

# REFLECTION:



## The Value-adding Component of Service Learning

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BY WILF RIEGER

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## Background

Service learning (SL) has come of age during the past two decades. A brief scanning of the literature and available Websites shows it to be *de rigueur*, spanning the educational continuum from preschools to universities. The latter institutions currently offer free-choice elective courses for academic credit, with undergraduates engaged in community internships<sup>1</sup> or volunteering locally and overseas with non-government organizations<sup>2</sup>; with the school of dentistry at one U.S. university pleased to adopt “Service Is Our Calling” as its motto.<sup>3</sup>

The 20th-century historical roots of service learning may be found in John Dewey’s educational philosophy, and are evident in the goals and activities of such bodies, groups, and associations as the Peace Corps Movement, Scouts, Guides, Pathfinders, Apex, Lions, and Rotary. From a biblical perspective, its origins may be traced back to Old Testament times and seen in the Schools of the Prophets that probably were founded in ancient Israel by Samuel.<sup>4</sup>

## What Exactly Is Service Learning?

Defining it becomes problematic because of its almost endless diversity. Service learning ranges from individual random acts of kindness, to preschoolers making biscuits for the residents of an aged-care center, to a group of tertiary students providing medical support in a developing country. Although there are no hard-and-fast criteria for SL experiences to be categorized as *bona fide*, the National Service-Learning Clearing House (NSLCH)—drawing on several publications—has proposed a number of criteria. These include that SL should be “positive, meaningful and real to the participants,” involving “cooperative rather than competitive experiences” that “promote skills associated with teamwork and community involvement and citizenship.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, these experiences (which would not ordinarily happen) address a perceived need in the community and “. . . offer opportunities to engage in problem-solving by requiring participants to gain knowledge of the specific context of their service-learning activity and community challenges, rather than draw upon generalized or abstract knowledge such as might come from a textbook. As a result, service learning offers powerful opportunities to acquire habits of critical thinking.”<sup>6</sup>

Overall, the NSLCH regards service learning as “a dynamic

process, through which students’ personal and social growth is tightly interwoven into their academic and cognitive development”<sup>7</sup>; all of which are furthered when the process is characterized by quality orientation and supervision.<sup>8</sup>

Numerous benefits have been claimed for service learning. Researchers have reported that students who volunteered for civic activities scored much better on follow-up tests of civic and democratic knowledge than non-volunteers<sup>9</sup>; some curriculum writers have deemed SL to be a teaching method<sup>10</sup>; while its advocates—for more than a decade—have listed real-life settings, improved academic achievement, the formation of values through altruistic service and enhanced student motivation among its benefits. David Lindsay, an Australian Christian secondary educator, sees positive student growth from SL in terms of leadership, stewardship, discipleship, scholarship, and relationships.<sup>11</sup>

Benefits, however, are not limited to students, but are claimed to extend to teachers, schools, and communities in delivering outcomes such as renewed teacher enthusiasm, developing a more inclusive and cooperative school climate and culture, as well as recognition of young people’s efforts to address community needs, among others.<sup>12</sup> According to U.S. data, more than 90 percent of school principals attested to the positive effects of service learning.<sup>13</sup>

Some advocates<sup>14</sup> of SL point out the symbiotic relationship between service and learning; each strengthens and reinforces the other. There are also commentators such as Howard and Fortune, who place importance on equality between beneficiaries and service providers in SL: “When the relationship among participants involved in a service project is defined by equality, all persons develop, rather than are given, the voice necessary for stating their needs, goals and responsibilities.”<sup>15</sup>

## A Distinct Christian Viewpoint on SL<sup>16</sup>

Service is not merely a humanitarian idea, but a deeply biblical concept; references to it in Scripture stretch from Genesis to Revelation. Jesus’ own words testify, “. . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve . . .” (Matthew 20:28, NIV).<sup>17</sup> In His parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus highlights that in serving (particularly the needy and vulnerable), we simultaneously encounter God on the vertical and our “neighbor” on the horizontal dimension of our personal lives

as Christians. Thus, service to others is a tacit recognition of the value of human beings, as avowed by English theologian John Stott.<sup>18</sup> In turn, U.S. educational philosopher George R. Knight, within the context of Christian schools introducing their students to service opportunities, asserts: “. . . a crucial function of Christian teaching is to help students not only to *internalize* God’s love but also to *externalize* it.”<sup>19</sup> Service learning provides an avenue for students to put this into practice. It is through selfless experiences that we truly understand and learn how to live, for it is *how we live* that ultimately defines us, according to Jesus (Matthew 25:35-40; 22:37-39; John 14:15, 21).

