

The Art of Spiritual Reflection: Applications for Service-learning and Civic Engagement on Campus

By Elaine Elliott, Barbara Quinn, and Chris Nayve

Colleagues from the University of San Diego share how reflection can be incorporated into service-learning and civic engagement courses and programs as a type of spiritual practice. Through sharing perspectives from faculty and staff at USD, the authors provide valuable examples for developing the connection between these engagement experiences and students' spirituality.

In our work at the University of San Diego, we have seen that the experience of service-learning and volunteerism can move students from ignorance of social justice issues to awareness and compassion. This increased alertness to the realities and challenges of our communities creates a series of significant moments that encourage spiritual development. For some of our student leaders, their spirituality becomes a source of deep energy as they motivate other students by example and enthusiasm. By cultivating awareness of the needs and gifts of the world, while gaining a greater self-awareness of their own needs and gifts, a foundation is laid for a life of engagement.

We see this engagement in many of our alumni and are beginning a process of interviews to explore how they trace the connection among their service-learning, their spiritual development, and their current commitments in order to impact positive social change. Clearly, the reflective processes before, during, and after these experiences are foundational. In this article we explore what some of those reflective practices include, addressing spiritual reflection and reflection surrounding diversity and inclusion in order to offer some practical examples of how this emerges in and out of the classroom.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICES TO PROMOTE SPIRITUAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Students who engage in community service-learning projects undoubtedly bring a measure of good will as they step into often-unfamiliar settings. Good will, however, is not enough to encourage a lifestyle of spiritual and civic engagement. Certainly, students need to bring a solid intellectual understanding and analysis of issues, culture, and needs. But just as importantly, if students are to draw out the best – both within themselves and others – they need to do the essential and rigorous work of becoming more self-aware. If they fail to examine the personal filters that can clarify or cloud their perceptions of people and situations, they risk the danger of objectifying others, whether by romanticizing or demonizing.

In a classical spiritual tradition, we are talking about "remote preparation" for the task at hand. Before setting out for the community service project, students can be invited to take twenty to thirty minutes to reflect quietly on what is stirring within them as they prepare to meet the people at the service site. What might be the fears or biases lurking underneath the surface of their consciousness? What unspoken assumptions might be at work about who the people are and what they are like and why they are in a situation of need? Are the hopes for change the students bring realistic and have they tested the values they want to communicate? Are they open to learning from those they meet? Growing in such self-awareness cultivates an interior freedom that allows one to see another or a group as they are, rather than as we think or hope they are.

During the community service-learning project itself, students are encouraged to stay on high alert to this inner dimension of their experience. The spiritual discipline of journaling soon after they engage in the project helps students underline and savor their inner movements and observations about the experience they just went through. The nature of journaling is a critical exercise to document the participant's reflection that can be lost in dialogue-based reflection

Moreover, the significance of students' experiences are mined and deepened with their classmates as they bring their experiences to public view through the ancient art of storytelling. In order to move beyond mere reporting to a level of discernment about the meaning of their experience and its transformative power, students are invited to choose key moments that have had particular impact on them – whether these moments are marked by harmony and excitement or by disharmony and struggle. What do these reactions signal about the development that is unfolding in them and about their place in the world? If the experience stirs energy, excitement, and satisfaction, it is important to consider what that might reveal about their gifts and talents, and even possible career directions.

Alternately, if the experience is marked by confusion, turmoil, and fear, it may signal the need for learning and growth on several levels. Perhaps it calls for a deeper and more accurate understanding and analysis of the culture of a people or of the root causes of a situation. It may suggest that further development of language and communication skills is required. It may reveal areas of personal transformation that are needed so that the student can enter situations with greater freedom, skill, and compassion. Attentiveness to the multiple layers of intellect, affect and behavior is key to the integration of the whole person, ultimately leading to personal and societal transformation.

CULTURAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The challenge for any program is to cultivate the opportunity for such deepened self-awareness within a service-learning experience. At the University of San Diego, we have attempted to cultivate this self-awareness largely through an emphasis on *cultural competency development*. Cultural competency is a critical tool in successful service-learning experiences and cannot be ignored during the reflection process. The task of deepening one's sense of self and/or others is not easier because the University of San Diego is a Catholic institution committed to Catholic social thought principles. Instead, the exercise of truly getting below the "iceberg" of facile reflection responses requires a commitment from the faculty and service-learning practitioners to understand issues of inclusion, diversity, and social justice.

