WHY REFLECTION IS IMPORTANT

Learning comes about not from doing, but from thinking about what we do. Often we go through our day to day life without spending too much time “processing” our experiences. This is not a bad thing, since much of what we do throughout the day is routine and it may not hold a lot of meaningful learning.

When we participate in new experiences, experiences that are outside of our comfort zone or outside of our routine, there is often a lot of learning that can take place. Research shows that reflection has some positive impact on the attitudes of the volunteers regarding service. However; the lack of reflection has a STRONG NEGATIVE impact on the volunteers’ attitudes about service and the service activity.

You may be familiar with the term, service learning or experiential education, but you may be a little unclear on what it actually means. Experiential education, as defined by the Association of Experiential Education, “is a process through which individuals construct knowledge, acquire skills, and enhance values from direct experience.” Reflection is a key component that transforms service into experiential-learning. It allows volunteers to look back on, think critically about, and learn from their service experience. Reflection may include acknowledging and/or sharing of reactions, feelings, observations, and ideas about anything regarding the activity. Reflection can happen through writing, speaking, listening, reading, creating art, acting, and a number of other ways.

Benefits of Reflection

- Gives meaning to the experience: How did we do? How is community served by this? How is this part of a larger effort?
- Provides an opportunity to establish individual and team expectations
- Helps volunteers understand the limitations and opportunities of the service site or community organization
- Relieves tension and provides re-energizing and renewal (especially important when service is emotionally challenging)
- Creates a sense of accomplishment that is crucial, especially where there are limited external rewards
- Develops a “spirit” of service and civic-mindedness into a way of life
- Improves ethics of service: As volunteers examine the effects of their behavior, they discover ways to improve the quality and quantity of their service.
- Can create a sense of closure, especially important after a long service period, project, or emotional experience.
- Fosters personal and team development:
  - Cultivates life-long learning skills in both positive and negative experiences
  - Produces a “reality check” that guards against reinforcing inaccurate perceptions/biases
  - Encourages broader perspective of other’s experience
  - Builds community among the volunteers
  - Increases problem solving skills, empowerment and confidence
  - Creates shared understandings, open communication and better teamwork
  - Clarifies values as volunteers confront new situations
  - Provides practice clarifying goals and making choices to accomplish these goals
  - Encourages volunteers to do higher level thinking, as they look for root causes of complex issues
  - Acknowledges gained skills gained builds confidence
The Cycle of Experiential Education:

A. An individual has to engage in an experience
B. He or she reflects upon the experience critically
C. The individual comes up with some insight and meaning from the experience
D. He or she incorporates that insight into their lives.

**Experiencing** — Individuals participate in a specific activity.
**Reflecting** — Time for individuals to look back and think about what they thought, felt or saw during the event.
**Generalizing** — When these thoughts, emotions, behaviors or observations are understood in one situation, this information can be generalized and applied to other situations. The key question is “So what?”
**Applying** — Individuals are encouraged to put into action the generalizations that they identified in the previous stage. The question here is “Now what?”

You have the opportunity to facilitate the “Reflection” and “Generalizing” stages with your group members during the Immersion process. You can do this by scheduling time throughout your trip for the group to come together and talk about their experiences by asking questions, prompting the group to think through a reading, a quote, or an activity (see examples below). As mentioned, you are the facilitator through this process.

It is up to the participants to draw their own meaning from their experience. The “Applying” stage may occur during the trip but most likely will occur when participants return home. Some participants may take an extended amount of time to figure out what the trip meant to them and how they will directly apply it to their life. You can encourage this reflection and learning to occur through your facilitation but don’t take it personally if participants don’t open up during reflection times. It is a personal journey.

Think about meaningful reflection times that occurred on your past Immersion trips and facilitate them with your group.

You will want to give yourself time prior to the trip to plan out your reflections. At the very least select your readings or activities. During your trip you will be able to have more focused questions for your group by thinking about the day’s events to prompt discussion. You can get creative with your reflection time by bringing in music or having time for participants to journal their thoughts before a group discussion. Use time during your preparation meetings to lead the group through
reflection exercises prior to trip. This will allow the group to become familiar with the format and also allow for deeper discussions.

Reflection time should also occur after the trip. Often, participants will be able to draw more conclusions about their experience when they return because they have had more time to think about it. Because you and your group shared this experience together, it is important to have the support of the group once you are home as well.

**What? So What? Now What?**

This is a well-used and successful model to assist you in designing the reflection activities. Although you can derive learning from each question, focusing on all three will provide broader insights and keep participants from getting stuck on only the facts or just the feelings.

1. **What?** (Reporting what happened, objectively). Without judgment or interpretation, participants describe in detail the facts and event(s) of the service experience. Questions include:
   - What happened? What did you observe?
   - What issue is being addressed or population is being served?
   - What were the results of the project?
   - What events or “critical incidents” occurred?
   - What was of particular notice? How did you feel about that?
   - Would someone with a different reaction like to share?

