



# Service Reflection Toolkit

Northwest Service Academy, Metro Center, Portland, OR  
www.northwestserviceacademy.org



**Why Reflect?** We do not learn from doing, we learn from thinking about what we do. Research shows that reflection has *some* positive impact on the attitudes of the volunteers regarding service.<sup>1</sup> However, the lack of reflection has a STRONG NEGATIVE impact on the volunteers's attitudes about service and the service activity.

**Reflection is** a crucial part of community service, which 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, drawing, acting, and any other way you can imagine.

## Benefits of Reflection<sup>2</sup>

- \_ Gives meaning to the experience (was goal accomplished, how did we do, how is community served by this, how is this part of a larger effort, etc.)
- \_ Provides an opportunity to establish expectations (individually, team)
- \_ Can help 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)
- \_ Can create a sense of accomplishment that is crucial, especially where there are limited external rewards
- \_ Can create a habit of appreciating ourselves
- \_ Integration of service into the rest of one's life – developing a “spirit” of service and civic-mindedness
- \_ Improved 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.
- \_ Personal and Team Development:
  - \_ Fosters life-long learning skills– develops an ability to learn from positive and negative experiences
  - \_ “Reality Check” – guards against reinforcing inaccurate perceptions/biases
  - \_ Volunteers gain a broader perspective of other's experience
  - \_ Builds community among the volunteers
  - \_ Personal Problem solving increases personal empowerment, confidence
  - \_ Group problem solving 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

*“A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.”*

*– Oliver Wendall Holmes*

<sup>1</sup> “Key Elements of Service Learning,” Indiana Department of Education, Service Learning Program

<sup>2</sup> Info taken from “Learning Through Service,” Kate McPherson, Project Service Leadership, and “Possible Outcomes of Service Learning,” National Youth Leadership Council.

## 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, focussing 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 judgement 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? Let’s hear from someone who had a different reaction?*

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:** *Did you learn a new skill or clarify an interest? Did you hear, smell, feel anything that surprised you? What feelings or thoughts seem most strong today? How is your experience different from what you expected? What struck you about that? How was that significant? What impacts the way you view the situation/experience? (What lens are you viewing from?) What do the critical incidents mean to you? How did you respond to them? What did you like/dislike about the experience?*
- **The Recipient:** *Did the “service” empower the recipient to become more self-sufficient? What did you learn about the people/community that we served? What might impact the recipient’s views or experience of the project?*
- **The Community:** *What are some of the pressing needs/issues in the community? How does this project address those needs? How, specifically, has the community benefited? What is the least impact you can imagine for the project? With unlimited creativity, what is the most impact on the community that you can imagine?*
- **The Group** (group projects): *In what ways did the group work well together? What does that suggest to you about the group? How might the group have accomplished its task more effectively? In what ways did others help you today? (and vice versa) 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 seem 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: Tips for Success

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, ages, 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

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

- \_ Seek a balance between being 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. Similarly, the conversation 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.
- \_ Use silence: People need some silence to reflect internally, some more than others do. Ask the question then wait.
- \_ Ensure that all participants have an equal opportunity to become involved

*"The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves, but in our attitude towards them." - Antoine de Saint Exupery*

## The Toolkit

Following is a collection of reflection activities, separated into the amount of time required. The intention is for reflection to be available and utilized any time, whether you have fifteen seconds or two hours. Endless supplies of activities are available from combining ideas from activities in the kit. This toolkit is also ever expanding, so please submit your favorite reflection activities to NWSA, Metro Center, 2044 E. Burnside, Portland, OR 97214 <nwsametro@esd112.k12.wa.us>

### 15 – 60 second activities:

Posed question: Reflection does not require a product or a discussion. Gather the group, obtain silence, and ask a question (for ideas look above). Give a few more seconds of still silence.

Posed sensation: Same as above, but ask participants to check in with some sensory stimuli (sound, smell, sight) and make a mental bookmark of the project with that observation.

Capturing: Each participant makes a face, a sound, or movement capturing how they felt about the service project.

Snapshot: Create a silent snapshot of the service project. One person starts with a pose or action related to the project, everybody else joins the "snapshot."

## **1 to 5 minute activities:**

Question discussion: Randomly, or in a circle, each person responds to a posed question (such as “project highlight”)

One to Three words: Each person shares one to three words to describe the service activity or how you feel about the service activity or anything else regarding the project.

Journaling: Each person responds to a question in writing

Poetry/Writing Slam: Take turns; each day somebody else will write a short poem or sentence about the project, then share it with the group.