That externalizing God’s love has a reciprocal effect has been recognized by previous generations of Christian educators: Ellen White spoke of those who ministered to others as being blessed themselves, “. . . for we receive heaven into our hearts,”<sup>20</sup> while M. V. C. Jeffreys, former professor of education in the University of Birmingham, U.K., pointed out, “. . . devoted service [i.e., given in love, and not coerced] liberates and fosters personal growth.”<sup>21</sup> Shane Lavery from Notre Dame University asserts that service learning is a prerequisite for adult spiritual formation.<sup>22</sup> A recent Australian research study tends to support such viewpoints. Of a total of 1,359 Christian youth surveyed, 63 percent reported that service activities had contributed to their religious faith development.<sup>23</sup>

For secular apologists, service learning creates many opportunities; in providing a context for intercultural understanding, restructuring oppressive power relationships, achieving liberal democratic ideals, and developing civic responsibility, to name some.<sup>24</sup> For Christians, SL takes place in the context of the gospel and has the potential to achieve many if not all of these outcomes, including some that are uniquely different; namely—through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit—transformed minds and lives (Romans 12:2), by the demonstration of fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and the discerning use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1-31).

In a gospel context, the “locus of motivation” for service learning changes from one primarily driven by a socio-political agenda of rights, equity, and justice (although these goals should not be discounted, given the warnings of the Old Testament minor prophets and the self-authenticated mission of Jesus in Luke 4:18-21, prophesied in Isaiah 42) to one centered in *shared grace*. “Freely you have received, freely give,” Jesus told His disciples (Matthew 10:8, NIV), who in turn remind us, “Indeed, every one of us has shared in his riches—there is a grace in our lives because of his grace . . . love and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:16, 17, Phillips).<sup>25</sup> A striking ex-

emplification of this gospel challenge is the courageous unselfishness of Katie Davis who, as a teenager, went to serve short-term in a Ugandan orphanage and came to a daunting realization. She wrote: “. . . someday I would return. I was forever ruined for comfort, convenience and luxury, preferring instead challenge, sacrifice and risking everything to do something I believed in.”<sup>26</sup>

She did return to Uganda. After several years of continuing in teaching and caring for young orphan children, she participated in the following dialogue:

“[Questioner:] You have written that we are called by God ‘to love with abandon.’ How has that path changed you as a person?”

“[Katie:] There is truly no greater gift than to give yourself away. The more we give the more He fills, and this is fullness of joy. I give and I trust Him, and as I trust, I overflow with joy and peace (see Romans 15:13). We pour out and He fills us,

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time and again.”<sup>27</sup>

Having provided some background, an overview and justification, it is appropriate now to focus on a particularly significant aspect of service learning.

## Reflection as Part of Service Learning

### Importance

Reflecting on a service-learning activity is not only an integral task but also an essential one—regardless of participants’ educational level—whether carried out formally or informally. For students to engage in service learning *without* reflecting is analogous to eating a meal without gaining any nutritional benefit from it.

Through reflection, Bringle and Hatcher point out, experience becomes *educative*.<sup>28</sup> And yet, surprisingly, reflection is often a neglected aspect in service-learning activities. It is insufficient for students merely to report descriptively on their SL experience without exploring or examining how they and



the beneficiary/ies may have been impacted and changed. When students become aware that as a result of the SL experience they have grown (*changed* in attitudes, behavior, or points of view), reflection has become *reflexive*, with cause and effect affecting one another; a kind of “boomerang” effect.

The complexity of the reflection and evaluation process in which participants engage, as expected, will differ greatly according to age, developmental, cognitive, cultural, and situational factors. Despite these differences, it is apposite and necessary to reflect, and critically assess even *before* an SL task begins, i.e., during the beginning phase, which often involves investigating, planning, preparing, and initiating. For reflection to be effective, it should take place during all three phases of a service-learning experience—before, after, as well as during service.