2. **So What?** (What did you learn? What difference did the event make?) Participants discuss their feelings, ideas, and analysis of the service experience. Questions can also be focused on the meaning or importance of the activity to:
   - **The Participant:**
     i. Did you learn a new skill or clarify an interest?
     ii. Did you hear, smell or feel anything that surprised you?
     iii. What feelings or thoughts seem most strong today?
     iv. How is your experience different from what you expected? What struck you about that? How was that significant?
     v. What impacts the way you view the situation/experience? (What lens are you viewing from?)
     vi. What do the critical incidents mean to you? How did you respond to them?
     vii. What did you like/dislike about the experience?
   - **The Recipient:**
     i. Did the “service” empower the recipient to become more self-sufficient?
     ii. What did you learn about the people/community that we served?
     iii. What might impact the recipient’s views or experience of the project?
   - **The Community:**
     i. What are some of the pressing needs/issues in the community? How does this project address those needs?
     ii. How, specifically, has the community benefited?
     iii. What is the least impact you can imagine for the project?
     iv. With unlimited creativity, what is the most impact on the community that you can imagine?
   - **The Group (group projects):**
     i. In what ways did the group work well together? What does that suggest to you about the group?
     ii. How might the group have accomplished its task more effectively?
     iii. In what ways did others help you today? And vice versa?
     iv. How were decisions made? Were everybody’s ideas listened to?
3. **Now What?** (How will they think or act in the future as a result of this experience?)

Participants consider broader implications of the service experience and apply learning. Be aware to strike a balance between realistic, reachable goals and openness to spontaneity and change. Some questions include:

- What seems to be the root causes of the issue/problem addressed?
- What kinds of activities are currently taking place in the community related to this project? What contributes to the success of projects like this? What hinders success?
- What learning occurred for you in this experience? How can you apply this learning? What would you like to learn more about, related to this project or issue?
- What follow-up is needed to address any challenges or difficulties?
- What information can you share with your peers or community volunteers?
- If you were in charge of the project, what would you do to improve it? If you could do the project again, what would you do differently?
- What would “complete” the service?

Whereas the “What?, So What?, Now What?” model focuses on group processing and discussion, ideal reflection activities allow the participants to reflect publicly and privately, utilizing a variety of forms of expression.

### Designing a Reflection Activity

An effective reflection activity should:

- Have an outcome in mind (i.e. leadership, team building, improved critical thinking, acknowledgment)
- Be appropriate for the team (age, culture, etc.)
- Happen before, during, and as soon after the service experience as possible
- Be directly linked to the project or experience
- Dispel stereotypes, address negative experiences, increase appreciation for community needs, increase commitment to service
- Be varied for different learning styles, interests, etc.
- Actively involve the service recipients for a really compelling reflection session
- Be facilitated well for maximum participation, creativity, and learning

### Facilitating a Reflection Activity: Tips for Success

The role of the Site Leader is to facilitate the flow of comments from participants. Although it is not necessary to interject comments after each participant speaks, periodically the Site Leader assisting the group with their contributions can be helpful.

There is plenty of information and resources available about facilitating group activities. Some specifics for service reflection activities include:

- **Paraphrase.** Paraphrase what a participant has said so that he/she feels understood and so that the other participants can hear a concise summary of what has been said. Say something like, “So, what you’re saying is that we need to be careful what we say to other people in the group.”

- **Check for Meaning.** Check your understanding of a participant’s statement or ask the participant to clarify what he/she is saying. Say something like, “Are you saying that this plan is not realistic? I’m not sure that I understand exactly what you mean.”
• **Give Positive Feedback.** Compliment an interesting or insightful comment. Say, “That’s a good point. I’m glad that you brought that to our attention.”

• **Expand.** Elaborate on a participant’s contribution to the discussion with examples, or suggest a new way to view the problem. Try “Your comments provide an interesting point from the community’s perspective. It could also be useful to consider how the government would view the same situation.”

• **Increase the Pace.** Energize a discussion by quickening the pace, using humor, or, if necessary, prodding the group for more contributions by saying something like, “Oh my, we have lots of tired people at this meeting! Here’s a challenge for you. For the next two minutes, let’s see how many activities we can think of to do back on campus.”

• **Argue Opposites.** Disagree (gently) with a participant’s comments to stimulate further discussion. For example, “I can see where you are coming from, but I’m not sure that what you are describing is always the case. Has anyone else had an experience that is different from Jim’s?”

• **Relieve Tension.** Mediate differences of opinion between participants and relieve any tensions that may be brewing. For instance, “I think that Susan and Mary are not really disagreeing with each other but are bringing out two different sides of this issue.”

• **Consolidate.** Pull together ideas, showing their relationship to each other, for example, “As you can see from Dan’s and Jean’s comments, we see how water resources affect the overall level of poverty.”

• **Change the Process.** Alter the method for obtaining participation or by having the group evaluate ideas that have been presented. Say something like, “Let’s break into smaller groups to discuss each theory that has been presented.”

• **Summarize.** Summarize (and record, if desired) the major views of the group, for example. “I have noted four main points that have been brought up . . . .”

• **Seek a Balance** – Be flexible to address member’s needs, and keeping the process consistent with the theme. In other words, if some notable incident happens during the day, or has been forming for some time, it will probably be on the member’s minds enough to prevent their presence in any other conversation. Thus, even if you have an outcome in mind, what needs to get said may be the most important thing to discuss or reflect upon.

• **Use Silence** - People need some silence to reflect internally, some more than others do. Ask the question then wait.

• **Invite Participation** - Ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to be involved in the dialog. If there are some dominant voices in the group, do not be afraid to draw others into the conversation.
• **Keep the Conversation on Target** - Discussion cannot be allowed to veer with no focus. Reflection questions often lead to other questions, which lead to other questions... while these diversions can lead to great discussion, they can, as easily, go all over the place with little value for participants. Maintain focus by bringing it back to the theme or significant topic, and presenting “so what, now what” questions before leaving a decent topic.