Assessment Brown Bag: Reflective Writing

Darcy Rameker
Associate Director, Student Activities
dar29@psu.edu

Charli Lehman
Program Director, Service
cdl11@psu.edu
Benefits of Reflective Writing

• Increases self-awareness, challenges beliefs
• Opportunities to connect previous knowledge with new knowledge
• Opportunities to connect learning in the classroom with their co-curricular experiences
• Provides students opportunities to make predictions and see limitations
• Students can see their progress
• Requires students to reflect on their experiences
• Provides a forum for all students to participate
Learning Outcomes

Students who participate in community service & service learning programs will…

• Gain knowledge and understanding of service and of opportunities to engage in service

• Develop the ability to interrelate and establish meaningful relationships with others

• Demonstrate the ability to make meaning of service experiences

• Construct a personal definition of social justice through exposure to social injustices

• Assume a sense of social and civic responsibility through involvement in the community
Programs that Incorporate Reflective Writing

• Fresh START Day of Service
• Urban Service Experience
• Alternative Spring Break
The purpose of the Fresh START Day of Service is to encourage new students to “get rooted” with service opportunities during their academic careers at Penn State University Park, not just for the day, but for a lifetime. It is hoped that, through Fresh START, new students will develop lifelong civic engagement and build leadership skills through service.

http://psufsvolunteerblog2010.blogspot.com/
Service Trips

Service Trips are designed as immersive and experiential opportunities for students to learn more about themselves, others, and the world around them through service experiences. Through individual and group reflection, students will explore various social issues such as power and privilege, stereotypes, and prejudice and discrimination.

Students journal throughout the trip. Intentional, thought-provoking questions are shared to guide students’ journal writing.
Day 1: What do you hope to gain from this experience?
I hope that together we will be able to see the power of our actions. I have helped at soup kitchens before, but I hope and look forward to seeing other ways I can help address the issues of homelessness and hunger.

Day 2: Additional Thoughts
Sorting cans today reminded me of my stereotypical view of service, not service learning. I think this conception should have been changed with reflection after the service activity. However, even though I didn’t get what I expected out of the experience the end result of organized full shelves gave me a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. The once barren shelves were filled with sorted food for organizations to pick and choose from. This sorting will allow organizations supporting the issue of hunger to easily and quickly select the goods they need for their meal preparations. Saving time in this process of the meal preparation can lead to better meals and more people fed, since volunteers can use this time to cook the food.

Day 3: How are you working toward meeting your goals for this experience?
I am working on being more bold with asking questions and I did this at the dinner tonight. I jumped in on conversations, started conversations, and introduced people. I learned a lot about how each person belongs and has a strong identity with the homelessness lifestyle and community. I hope that my ears will hear these individuals stories and my own words can help spread awareness to those around me.
Day 4:
What do you believe is the relationship between power and privilege and societal issues such as hunger and homelessness?
Having privilege and power in society can help prevent hunger and homelessness. It also can make others treat your differently. Many of the homeless talked about how people see right through them. The homeless are often ignored and not acknowledged when they say “hi”, panhandle, or sell “street sense”. Selling Street Sense with David helped me realize how we were ignored or counted off in society just as visitors. Some people would pause because they saw our Penn State jackets and comment on the weather. Also knowing that we were students and our appearance was not the typical stereotype of a homeless person made people come closer to us and often at least listen as they passed.

How could you potentially affect social change in the future?
For my street sense group we were able to make $31.30 for selling only 10 papers during two hours. Our vendor David usually only made between $8 and 13 dollars an hour at this CV station. Yet, if you talk to him he is so experiences and full of life. He talked about how he uses a booming voice to attract people. He also is a great, personal writer and poet. He wrote the poems in an issue of street sense about his experiences as a homeless man and also his experiences with drug addiction. His writing was so true to physical and emotion signs of drug addiction that I bought another copy of street sense to share with my Drugs and Abuse professor. I think by sharing this it will be an educational experience and opportunity for me to spread awareness of others about hunger and homelessness. Especially since this class is predominantly nursing students and other students seeking a degree in a healthcare profession makes them more prone to running into people who suffer from those problems. I can refer patients to resources.
Day 5: What would you tell us about the impact of this experience on you?

