

# 3

*This chapter explores how community engagement creates opportunities to facilitate meaningful discussions about issues including: the nature and sources of power; who benefits and who is silenced by service and leadership efforts; which community actions result in change rather than charity; and how to developmentally sequence reflective practice.*

## Fostering Critical Reflection: Moving From a Service to a Social Justice Paradigm

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Adopting a learning outlook and growth mindset seems to be a key differentiator between leaders who attempt to motivate followers through the use of rewards and corrective action, and those who view their role as building collective capacity for meaningful change. Much has been written on the intersections of leadership and learning (Daloz Parks, 2005; Owen, 2015; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009; Roberts, 2007) and indeed learning is core to modern approaches to leadership such as transformational, servant, relational, and adaptive theories. This capacity to learn from experiences is tied directly to one's ability to analyze, integrate, and interrogate those experiences in light of existing knowledge and schemas.

Reflection, intentionally pausing to carefully consider aspects of an experience, is an essential component of learning, yet is often short-changed in formal leadership education, especially in Western contexts. Meanwhile, the field of community service-learning has long embraced the concept of reflective practice as a core element of pedagogy and practice (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Rice, 2010; Schoen, 1983, 1987). This chapter will explore ways leadership educators can integrate practices of reflection, especially of deep or critical reflection, in order to more effectively foster leadership for social change.

## Distinguishing Among Levels of Reflection

Reflection is not a new concept. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as “the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it” (p. 6). There are numerous prescriptions on how to best engage in reflection, and a variety of differences among concepts of personal reflection, common sense reflection (Moon, 2004), and reflection in action (Schoen, 1983). More recently, scholars and practitioners have concluded that not all reflection is equally efficacious, and indeed, shallow or merely descriptive reflection, especially as tied to service-learning, can be damaging (Butin, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). Jacoby (2014) describes these dangers: “experience without critical reflection [described below] can all too easily allow students to reinforce their stereotypes about people who are different from themselves, develop simplistic solutions to complex problems, and generalize inaccurately based on limited data” (p. 26). These cautions are not limited to service-learning. It is easy to see how students engaged in leading change or leading for innovation could also fall prey to similar parochial thinking.

Most service and community-based learning programs now differentiate the processes of reflection from those of *critical* reflection. Jacoby (2014) defines the latter: “Critical reflection is the process of analyzing, reconsidering, and questioning one’s experiences within a broad context of issues and content knowledge” (p. 26); it guides students into a depth of thinking that challenges underlying assumptions and beliefs. Eyler, Giles, and Schmeide (1996) offer that critical reflection should be conducted in a way that is continuous, connected, challenging, and contextualized. That is, critical reflection should take place before, throughout, and after a community engagement experience (continuous); should serve as a bridge between the action or experience and more cognitive or discipline-based ways of knowing (connected); should involve being pushed out of one’s comfort zones to make connections and think in new ways (challenging); and should be framed in appropriate ways given the context of the experience (contextualized) (Collier & Williams, 2005). Mitchell (2008) describes how a commitment to critical reflection shifts the emphasis of service-learning from individual actors to systems thinking:

While individual change and student development are desired outcomes of traditional and critical service-learning, critical service-learning pedagogy balances the student outcomes with an emphasis on social change. This requires rethinking the types of service activities in which students are engaged, as well as organizing projects and assignments that challenge students to investigate and understand the root causes of social problems and the courses of action necessary to challenge and change the structures that perpetuate those problems. (p. 53)

In addition to these hallmarks of critical reflective practice, there are often political dimensions as well. Kreber (2012) states that “an important feature that distinguishes critical reflection from these other constructs is its strong foundation in critical theory [for example Freire, 1970; Habermas, 1971; Gramsci, 1971] and variations enriched by postmodern ideas [Brookfield, 1995, 2000; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993]” (p. 324). Critical reflection demands that experiences and issues be examined in light of social and political forces, link explicitly to further social action, and reveal hegemonic ideology—that is, the influence of unquestioned dominant cultures and philosophies. Freire (1970) did not believe that reflection and action could be separated. He coined the concept of *praxis*, or action and reflection upon the world in order to change it. Through critical or deep reflection, assumptions about the world can be revealed and interrogated, power dynamics and relationships can be examined, and diverse and often contradictory worldviews can be tested. While there are elements of critical thinking in critical reflection, critical thinking as typically defined is often considered a politically neutral enterprise that involves applying logic to a problem or situation.

