

Post-Immersion Reflective Practices

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Abstract

Through experience of working with students in a Summer Service Learning Program (SSLP) course, the authors discovered the value of two types of post-immersion reflective practices: one-on-one debriefing sessions and small group discussions facilitated by graduate students. The authors argue that the combination of the two practices is valuable at three levels: (a) enhancement of the primary learning goal for the SSLP; (b) fuller participation of all students, those who are more introverted as well as extroverted, in verbal reflection on their experience; and (c) increased opportunities to look at how the questions and insights from the SSLP can inform the remaining years of their college education. Findings suggest that these practices are valuable for all types of educational immersion experiences.

Reflection is a key element in service-learning. Bringle and Hatcher's definition of service-learning includes the condition that students "reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). In this article we explore reflective practices in summer service-learning courses, which include an immersion experience for an extended period of time, rather than typical service-learning courses that include a few hours a week of community involvement. With the displacement of students away from their ordinary environments and into cross-cultural situations within the United States, students often return to campus with new insights and questions about the complex social issues they experienced and what their continued role is in responding to the issues.

In light of the displacement that takes place in immersion experiences, another key element for service-learning courses is the development of post-immersion practices, giving attention to the process of re-entry that addresses the learning goals of the course, personal growth, and social awareness. We have been in discussion with 15 institutions that offer summer service experiences and are continuing to explore with them post-immersion reflective practices. For example, the Shepherd Alliance based at Washington and Lee University holds a closing conference at the end of the summer in which students make presentations and engage in discussion about their service experiences. The University of Delaware's Summer Scholars course emphasizes community-based research placements, and their post-immersion practices include a presentation to the faculty sponsors, community partners, and other student participants.

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Our interest in post-immersion reflective practices emerges from working with the Summer Service Learning Program (SSLP), in which 210–240 students spend eight weeks in service with agencies across the United States. Notre Dame Alumni Clubs sponsor the students by choosing sites, arranging room and board, and, with the James F. Andrews Scholarship Fund, providing a \$2,300 scholarship. The SSLP is a three-credit course in theology with classroom sessions of orientation in the spring semester, reading and writing assignments during the summer, and two types of follow-up sessions when the students return for the fall semester. Over the years we have examined ways of assisting students in the learning process, particularly as they return to campus. We discovered the importance of engaging students in the combination of two post-immersion reflective practices: a one-on-one debriefing with an SSLP staff member and a series of three discussion sessions in groups of eight students with a graduate student facilitator.

Post-immersion reflective practices offer many ways of enhancing students' learning from an immersion experience, most importantly by addressing the learning goals for the course. Since much of the course work in the SSLP is done independently during the summer in the form of reading and written assignments, the post-immersion practices of individual meetings and small group discussions provide an opportunity to reinforce the main learning goal of integrating the theological readings with the service experience through verbal articulation.

The reflective practices also assist with a second learning goal, to expand the students' understanding of social issues related to their experience. Most of our sites engage students in direct service, such as clinics that provide health care for the uninsured, day and overnight camps for children, shelters for people who are homeless, homes for people who have disabilities, organic farms, and summer schools. Although students read about social analysis, it is through the post-immersion reflection that many develop a more thorough understanding of the interconnectedness between community service and social change (Rhoads, 1997, p. 202).

As students return from immersion experiences, we also recognize the need for them to talk and be heard in an attentive and sustained manner. The majority of our students are most comfortable in written reflection, not oral. We see the need to provide a place for the reception of the varied stories, questions, and concerns that bring written thoughts into discussion.

In the two post-immersion reflective practices, students not only have the opportunity to talk about their experiences, their stories are considered by others in light of the students' own experience and the readings of the course. By offering both one-on-one meetings and small group discussions, students along the spectrum of introversion and extroversion have an opportunity to be in a setting where they are comfortable expressing themselves orally.

In addition to making connections with the readings, the follow-up sessions allow students to make connections with their own life experience. As Wade points out, past experience must be reconsidered in light of new information. This can lead to new insights that can be applied to future actions (Wade, 1997, p. 95).

In the SSLP, we are particularly interested in the process of students integrating theological reflection and faith perspectives with their service experience. Students are at many points along a continuum of openness to discussing their personal faith journeys and the connection between their faith life and their service experiences. Beginning with a one-on-one meeting assists students by helping to build their confidence about their insights and questions before they enter into a group discussion.

Debriefing Meetings

When the SSLP students return to campus, they sign up for a 20-minute, one-on-one debriefing meeting with one of the SSLP staff members. The preliminary questions ask students

to speak about their personal experience of summer service, starting with a description of what they did day-to-day, sharing comments about their living situation, and then moving to insights about the integration of the summer reading/journal writing with their service experience.

Gradually, the session moves to deeper and more probing questions. The interviewer asks the student how he or she grew through the experience and draws out the new skills, ideas, and understandings that have been germinating throughout the summer. One key area of the debriefing session focuses on the relationship between faith and service; thus the staff member asks the student how the service and theological readings of the course have impacted his or her faith. While many students have profound experiences of spiritual transformation during the SSLP, some students have trouble articulating this growth. The interviewer can help to draw out the student's insights about his or her faith journey and provide some of the theological language that the student may struggle to find. Some students do not use the language of faith to express themselves, so the interviewer focuses on questions of what was meaningful for the student throughout the experience and how they grew from the SSLP.