Sculptor: One participant chooses a topic and asks for a set amount of participants to be the clay. The clay people let the sculptor mold them into the sculptor's vision of their topic i.e. invasive plant removal or the plight of someone who is homeless or racism.

## **5 to 30 minute activities:**

What? So What? Now What?: To get to each step in the model, allow five to 30 minutes for group processing.

Written Reflection: Pose three or four questions, using “what, so what, now what” model, and allow time for writing. (i.e. What you did, why/how you did it, how you could do it better)

The Image: Prior to the project, each person writes or draws about the people or objects they will be working with (such as a tree for a tree-planting project or the community being served), the subject matter, or their feelings about the project. Revisit (or re-write/draw) it after the service project and discuss.

Senses: Before activity, project, event or even before the first day or service, ask participants to share what they expect to hear, smell, see, touch and taste. The follow up after the day with what the participant actually senses

Pictionary: Have a pictionary game about the experience and how you felt. Talk about it as a group.

Parables/Stories: Read a piece of pertinent literature and have participants respond and draw correlations to service experience

Letter to self: Prior to a project, have participants write a letter to themselves about their personal and career goals regarding the project, or feelings about the project or community. Place it in a sealed envelope, mail it to yourself or hand out again to the team after six months and reflect.

Masks: Make a two-sided mask from a paper plate. Draw an image of how others might see you on one side, and how you see yourself on the other. Discuss the contrast. Or, could be work self/free time self, actual work/dream work.

Gingerbread Models: Draw a large gingerbread person at the beginning of the day, with drawings/writings of what makes a good (mentor, urban forester, team member, etc.). At the end of the day, share what you did well, how you thought you could improve.

Yarn Web: Stand in a circle with a ball of yarn. Each person throws it to another and says one word that explains what they will bring to the next project, something they appreciated in the person they are throwing it to, what they learned, etc. The yarn forms a web supported by the group. Use a thicker string, lower it, and have someone climb on, and try to support a person! (use caution with this one).

Cartoon: Draw a cartoon that teaches something important regarding the service project.

All on the Wall: Put a large piece of paper up on one wall or all the way around the room. Participants write or draw feelings/thoughts/learnings on the paper. Facilitator leads discussion based on writings.

Recommendations: Compose a letter to your site supervisor offering suggestions for working with future volunteers.

Lifeline Biography: Draw a line representing and plot significant periods/events (with writing or drawings) influencing who you are. Share with a partner or small group. This can be adapted many ways: do the same except using a river as a metaphor (where were there rapids, meandering, etc.) or do a Service Biography line (when first service experience, what influenced you, positive and negative impacts on your life)

Object share: Each person brings in and passes around an object, and shares how the object is like them or the project they just did (pick a specific one) examples include: “what I contributed to the team, how I felt about this project, what I learned, etc.” The object can be something found in nature, a type of food, a book, etc. (pick one!)

How did it taste: Bring a mixture of fruits and nuts, have them use these items as metaphors to describe their day, week, project, group interaction, etc, and answer the question, “how did it taste.” The, “what would you like it to taste like?”

### **30 minute to two-hour activities:**

Song, Poem, Collage, Sculpture, Written Story, Skit: Create something artistic as a large group, or individually then meshed together, to express what happened, how it felt, or what the service experience meant to you. It can incorporate what was learned, accomplished, challenges overcome along the way. Could be presented to people from organizations that helped, parents, community volunteers, etc.

Interview each other: Break the group into pairs or triplets and have them interview each other about their service experience, take notes, and summarize a couple of things to the group.

Teach: Teach others what you learned through this service experience. Put together instructions or references for learning more about it.

Imitations: Each team member picks the name of another team member out of a hat, and imitates that person relating two or three positive traits/contributions to the team, and one quirky habit (something light – judgement is essential)

Inventory: Develop an inventory for the community being served or your own community, regarding the problem you are addressing or work you are doing. What are the resources, who are the local leaders, what roles to certain organizations play, what relationships exist, what other work has been done, what are the various attitudes about the project, what are the challenges, where are they, etc. (see CNS document “By the People” for more info.)

Media: Build a skill as well as reflect by writing press releases, taking pictures, contacting media, and obtaining some media coverage of the project.

Poetry: Each participant comes up with a metaphor to represent where they are in life (or in service) right now. The metaphors are shared in the whole group, writing them on the flip charts. Break into groups of six, each group chooses a metaphor to write about, each person writes (stream of consciousness) for five minutes. Each person chooses two favorite phrases from their writing and weaves them together with the phrases from other participants of their group to compose a twelve-line poem.