Critical reflection goes beyond critical thinking in several ways. In addressing issues of the nature and sources of power, for example, critical reflection asks students to consider who is represented in the staffing and leadership of an organization, and who is enacting formal and informal power. Critical reflection invites students to consider who benefits and who is silenced by service and leadership efforts. For example, students can explore whether guests or clients of an organization have a voice in setting an organization’s goals or programmatic priorities. Critical reflection also draws distinctions between acts of charity and acts of social change. Students can be asked to consider whether their own community actions support social change or provide immediate relief (and the potential benefits of both types of action). Finally, through critical reflection students are encouraged to know and discuss the systemic and institutionalized nature of oppression. By asking a series of “why” questions, students may develop a more complex understanding of the social issue evidenced in their service.

Table 3.1 offers sample reflection questions by level of criticality. Note how questions move from simple didactic retelling of events from a monolithic perspective to those where students “become constructive critics of themselves, society, politics, and course content” (Pigza, 2010, p. 75). Deeper levels of critical reflection offer more complex analyses of multiple contexts, perspectives, and diverse constructions of meaning.

## Connecting Critical Reflection to Leadership Education and Development

So what can leadership educators learn from service-learning’s approach to critical reflection? Kreber (2012) cites research that critical reflection is

**Table 3.1 Sample Reflection Questions by Level of Critical Reflection**

<i>Levels of Critical Reflection</i>	<i>Sample Reflective Questions</i>
<p><b>Surface (descriptive):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on singular aspect of a situation or experience</li> <li>• Uses unexamined and unsupported personal beliefs as evidence</li> <li>• May acknowledge different perspectives without valuing or discriminating among them</li> <li>• Lists facts learned, places visited, tasks completed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What happened?</li> <li>• What did we do today?</li> <li>• What did you see, hear, smell, touch, say?</li> <li>• What is a moment that stands out for you?</li> <li>• What surprised you? Frustrated you? Confused you? Disappointed you? Angered you?</li> <li>• How did this affect you?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emerging (analysis and application):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection provides a cogent critique from a single perspective, but may fail to see the broader system in which the issue or situation is embedded and other factors that may make change difficult to achieve.</li> <li>• May make some connections to the issue or discipline, but the connections may not be deep or insightful.</li> <li>• Demonstrates a beginning ability to interpret evidence and draw reasonable conclusions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are you learning from this?</li> <li>• What do you understand differently now?</li> <li>• What are the strengths and limitations of this service experience?</li> <li>• How does this relate to larger contexts, theories, ideas?</li> <li>• What social issues are connected to the problem addressed by the service experience?</li> <li>• What will you do with what you have learned?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Deep (synthesis and critique):</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participants view situations from several perspectives, demonstrate clarity of reasoning, and place their experiences in broader, nuanced, and complex contexts.</li> <li>• Perceive conflicting goals and choices of individuals involved in a situation and acknowledge that differences in ideas or choices can be analyzed and evaluated.</li> <li>• Recognize that decisions and actions are situationally dependent. Can examine own responsibility and connection to issues at hand.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What influence does culture have on this interaction?</li> <li>• What influence does power have on this interaction?</li> <li>• How does your understanding of service impact this interaction?</li> <li>• What voices are missing from the conversation?</li> <li>• What current systems maintain the problem and how can they be addressed?</li> <li>• How have my own assumptions been challenged through this experience?</li> </ul>

*Source:* Adapted from Bradley (1995); Collier and Williams (2005); Owen and Wagner (2010); Pigza (2010); Preskill and Brookfield (2009); Rice (2010).

essential to sustaining positive personal relationships; productivity, decision-making, and well-being in the workplace; personal meaning making; and to fostering a healthy democracy. Each of these aims are also connected to the goals of leadership education, especially those of collaborative and postindustrial approaches to leadership.

The Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) identified community service as one of the strongest predictors of socially responsible leadership (Dugan, Kodama, Correia, & Associates, 2013). The authors describe that if community service experiences are to leverage leadership learning most effectively then “the quality with which the experience is processed is of equal importance” (p. 12). Participants are more likely to gain leadership outcomes from service-learning when:

- Service experiences are designed such that students work with individuals and communities as opposed to working on behalf of them
- The nature of the service experience parallels the values of the type of leadership being cultivated
- Critical reflection is incorporated as a tool for students to interrogate their personal values and challenge normative assumptions
- Students explicitly process service experiences in the context of leadership
- Students examine what additional leadership knowledge and skills are necessary to sustain difficult and complex work

In many ways, critical reflection is the bridge that allows learners to connect their community service experiences to leadership-related themes such as developing critical group-related skills, deepening personal commitments to shared public problems, building resilience for working in complex systems to create change, and disrupting assumptions about social systems and how they operate (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).

### **Moving From Critical Reflection to Critical Discourse and Action: Three Applications**

Developing more complex and interdependent ways to view the world are important but not sufficient levers for social change. Creating lasting change requires actively working to address root causes of issues, to redistribute power, and to develop deep, reciprocal, and authentic relationships (Mitchell, 2008; Morton, 1995). Kasl and Yorks’ (2012) model of holistic epistemology includes the concept of presentational knowing, which is “a way of knowing that fosters transformative learning in both individuals and larger human systems by connecting thinking to feeling, thus providing the ‘flow in between’ that enriches practical action” (p. 504). Presentational knowing links experiential knowing (which comes from “*being in*

**Table 3.2 Building Coherence and Human Connection through Presentational Knowing**

<i>Levels of Presentational Knowing</i>	<i>Experiential Knowing (derives from being in the world)</i>	<i>Propositional Knowing (involves reflecting on the world)</i>
<b>Intrapersonal/Holistic Knowing</b> Brings feelings and emotions into consciousness.	Affective feeling and emotion	Critical reflection
<b>Interpersonal/Relational Knowing</b> Dialogue across differences challenges taken for granted worldviews and builds empathy for lived experiences of others.	Empathic field	Critical discourse
<b>Collective/Systems Learning</b> Creates spaces for conversations about community's group identity and place within society, and, builds solidarity for action.	Group identity	Community reflection and dialogue for action

Source: Adapted from Kasl and Yorks' (2012) Model of Holistic Epistemology.

the world”) and propositional knowing (which comes from “*reflecting on the world*”) (p. 516). Because presentational knowing connects experiences and reflection across three levels—intrapersonal or holistic knowing, interpersonal or relational knowing, and collective or systemic knowing—it is an apt frame for the types of knowing that emerge through service and critical reflection.

Table 3.2 depicts Kasl and Yorks' (2012) model of holistic epistemology and describes the three levels of presentational knowing and how they result from the interplay between experiential knowing and propositional knowing. Internal coherence and human connection are fostered by engaging in all three types of knowing. The three ensuing examples can be adapted by leadership educators as ways to interrogate existing systems and structures and an individual's role in challenging or sustaining those structures in a connected and caring way.

**Critical Reflection (Intrapersonal): Addressing the Disorienting Dilemma.** Service-learning and leadership educators understand that learning requires change and change only occurs when complacency and one's typical worldview are challenged. Many service-learning efforts “confront participants with the unexpected, unfamiliar, surprising, and perhaps even disturbing, thereby calling into question the suppositions they hold and possibly revealing them as distorted” (Kreber, 2012, p. 330).

Critical reflection is most likely to happen among students when they face a disorienting dilemma, then work to make meaning of the dilemma.

Mezirow (2000) outlined 10 phases of perspective transformation. Table 3.3 offers an example of a student encountering an unexpected obstacle in his desire to help the community and how that individual worked through the stages of perspective transformation in order to arrive at a more complex understanding of asset-based approaches to change. Educators will see connections between this model and diverse learning and development theories (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kohlberg, 1976; Kolb, 1984; Perry, 1970).