### Avoiding Pitfalls

Despite the best of good intentions, an SL activity can go “pear-shaped.” Take a hypothetical example of students collecting, washing, bundling up, and sending a hundred pairs of pajamas to an orphanage in a developing country: What might the potential outcomes of such a praiseworthy activity be? In a worst-case scenario, the following unanticipated predicaments could eventuate: excessive costs for postage, freight, or distribution; recipients (or eventually the sender) having to pay import duties on landed goods (otherwise they are impounded or confiscated); garment unsuitability for a particular climate; fire-safety concerns regarding some garments; and the possibility of the livelihood of small local garment makers, at the recipients’ end, being negatively impacted. Consequently, in some cases, helping may actually hurt,<sup>29</sup> and one may justifiably ask: Would it have been more effective for students to have engaged in fund-raising activities and donated money for the needed pajamas through means and avenues that would have maximized benefits “all round”? Clearly, we do not have all the answers to perceived needs—particularly when *need* is in the life of the other—although many times we think we do. With prior reflection, many pitfalls may be avoided.

### A Deliberative Process

The process of reflection focuses on taking time to *think*—clearly, logically, critically, constructively, creatively (“outside the box”), practically, and (in faith-based schools) Christianly in relation to the SL activity under scrutiny. It should not escape educators’ notice that Jesus was a master teacher of critical thinking and penetrating critique through the use of narrative, questioning, and “interrogation.” He provoked people to reflect on their cherished, long-held beliefs and to rethink issues, as illustrated by His exposure of:

- Hypocrisy/selfishness—in the case of *corban*, a “future” temple gift, which released one from financial responsibility to one’s parents (Mark 7:11).
- Distorted professional identity—when professionals show a total lack of empathy for those in distress (Luke 10:31, 32).
- Faulty reasoning—in reasoning from cause to effect regarding spiritual matters (John 9:2, 3; Luke 13:2, 4).

Reflection will often require participants to discuss, weigh

up, and attempt to resolve the priority of competing values in a world of limited resources and flawed human beings. Students may learn that, taken to extremes, even important values such as *equality* may be so seriously distorted and misrepresented as to be unacceptable in particular contexts.

A case in question is Peter Singer’s claim that in certain instances, human rights do not necessarily have priority over animal rights.<sup>30</sup> Singer, an evolutionist, believes “there’s really no overt qualitative difference between us and the animals. We just have evolved into something different from what they did, that’s all.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, under the banner of equality, “progressive” special-interest groups tend to portray or brand—particularly in U.S. courts, according to Alan Reinach—the biblical view of marriage (defined as between a man and a woman) as *discriminatory*. Thus it appears that increasingly, “[o]nly ‘inclusive’ value systems are permitted legal status under the new tyranny of equality.”<sup>32</sup>

Reflection and analysis give students an opportunity to examine the validity of arguments presented, decisions made, actions performed, and values espoused, following the gathering of data through service experience(s). Carefully undertaken, the process should lead to synthesis with students owning conclusions that help them to understand the world in which they live; how they can make a difference, by integrating prior knowledge with what they have newly learned and then applying it in future situations.

## Process Particulars

### Stages

The NSLCH provides some helpful general guidance (in summary form) regarding the reflection process at different stages of the SL activity:

“In *pre-service reflection* activities, students examine their beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes about issues. They do this when they choose service projects and prepare to engage in service. *During service*, students have the opportunity to learn from their peers, share observations, ask for and receive feedback, ask questions, and solve problems. Teachers can evaluate student work and provide feedback as the reflection process continues. *After service*, students look back at their initial beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes to assess their own development. They also evaluate their projects, apply what they learn, and develop ways to solve problems that may arise in the future.”<sup>33</sup>

It is instructive, now, to look at what kind of questions might feature in the three stages of the reflection process.

### Questions

Outcomes of reflection, to a large degree, are a function of the quality of the questions posed. Questions in relation to service learning may designate, *inter alia*, tasks, articulate problems, frame issues, and point to possible solutions.

By raising or asking questions, we initiate “cognitive probes” that challenge students to think. To accomplish this, teachers must differentiate between low- and high-order questions as

well as convergent (close-ended) and divergent (open-ended) questions. Students who can rely on recall to give correct pat answers to low-order convergent questions are unlikely to be cognitively stimulated and “stretched.” On the other hand, students will be challenged to engage in critical thinking by divergent questions that more often require a higher level of cognition involving analyzing information, issues, or situations and weighing competing claims, before eventual conceptual integration and reaching an acceptable conclusion.

And how does this rather theoretical “stuff” work out in real-life classrooms? In response, a practical illustration involving service learning is offered below, relating to a primary school curriculum unit of work in Studies of Society and the Environment, at Level 2 (approx. grades 3-4)—common to many state education jurisdictions.

