

Through his service learning assignment, Rudy learns to pose new questions about his old habits of thought. He learns the important difference between an opinion passionately held and a problem that needs to be solved. He learns to think and reflect critically.

Reading, Writing, and Reflection

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“What really irked me about Betty’s decision,” Rudy writes in his journal, “was that it should have been an editorial decision based on layout, design balance, etc. Instead, it was based on a phony rationale. The incident had an adverse effect on my outlook towards service at the Center.” Rudy explains:

When Betty and I discussed the final edits for the newsletter, she also explained to me that there was to be a change in the layout: [U.S.] Senator [Spencer] Abraham would not have his picture included in his story [about renaissance zones in Michigan]. Another individual, Flint Mayor Woodrow Stanley, had just sent a photo of himself to accompany his article. Mayor Stanley happens to be Black. Since Newt Gingrich’s photo was already running with his story [on the Earning by Learning program Gingrich founded for inner-city youngsters], it would be “more balanced” if we ran a photo of the Black gentleman and withheld Abraham’s, providing an element of diversity. . . . I am simply tired of hearing we should/should not do something based on the color of a person’s skin. This type of action does nothing to advance the fight against discrimination. It is a way for those in charge to give the appearance of a diversified newsletter. . . . This one incident affected my outlook on the service I was doing.

As part of a required service learning component for his general education writing class, Rudy chose an assignment as newsletter assistant at his university’s outreach office for economic development and urban affairs, where he works closely with Betty, editing articles that appear in the Center’s monthly newsletter. The community placements chosen for students in Rudy’s class were carefully selected as good sites for “real time” writing projects that address tangible and responsive audiences and link writing in a field of the student’s choosing—in Rudy’s case, public administration—with formal classroom-

based writing activities and instruction. In addition to writing for an agency, students are required to keep a written journal record that functions both as further writing practice and, more important, as opportunities for students to reflect critically and systematically on their service experiences.

In his next journal entry, Rudy relates an incident that has no ostensible bearing on diversity policy. At the prompting of his teacher, Rudy chooses instead to write about Betty herself, seeking some insight into her personality and the character of her commitment.

As we were leaving the Center last Tuesday so that Betty could give me a ride home, the family that lives next door to the Center arrived home. They were obviously an economically disadvantaged family, since they lived in a less affluent part of the city. As Betty was getting in the car, the little girl from next door called her name and came racing over. Immediately Betty gave the little girl a big hug, and asked about her day at school, etc. This scene may have had nothing to do with my work, and it may have been just a minor event in the grand scheme of things, but it touched me. Here was a woman that was so compassionate and caring, and here was a little girl who respected and appreciated this relationship so much. It really gave me a bit of insight into Betty's nature. It became clear why she was working at the Center. She was inherently a person with a great deal of love to give. That's simply a part of her make-up, and it was evidenced by this scene. One could tell that Betty truly believed that nothing, not even a poor economic situation, could hinder this young girl's future. And I think I felt the same.

Even though Rudy takes pains to point out that the scene in the driveway "may have had nothing to do with my [actual] work," it still has powerful resonance for his attitude toward service and the legitimacy of his service-learning assignment at the Center. Indirectly, even covertly, Rudy's discovery of the depth and authenticity of Betty's commitment to economic justice surely complicates, as his teacher may have hoped, that attitude of certainty he had earlier used to dismiss Betty's editorial decision as partisan and politically motivated.

Structuring Critical Reflection: The Critical Incident Journal

The journals that Rudy and his classmates kept are modeled on the critical incident journal format devised by Stanton (1995). The "critical incident" technique differs from more traditional journal narratives in several ways. Primarily, as Stanton explains to students, "Rather than [providing] a descriptive record of daily life, a critical incident journal includes detailed analysis of only those incidents which change you or your perspective on your service experience. . . . Rather than simply describing and interpreting an incident and the people involved," Stanton continues, "this reflective technique enables [you]

to use the incident and its impact as a means for self-monitoring and personal exploration” (p. 59). In addition to identifying an event and describing its relevant details, the critical incident journal format requires students to pursue the three rhetorical steps of description, analysis, and reflection.

