection was not required as part of the service learning experience because educators may not value or recognize the reflective component as a criterion of authentic service learning. Educators may avoid incorporating reflection because they are unfamiliar with effective reflection strategies or hold the misperception that grading reflection results is an unreasonable faculty workload. The purpose of this paper is to demystify the process of reflection by identifying best practices to enhance reflection and offering suggestions for grading. By understanding “the what” and “the how” of reflection, educators can implement service learning experiences designed to include the essential component of reflection.

Facilitating Meaningful Reflection by Students

“Reflection is the hyphen that links service to learning” (Eyler, 2002, p. 453). The experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) is often cited as the theoretical basis for reflection (Ahmed, Hutter, & Plaut, 2008). Concrete activities must facilitate reflection about experiences to help students make connections to previous learning so that they can subsequently apply their ideas to new situations.

Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) propose critical factors known as the 4 Cs, noting that reflection is most

Table I. Questions to Guide What? So What? What Now?

Category	Taxonomy	Sample questions
What?	Remembering	What did I observe during my first visit?
	Understanding	What is the community partner's mission or goal? Describe the people you worked with at the community site. What do I expect to get out of this experience?
So what?	Analyzing	What am I learning about others and myself?
	Applying	What did I do that was effective? Why was it effective? How was I different/similar than other people?
What now?	Evaluating Creating	What values, opinions, decisions have been made or changed?
		Is it important to me to stay involved in the community?
		How will my efforts contribute to social change?
		Will I continue to do this?
		How can society better deal with this problem?
		What social and economic policy changes will resolve the problem? Where do we go from here? What is the next step in the process?

Adapted from Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) and Reed and Koliba (2003).

	Before Service	During Service	After Service
Reflect Alone	Reading	Writing	Writing
Reflect with Peers	Writing	Doing	Doing
Reflect with Community Partner	Telling	Writing	Telling

Figure 1. Example of a reflection map.

effective when it is within a continuous time frame, connected to the “big picture,” challenging to assumptions and complacency, and contextualized in terms of design and setting. To assure a continuous time frame, it is helpful to plan multiple opportunities for reflection that can occur before, during, and after community experiences. These opportunities assist students to explore the questions, challenges, and insights that arise over time. Reflection activities need to be connected to course goals and objectives. While reflection is best suited for affective objectives, activities included in the service learning experience can also address knowledge and skills. Challenges are incorporated when faculty pose thought-provoking questions that require students to think critically. Students must be challenged to question their assumptions while maintaining an atmosphere conducive to open inquiry while respecting the perspectives of others. Reflection must be contextualized. In other words, meaning must not be limited to the student perspectives. Students need to look at the larger context by examining academic and community factors.

Given the importance of reflection in service learning, it is imperative that educators be aware of best practices and be

equipped to design, implement, and evaluate activities for reflection. Elyer et al. (1996) note that the key to achieving meaningful reflection is assuring that “the what” and “the how” are addressed.

Determining “The What”

Perhaps the greatest challenge faculty face when creating assignments is determining what should be addressed to encourage reflection that is meaningful and congruent with the philosophy of service learning. While it can be easy to identify a topic and direction to pursue, creating questions that challenge students to take pause and reexamine their world views can be difficult. A popular framework that is useful when creating reflection activities is known as “What? So What? Now What?,” which is based on Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning (Elyer et al., 1996). “What?” questions focus on description, whereas “So what?” questions are interpretive and emotive. “Now what?” questions move students to consider actions. Examples of questions are presented in Table 1.

There are also some excellent resources, many of which can be easily accessed on the Internet, that provide questions to increase the depth of analysis of situations and experiences by

