



# Faculty Guide Series

*ASU Service-Learning & Community-Based Research  
University College | Appalachian State University*





# Service-Learning Assignments and Reflections

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## Facilitating Preparation & Critical Reflection

According to Thomas Dewey, “truly educative” experiences generate interest, are intrinsically worthwhile, present problems that awaken new curiosity, create a demand for new information, and take sufficient time to foster development. By involving them in real community problems, service-learning provides students with a need to know, a desire to enhance their skills and a commitment to solving problems of importance to them. In order for this to take place, students must be given the opportunity to prepare for and learn from their service-learning experiences in an intentional way. The culture of the class must be one in which students feel included, respected, and safe. In service-learning terminology, the initial stage is known as “preparation”, while the learning stage is called “reflection.”

*“When a person’s behavior contains action, but no reflection, it is only activism. When one has reflection, but no action, one performs hollow verbalism.”*  
Paulo Freire

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## Why Preparation?

Although most students are familiar with traditional community service, service-learning is often a new concept for them. Thus, in order for students to understand the educational value of service, the philosophy of service-learning, and help them work through some of their concerns, preparation is an essential part of the total service-learning experience. It allows students to have the opportunity to examine their expectations, assumptions, and fears, as well as provide them a context to understand their experience. As the first step in the process, preparation activities will enrich your students’ service-learning experiences and serve as a springboard for future reflection activities and class projects.

## Things to Consider During the Preparation Stage:

- Clarify students’ responsibilities and expectations — write them down and provide a copy for each student.
- Set the tone by establishing norms of behavior:
  - Anyone in the group may speak at any time — no hand raising is required, but the rules of polite conversation are followed.
  - No profanity or sexual innuendos are necessary to make a point.
  - Speakers should be respectful, open-minded and not aim to put anyone down.
- Research background information about the people and problems the students will encounter in the service situations to sensitize them and help them change any misconceptions.
- Assess the values, knowledge, and skills of your students. Develop and practice any skills that will be required, including being active observers and questioners of experience.

## Suggested Activities:

- Take students on an agency tour or have a representative come to speak about the agency’s mission, history, etc.
- Coordinate a panel of students who have previously taken the course to speak with the class about their experiences.
- Require that students do readings about the population that they will be serving.
- Conduct an “experience inventory” to assess the skills and knowledge that each student brings to the project.
- Do role playing to practice skills that may be required for the project.
- Use journaling, discussion, or drawing to have students express their assumptions, fears, and feelings about the project.

## Why Critical Reflection?

Reflection is a process designed to promote the interpretation of experience and the promotion of cognitive and affective learning. Service-learners should be asked to think critically about their experiences by looking back on the implications of actions taken—good and bad—determining what has been gained, lost, or achieved, and connecting these conclusions to future actions and larger societal contexts. Through reflection, students analyze concepts, evaluate experiences, and form opinions during and after the service experience. It involves observation, asking questions, and putting facts, ideas, and experiences together to derive new meaning. Reflection is an essential process for transforming experiences—gained from the service activities and the course material—into powerful learning. It fosters learning about larger social issues such as the political, economic, and sociological characteristics of our communities. It enhances students' critical understanding of the course topics and their ability to assess their own values, goals, and progress.

### Things to Consider During the Reflection Stage:

- Reiterate your expectations and norms of behaviors for the classroom.
- Develop a framework for guiding reflection discussions.
- Lead the group by actively engaging each student.
- Design ongoing reflective activities that complement an array of learning styles and different cultural communication styles.
- Get closure on emotional issues by the end of each reflective session.
- Leave some topical issues open until the next session to give students an opportunity to think more about them.

### Suggested Activities:

- Since students learn in different ways, reflective activities should accommodate multiple learning styles and intelligences. Don't limit yourself or your students to only learning through journaling and group discussions. Learning styles have a significant impact on how well a student learns and retains information. Ideally, instructors should provide a variety of options and empower students to choose activities that match their learning styles. Below are some suggested activities that will engage a wide variety of learning styles.
- Reading (Written Materials): Read case studies, books about social issues, government documents/legislation, professional journals, or classic/fictional literature on the subject matter.
- Writing (Written Exercises): Keep individual/group journals, write reflective essays, develop poems, write songs, draft grant proposals, write press releases, draft legislation, send letters to politicians, publish articles in newspapers, or write community agency training manuals.
- Telling (Oral Exercises): Conduct focus groups, participate in informal/formal discussions, give class/community presentations, teach a class, do story telling, give legislative testimony, or have one-on-one conferences between student and community partner/instructor.
- Doing (Projects/Activities): Create art/photo journals, do role playing, develop skits, paint/draw pictures of evoked emotions, give agency tours, watch movies/videos, plan public relations events for an agency, conduct a rally or community forum, or plan service activities associated with campus "awareness days" (i.e., Make a Difference Day, National Youth Service Day) or "awareness weeks" (i.e., Hunger & Homelessness Awareness Week, Earth Week, etc.).



- **Contracts and Logs:** Service learning contracts and logs formalize the learning and service objectives for the course and may be used from the beginning to the end of the coursework. In concert with the faculty and agency supervisor, the student creates a contract that outlines learning and service objectives and identifies the range of tasks to be completed during the service experience, as well as the goals to be achieved and skills to be learned and/or refined. A service log is a continuous summary of specific activities completed and progress towards accomplishing the service learning goals.

*“Working together, we can reach across the racial, cultural, social and economic gaps that divide us. We can recover our sense of community—our pride in being a nation of neighbors who care. We can revitalize the tradition of service to others that has been so much a part of our history and national character.” Colin Powell, Retired U.S. Army General*

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## Further Readings on this Topic

- Eyler, J. Giles, D.E. and Schmiede, A. (1996) *A Practitioner’s Guide to Reflection in Service Learning: Students and Reflections*. Nashville, TN. Project funded by the Corporation for National Service.
- Hatcher, J. and Bringle, R. (1996). *Reflection Activities for the College Classroom*. Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. (Ideas adopted by Diane Sloan, Miami-Dade College, and Toni Hartsfield, formerly of Bellevue Community College).
- King, P.M. and Kitchener, K.S. (1994). *Developing Reflective Judgement: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Silcox, H.C. (1993). *A How to Guide to Reflection: Adding Cognitive Learning to Community Service Programs*. Philadelphia, PA: Brighton Press.
- Wylie, J. (1993). Using initiative activities to build community within a service-learning class-Room. *Praxis II, Service-Learning Resources for University Students, Staff, and Faculty*. Ann Arbor, MI: OCSL Press, 67-75.

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