Step 1. Describe your role in the incident. What did you do? How did you react? How did others react?

Step 2. Analyze the incident. How well or how poorly did you understand the situation? Was your reaction—or the reaction of others—well informed or based on misinformation? How did you handle it? What would you do differently next time?

Step 3. What impact did the incident have on you? Why do you view it as “critical”? How has the incident influenced your feelings about working at your placement site? What have you learned? How has your perspective on yourself or others been changed and/or reinforced? Where do you go from here?

When responding to his first journal entry, Rudy’s teacher notes that he describes the incident surrounding Betty’s photo layout decision with precision and good detail, but his reaction to it, she suggests, may be more emotive (“What really irked me . . .”) than critically reflective. She encourages him either to revisit the incident in another entry or select a new incident to write about with special attention to fleshing out Step 3. Rudy’s teacher also wisely defers direct comment on Rudy’s conclusion that the episode over the picture layout evidences a phony diversity policy. Nor does she broach the issue of Rudy’s boilerplate conservatism, a political alignment he had proudly and skillfully underscored in earlier journal entries as though itching to provoke her own liberalism. Instead, she focuses on the way Rudy “bookends” his journal entry with references to unarticulated changes in attitude. She encourages Rudy to spell out the exact changes in his outlook toward service brought about by the incident. In an effort to redirect his antagonism, she also urges him to write about another incident at the Center that either confirms or perhaps confounds his strong belief that Betty’s editorial decision grew out of a bogus rationale for racial diversity.

With the help of the critical incident format, Rudy’s teacher provides new conditions and ramifications that seek to redirect Rudy’s natural powers of curiosity into investigations that are more intellectually responsible and more critically engaged. In doing so, she seizes on the rival interpretations that open Rudy’s first passage to critical scrutiny—what John Dewey (1933) called “the strife of alternative interpretations” (p. 121). It may not be enough, she suggests, to be “simply tired of hearing” about racial diversity. She persists in posing questions that push Rudy to think in new ways, to reflect critically, and to question his own perceptions of what he considers a critical incident at the Center. Why, for example, should one choose pictures for a newsletter based on typographic considerations alone? Do race-based editorial decisions over layout send important and defensible messages to readers in support of diversity? Which of these competing interpretations has the rightful claim? What implications, she hints, might that “rightful claim” have for Betty’s integrity?

Transforming Values Through Reflection

The narrative development between Rudy's two journal entries—from static indignation to dynamic reaffirmation, from annoyance to rectitude—captures, in fact, what Dewey considered as the primary function of reflective thought: “to transform a situation in which there is experienced . . . conflict [or] disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious. . . . Genuine thinking winds up, in short, with an appreciation of new values” (1933, pp. 100–101).

It is important to point out that Rudy continues to write favorably about articles and opinions advancing the conservative agenda. “The key to turning around the urban disadvantaged,” he later writes, “lies in programs that promote rugged individualism, rather than encouraging people to expect a hand-out.” His curiosity and powers of inquiry shift, however, to the moral integrity of those who act on behalf of policy and away from the validity or political viability of the policies themselves. Rudy's political conservatism begins to expand and take on a communitarian ring—once again illustrating Dewey's belief that “all reflective thinking is a process of detecting relations” (1933, p. 77). For example, Rudy writes that “one can show their [sic] compassion by forming ideas . . . such as [about how] people help themselves,” and that urban renewal policies must “provide a greater good: helping the community as a whole.” His new interests in moral consensus and the common good, moreover, reveal the kinds of social attitudes that naturally grow out of reflective thought and, as Dewey further believed, are indispensable to the nurture of democracy and responsible citizenship.

“The clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications,” according to Dewey, “constitutes the idea of democracy” (Robertson, 1992, p. 341). That clarifying consciousness can be seen in Rudy's willingness to reevaluate his beliefs in light of Betty's different attitude about photo layout and diversity, Rudy's reconsideration of public policy in terms of the community as a whole, and ultimately (what he may have been most “touched by” when the child raced over to embrace Betty) his realization that one's own good cannot be easily separated from the good of others.