**A unit of work: “The Human-made Environment.”** Some of the listed outcomes of the unit are that students are able to: *Draw* a map of the school’s locality, *label* specified places; *list* the facilities and the services provided by the council; *discuss* the convenient placement of these services and the contrasting problems of city environments—safety, air and noise pollution, litter, etc.

During the course of the unit, in one of the class discussions, students report that the local park is “not a nice place to play because of all the rubbish.” After some disagreement as to whose responsibility it is to keep the park tidy and what can be done, students want to “make a difference” as part of Clean Up Australia Day and clear the nearby park of litter. Following careful preparation and observing planning initiatives that are in line with the school’s excursion policy (half day), the whole class, teacher, and four parent helpers set out to collect litter from the park. The group is “armed” with gloves, tongs, litter receptacles, etc.

On completing their collection task, the group returns to school and deposits all the litter in an assigned place for sorting into several categories with the help of the school caretaker, on the following day. Two days later, when the students have gathered their information, there is a discussion about what to record, how to display it, and with whom to share it.

Given this brief illustration, it is pertinent to ask: What kind of reflection question might be posed *before*, *during*, and *after* these students’ service experience? The suggested examples given in Tables 1, 2, and 3 address this question, being neither intended to be exhaustive nor pre-

**Table 1: Sample Pre-flection Questions**

Is the park our responsibility? Why (not)?
As a class, can we make a difference? How?
From whom can we find out more about the problems that spoil the park?
Shall we invite a local councilor to speak to us and/or get some students to report back to the class (after having walked through the park after school with their parents)?
If we collect the litter in the park, shall we do it as part of Clean Up Australia Day, or do it separately?
What planning and preparation need to be done?

**Table 2: Sample Intra-flection Questions**

Who do you think might have dropped this litter? What makes you think so?
Where do you think the litter originated from?
How do you feel when you see this litter in the park?
Is there some litter we should not pick up? Why? How should the litter be dealt with?
Which litter problem discourages you most (and perhaps other people)?
How many rubbish bins or signs have you noticed in the park? Should there be more or fewer? Why?
Have you spoken to other class members, asking what litter they have picked up?

**Table 3: Sample Post-Reflection Questions**

How can we sort/group and record the litter collected and determine the top-scoring category?
Should there be a refundable deposit for bottles (glass and plastic) and all drink cans? Why (not)? If yes, how much deposit? Would it solve the litter problem, in your opinion?
What would Jesus do (WWJD)? Why?
What did you learn from this service-learning activity (Can you draw a “mind-map”)? How can we share this knowledge?
Is there anything that you would do differently after having done the project?
What did you learn about other people from our service project? How is that helpful to you?
How would our lives be affected if no one cared about littering?
Do Christians have a responsibility to care for the environment? Why? The Bible refers to being “good stewards” (1 Peter 4:10, KJV). What does that cover?
Which new skills that we learned could be applied to other tasks?
If we conducted a second litter pick-up in the park four weeks later, what might we learn, additionally?
Should we “celebrate” our service-learning experience? If so, what would be the most appropriate way to celebrate?

scriptive, but illustrative.

In summary, according to Ash, et al., the essence of all reflection questions can be “distilled” into: “What did I learn? How did I learn it? Why does it matter? What will I do in light of it?”<sup>34</sup> Effective teachers do not merely pose reflective questions (such as those in Tables 1, 2, and 3) intuitively, but they do so intentionally.

Next, it is fitting to turn to the manifold strategies, practices, and expressions (SPEs) that may be utilized for reflection purposes.

**The Significance of SPEs**

The SPEs are of interest and importance on several counts. First, the numerous listed reflection strategies, practices, and expressions that make up the proposed typology in Table 4 may be perceived as being positioned on several axes:

- Nature of expression—ranging from concrete to abstract.
- Conceptual level—stretching from rudimentary to complex.
- Time frame—before, during, and after the service-learning activity.

Flexibility is evident as a hallmark of the typology catering for differences in students’ developmental and conceptual levels, offering learning that spans simple to sophisticated engagement. In relation to the time frame, it has already been made clear that reflection questions may occur during any stage of the service-learning activity, and this principle also applies to the SPEs. While many of them fall into the *post-reflection* category, others may also be used to advantage in the *pre-reflection* (before) and *intra-reflection* (during) phases of the reflection process.

