## Critical Reflection Definitions and Characteristics

| What? | **Reflection** is a learning process that entails “a person’s intentional and systematic consideration of an experience, along with how that person and others are connected to that experience framed in terms of particular course content and learning objectives (Collier & Williams, 2005, p. 84).

**Critical reflection** in the context of community engagement means “guiding students through the process of considering and reconsidering their values, beliefs, and acquired knowledge that enables them to question and challenge their stereotypes and other a priori assumptions. Critical reflection adds depth and breadth to meaning by challenging simplistic conclusions, comparing varying perspectives, examining causality, and raising more challenging questions” (Jacoby, 2015, p. 27). According to Kiely (2015), “the ‘critical’ in reflection requires an explicit set of questions that prompt students to examine relations of power, hegemony, ideology, and trenchant historical structures and existing institutional arrangements that marginalize and oppress (para 19).

For Eyler & Giles, (1999), **reflection is the glue** linking the community engaged experience with learning. Based on their extensive research on student learning in service-learning, they developed the “5Cs” model below as a useful set of guidelines to assist educators in facilitating student learning through high quality reflection (see pp. 183-185).

**Continuous: Quality reflection should occur before, during and after the community-engaged experience.** Reflection or “pre-flection” (Jacoby, p. 27) prior to community engagement, should focus on preparing students with the skills, knowledge and attitude for effectively engaging with community partners. The pre-flection should also allow students to practice a particular approach to reflection on their own and with their peers. Pre-flection should introduce a specific framework for critical reflection (see below) and offer students opportunities to practice using the framework to surface, reflect on and evaluate the validity of their own assumptions, values, beliefs (self-reflection) as well as the reflect on the assumptions of others. Pre-flection might focus on the meaning of service and models of community engagement; citizenship and social responsibility; approaches to community development, the context, history and culture of the community or organization where community engagement will take place; reflection and observation skills; and/or the various factors that affect the problem engagement is meant to address.

**Connected: Effective reflection focuses on connecting students’ community engaged learning experience with disciplinary and academic content learning in the classroom.** Reflection also connects emotional, affective, visceral and |

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**Connected: Effective reflection focuses on connecting students’ community engaged learning experience with disciplinary and academic content learning in the classroom.** Reflection also connects emotional, affective, visceral and |
cognitive dimensions of community-engaged learning along with personal, professional and intellectual growth and development. In addition, reflection should assist students in connecting diverse lenses (i.e., their own, peers, faculty, community partners, scholarly literature, and previous research) for understanding and addressing an issue, problem and/or experience before, during and after their community engagement. Also, reflection should encourage students to explore the diverse cultural, economic, political, ethical, personal, social, historical and disciplinary dimensions of their community-engaged learning experience.

**Challenging:** High quality reflection means getting comfortable with new, unfamiliar and sometimes dissonant experiences outside the classroom. Ideas and experiences that are outside one’s frame of reference or worldview necessitate an openness and willingness to examine and potentially challenge existing sets of assumptions thru reflection.

**Contextualized:** Effective reflection is appropriate to the type of community engagement, the context in which the community engagement is taking place and the knowledge, skill and developmental level of the participants. The type of learning and service outcomes should inform decisions about the form, timing and processes of reflection whether individual or group, written or oral. Reflection is dependent on the nature of the community-engaged experience, the intensity of the experience and presence or absence of environmental and situational stressors.

**Coached:** Critical reflection should enhance students’ ability to process their community-engaged experience and requires the support of a well-trained facilitator. Providing ongoing constructive feedback that both challenges and supports students who are grappling with new, unfamiliar, dissonant and often challenging cross-cultural community-engaged experiences outside the classroom is a balancing act for facilitators requiring a lot of practice.

**How?** Critical reflection is both a learning process and outcome and it will take some time for students to gain knowledge and skills in reflection. Systematically and intentionally engaging in diverse modes of structured reflection will assist students in processing their community-engaged learning experience in order to enhance knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors and inform more valid decision-making and informed actions. Therefore, it is important for to utilize a specific reflection framework (i.e., DEAL model, or What? So What? Now What?) that will allow students to develop the knowledge, skills and attitude to engage in quality reflection. A reflection framework provides students with a consistent language, format and set of criteria to assess their progress and informs all reflection activities that they should practice and engage in before, during and after the community-engaged learning course or program. Two common critical reflection frameworks in community engagement are the

There are many different types of reflection activities that faculty can include as a part of a course or program. Good practice suggests that students should practice some intentional and structured form of written, oral and/or web-based reflection on a weekly basis using a consistent framework. Please see below for a list of reflection strategies and methods:

**Written:** Journals, essays, case studies, poetry, policy briefs, op-eds,

**Oral:** Presentations, think-pair-share, interviews, storytelling, class facilitation, dialogue, discussion and debate

**Audiovisual, Creative and/or Performance-based Activities:** Role-Play and Scenarios, Digital stories, drawings, photographs, posters, songs, video, and electronic portfolios.

**Why?**

There is substantial evidence from research in the field of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) that community-engaged learning experiences that are connected to the learning objectives of an academic course or program through extensive use of critical reflection before, during and after the experience positively affect students’ personal, social, ethical, civic, intercultural and intellectual learning outcomes (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Clayton, Bringle & Hatcher, 2013; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, Stenson & Gray, 2001; Kiely, 2004, 2005; Norris et al, 2017).

In addition to the evidence base above, community-engaged learning courses and programs that require students to practice and engage in intentionally structured, systematic and critical forms of reflection before, during and after their community-engaged experience will ensure that students develop the knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviors to process, communicate and represent their learning. Critical reflection is a useful method to assess student learning outcomes and importantly, can become a lifelong learning process that enhances students’ ability to work through future life experiences that are challenging, dissonant and/or outside their comfort zone as well as mentor others’ in the becoming reflective practitioners.
Reflection Resources


DEAL Model of Critical Reflection at:  


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