

Educative Outcomes for Academic Service-Learning: Explicit Illustrations of Reflection

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Higher education faculty are drawn to academic service-learning (AS-L) for its positive outcomes. In order to achieve such outcomes, it is necessary for faculty to be intentional about students' reflections on their AS-L experiences. This article describes research on three reflection exercises conducted with 41 students enrolled in two sections of an Educational Psychology course. Each reflection exercise was designed to help students achieve one of the following outcomes: becoming aware of negative stereotypes, making connections between their AS-L experiences and course content, or developing an appreciation for complexity in a situation at the AS-L site. Qualitative analysis was used to examine the data for patterns of the personal and academic knowledge study participants gained from each of the reflection exercises. Suggestions are included for adapting the three reflection exercises to suit the varying needs faculty have for their courses.

Higher education faculty turn to academic service-learning (AS-L) pedagogy because it connects classroom instruction with community service and helps students learn about the complexity of societal issues firsthand. AS-L experiences help students to enhance their academic knowledge, reduce negative stereotypes, develop a greater appreciation of other cultures, increase self-knowledge, and cultivate civic participation (Eyler & Giles, 1999). These are the outcomes faculty hope for when placing students in AS-L settings. Unfortunately, not all students leave their AS-L experience with increased academic knowledge and greater social, personal, and civic awareness. When faculty are not intentional about building in class time for reflection on AS-L experiences, some students can leave their AS-L experience with less than desirable results (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Dewey's classification of experiences as either "educative" or "miseducative" provides a useful framework for AS-L faculty as they consider how to incorporate reflection into their courses (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Experiences are *educative* when reflection leads to new discoveries about oneself and the world, personal and professional growth, and the ability to take informed action. Experiences are *miseducative* when critical thought is lacking and students become more ingrained in their existing schemata (p. 180). Reflection is a critical element for determining whether experiences are educative or miseducative.

Definitions of Reflection

Eyler and Giles (1999) identify the need for balance between community service and academic learning in AS-L, noting, "[T]he hyphen in the phrase symbolizes the central role of reflection in the process of learning through community experience" (p. 4). Within the AS-L community there is consensus that

reflection is essential for optimal student outcomes (Weigert, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004; Correia & Bleicher, 2008). Reflection is often thought of as the bridge between academic concepts and concrete experiences in AS-L (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Felten, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006). Indeed, Hatcher and Bringle (1997) define reflection as "the intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives" (p. 153). Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) likewise observe that reflection represents a "stepping back from intense social engagement to learn more from it in order to be more effective the next time, and the connecting of these reflections with existing theoretical knowledge" (p. 191).

Bringle and Hatcher (1999) note that in addition to linking the service-learning experience to course objectives, well structured reflection is needed on a regular basis throughout the semester to provide students with multiple opportunities to practice the art and skill of reflection. They also believe the instructor needs to provide feedback that encourages students to deepen and broaden their reflection. Finally, Bringle and Hatcher argue that reflection should include opportunities for students to study, clarify, and reframe their values.

Need for Reflection in AS-L

When reflection is not central to the educational process, there are several ways AS-L can go awry. Potential negative outcomes include, but are not limited to, reinforcement of negative stereotypes (Jones, Gilbride-Brown, & Gasiorski, 2005; Ash & Clayton, 2009), disconnection of AS-L experience from course content (Eyler & Giles, 1999), and simplistic understandings of situations at the AS-L site (Ash & Clayton, 2009). These outcomes are discussed in greater detail below.

While the reduction of stereotypes is often identified as a goal of AS-L, the exact opposite result, reinforcement of stereotypes, can also occur. Jones et al. (2005) note that when students engage in AS-L, “previously held assumptions, stereotypes, and privileges are uncovered” (p. 4). Darby, Knight-McKenna, Spingler, and Price (2008) found that placing middle-class college students in AS-L experiences at high poverty public schools without significant preparation resulted in students making negative generalizations about the children, families, and teachers at these schools. Faculty seeking to avoid such outcomes will be motivated to focus students’ reflections on assumptions and stereotypes and to provide opportunities for students to reframe their thinking.

Students miss learning opportunities when they fail to connect their AS-L experience to course content. Simply completing the service is not enough to attain desired outcomes (Jay, 2008). In research conducted by Eyler and Giles (1999), students who volunteered without the structure of an AS-L course tended to talk about the people they met and the experiences they had. In contrast, students who engaged in AS-L with a strong reflection component talked about what they learned and how that learning could be applied to real work situations. Reflection appeared to support students in making connections between the personal and the academic. Eyler and Giles concluded, “[R]eflection is a useful tool for most service-learning goals, but it is central . . . for improved academic outcomes” (p. 173).