Table 2. Suggestions for Reflective Journals

Journal type	Description
Key phrase	Students are provided a list of terms and key phrases which they are to incorporate into their entries.
Double entry	Students divide the journal pages into halves. On the left, service learning experiences, personal thoughts, and reactions are recorded. On the right, key concepts, readings, and class discussions are connected.
Critical incident	Students respond to prompts that cause them to reflect on a critical incident that occurred during the service. For example, a prompt may encourage reflection about an ethical dilemma that occurred.
Three part	Students relate course material and suggest courses of action that they could have pursued.
Team	Students respond to three prompts: (a) describe in a detailed manner what happened in the service experience, (b) make connections between course content and service experience, and (c) related experience to personal values, beliefs, goals, attitudes, and philosophy.
Team	Students take turns making entries about individual and shared experiences and respond to each other’s entries.
Cluster	Students shout out words that describe the day. Each person writes for 2 minutes about the interconnectedness of the words that were identified.
Dialog	Students are instructed to observe a conversation between others, paying special attention to the content, nonverbal communication, and tone of the conversation. Later, they try to record the conversation verbatim and analyze the conversation. This is similar to a process recording.
Different perspectives	Students record a situation that involved some degree of conflict. They assume the perspective opposite from the one they originally held. They also reflect about the process of writing from the opposing viewpoint.
Fly on the wall	Students write about the service experience by from the view of a fly on the wall. They write a short, descriptive passage based on the observations.

students. *The Service Learning Reflection Guide: Making Sense of the Service Experience* (McDonald & Kunard, 2008) provides questions that cluster around writing and talking, group activities, and civic engagement. For example, questions to guide reflection about civic engagement include, “To what degree do you see yourself as responsive to the concerns and needs of the community?” “To what degree do you see your university responsive to the concerns and needs of the community?” and “To what degree do you see your peers responsive to the needs of the community?” Excellent questions can also be found in the *The Reflection Toolkit* (Watson & Kinsel, 2003), *Critical Reflection in Service Learning: Generating, Deepening, and Documenting Learning Challenges, Strategies and Activities* (Moses, 2009), and *Teacher Tools* (National Youth Leadership Council, 2007).

Handling “The How”

Once “the what” has been determined, faculty can develop methods addressing “the how.” The resources suggested previously also provide ideas for nurse educators to create and implement assignments for meaningful reflection. To guide reflection assignments, it has been suggested that faculty use a reflection map (Connors & Seifer, 2005; Eyler, 2002), a 3 × 3 matrix (Figure 1) that crosswalks reflection alone, with fellow students, and community partners with reflection before, during, and after service learning projects. Ideally, there would be one reflection activity for each box of the matrix, allowing faculty to implement a variety of strategies. Eyler et al. (1996) categorize activities as reading, writing, doing, and telling. Although journals, papers, discussions, and presentations are commonly used, creative use of art work, music, cartoons, photography, skits, and dance can also be meaningful forms of expression (Eyler et al.). Many effective strategies can be accomplished within 5–30 minutes, but some can be as short as a minute or take a number of hours (Watson & Kinsel, 2003).

Including activities from all categories is critical so that students with diverse learning styles can engage in meaningful reflection. For example, Chirema (2006) collected data from 42 reflective journals and conducted 17 face-to-face interviews with students, teachers, and preceptors. Qualitative data analysis revealed six themes: (a) attending to feelings, (b) association, (c) integration, (d) validation, (e) appropriation, and (f) outcome of reflection. The researcher concluded that journals could be evaluated for the presence or absence of reflective thinking; however, one third of the sample was unable to demonstrate reflection. Therefore, engaging students in a variety of exercises may result in richer and more robust reflection.

Reflection can also be facilitated when faculty participate in reflection activities. For example, O'Donovan (2005) suggests that faculty need adequate preparation and support to successfully mentor student reflection. Having faculty reflect in reading, writing, doing, and telling concurrently with students is one way that faculty can hone their own reflective skills.

Reading. Reading assignments are a worthwhile activity for students to begin engaging in “the how” before a

service activity. Students should be encouraged to make connections between the reading and the service. Readings do not need to be complicated or lengthy. Articles, poems, short stories, or even song lyrics can be creative ways to sensitize students to issues of social justice. Bringle and Hatcher (2014) recommend using readings from *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* and *The Call of Service: A Witness to Idealism*. *The Civically Engaged Reader* also offers a useful collection of poetry, essays, and short stories about community engagement (McDonald & Kunard, 2008).