One of the most difficult tasks is to hold these reflective sessions (whether in dialogue form or other creative methods such as journals or art) without judgment or sense of "fixing" the situation for students. Whether the reflection experiences are formal or informal, faculty and service-learning professionals must continually consider their own cultural and social identity development. Because reflection at a deep level is often sought from service-learning participants, those leading the reflection are most effective when they have a true understanding of their strengths and limitations when it comes to facilitating such reflection in the context of analyzing issues such as injustice, poverty, and race.

Self-awareness around diversity, inclusion, and social justice is counterintuitive when leading reflections. Faculty and service-learning professionals are often effective because they typically lead a classroom or service project as "the expert." However, this expert-based approach must be relinquished when leading participants through experiences that require insight into the cultural development of an individual. When leading deep reflection, if insightful information shared by participants is met with an expert-based approach, the response can feel disingenuous to the participant and undermine the level of engagement that future participants provide. In other words, how the reflection facilitator receives and gives feedback can determine the level of depth that occurs in a dialogue or reflection project.

An important skill in spiritual direction is the art of asking *evocative questions* that challenge people to dig deeper into their own experience or into their own interpretations of that experience. We want faculty to learn to cultivate profound listening to the "person and world as text" with our students, asking evocative questions and creating the space in the classroom where they can hear the answers together. In faculty workshops for service-learning up to this point, we have modeled three levels of questions in reflections and offer specific examples for faculty to use: questions that elicit descriptions of the service; those that elicit feelings about it; and questions about social justice issues, ethics, and personal growth. In reality, most faculty ask the questions that link experience to the course content; while this is a legitimate use of the pedagogy, this practice may leave values questions hidden and personal. As part of on-going commitment to faculty development, USD faculty will have the opportunity to participate in two workshops this spring that will address the moral and spiritual dimension of reflection.

Additionally, through the years we have held multiple workshops to help deepen faculty understanding of issues surrounding diversity and inclusion. We are also sponsoring and facilitating a two-day workshop on “Creating Dialogue on Diversity and Social Responsibility” this semester. The purpose behind this workshop is to capitalize on the inauguration of President-Elect Obama and the inauguration theme of “A New Birth of Freedom.” The workshop will be led by two USD faculty selected as civic engagement fellows by California Campus Compact to connect participants to the notion of engaged citizenry in the age of Obama. In addition we will have a faculty luncheon led by the Director of the Center for Christian Spirituality, the Director of Campus Ministry, and one of our theology professors. The goal of this luncheon will be to encourage incorporating spiritual reflection in the classroom. We hope that faculty may become more open to reflection on community-based learning experiences that draw from the long history and deep reservoirs of spiritual practices through these workshops.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES TO CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

The integration of service-learning and spirituality at the University of San Diego has a tentativeness that is undoubtedly similar to the majority of campuses across the country. While faculty acknowledge research which shows that moral and spiritual development occur as a by-product of service-learning, most faculty focus on the intellectual learning goals for their course. Reflection assignments and discussions draw out the connection between experiences and course content, rather than the spiritual development occurring in students. However, because students are not one-dimensional, these questions emerge even without faculty prompting. Students find themselves challenged by their community-based experiences and their reflections on their values emerge as the following examples from USD faculty demonstrate.

One professor who took his students for an overnight experience in Tijuana, Mexico found it striking in student reflection papers that they addressed values questions. Their comments addressed the themes of Catholic social thought that have been identified by the US Bishops in summary form: life and dignity of the human person; call to family, community, and participation; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor and vulnerable; dignity of work and rights of workers; solidarity; and care for God’s creation. None of these ideas were explicitly taught in the professor’s course, yet he found students wrote about them based on their service-learning experience.

Another faculty member created an online blogging assignment for students, conceiving of the blog as analogous to the “third place” in a society: Neither work nor home, this space allowed students to write freely. Surprisingly, many of their thoughts connected to their own experience of faith and spirituality. Their observations on the issue of immigration as they personally got to know migrants paralleled the principles in a document prepared jointly by the US and Mexican bishops, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope*. Again, this was not an explicit part of the course.