This experience null and voided my stereotypical and stock viewpoints about the hungry and homeless. I realized homeless people can be very intentional and how they have hopes and dreams, but how these visions have to be put on hold as they struggle to meet their basic needs. Just handling the stares, comments, and humility of having to need and take assistance makes a homeless person often feel shameful. I realized how many struggle to see themselves as human and worthwhile when everything seems so bleak. However, with resources, generosity, and an active listener the homeless can be empowered to work towards making drastic lifestyle changes. Still an individual needs that steady support system to maintain and actively work toward those goals. The more homeless people and advocates I talked with the greater appreciation I acquired for programs like housing first. Housing and having a place a person can call their own provides a comforting and safe environment in which individuals can work on their problems. Without this security it makes it difficult to tackle dramatic life changes when you need to focus on basic needs of food and shelter. Each day and night.
Question: What were your initial experiences and reactions at your site?

ASB participant – “Today we began our service projects with our families. While we were working I couldn’t help but begin to realize the seriousness of poverty. Granted, Meg had described the situation to us and told us what to expect, but my imagination could not even create what we actually saw.”

ASB participant – “Another thing I cannot shake from my mind is the fact that directly behind the house we are working in which doesn’t even have locks, is this beautiful Victorian Style home with a sports car. At first I was grossed out, but then I realized it’s because it mimics my home neighborhood which is very nice but stands next to what I’ve referred to all my life, as “ghetto.” This never phased me, it does now.”
Alternative Spring Break: Journal Excerpts

Question: How would you describe yourself before this experience? After this experience? What would you tell us about your experiences on this trip? Any additional thoughts?

ASB participant - My week began with an empty box. The box was tangibly, physically empty, but it was emotionally full. It was full of anxiety and nervousness. What in the world is Appalachia like? It was full of stereotypes and preconceived notions. Is West Virginia really as backwards as everyone in the East says it is? It was full of expectation and curiosity. Who were these 20 other people? Why did they want to do service too? Slowly, as my week progressed, my box became empty of these thoughts and full of new ideas, people, objects and events. It became full of lifelong friends with unforgettable memories. Even if I never talk to any of these 20 other people again in my life (which I hope is not the case!), we all will remember these 7 full days full of laughter.
Alternative Spring Break: Journal Excerpts

Question: How would you describe yourself before this experience? After this experience? What would you tell us about your experiences on this trip? Any additional thoughts?

ASB participant - “This week I forewent going to spring break in Florida. Instead it was off to WV. I went with a bunch of strangers. It wound up being one of the most rewarding experiences I can remember. It really has changed me-being able to help these folks out here. I hope we stay in touch back in SC. We discussed and viewed poverty in real life- not by words in a textbook. I am a thoroughly changed person. I hope I can share my passion with others. I feel renewed and energized to take back up my studies. I will and can make a difference in this world with people like these alongside me, anything is possible.”
Alternative Spring Break: Journal Excerpts

Question: How would you describe yourself before this experience? After this experience? What would you tell us about your experiences on this trip? Any additional thoughts?

ASB Participant - “and so the week gradually comes to an end. We have reached the surface after drowning in the ocean. We began as lost individuals not really clear of our purpose here but now I feel my eyes have opened to a greater world. I came on this trip with good intentions at heart, fear in my pocket and curiosity in my eyes. I tried new things, I met new people, and I changed my work to the needs of someone other than myself. I can honestly feel the change in me as I write these words. After seeing such emotionally wracking scenes, meeting unfortunate people and feeling the pain of others. My entire life perspectives have shifted to the giving to others. To sacrifice with challenges ahead but with a picture of a better day right before me. May this week be the beginning to a new start.”
Future Opportunities

• Leadership Certificate

• Student Involvement Blog

• Student Leaders from Affiliated Student Organizations
Limitations

• Students may censor themselves
• Subject to interpretation
• Learning styles-journaling does not work for all students
• Does not fulfill all steps of the experiential learning model, important to provide opportunities for students to share
• Individual vs. Group assessment
Questions and Discussion