In many respects, Rudy's experience at the Center encapsulates a tension among service learning educators and practitioners that is best resolved through the use of structured critical reflection exercises and techniques like the critical incident journal. Should Rudy's teacher, to put it bluntly, set out to redirect, indeed redress, his political and social conservatism? Or is Rudy's social consciousness incidental to the academic work going on at the intersection of his assignment at the Center and his enrollment in a writing class at his university? What is the proper character, in other words, of her intervention? Should the goal of a service-learning-infused curriculum be the preparation of students like Rudy for social action skills? Or should the goal be to develop intellectual competence and working knowledge in service of students' courses of academic study? To track Rudy's learning curve along separate social and

cognitive spectra may beg, however, the wrong questions. Rudy's case may suggest that solving social problems vis-à-vis active community involvement and engaging intellectual processes may be more complementary than polarized. Rudy simultaneously learns to apply critical intelligence to his political beliefs while he engages in a practice of building democratic awareness and democratic community at the Center. He submits his political beliefs to the stimulus of critical reflection, not to a political litmus. He learns to formulate new questions about old habits of thought. He learns the important difference between an opinion passionately felt and powerfully held and a problem that needs to be solved and for which answers must be sought. He undergoes what Kolb (1984) describes as "learning [that] transforms . . . impulses, feelings, and desires . . . into higher-order purposeful action" (p. 22). If anything, ideology loses its exclusive and unchallenged grip on Rudy's political conservatism. His passion for rugged individualism now carries an ethical valence that transforms it into a more socially responsive conservatism: a conservatism, it could be said, with an articulate moral philosophy.

In the development of his narrative reflections, Rudy discovers that a valuation he previously held no longer works well for him. He could no longer satisfactorily dismiss Betty's editorial decision as politically motivated and, as such, rooted shallowly in ideological ground. He begins instead to experiment with alternative modes of valuation based on ethical and moral criteria and then to test those criteria experimentally to find out whether a life, as well as social policy, can be guided more satisfactorily according to them. Rudy is clearly more moved by the Betty who elicits the child's tender affections than he is by the Betty who makes an editorial decision based on racial balance. Given his teacher's encouragement to rethink his beliefs through the encounter with someone who believes differently, Rudy learns more about diversity—its complexity, its interpersonal ramifications, its socioethical consequences, its rootedness in the common good—than he could have in weeks of reading and classroom discussion alone.

Experiential Roots of Reflective Thinking

In a word, Rudy undergoes what several generations of modern educational theorists, beginning with Dewey and cresting in the more recent work of Kolb, refer to formally as an experiential learning cycle that is driven, in large part, by the adaptive learning modality of reflective observation. Arguing for the reflexive nature of learning processes, Kolb (1984) acknowledges the dynamic spiral character of knowledge formation and its anchorage in a student's concrete, lived experience. Rudy's service learning assignment at the Center provides a good case for what Dewey and Kolb view as the "situatedness of reflective thinking" (Dewey, 1933, p. 99) that is both the indispensable agent and the object of knowledge formation. Follow the thread of an idea or "the stuff of knowledge far enough," Dewey writes, "and you will find some situation that is directly experienced, something undergone, done, enjoyed, or suffered,

and not just thought of. Reflection is occasioned by the character of this primary situation. It does not merely grow out of it" (1933, p. 99).

Reflective thinking is not only an organic component in the learning cycle, it is simultaneously the very ground from which knowledge and belief spring. Reflective thinking, in short, is both process and product. As such, reflective thinking has become a key subject in the massive literature of experiential learning theory and, more recently, the operational linchpin of contemporary service learning pedagogy (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1984; King and Kitchener, 1994; Silcox, 1993).