Writing. Journals, both hand written and electronic, are a common approach used to stimulate student reflection (Eyler, 2002; Eyler et al., 1996; McDonald & Kunard, 2008). The key to achieving reflective writing in journals is to provide students sufficient direction so that the entries are not simply an inventory of the events that occurred during the service experience. One strategy to help students begin to develop reflective writing is to have them make two columns in their journals. In one column, students record their observations. In the other column, they record their interpretations of the experiences. As their skills progress, students begin to differentiate between observations and reflection. At this point columns can be merged. Another helpful strategy is to allow 5 minutes or so during the lecture for journaling. This allows students to begin focusing on the topic, thus avoiding the blank page phenomenon (Watson & Kinsel, 2003).

There are several other types of journals that can be used to enhance the level of reflection (see Table 2). It often takes time for students to feel that they can be honest about their feelings without a fear of being judged; therefore, careful consideration should be given to the decision to assign groups of students to journal together. Likewise, decisions about grading journals may affect the degree to which students self-reveal (Eyler, 2002). For example, students may be more honest when a journal is graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory than when letter grades or points are assigned. The authenticity of student reflection may be affected by whether the journal is graded by a professor, a clinical instructor, or a teaching assistant. Papers offer another method of reflection that allows for more formal writing than journals (California State University Channel Islands, 2005; Eyler, 2002). Increased depth and detail about the connections between the experience and class room content can be achieved through this more formal venue. Essays can also be effective. For example, students can write a philosophy of service or a first impressions assignment about the service site (McDonald & Kunard, 2008). Creative writing, such as poems, lifeline biographies, and letters to self are other writing exercises that can be used to foster reflection (Watson & Kinsel, 2003).

Doing. Another way faculty can handle “the how” is to engage students in doing activities. Students find these activities enjoyable; however, students and faculty may underestimate the amount of time required compared to

Table 3. Telling Strategies

Activity	Description
Presentation/guided discussion	
Narrations	Individuals describe an experience that was significantly memorable.
Connections	Individuals describe connections they have made among the service project and readings, classmates, other courses, and the community
Insights and learning	Individuals describe what they have learned about themselves, other people, their values, the community, and citizenship.
Appreciation acknowledgement	
Whisper walk	The group forms two lines. A blindfolded person walks between the lines. Individuals tap the walker on the shoulder and whisper in an ear something they appreciate about the person.
Yarn web	Standing in a circle, individuals throw a ball of yarn to one another. When the ball is tossed, they say one word that explains what they will bring to the next project, something they appreciate about the person they are throwing the ball to, or a word that describes what they learned.
Inside circle	Each team member takes turn sitting in the middle of the circle with eyes closed. Others randomly share things they appreciate about that person.
Concentric circles	The group forms two circles; one within the other. Individuals pair up. The facilitator poses a question for each pair to answer within a few minutes. Then individuals in one circle rotate x spaces to the left or right. Another question is asked for the new pairs to answer.
Quotes exercise	Individuals randomly select strips of paper containing different quotations. Individuals read the quotes aloud explaining what it means, and discuss how the quote is related to the service project.

Adapted from McDonald and Kunard (2008) and Watson and Kinsel (2003).

reading and writing activities. When incorporating doing activities, faculty members need to anticipate that the time investment, on the part of both faculty and students, can become burdensome. Despite this potential drawback, doing activities fosters creativity, which may result in reflection different from reflection achieved through reading and writing. Doing activities tend to fall into two categories: artwork and portfolios (Watson & Kinsel, 2003).

Artwork is beneficial because it can appeal to students of various ages and learning styles (Watson & Kinsel, 2003). Artwork allows for expression of what happened, feelings, or the meaning of the service experience. It can be created as a group project or individually and then meshed together. Mediums can include video, photography, sculpture, drawing, and murals. Collages are another way students can use art to express what they have learned during their service learning experience. An advantage to artwork is that it can be publicly displayed to raise awareness about the university, community partner, and the social need being addressed.

Other activities that involve doing include the creation of portfolios. Portfolios are advantageous because they can be used for various purposes; therefore, when providing directions it is important for faculty to be clear about the reflection that is to be accomplished. For example, students could develop an inventory for the community being served. The portfolio would include information about the resources, local leaders, relationships between organizations, attitudes about the project, and challenges encountered (Watson & Kinsel, 2003). A scrapbook or memory box is another way for individuals or groups to record their memories about their projects. Assembling a collection of photographs, quotations, and mementoes stimulate reflection about the skills learned or challenges overcome. An ABC book challenges students to illustrate each letter of the

alphabet with one sentence, thought, and/or picture representing an aspect of their project. The assignment can be shortened by using letters from the name of the organization rather than from the entire alphabet (Watson & Kinsel).