The third potential negative outcome of an AS-L experience that does not emphasize reflection is that students may leave the experience with only simplistic understandings of the things they have seen and experienced. Ash and Clayton (2009) explain that students may make sweeping generalizations based on their narrow perceptions and the limited data at their AS-L site. Some students have a superficial understanding of complex social conditions, which can lead to “students supporting the status quo, rather than being the effective agents of change that service-learning proponents hope to help mold” (Ash & Clayton, 2004, p. 139). For example, at an AS-L setting of a high poverty school, one undergraduate student noted that parents of students often do not review their children’s folders and sign appropriate paperwork to send back to school. This undergraduate student concluded that the parents do not care about their children’s education instead of considering the parents’ work schedules, language differences, and literacy levels (Darby et al., 2008). Unless students are asked to step back, gather data in a comprehensive way, and analyze it to discover its complexity, they may retain

oversimplified notions of situations that actually contain layers of complexity.

To avoid these negative outcomes and achieve the educative outcomes AS-L can offer, faculty need to carefully plan how their students will reflect on their experiences. This article presents research on three reflection exercises designed by the authors. Each reflection exercise is intended to help students achieve one of the following educative outcomes: becoming aware of negative stereotypes, making connections between their AS-L experiences and course content, or developing an appreciation for complexity in a situation at the AS-L site. There is some overlap between these outcomes, but each reflection exercise is most strongly associated with one of the three educative outcomes.

The need for well-structured reflection is firmly established in the AS-L literature, yet there are few examples in the literature of actual AS-L reflection exercises and little research on students’ learning as a result of participating in the exercises. Most of the articles on reflection present general models for faculty to adopt for their courses rather than concrete examples of reflection exercises that have been successfully implemented in AS-L courses. With this in mind, we share research on three reflective exercises with analyses of student feedback.

Methodology

Desiring educative outcomes for our AS-L, we examined the epistemology of pragmatism espoused by Dewey. This framework is known for being real world centered and for having an emphasis on “what works” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 23). Despite its appeal, we realized this approach was missing a critical examination of assumptions and the need to consider multiple perspectives. Knowing how important these aspects are to AS-L reflection, we decided to look beyond the framework of pragmatism. Along with many others, Brookfield (2005) notes the limitations with pragmatism. He argues for an epistemology that encompasses both real world applications and a critical stance. This approach, which he calls critical pragmatism, “allies itself with the struggle to create a world in which one’s race, class, and gender do not frame the limits within which one can experience life” (p. 16). AS-L provides a natural connection with critical pragmatism because of its emphasis on experiential learning and critical reflection. Thus, this epistemological framework guided our study.

Context of Study and Participants

Nationally recognized for its implementation of AS-L pedagogy, the university which served as the context for this study is a private mid-sized liberal arts

institution located in the southeast region of the United States. The university faculty is over 90% Caucasian, as are 81% of the students. Many of the students come from the middle to upper-middle socioeconomic class, and most are of traditional college age. A significant majority of the students study abroad and participate in volunteer opportunities. The local community provides a contrast to the university with regard to racial makeup and socioeconomic status. Over 40% of the members of the local community are African-American or Hispanic with 16% living below the poverty line and nearly 11% lacking employment. These figures do not include undocumented workers. The local school district has been designated a Title I district due to the high numbers of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Specifically, this study was situated in two sections of an undergraduate educational psychology course held on the university's campus. Students enrolled in this course come from a variety of majors; however, a large percentage have declared either education or psychology majors. Several sections of the course are offered each semester, giving students the choice of selecting a section with or without AS-L pedagogy. The 41 participants in this study chose AS-L sections of the educational psychology course. Thirty-five participants were female, and six were male; all were of traditional college age. Fifteen of the participants were seniors, and 26 were juniors. Thirty-eight participants were Caucasian, two were Asian, and one was Hispanic.

In this course, college students carried out 20 hours of service-learning during the semester at a local high poverty elementary school. The racial breakdown of the elementary school student population was approximately 40% African-American, 40% Hispanic, and 20% Caucasian and others. The college students' AS-L experience involved working one-on-one or in small groups with students on math or reading, assisting teachers with student behavior problems, and/or supporting everyday classroom activities. Each Educational Psychology class entailed discussion, reflection, and synthesis to help the students connect their AS-L experience with the course material.