Theoretical Foundations of Reflective Thinking

Dewey (1933) presents one of the most durable cases, as Kolb (1984) acknowledges, for the critical primacy of structured reflective thinking in the educative process. Together with other significant works, Dewey (1916, 1938) left an intellectual legacy that best articulates that educative process through the guiding principles of experiential learning, including the cultivation and expression of a student's individuality, the transformation of the classroom into a venue for free and independent activity, inquiry, and thought, and the importance of learning through experience. Growing out of his abiding faith in the scientific method and experimentalism and his deep dedication to radical democracy as the model for progressive education, Dewey argues that reflective thinking is both the means and end that should be cultivated by education, properly considered.

Dewey defines reflective thinking succinctly as "active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1933, p. 9). Extending his definition into the sphere of pedagogical practice, Dewey argues that reflective thought results from "careful and extensive study, . . . purposeful widening of the area of observation [under study], . . . [and] reasoning out the conclusions of alternative conceptions to see what would follow in case one or the other were adopted for belief" (1933, p. 8). For Dewey, reflective thinking is essential to the pragmatic application of the scientific attitude and outlook to human life and education. It therefore encompasses *cognitive processes* such as the logical management of an orderly chain of ideas to a controlling purpose and end, *social or democratic functions* called upon when public conflicts demand resolution through common problem solving and effective public discourse, and the *ethical skills* that Dewey adopts as the ground of reflective thinking: open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and intellectual responsibility.

Reflective thinking is always inaugurated by what Dewey calls a "forked-road" situation in which a student faces an ambiguous dilemma that confronts him or her with the reliability and the worth of a previously held belief. "Difficulty or obstruction," Dewey continues, "in the way of reaching a belief brings us . . . to a pause. In the suspense of uncertainty[,] . . . demand for the solu-

tion of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection” (1933, p. 14). Kolb synthesizes Dewey’s point into one of the central premises of current experiential learning theory. “The process of learning,” Kolb (1984) states, “requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world” (p. 29). Kolb is quick to add that “reflective observation abilities” are indispensable agents in that experience of adaptation.

Dewey takes pains to break down that process of engaging a dilemma into multiple aspects or “terminals” of reflective activity that span three progressive stages: problematization, hypothesis formation, and testing of the hypothesis. “Reflective thinking,” Dewey summarizes, “involves (1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity” (1933, p. 12). The movement from doubt to the disposition of a perplexity is engendered, first and foremost, by what Dewey insists are the critical conditions under which students must work and learn: “the provision of a real situation that arouses inquiry, suggestion, reasoning, testing, etc.” (p. 283). This emphasis on the situatedness of reflective observation and its centrality to the learning process leads to a statement of Kolb’s that has become a widely quoted catch phrase of the contemporary experiential learning movement: “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (1984, p. 38).

Practicing Critical Reflection

Among the many successful efforts to render Dewey and Kolb’s theories of reflective thinking into practical classroom application (Silcox, 1993; Goldsmith, 1995), Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede’s 1996 *A Practitioner’s Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning* stands out as particularly illuminating and incisive. They succeed in putting theory into practice, but, more important, their guide to reflection activities and techniques grows out of hundreds of structured interviews with students across the country enrolled in service learning courses. “The experiences of the students we encountered through this study,” the authors write, emphasize “that reflection is the glue that holds service and learning together to provide [optimal] educative experiences” (p. 16).

The authors’ research indicates that there are four principal criteria for successful application of reflective thinking to students’ service learning experiences. They compress these criteria into “the 4 Cs of reflection.” “Over the course of this study,” they conclude, “certain themes have reappeared repeatedly as critical factors in effective reflective activity. The best reflection is *Continuous* in time frame, *Connected* to the ‘big picture’ information provided by academic pursuits, *Challenging* to assumptions and complacency, and *Contextualized* in terms of design and setting” (p. 21).

In using their interview data to structure reflection guidelines, Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede stress that reflection activities must flex according to various

student learning styles. After all, students “learn to learn” in different ways. Therefore, faculty and coordinators involved with service learning should ideally offer a variety of reflection activities that accommodate differences across the range of student learning styles, which Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede identify as *activists*, *reflectors*, *theorists*, and *pragmatists*. In addition, the authors offer a “Reflection Activity Matrix” that reminds service-minded educators just how integral critical reflection is to other learning activities and modalities.