The key components of the debriefing meetings that have emerged are that the sessions are one-on-one and dialogical. These elements give the interviewer flexibility so that he or she can focus on areas that most deeply impacted the student and help the student to verbalize new thoughts, insights, and growth.

Small Group Discussions

In addition to the one-on-one debriefing session, all students are required to participate in small group discussions in the fall semester. SSLP students have two choices: to attend a day-long workshop that centers on three discussion sessions, or to attend three discussion sessions that are spread over consecutive weeks. Each small group consists of eight students and a trained facilitator.

The topics addressed in the three discussion sessions are consistent for all groups. The first session is introductory, inviting students to talk about where they were and what they did during their SSLP. The students share how their senses were bombarded and what emotions were most prominent for them. Equally important is that students listen to each other and make comments to each other.

The second session focuses on insights and questions that arose from the experience and the course readings on the themes of service, God, compassion, and suffering. The discussion provides the students with an opportunity to make deeper connections between their concrete experiences and the readings by a variety of authors.

The third and final session invites students to analyze larger social issues, such as poverty, race, education, and violence. The facilitator poses challenging questions about these issues to students, inviting them to dig deeper into their experience and examine ways that they are living as students and global citizens. Within this final session, participants are invited to think about how they will carry what they learned from this experience, and questions that were raised, into courses, research papers, senior theses, and further opportunities for service and social action.

The small group sessions allow students to dialogue with one another about their experiences, the readings, and the larger themes of the course. The contributions of each group member add to the others and enrich the conversation (Kinast, 1996, p. 70). Thus, through this process, students have the opportunity to both teach and learn from one another. Students also contribute ideas for each other about service opportunities and courses related to the work of their SSLP.

Findings

For many of the students, the SSLP is the first time that they have participated in reflective practices, and some students indicate they have problems examining their experience analytically. To facilitate this reflective learning process, we require each student to do bi-weekly readings, reflections, and journaling throughout their eight-week service immersion. The course packet of readings and reflection questions for written responses provides a framework for the students as they begin to do theological reflection and social analysis. When the students return to campus, they are asked to continue to reflect orally, both individually and with their peers. This continues to stretch students in the process of reflection and learning.

Post-immersion reflective practices create ways for the service experience to have a more lasting impact, so that the SSLP does not remain an isolated experience. Repeatedly, students remark that although the journaling, debriefing, and small group reflections were time-consuming, they appreciate assignments because the process challenged them to think about their experience at a deeper level.

Students need help exploring and integrating the challenges, complexities, and contradictions that have risen out of their service experience. This is especially seen in the SSLP students in two areas: their sense of self and their sense of the world. In the debriefings, students speak about learning about themselves and how they grew in individual skills such as patience, decision making, empathy, flexibility, and confidence. Rhoads confirms this finding, "Students experience a variety of learning outcomes related to self-knowledge in the areas of values and commitments, and their own leadership abilities, as well as general understandings related to one's sense of self" (Rhoads, 1997, p. 202). When they return to campus, students are often quite different people than when they left, having grown and matured through their experience. One student expressed, "This was an experience that really changes the way I think about the world. I can't even express how much of an impact this program has had on my life." He went on to speak about how much he grew in patience, leadership, and responsibility throughout the summer by working with the children in a summer day camp.

An additional observation is that many students become passionate about an issue through the service experience. Many of our students continue working with the population with whom they served and/or become involved in advocacy efforts. For some students, this summer experience revealed ways to continue to serve those who are economically poor in their chosen professions of medicine, law, engineering, or architecture. Other students have changed their career paths, decided to do a post-graduate service program, or chosen employment in the social service or educational fields because of the summer experience.

The SSLP also challenges students' sense of the world. In debriefings, students frequently comment on how much their worldview has expanded through their experiences. Many say that they did not even know that such an extreme level of poverty, racism, violence, or homelessness existed or that they had never experienced working with the elderly, victims of domestic violence, or people with disabilities. At first, many students described their new environment as disorienting or scary. But, forming relationships with people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, economic statuses, and abilities helped many students to be less judgmental and focus on the similarities that they share instead of the differences. Learning to care for people who suffer from discrimination, injustice, and oppression helped students to see the need for both direct service and structural change to address poverty and other social issues.

Those who conduct the debriefing meetings and facilitate the small group discussions help students process this new worldview, aiding participants in exploring how their lives may change now that they have discovered this new reality. This is especially important in the

students' transition back into campus life as they explore the impact on their relationships with others who did not have a similar experience.

Conclusion

The testimonies of students speak highly of the value of post-immersion reflective practices, as this student commented,

I loved the small group discussions because I was able to intimately share my experience and hear the experiences of others. The blending of everyone's summers and our thoughts as we all explored the same readings was very motivating. I was so inspired to meet others who feel that they want to change the world and that this summer learning experience was a start of pursuing that dream.

Through the two methods of post-immersion reflective practices we hope to continue to address the students' learning in all areas, academic, personal, and spiritual, as a means to continue the SSLP as one step in a process of lifelong learning. Although this is a time-intensive process, we hope others involved with educational immersions will see the benefits of engaging students in this dual approach to reflection and integration of the learning goals of the course.

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