Telling. Telling is a commonly used educational method to engage students in reflection. In clinical settings, nursing faculty often use time during pre- and postconferences to pose reflective questions. Keeping discussions focused while seeking to balance the needs of individuals in the discussion is key to successful reflection (Watson & Kinsel, 2003). For example, when structuring a post-conference, it is beneficial to first discuss any significant incidents that may have occurred during the day because these events will be foremost in the minds of the students. Linking reflection questions to the situation can enhance students' processing while pressing them to consider social justice. Focus can be maintained by assuring that questions employ the "What?," "So what?," and "Now what?" framework (Eyler et al., 1996). Faculty should be comfortable with allowing silence and avoid interpreting it unfavorably because students need time to formulate thoughtful reflection. A variety of telling strategies are presented in Table 3.

Grading Reflection

Faculty may shy away from including reflection in service learning activities for a variety of reasons. Grading assignments that include reflection is often perceived as time consuming and arbitrary. Furthermore, because reflection is personal in nature, some faculty members are reluctant to grade reflection assignments. Another obstacle for faculty is the perception that grading reflective writing is unreliable and inconsistent; however,

Table 4. Grading Rubric for Reflection

Level of reflection demonstrated by student	Elements of reflective process	Criteria
Nonreflectors	No criteria met	
Reflectors	Attending to feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing positive feelings • Working to minimize negative feelings
	Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linking of prior knowledge, feelings, or attitudes with new knowledge • Discovering that attitudes are no longer consistent with new knowledge • Reassessing prior knowledge to accommodate new attitudes
Critical reflectors	Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking the relationships among old and new knowledge and attitudes • Arriving at insights
	Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resolving inconsistencies among new appreciations and prior knowledge or beliefs
	Appropriation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making knowledge one's own • Integrating new knowledge, feelings or attitudes into sense of self • Embodying new beliefs in one's life
	Outcome of reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completing transformation in perspectives • Changing behaviors are apparent • Committing to action

Adapted from Wong et al. (1995).

studies show that acceptable interrater reliability coefficients can be achieved when a grading rubric is used (Plack, Dricoll, Blissett, McKenna, & Plack, 2005; Plack et al., 2007; Wong, Kember, Chung, & Yan, 1995).

Having a grading rubric is invaluable when grading student reflection. Grading rubrics can be simple or complex depending on the faculty's preference and the nature of the assignment. For example, a simple way to grade reflections is to consider the work satisfactory when reflection is present. Conversely, a grade of unsatisfactory is assigned to student work that offered accounts of activities without including analysis of personal thoughts, interpretation of activities, or linkages to assigned readings or other experiences. Greater discrimination can be achieved by using a standard letter grade scale. For example, grades can be assigned using Bloom's taxonomy by applying a three-level grading rubric (Plack et al., 2007). Evidence of knowledge and comprehension are demonstrated through data gathering, and reflection of this caliber is assigned a grade in the C range. When analysis is demonstrated through data analysis, students earn grades of B, whereas synthesis and evaluation demonstrated by conclusion drawing earn an A. A more sophisticated grading rubric, based on a coding schema derived from Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), is suggested by Wong et al. (1995) and Chirema (2006). These authors examine student reflections for six elements of the reflective process (see Table 4).

Regardless of the grading rubric used, the process of grading reflective journals may initially seem daunting; however, the more educators engage in this activity, the easier it becomes to judge the quality of students' reflections.

Conclusion

It is essential that educators be proficient at engaging students in reflection because it is a critical component of service learning. When educators use “the what” and “the how” to design student experiences, students can make meaningful connections between their previous learning and new ideas and experiences. Awareness about the variety of reflection strategies allows educators to match assignments to diverse student learning needs. The best practices identified in this article have been, and continue to be, effective mechanisms to sensitize students to issues of social justice. Through meaningful reflection, students will be better able to achieve their potential as active participants in public life.

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