From Expectation to Experience

As service learning practitioners themselves, Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede realize that the most important element in effective reflection is also the most difficult and problematic for teachers to implement successfully: the challenge of pushing students to think critically and to engage issues in a more critically reflective way. Challenging reflection involves a hard balancing act. A teacher must be willing to intervene, pose tough questions, and propose often uncomfortable points of view for a student’s consideration. A teacher must also be ready to back off and give support in order to nurture the independence and autonomy that are the lifeblood of experiential learning processes. Revisiting Rudy’s service learning experience may suggest that achieving this balance is not strictly a matter of adopting frameworks and guidelines or following rules, but it is more a question of taking what service learning practitioners recognize as the path to critical learning: “Learning is best conceived as a process . . . grounded in experience, not in terms of outcomes,” as Kolb puts it, and “a process . . . continuously modified by experience” (1984, pp. 26–27). In other words, a good teacher is prepared to set his or her students upon a journey to knowledge, and then be willing to go along for the ride.

Returning to Rudy’s service learning assignment at the Center, much to his own credit he sets out to inquire into the meaning of what he learns and what difference it may have to his conservative beliefs. That search for meaning begins in Dewey’s “forked-road” situation and it follows, as predicted by Kolb, a trajectory of transformation. On the one hand, Betty’s editorial decision initially demonstrates to Rudy that diversity is only a matter of “appearances.” Therefore, he is inclined to dismiss Betty’s actions as arbitrary. But given the interpersonal realities Rudy faces in his actual working relationship at the Center (because his learning process is situated and grounded in lived experience), does it follow, as logically perhaps it must, that *Betty is an arbitrary person?* Should he not respect her?

Rudy’s teacher occasions the ambiguity by inviting Rudy to probe into the implications that Betty’s layout decision has for changes in his attitudes about working at the Center. He must squarely face the antagonism he writes about in his journal over this incident against the great enthusiasm he has when returning to work at the Center—for Rudy continues to speak about how “stimulating” his service has been and how he is “gaining a better understanding of the nuts and bolts of editing a newsletter . . . while also looking at

Michigan's distressed communities and ways to revitalize them." Rudy's teacher also positions Rudy in such a way that he has to confront and work through some unstated assumptions he might be making. Is Betty an enforcer of orthodoxy? And what about the Mayor of Flint? Were it not for the color of his skin, would he deserve his picture on the newsletter cover? Paraphrasing Dewey, Rudy's teacher seizes on the real possibilities the incident harbors for Rudy to examine his assumptions more carefully and extensively, to widen the area of his inquiry into a cherished belief, and to follow his reasoning all the way to conclusions and alternatives he had not before considered due to the narrow depth of field compassed by his initial dismissal of Betty's decision as biased and unfair. Rudy's teacher problematizes his strongly held belief that diversity is a matter of "appearances" alone and "does nothing to advance the fight against discrimination." She provides impetus to Rudy's formation of a hypothesis concerning whether Betty's diversity policy is only skin-deep. Rudy tests the hypothesis. He probes into the reliability of a belief that once seemed so indisputable and obvious, and he finds it wanting in light of his discovery of Betty's real passion for community.

Rudy's learning occurs right at the place Kolb (1984) describes as "the interplay between expectation and experience," an interplay mediated by reflective thinking. Dewey (1933) reminds us that, like Rudy, we all have the tendency to believe that which is in harmony with desire. We take that to be true which we should like to have so, and contrary ideas have difficulty gaining lodgment. We draw weak conclusions as we fail to examine and test our ideas because of personal attitudes. When we generalize, we tend to make sweeping assertions based on only a few cases. Observation also reveals the powerful force wielded by social influences that have actually nothing to do with the truth or falsity of what is asserted and denied. As such, Kolb wisely concludes, "if the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining them and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person's belief systems, the learning process," as in Rudy's case, "will be facilitated" (1984, p. 27).

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