

Reflection Journals: A Tool for Integrating Service Learning into Gerontology Curriculum

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“Service without reflection is like eating without digesting” – based on a quote by Edmund Burke

Gerontology education strives to dispel myths about aging, provide information about the various aspects of human aging, and it sometimes achieves the goal of interesting students in exploring the field as a future profession. Research (Brown & Roodin, 2001; Cummings, Galambos & DeCoster, 2003; Hatchett, Holmes, & Ryan, 2002; Mason & Sanders, 2004) has shown that formal contact with older adults through experiences such as service learning is connected to increased interest in working with older adults in the medicine, nursing, and social work fields.

Service learning, through creating university/community educational partnerships, provides a formalized method of instruction to connect students with older adults. Service learning outcomes may include: applying and evaluating relevance of gerontology theory to real-life observations of and interactions with older adults; evaluating the role of the agency in the senior services network; and identifying one’s own reactions to interactions with older adults.

At CSULB, students in an introductory gerontology course (Gerontology 400I: Perspectives on Aging) are required to complete 21 hours of service learning at a partner community site, such as a senior center, assisted living facility, or hospice. Concurrently, students integrate classroom material and service learning experiences through Expectation Papers to prepare for beginning service learning and weekly Service Learning Reflection Journals, which help them to identify tasks accomplished, thoughts/feelings about participation at the agency, and reflective questions regarding the agency.

Sample Reflection Questions

1. What is the administrative structure of this agency? Who makes decisions? What’s the mission of the agency?
2. What role do clients/residents/customers play in decision-making at this agency?
3. How does this agency support continuity theory?
4. How does this agency care for the biological, psychological, AND social needs of the clients/residents/customers?
5. What have you learned about the field of Gerontology from your service learning experience, completion of this journal assignment, and hearing your colleagues discuss their service learning experiences?

Reflection Journals ask students to make meaningful and explicit connections between what they have observed and experienced during their service learning hours with in-

class course content and discussions. It contributes to a richer class discussion about the class topics, because students have had the chance to process information individually before engaging in conversations with their classmates.

Student Reflections

“Service learning was rewarding, but it was reflecting, writing, and sharing my experiences that added to the overall benefits of the service learning.”

“The biggest thing I learned from the journal assignments was how to really think about how everything at my site made me feel.”

“Writing the journals made me relate my experiences to what we learned in class and in our readings. This gave me many ‘light bulb moments’ when I was able to say to myself, ‘Oh yea. We learned that in class and I read about that.’ It really taught me that the things I learned were valuable in my experiences.”

“The journal assignment gave me the opportunity to really go in depth about the purpose of each day...I didn’t just go home and leave my experience behind. I truly thought about the seniors that were involved, and how they helped to develop my understanding of human aging.”

“Identifying the importance of each day I completed service learning made my journal writing experience more special.”

“The journal assignments really helped me critique myself at the end of each week. It was a way to evaluate my actions and compare those to what we learned in Gerontology class.”

“I went back and reread all of the journal entries chronologically. It was interesting to watch my progress.”

References:

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