Research Methods and Analysis

Case study methodology applies as this research was bound by the length of a single semester and bound by the context of an educational psychology course offered on campus (Creswell, 1998). Data collection methods for the reflective exercises came from three sources: participants' responses to the reflection exercises; the instructor's notes, taken during and after the classroom discussions; and

participants' written responses to the prompt, "What did you learn as a result of participating in this reflection exercise?"

Our interest in the educative outcomes for AS-L led us to filtering the data according to two guiding questions: "What did the students learn academically?" and "What did the students learn about themselves?" Each of the participant's written responses and the instructor's notes were coded for answers to these questions. As we read each written response, we referred to previous participants' words and codes to identify similarities and differences. We created memos explaining the similarities and differences in an effort to generate categories pertaining to educative outcomes. Further analysis of the memos and the participants' written responses allowed us to refine the categories and reduce the data. This approach, called the constant comparative method (Roulston, 2010), enabled us to deepen our understanding of the personal and academic knowledge participants gained from each of the reflection exercises.

Findings

In presenting our findings we describe each reflection exercise in detail and then provide illustrative quotations related to the research. The research findings support the three educative outcomes of recognizing and refraining from stereotypical thinking, discovering the connections between the course objectives and their AS-L experience, and developing an appreciation for the complexity of situations at their AS-L site.

Alternative Explanations

The first reflection exercise was called "Alternative Explanations." Strategically placed at the beginning of the semester, this reflection exercise helps prepare students for their initial AS-L experience. The exercise focused on recognizing negative stereotyping and provided an opportunity for students to consider alternative ways to understand others. A strand within the Educational Psychology course is the understanding of cultures and families different from the student's own. Specifically, at the beginning of the semester, students read about culture and diversity in their textbook (Woolfolk, 2010) to learn about socioeconomic class differences as well as issues of prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping. While reading the unit on families, we accessed the information introduced by the textbook and discussed its influence on our interpretation of families. In this reflection exercise, the students were asked to read quotations from former university students that portrayed negative views of the families of children who live in poverty. The students were then asked to

discuss these views, consider where they may have originated, and generate alternative ways to interpret the family's behavior. This reflection exercise helped students become aware of negative stereotyping of families living in poverty and generate other explanations for family members' behavior.

Below is one example of a quotation from a former student that was shown to the participants in this study for analysis and discussion. Similar to many of the participants in this study, this student was white, female, and traditional college age.

They'll have like award ceremonies for the kids that get all As and Bs, no one's there. Like, Open House, no one's there. They have to bribe the parents with food a lot of the times to get them to come in and . . . even if a little kid goes home and he's like look, I got a 100 on my spelling test and nobody cares.

Study participants were asked to discuss this student's view and why she may have developed this perspective, and to provide a list of explanations, other than lack of caring for their children, for why parents did not attend award ceremonies and Open House. Since they were analyzing another student's words, the exercise created a safe atmosphere for them to objectively discuss assumptions and stereotyping. For this quotation, participants quickly recognized how the judgment of the former student was influenced by her upbringing and socioeconomic privilege. The study participants pointed out that it is unlikely that "no one" attended the award ceremony or Open House; some family members did attend. They also noted that the former student could not actually know whether family members responded with disinterest when a child brought home a spelling test with a high grade.

The study participants listed several alternative explanations for poor attendance at school events, such as lack of transportation, lack of fluency with the English language, working two or more jobs and not having time, apprehension about entering a school, not feeling welcome, and not wanting to interfere with a teacher's role. The participants had to place themselves in the role of the parents who were not attending school events to understand what might prevent them from participating. This helped move them beyond negative generalizations to considering multiple perspectives.

When the study participants read the quotations from former students, they were able to see the initial responses one could have about the level of parental involvement in high poverty schools. With further analysis and reflection, they developed a broader understanding of the challenges facing families living

in poverty and the obstacles they experienced to fuller participation in their children's schools.

After analyzing the former students' quotations, the study participants were asked to write about what they had learned from this exercise. Carrie Ann, a white, female sophomore student majoring in elementary education, wrote, "It is important not to stereotype and to be empathetic to the situations others are in that could affect their involvement in education." Chelsea, a student with the same demographics as Carrie Ann, wrote, "Things aren't always as they seem, and you have to step back and think of other explanations."