**Critical Discourse (Interpersonal): Short-Term Immersion Experiences Enhance Understanding across Differences.** Critical discourse, or dialoguing across differences, is essential for enhancing understanding and building empathy. Many service-learning practitioners have developed skills in facilitating inter-group dialogue and cross-cultural reflection as part of the evolution of alternative breaks and other service-immersion programs. Leadership educators, though perhaps just as likely to work with students across cultural contexts, may not have as frequent access to resources and experiences that develop skills in facilitating critical discourse.

Kiely (2004, 2005) conducted a longitudinal case study examining the ways an international alternative break service-learning program contributed to the development of transformative learning. A grounded theory inquiry process revealed five stages of perspective transformation as outlined in Table 3.4.

Kiely's findings, augmented by Jones et al. (2012), reveal the transformative potential of short-term immersion experiences, such as service-learning, and link much of this transformation to the power of critical discourse. Border crossing often "elicited in students a scrutiny of their own identities, backgrounds, and privileges in relation to those with whom they were interacting, and a breaking down of stereotypes" (pp. 215–216) leading participants to try and close the gap between themselves and others by identifying elements of common humanity. The more students spent time interacting across cultures and experiences, the more they developed a shared connection and commitment to further actions.

Much of the service-learning literature describes this action of "dialogic engagement" as critical to developing authentic relationships and sharing power. Mitchell (2008) describes the importance:

A critical service-learning pedagogy asks everyone to approach the service-learning relationship with authenticity. In this process, we would develop a shared agenda, acknowledge the power relations implicit in our interactions, and recognize the complexity of identity—understanding that our relationship within the service-learning context is further complicated by societal expectations. (p. 10)

**Community Reflection and Dialogue for Action: The Highlander Experience.** Perhaps the most complex level of critical reflection is conducting reflection on a systems level and using dialogue as a springboard

**Table 3.3 Ten Phases of Perspective Transformation***Phase and Service-Learning Example*

1. Experiencing an event in society that disorients one's sense of self within a familiar role.  
A student organization has a member who works at a bakery where day-old bagels are thrown out every evening. The student takes the bagels to a local food pantry and asks that they be donated to feed the homeless. The food pantry rejects the donation of the bagels as many of their clients have inadequate access to dental care and the stale bagels frequently cause dental issues. The student feels affronted that the donation was not welcome.
2. Engaging in reflection and self-reflection.  
The student relates this story to a member of the service-learning office on campus. The service-learning practitioner asks the student what assumptions he made as he decided on the donation. The student reflects on the assumption that food-insecure individuals would be glad to have any food, and not question the condition of the food. The student also reflects that he didn't think about possible dental issues related to poverty.
3. Critically assessing personal assumptions and feelings.  
The student realizes his own privileged access to health care blinded him to the fact that not everyone has equal access. He also hadn't considered the fact that their donations could be burdensome or even harmful to the people they were trying to help.
4. Relating discontent to similar experiences of others; recognizing shared problems.  
The student reflects that perhaps this experience was like when all his peers assumed his parents paid for his college tuition, when in fact he was paying his own way through college.
5. Identifying new ways of acting.  
The student decides to think more critically and carefully in engaging in acts of charity in the future. He decides there is value in letting the community state what their needs are rather than assuming he knows what they are.
6. Building personal confidence and competence.  
The student realizes this is a new way of thinking about the community for him and shares his new understanding of asset-based approaches to change with the rest of the student organization members.
7. Planning a new course of action.  
The organization decides they still want to work with the food pantry and reaches out to ask how their help could be most beneficial.
8. Acquiring knowledge and skills necessary to implement this new course of action.  
The food pantry requests that the student group agree to fill a regular shift helping distribute donations from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Friday. They also talk to the students about getting support for an addendum to the county budget that increase funding for human services.
9. Trying out the planned action and assessing the results.  
The student organization commits to this plan and develops a sustained relationship with both the food pantry staff, as well as several regular clients who make use of the food pantry services. They work on campus and in the community to raise awareness about the upcoming vote on the budget addendum and share stories of the hard-working clients and families they met during their work at the shelter.
10. Reintegrating into society with new role behaviors, new assumptions, and perspectives.  
The students work to promote this service opportunity to other student groups in order to fill more shifts at the pantry, and decide to develop a policy watch program that advocates in long term ways for increased support for human service agencies on the local, state, and national level. Their visibility on these issues also invites food insecure students from their own campus to visit the group to discuss developing a food pantry for students in need.