Second, the range of the SPEs cater for Howard Gardner’s concept of multiple intelligences, allowing all students to contribute to and participate in the learning journey, according to their giftedness, and providing both students and teachers a good deal of freedom over choices regarding expressions and materials.

**Table 4: A Proposed Typology of Reflection Strategies, Practices, and Expressions<sup>35</sup>**

Oral-aural communication Speaking and listening	Writing, print, text types	Performing and creative arts
Intersection/interface with multiple intelligences—giftedness		
A student’s preference may be for one or more of the following: linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, logical mathematical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and [super]naturalistic <sup>36</sup> intelligence.		
Show and tell, discussion: What Would Jesus Do?, oral presentation, reading of relevant selected texts (including the Bible), listening to invited speaker(s), speech, oration, debate, mock trial, monologue, other	Diary, journal, scrapbook, log, poem: cinquain, limerick, haiku, acrostic; letter: personal or to newspaper, pen pal; greeting card, poster prayer; psalm; parable; slogan; big book, short story, summary, publication, report, essay, field notes, statistical report, graph, flow chart, diagram, map, sign, budget, other	Write/produce/stage: news report, TV show, radio commercial, a play, a skit; music/songs: compose and play/sing, write lyrics (e.g., rap); photograph, drawing, collage, pattern, design, mural, cartoon, painting; crafts; dance; sculpture: play dough, origami, clay, wire, papier-mâché, Lego blocks; model, diorama, other
Intersection/interface with multimedia and information technology		
Word processing, video filming, phone camera, chat room, Skype, Twitter, e-mail, blog, text messages, PowerPoint, Facebook, digital photography, Webpage design, other		

Third, in the current educational climate where performance curricula predominate, SPEs may present learning opportunities as part of reflection, reminiscent of Elliot Eisner's expressive objectives, which are evocative (*vis-à-vis* being narrowly prescriptive), describing educational encounters that, according to Eisner, have many positive "yields" in the more sophisticated modes of cognitive functioning and intellectual work.<sup>37</sup>

Fourth, it should not be overlooked that information technology and multimedia readily interface with many of the SPEs in the typology; a convenient mesh with IT skills that form an integral part of functioning in contemporary society. Last, and perhaps most important, the reflection strategies, practices, and expressions help students to *process* the service-learning experience. Reviewing, reconstructing, and evaluating an SL experience should facilitate self-understanding on the part of students. They are helped to make sense of the "jigsaw puzzle" of life and that life is lived in relationship with others, the environment—and for Christians, with God. To this end, students are encouraged to examine life in the context of whether our humanity exhibits the *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27).

Many of the SPEs provide a record of the SL experience to which students (and teachers) can look back to with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Furthermore, when interfaced with multimedia and information technology, the results may be shared with a wider interested audience and act as encouragement for them to take up the challenge of service learning.

### A Word of Caution and Encouragement

*It is absolutely essential* that the selection of reflection SPEs—by consultation between student(s) and teacher—is *age, ability, context, culture, time taken, resources available and ethically appropriate; and meeting the school's IT policy and guidelines*. Consultation and choice should enable students to use their preferred gift(s) for effective learning and understanding. Additionally, reflection should not become "burdensome by overkill." Carefully chosen SPEs will always put emphasis on quality before quantity. If there is to be a formal evaluation/assessment of students' reflection (particularly at upper secondary or tertiary education levels), there is a need for students to be clearly informed, in advance, regarding expectations and marking criteria (for an example, see Bradley's criteria for assessing levels of reflection<sup>38</sup>).

### Conclusion

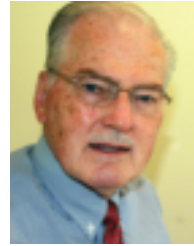
Service-learning experiences are often memorable and enjoyable. But *without intentional reflection*, they may merely reinforce existing paternalism and stereotypes; in the end, running the risk of becoming trivialized. What matters in the final analysis is whether or not the process of reflection in service learning facilitates the development of responsible citizens who have learned to think clearly for themselves, see issues and problems from a wide perspective, (re)examine their espoused values, and live authentic lives that contribute actively to peace and progress in local and global communities. For many individuals, this growth and development will be augmented by the

framework of a Christian worldview as they participate in making a difference in the lives of others. ☞

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*This article has been slightly adapted with permission of TEACH, where it was originally published.*

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