### **Appreciation/Acknowledgement**

Yarn Ball: (see above for more info) Each person states what he or she appreciate about the person they are throwing the ball to.

Appreciation Cards: Each person writes their name on a card, or slip of paper. Then, the cards are passed around the circle, and each person on the team writes (and draws, if desired) something they appreciate about that person. When they come back to the person of origin, have each person take time to read the cards and make comments.

Whisper-walk: The group forms two lines facing each other. One blindfolded or eye-closed person at a time walks down the middle of the two lines. People on either side of the line step in to the middle (if and when moved to), tap the walker on the shoulder, and whispers in their ear something they appreciate about them. People at the end of the line help guide the person back in line, then they take their blindfold off.

Inside Circle: Each team member takes turns sitting in the middle of the circle with their eyes closed (or opposite the group with their back to the group) and remains silent while the rest of the team randomly share things they appreciate about that person. You might even have somebody writing down what was said.

Imitate-Exaggerate: Each person in the team picks from a hat the name of one other person on the team, and imitates their positive qualities with exaggeration, until the other team members guess who that is. This can be done with the entire group at once, around some task or decision, then discussed afterwards.

### **Longer-term Project or Team Experience activities:**

Scrapbook or Memory Box: Create a scrapbook of your memories with the team or project, including pictures, quotes said, skills learned, challenges overcome, etc.

Letter to Yourself: At the beginning of the year, write a letter to another person or yourself on something like what your expectations or goals are for the year or why you choose to do service. Collect, save and redistribute at the end of the year. Share and discuss.

Team Photo Trading Cards: You can add history, quotes, and service “stats.”

Video: Shoot a video about the project or about the topic related to the project.

Display/Mural: Create a group or project display/mural, which chronicles the project. If utilized, this can be an excellent outreach tool for recruiting new members or community volunteers, or the public awareness of the project.

Newsletter: Pool your service reflections, stories and pictures together to make a newsletter. This can be sent out to members, sponsors, staff, and community volunteers involved in the project.

Journal: A little writing, every day, goes a long, long way.

Report: Write a report on the project. Use photos!

ABC book: Illustrated with one sentence, thought and/or picture for each alphabet letter. For grown-ups, use the project or organization name instead of alphabet!

## **Journaling: A Primer**

Journaling is one of the best reflection tools. Ideally, the program or project would allow for a ten to fifteen minute period every day for the volunteers to journal; preferably at the end of the day or during/after a debrief. It is helpful if staff or the project leader provides substantial structure to insure quality, conscientious journaling, and even more helpful if the person leading the reflection activity is journaling themselves! Regardless of the time allotted, it is important to encourage participants to write whatever comes to mind, and to not worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. This entails a commitment to confidentiality, that nobody will ever share what they have written unless they want to. You also want to be definite and clear about the time allotted, (five to fifteen minutes) and let them know when it is almost finished.

### **Journaling Methods**

Clusters: Have people shout out words or phrases that describe the day. Ask each person to take two minutes to write five or six words in random spaces on their journaling page. Give a short speech about the interconnectedness of everything, the web of life, Quantum Physics, or whatever and ask them to do a free write focussing on those five or six items and how they are related.

The Critical Incident: Choose an incident that involved the entire team and give them a couple of minutes to think about the incident. Then ask them to write a detailed, factual report of what happened, making sure to answer the four “W” questions, “who, what, where, when.” You can then have participants share their stories to see how they differ from another.

Dialogue: A good one for developing observation and communication skills. Ask participants in the morning to pay special attention to conversations they hear throughout the day, including light conversations between staff and volunteers, volunteers and sponsors or stakeholders, etc. Ask them to pay special attention to mannerisms, accents, and the tone of the conversation. Later, have the participants pick a dialogue and duplicate as closely as possible how it went. This should be done in a light-hearted manner on a light-hearted day to avoid a “bashing” session. This is an exercise that gets better with time, as their observation and retention skills improve.

Different Perspectives: A great one for developing empathy skills. Ask participants to recall a specific occurrence from the day that involved some degree of conflict. Ask them to assume the viewpoint opposite that which they actually held during this conflict (or the viewpoint they were the least empathetic with) and write a description of the conflict from this perspective. This can include what happened, their role in it, what they want, what they envision as the ideal solution. Good debrief questions are, “How did it feel to do this writing, how were you able to get in their shoes or how was it difficult, what is one thing you realized through this writing.”

