Introduction to Reflection in CEL

August, 2020

Reflection is a critical component of Community-Engaged Learning (CEL). CEL is facilitated by “reflection whereby experience enhances understanding [and] understanding leads to more effective action” (Eyler & Giles, 1999). This document is based on a literature review and environmental scan of reflection in CEL. Contact the CEL Office to find out more.

Prepared by the Community-Engaged Learning Office
Facilitated reflection is the most consistent predictor of achieving learning outcomes in community-engaged learning (CEL).\(^1\) The amount, timing, integration and quality of reflection therefore highly influence students’ success in CEL. The need for reflection in CEL is informed by John Dewey’s\(^2\) and David Kolb’s\(^3\) theorizing on experiential learning, which both indicate that reflection is a key method of interrogating one’s assumptions and making space for new learning. Sometimes called “the hyphen in service-learning”,\(^4\) facilitated reflection is an important strategy in helping students make connections between their community experiences, observations, and course content. Indeed, facilitating reflection that aligns with academic, personal, and civic intended learning outcomes (ILOs) can help students to make these connections.\(^5\)

However, ‘reflection’ is not a one-size-fits-all directive; different types of CEL require different types of reflection according to where they fit on the Spectrum of Engagement (see chart on next page). Furthermore, the approach to reflection differs in response to the following factors: 1) the phase of a CEL project (as a CEL experience progresses, students may benefit from different prompts or reflective exercises); 2) how best to scaffold the students’ learning experience; and 3) how best to align intended learning outcomes with the community experience. Reflection can take many forms, including creative exercises (such as role-playing or multimedia projects), written, discussion-based, independent, within groups, etc. Many instructors implement reflective journals or similar forms of written reflection; in this case (and similarly in other reflective exercises), there is value in guiding students through the differences between descriptive writing, personal journaling and reflective academic writing. There are a number of well-developed frameworks that can help with this distinction, as well as sample activities and questions that can help the reflection process. Regardless of what avenue for reflection is pursued, there are several key factors in ensuring the reflection strategy is successful.

**Keys to Successful Reflection:**

- Reflection needs to be continuous: reflection is inherently a cyclical process, and students benefit from continued engagement in reflection throughout the entire CEL project.\(^6\)
- Three characteristics of reflection that predict course quality:\(^7\)
  - Reflection activities that give students the opportunity to explore and clarify their personal values
  - Reflection activities which are ‘regular’ (i.e., activities are integrated into the course in a way that makes sense, rather than tacked on as an afterthought)\(^8\)
  - Reflection activities which have structure and clear guidelines for students
- Students benefit from witnessing their instructor model reflection. The reflection process also supports the instructor’s learning about their teaching and course content.

A common approach to student reflection within CEL is the tendency to focus on the negative aspects of CEL: for example, those situations which went poorly, the actions students would have done differently in hindsight, or the problems students encountered. Consider framing reflections from a strengths/assets-based perspective,\(^9\) which can still address the same situations but encourages students to recognize what went well and how to implement those strategies in other areas which could be improved.

Finally, reflexivity is a reflective practice that introduces the importance of positionality to one’s work, both in the academy and the community.\(^10\) Reflexivity is the ability “to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others.”\(^11\) It is beneficial to provide opportunities for students to engage in this reflective practice throughout their degree program. While this is more common in disciplines such as Social Work, it also has its place across the disciplines and is an essential part of responsibly navigating the privilege that accompanies the academia.
Reflection Across the Spectrum of Engagement

Reflection is integrated differently depending on the type of CEL. CEL experiences with lower engagement and simple reciprocity may not necessitate as extensive a reflection strategy as those experiences with higher engagement and complex reciprocity, in which a plan for continuous reflection will be important given the duration and/or intensity of the experience. While there is overlap between the different types of CEL across the spectrum, this section will address some of the nuances of reflection across the Spectrum of Engagement (SoE), as well as offering some examples.