The class period ended with a discussion about how this new learning could be referenced throughout the semester in their AS-L experience. Study participants discussed the value of withholding judgment and refraining from jumping to conclusions about situations they had not observed, particularly in the child's home. They talked about the need to consider alternative explanations to negative stereotyping when observing behavior different from what they experienced in their upbringing.

Cognitive Disequilibrium

The second reflection exercise, "Cognitive Disequilibrium" was conducted soon after the first exercise at the beginning of the semester. This exercise supported students in making connections between their AS-L experiences and the course content. Before engaging in this exercise, students learned in class and through their textbook (Woolfolk, 2010) about the Piagetian theory of cognitive disequilibrium. People experience disequilibrium when they feel "out of balance" in their approach to solving a problem or making sense of a new situation. In striving for balance or equilibrium, people either change their perspective to fit the new circumstances – a process referred to as *accommodation* – or try to fit the new situation into their existing perspective – a process known as *assimilation* (Woolfolk, 2010, p. 33). In preparation for an upcoming class, students were asked to write about a new experience at their AS-L site where they experienced disequilibrium and to identify how they went about creating equilibrium through assimilation or accommodation.

Kevin's response to this reflection exercise provides an example of the work participants brought to class. Kevin, a white middle-class male, was a junior majoring in history. He wrote,

The first time I experienced disequilibrium was on the orientation day. It stemmed from a mixture of things. I had never gone to a public school, I knew little about the education system, and everyone else did . . . this was totally different for me.

Kevin referenced his private school education and acknowledged his lack of familiarity with the public schools, which led to a cognitive state of disequilibrium.

Discussion time was provided for students to share their experience of cognitive disequilibrium and how assimilation and accommodation play a role in the learning process. At the end of the class period, students answered the prompt, “What did you learn as a result of participating in this reflection exercise?” One student responded that the reflection exercise “provided real-life examples of disequilibrium and therefore accommodation and assimilation within schools. Overall, I got a better understanding of these theories.” Another participant said she learned “that there is a name and a definition for the confusion and disorientation I feel sometimes.”

Similar to Kevin, the pattern for many students was first to identify their disequilibrium, then to explore the differences between their own schooling experiences and what they saw in high poverty schools, and next to realize how the differences led to their disequilibrium. The final step involved the students sharing how they achieved equilibrium or balance in their thinking by pulling back and analyzing the situation. This reflection exercise provided a tool to help students understand Piagetian theory as they explored the sources of their own cognitive disequilibrium while gradually moving toward reestablishing equilibrium.

The Challenging Student

The third reflection exercise, conducted half-way through the semester, was called “The Challenging Student.” The students moved beyond initial negative views of a challenging child by identifying the child’s strengths. This reflection exercise helped the study participants learn to see complexity in a situation at their AS-L site. Before engaging in this strategy, students learned in class and through their textbook (Woolfolk, 2010) about behaviorism and aspects of the environment that reinforce certain behaviors. In analyzing the behaviors, students were asked to choose a child from their AS-L site whom they considered difficult in some way and to write down their impressions of this child. The faculty member collected this paper for comparison purposes at the end of the exercise. The study participants were then asked to observe the child with challenging behaviors for two weeks and fill out a form after each observation. On the form they recorded what happened that day, looking specifically for positive behaviors, strengths the child exhibited, and positive interactions the child had with peers and teachers.

At the end of the two weeks, the students completed a summary in which they described the

overall strengths of the challenging child. Students were asked to bring this description to class, along with the observational data collected over the two week period. At the beginning of this class, the faculty member returned the papers study participants wrote regarding their initial impressions of the challenging student. Next, the students were asked to write about the similarities and differences between their initial impressions and final summary. The students also wrote about how this exercise related to the course content, particularly with regard to the role of the environment in reinforcing negative behavior.

Rhonda’s response to this reflection exercise provides an illustration of our students’ work. Rhonda, a psychology major, was a middle-class white, female student. She wrote:

Initially, I assumed that the student acted out in class due to a lack of attention at home. Careful observation and conversations with the boy have helped me to see that he is more complicated than that . . . The constant reprimanding from his teacher makes him extra sensitive and causes him to get angry easily. However, I see a maturity in this child that I did not initially notice . . . Originally I thought he was just doodling and refusing to participate, but actually he was taking time to calm down so he could effectively participate later.