Source: Adapted from Cranton (2002); Mezirow (1991).

**Table 3.4 Stages of Transformative Learning through International Service-Learning**

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Student Actions</i>
Contextualized Border Crossing	Examines how personal, structural, historical, and programmatic elements of the context for service-learning frame the unique nature and impact of the experience.
Dissonance	Experiences disconnect between their own personal context and that of the immersion service-learning experience.
Personalizing	Builds relationships with community members which allow them to humanize previously abstract ideas such as poverty.
Processing	Intellectually engages with the experience and challenges previously held assumptions.
Connecting	Develops affective connections with community members and commits to work for justice upon return to their home culture and contexts.

*Source:* Adapted from Jones et al. (2012); Kiely (2004; 2005).

for action. Beyond mere personal reflection, or discussions within a group or organization, community dialogue and reflection transgresses organizational and contextual boundaries in order to invite shared understanding and commitment to action. Drawing on Buber's (1958) concept of dialogic moments, these conversations reflect on moments of dissonance within a community. Pearce (2001) describes that "the defining characteristic of dialogic communication is when people are able to hold their own position and 'allow others to hold theirs by being profoundly open to hearing others' positions without needing to oppose or assimilate them" (p. 11). The four conditions of transformative dialogue in groups include a shared commitment and motivation to learn; curiosity and openness to difference; emotional engagement through storytelling; and using inquiry as a catalyst for reflection and mutual meaning making (MacKeracher, 2012).

The Highlander Folk School, also known as the Highlander Research and Education Center, provides an example of this notion of community reflection that leads to action. The Highlander Research and Education Center:

Serves as a catalyst for grassroots organizing and movement building in Appalachia and the South. We work with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny. Through popular education, participatory research, and cultural work, we help create spaces—at Highlander and in local communities—where people gain knowledge, hope and courage, expanding their ideas of what is possible. (Highlander Research and Education Center, 2015)

Myles Horton, the director of Highlander (Adams, 1975) from 1932 until the early 1980s, knew that increased understanding “is best achieved through participation in an actual situation, and that conflict and crisis must be seized as opportunities for people to learn how they can effectively resolve their own individual and community problems” (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 119). For example, Highlander hosted a gathering of a diverse group of people in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which called for the integration of public schools. After extensive storytelling and context sharing, the group “began the task of analyzing the information by asking questions, searching out contradictions, looking for sources of strength, and considering starting points for bringing about change” (p. 121). This process valued personal story, openness to learning, courageous questions, and commitment to further action.

This form of community reflection linked to specific action planning connects to Freire’s concept of *praxis*, or action and reflection in order to change the world. In what ways can leadership educators and service-learning practitioners alike invite students and community members to come together around shared public problems and engage in deliberative dialogue to deepen understanding and commitment to change?

## Reflection for Transformation

As stated previously, engaging students in reflective thinking to facilitate learning from experience is not a new concept for leadership educators, however, there is much to be gained by gleaning insights from the reflective practice of service-learning practitioners. This chapter explored the ways community engagement creates opportunities to facilitate meaningful discussions about issues including: the nature and sources of power; who really benefits and who is silenced by service and leadership efforts; which community actions result in change rather than charity; and how to developmentally sequence reflective practice across increasingly complex ways of knowing. The power of linking leadership and critical reflection augments the transformative potential of leadership efforts—for individuals, groups, and communities. Stephen Brookfield (1995) offers sage advice: “it becomes easy to lose sight of the political underpinnings, dimensions, and consequences of our reflection. But how we reflect and what we chose to reflect on are partisan questions. . . . Reflection in and of itself is not enough; it must always be linked to how the world can be changed.” (p. 217).

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