Spectrum of Engagement:

Inform
Examples: Course-based guest speakers, creative performance or exhibit, conference presentation

Instructors sometimes neglect to incorporate reflection at this point on the SoE, as it is not always discussed as a type of CEL. However, facilitating reflection for students at this level of engagement is helpful for students’ learning and retention of knowledge. Even a simple exercise such as a ‘minute paper’ (in which students are given one to five minutes at the end of a guest lecture or presentation to write down their reflections on what they’ve just learned, either with or without a prompt from the instructor) can be a helpful tool in encouraging students to reflect on what was presented and how it connects with course material. This type of reflection is often collected for participation marks and is useful in formative, low-stakes assessment.

Consult
Examples: Research, design, creative (or other) project.

In “Consult”, project development is largely done by the community —determined according to community needs—before passing into the student’s hands to carry out the project. In consultation-type CEL projects, students should be encouraged to reflect on how their project will be accessible to the community they are working for (including the audience, use of jargon, etc.) and how they can use their research and other skills and knowledge to benefit the community. Students may also reflect on the application of skills acquired through their studies, as well as how to engage ethically when working in a community setting.

Self et al. discuss an example of integrating reflection for this level of engagement for a CEL research project. In their report, public health and nutrition students undertook research about food production and distribution on behalf of their community partners. Throughout the course, students completed five reflection assignments, each based on a specific prompt that integrated the students’ community...
experiences and academic course content. See more about this example of reflection within a CEL research project-based course.

**Involve**
Examples: Community service-learning, field experience

As this type of CEL often involves active in-depth involvement with community as opposed to a specific deliverable, such as a research report, reflection is the key way in which students are able to connect their community experiences to academic course content to maximize their learning and improve their practice in community. “Structured reflection permits learning to occur from the chaos and ambiguity of experience.”14 As such, instructors need to provide thorough guidance to ensure students engage in reflection. Given that “Involve” typically requires students to be immersed within the community space (physical or remote)—where they frequently work alongside both community members and community service users—students may be interested in reflecting on social factors (socioeconomic status, race, gender, etc.) that are relevant to the community partner’s mandate. One exercise that is useful for CEL projects at this level of engagement is the ‘preflection’15 in which students can examine their own assumptions, values, and beliefs about a community before engaging with it as a method of becoming aware of their own biases prior to a service experience.

**Collaborate and Co-Create**
Examples: Research, design, creative (or other) project in which students, staff/instructors and community partners work collaboratively

In these experiences, students and faculty/staff work collaboratively with community partners to develop a project of mutual interest and benefit. Students apply their discipline-based skills and knowledge to achieve a concrete output (e.g. theatre production, engagement process, community map). Reflection can be anchored in that output. For example, if students are producing a research report, students can be prompted to reflect on what the research will mean for the community partner and how the research relates to the theories discussed in class. Reflection can support the collaborative process as much as the outcome. For example, project directions and timelines often change and it is therefore helpful for students to reflect on the need to be flexible whilst working on projects with and for a community partner. Further, projects of this nature —which are relatively high in engagement and involve complex reciprocity—benefit from reflexivity in the reflection process because reflexivity fosters humility and self-awareness. Reflexivity can, for example, support students in constructively receiving feedback.

Co-Created CEL experiences have the highest level of engagement and involve the most complex degree of reciprocity. These experiences share many similarities with “collaborate” except that project development, implementation and evaluation in co-created experiences are all done collaboratively. As such, it is helpful to have significant and frequent reflection to support students in navigating that complex and intense relationship. Field notes - both descriptive and reflective, and taken over the course of the students’ work with community - can be particularly helpful in these experiences.

Morton et al.16 share their experience with a CEL course that brought interdisciplinary social sciences students together to complete a research project about femicide developed in partnership with a local women’s shelter. The students’ main deliverable was to create a tool for knowledge mobilization regarding the effects of media portrayals of femicide. A reflection dossier was integrated into the course, which required students to submit three written reflections in response to questions posed by the course instructor. Read more about this example here.
References

8 Eyler (2001) also supports this point