Rhonda described behaviors she observed in this child, including leaning back in his chair, sticking his tongue out, and laughing at inappropriate times. She concluded that this student was challenging. The second question, “Where did my perception come from?” prompted Rhonda to examine her belief that poor behavior stems from lack of parental oversight. When answering the question for the third step, “How else might I view this situation or understand this person?” Rhonda commented on ways that this student did exhibit self-control in a high stress situation. This reflection strategy helped Rhonda move beyond her initial negative view of this student to a new appreciation for the student and a more complex understanding of his situation. She came to think of him as a mature child who was finding unique ways to solve problems.

The participants whose views changed while engaged in this reflection exercise emphasized a deeper understanding of the challenging child and the role of the classroom environment in provoking students’ negative behaviors. By carefully observing the child’s strengths, participants uncovered academic and social abilities in these children that they had formerly overlooked, uncovering layers of complexity they had previously missed. Rhonda illustrates this point, noting,

“I really liked this assignment. It showed the importance of stepping away and removing yourself from the situation to try and fully understand where the student is coming from, rather than being so immersed in the stressful classroom.”

Discussion

Similar to previous research, we viewed reflection as a central aspect of the AS-L experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004; Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Felten, Gilchrist, & Darby, 2006; Correia & Bleicher, 2008). We saw a need to structure reflections in order to help students recognize and reduce stereotyping, make stronger associations between their AS-L experiences and course objectives, and achieve more complex understandings of the people and dynamics at their AS-L site. The three reflection exercises presented here accomplish these goals.

AS-L experiences can uncover assumptions, stereotypes, and privileges (Darby et al., 2008; Jones, 2005). With the reflection exercise called Alternative Explanations, students had the opportunity to recognize, analyze, and discuss negative stereotyping with another student's words. They then examined how privilege led to the tendency to stereotype. When encouraged to move beyond negative stereotypes and generate alternative explanations for the behavior of the children or family members living in poverty, participants provided a long list and engaged in a discussion about the value of withholding judgment. Although the data did not clearly point to prevention of negative stereotyping, participants did report that they learned to consider alternative explanations in situations that typically led to stereotyping.

As noted by Eyler and Giles (1999), a well structured reflection component supports students in making robust connections between the AS-L experience and the course content. The Cognitive Disequilibrium reflection exercise had strong links with the curriculum of the educational psychology course. Students did not merely memorize a definition; they had an experience of cognitive disequilibrium they could then analyze. By reflecting on their disequilibrium and how they reestablished equilibrium, participants gained insight into how their own schooling experiences influenced their initial impressions of the high poverty schools.

Without reflection, students may have superficial understandings of the complex situations (Ash and Clayton, 2009). The third reflection exercise, The Challenging Student, was designed to help students gather more data in order to achieve a multifaceted understanding of a situation at their AS-L site. Each student was asked to catalogue the positive behaviors of

a child in the high poverty school known to display challenging behaviors. As Rhonda's comments demonstrate, this process helped study participants develop a deeper understanding of a child who initially was seen only as a problem.

Implications

The reflection exercises used in our AS-L course – Alternative Explanations, Cognitive Disequilibrium, and The Challenging Student – can be adapted by other faculty seeking ways to support their students' reflections on their AS-L experience. Alternative Explanations can be adapted by having students consider negative generalizations about any situation or a group of people relevant to their AS-L experience. Reflecting on alternative explanations for that situation or behavior gives students the chance to view the dynamics or the people in a new way.

The Cognitive Disequilibrium exercise can be adapted by choosing any construct from the course objectives that students can experience themselves in the AS-L setting. When students reflect on the experience, they are able to understand the construct from a personal vantage point. Similarly, The Challenging Student exercise can be adapted by having students rethink any person or situation labeled as difficult or challenging and search for positive ways to view the person or situation. In many cases this leads to new insights about the person or situation and a better grasp of the complexity involved. All three reflection exercises can be adapted in a variety of ways to suit the varying needs faculty have for their courses.

Telling students that “it is now time to reflect” (Welch, 1999, p. 1) will not produce the quality of thinking that faculty desire (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Providing structure and guidance for the reflection is more likely to produce educative results. The reflection process does not need to be complicated or elaborate, but it should be arranged so that students have the opportunity to recognize and refrain from stereotypical thinking, discover the connections between the course objectives and their AS-L experience, and develop an appreciation for the complexity of situations at their AS-L site.

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