The Fly on the Wall: Ask participants to take a couple moments to reflect on the day (where they’ve been, what they’ve done, whom they’ve worked with, tools they’ve used). Then ask them to pretend they were a “fly on the wall” observing but not participating in the scene, and write a short descriptive passage based on their observations. You can also use any animal or plant or person that was near the project site.

Guided Imagery: Encourage participants to relax, close their eyes, get comfortable, notice their breathing, etc. and read a guided imagery. Then, ask the participants to free-write about what they experienced.

The Free Write: The easiest and perhaps most effective journaling method, wherein people that think they “can’t write” or “have nothing to say” realize how much and how well they can write. For a predetermined amount of time participants engage in continuous writing by keeping their pens moving . . . even if only to write, “I don’t know what to write.” It is helpful to trigger the free-write with an open-ended sentence such as “I don’t think I’ll ever forget . . .” or “If I could do one thing differently, I would . . .” or make up your own! Let participants know when they are nearing the end of the write time, then ask them how it went.

The Letter: Have participants write a letter to themselves, a relative, a historical figure, a political figure, etc. describing the project and what it means to them, or ask for some piece of advice, etc.

### **Good Reflection Writing/Sharing Questions:**

- \_ What is service? What is the difference between service and volunteering?
- \_ Has your definition of service changed? Why? How? Should everyone do service?
- \_ Describe a problem the team has been having. List possible solutions.
- \_ Make a list of the skills used and learned on this project.
- \_ What have been the best and worst parts of this project?
- \_ Describe a person you met on your project. What are their attitudes about the project, where might those attitudes have come from?
- \_ What communities/identity groups are you a member of? How might this be related with your commitment to service?
- \_ Have you ever felt hopelessness, despair, discouragement or burnout related to your service? How have you dealt with this? How can reflection help?
- \_ What are some of the problems facing the world today? (mind map) How does your service connect or address these issues?
- \_ Identify a person, group, or community that you got to know this year, who is significantly “other” for you. What are the needs or challenges facing them that particularly got to you? What is one way in which you’ve allowed yourself to be changed as a result of knowing these folks?
- \_ What community need, work challenge, or public issue have you given the most deliberate, critical, analytical thought to this year? What are some factors and facts you looked at, data you considered? Who or what resources did you consult?  
Over the next two years, what’s one issue or challenge you would like to be a more respected authority on? How will this be a challenge for you?
- \_ Dedicating ourselves to service rather than selfishness or our own comfort can be scary. We risk honestly getting to know others who are different, and come face to face, day after day, with pain, abuse, hatred, violence. What are two fears or inner worries you have, that somehow keep you from being the person of service you hope to become? What is something in your life that brings your courage, that gives you hope?
- \_ What is one way in which you expect the community you are serving to nourish, nurture, or satisfy you? What are two ways you will take responsibility for that community?
- \_ Summarize the most important things you will take with you from the experience.
- \_ Your commitment to service can involve many things, including keeping your word (also being realistic when we say “yes”) and resisting the temptation, at least some of the time, to move on to new causes and needs. Think of something this year that you really didn’t want to continue doing, but you kept doing it the best you could. Was there something you got out of that?

## Service Reflection Quotes

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: The unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” - George Bernard Shaw

“Nothing will ever be attempted, if all possible objections must first be overcome.” – Samuel Johnson

“The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.” – Auriel Rukeyser

“You cannot travel on the path until you have become the Path itself.” – Buddha

“It is better to light one small candle than to curse the darkness” – Confucius

“We didn’t inherit the land from our fathers. We are borrowing it from our children.” – Amish Belief

“The best test, and the most difficult to administer is: Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?” – Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*

“All . . . are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny . . . I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

"A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." -Albert Einstein

"If you want to build a ship, don't drum to the women and men to gather wood, and divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." - Antoine De Saint-Exupery, *The Wisdom of the Sands*

“Reading (or serving) without reflecting is like eating without digesting.” ~Edmund Burke

"Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves." ~Henry David Thoreau

"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." -Anais Nin

“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” – Albert Einstein

“No gem can be polished without friction, nor human perfected without trial.” – Confucius

“Not everything that counts can be measured. Not everything that can be measured counts” – Albert Einstein

“I was taught that the world had a lot of problems; that I could struggle and change them; that intellectual and material gifts brought the privilege and responsibility of sharing with others less fortunate; and that service is the rent each of us pay for a living . . . the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time or after you have reached your personal goals.” - Marian Wright Edelman