For a professor teaching Islam, the connection to Muslim spirituality was an explicit part of both the service and the paper response. The faculty member chose an agency that had been started by a Sufi Muslim and taught non-violence out of that spirituality. Students were asked to link the concepts of “doing the beautiful thing” (Ihsan) and “building community” (Umma), and “the rights of people” (Haq-An-Nas), and describe how they experienced these ideas in their service-learning experience. However, the most profound response for students came from the challenge to their stereotypes that Islam is inherently a violent religion, and a shift toward acceptance of this unfamiliar faith.

In courses and public events that are sponsored by the Center for Community Service-Learning at USD, we have been more intentional about incorporating spiritual reflection. Our one-unit leadership courses explicitly deal with ethics, values, community-building, inclusion and diversity, social justice, Catholic social thought, a sense of vocation, the need for self-care and reflective practices, and becoming conscious of self. Consequently, in the context of these class discussions and questions for reflection papers, the deeper questions about spirituality are explicit. In addition, the director of University Ministry led a reflection session with students that became an opportunity for a meditative/contemplative experience.

Our Center also hosts a “Social Issues Committee” that sponsors an annual workshop and speakers throughout the year. Without any limitations, many of these speakers do make connections between the spiritual and social explicit. For example, our sessions have included Sr. Helen Prejean in her work on the death-penalty issue, a group of students and faculty offering examples of reflective practices, artists linking their spoken-word/visual or musical efforts to their own spiritual development, or hot-button issues examined from a faith perspective. We have often collaborated with the Center for Christian Spirituality on dialogues where issues are addressed from a faith perspective, and where people with competing points of view are asked to present the rationale for their ideas from their deepest values.

CONNECTING SPIRITUAL REFLECTION & SERVICE-LEARNING WITH INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING GOALS

A critical first step in facilitating effective reflection is analyzing the learning goals of the campus environment. In July of 2002, USD was part of a case study titled, “How Higher Education is Integrating Diversity and Service Learning.” One of the most significant outcomes from the study was the development of strategies to engage staff, faculty, students, and community partners in dialogue regarding the intellectual and academic issues of diversity and their relationship to courses and the broader community. The Association of American Colleges and Universities one-time senior fellow, Edgar Beckham wrote an article entitled “Civic Learning and Campus Diversity: Bridging the Language Gap” (Beckham, 1999) that became a focal point at USD. In his article, Beckham argues that the conflicting languages of diversity and democracy can isolate individuals in the social justice and diversity or the civic engagement movements. To generalize Beckham, the opponents of civic engagement argue that service-learning is a tool to understand and obtain democracy.

Conversely, diversity advocates argue that service-learning is a method to achieve social justice. Arguably, there is a spectrum in-between, but participants to this study reflected that service-learning is a means to achieve both democracy and social justice. Likewise, The Center for Community Service-learning at USD identifies social change as a learning goal in their mission statement. This is relevant to service-learning reflection because understanding our departmental consciousness frames the approach in which we reflect with participants and our willingness to challenge assumptions and achieve deeper understanding of self and community.

The undergraduate learning goals include supporting students to be capable communicators, critical thinkers, independent learners, and competent in liberal arts and discipline-specific knowledge. The goals of civic engagement, cultural competence, global engagement, and ethical and responsible conduct assume moral development. The most explicit goal regarding spiritual development is that of “well-being, by learning to balance the habits of heart, body and spirit.” This set of goals, including this final integrative goal, is a significant part of what USD faculty are in the process of discussing. Given this current conversation among faculty and our efforts to reinforce it with workshops, spiritual reflection may become more evident in our classrooms.

In conclusion, the increase of spiritual reflection to highlight civic engagement opportunities is not reserved for faith-based higher education institutions. There is also a significant push by secular organizations and higher education institutions to capture the spiritual nature of reflection. The bias of academia toward the intellect is not overcome easily, even in an institution committed to holistic education and whose mission statement includes reference to our Catholicity. The stated emphasis is on “advancing academic excellence” and “expanding liberal and professional knowledge.” One could say that the goals of “creating a diverse and inclusive community and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical conduct and compassionate service” require an underlying spirituality, but again, this is not explicit. Of course, the challenge of achieving integrated learning which offers pride of place to experience as revelatory of the deepest layers of human meaning as well as the essential companion of rigorous intellectual analysis begs a larger epistemological question that is clearly present in the community service-learning context.

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