Defining Service-Learning

SERVICE-LEARNING AT A GLANCE

Each week Kendra volunteers at First Harvest Food Pantry, where she stacks boxes with donated food items. Kendra is providing an important service to her community.

Eric is taking a course titled This American Life as one of his general education requirements. Through lectures, readings, and class discussions, students learn about social issues, such as hunger, that confront Americans today. A guest speaker explains how First Harvest Food Pantry responds to hunger needs in the local community. Eric is learning about contemporary American social problems.

Lisa is majoring in nutrition at an area college. For one of her courses, Lisa and her classmates serve at First Harvest Food Pantry every week throughout the semester. As they fill food orders, they attend to such concerns as nutritional balance, medical conditions, and cultural considerations as part of their learning goals. Lisa also keeps a reflective journal to explore connections between what she is learning about nutrition in class and what she is seeing, doing, and learning at the food pantry. She draws from her service experience during class discussions about nutrition, hunger in America, and the roles and responsibilities of citizens. Lisa seeks to apply new theories and understandings about the complex issue of hunger.
as she continues her service at First Harvest. Lisa is participating in service-learning.

Reflect on these scenarios. What do they have in common, and how do they differ? What do your answers tell you about service-learning? To help you comprehend the differences and more clearly understand who you are about to undertake as a participant in service-learning, study the following definition: Service-learning is a teaching and learning method that upholds a commitment to appreciating the assets of and serving the needs of a community partner while enhancing student learning and academic rigor through the practice of intentional reflective thinking and responsible social action. Analyze the definition so that you can see how each key idea in the definition corresponds to Lisa's work. Discuss your ideas with a partner or a small group. You have just done a focus exercise. The purpose of a focus exercise is to help you engage with the text and apply the material to your learning experience.

As a participant in service-learning, you are part of a firsthand learning experience that creates intentional reciprocal partnerships between you and your community. Those who incorporate service-learning to address learning goals adhere to the philosophy that students and community-service partners offer one another valuable assets and resources. When community and classroom are directly and thoughtfully conceived, each is enhanced.

More and more college students are participating in off-campus firsthand experiences as part of their higher education. All across college campuses, community-based learning is occurring in various forms. Consider these diverse examples. Every spring, the men's basketball team volunteers to help host Special Olympics in the community. A print journalism major works at the local newspaper for her senior year internship. The university chapter of a fraternity performs community service by holding the campus blood donation drive every fall. An elementary education major earns course credit for the cooperative learning experience of organizing and leading an afterschool reading program. Are all these community-based experiences service-learning? Not necessarily. Terminology related to community-based learning—such as volunteerism, community service, internship, and cooperative education—are often used interchangeably with service-learning, but the other terms describe experiences different from service-learning.

Your Traits That Characterize Service-Learning

1. Commitment to community partnership
2. Learning and academic rigor
3. Intentional reflective thinking
4. Practice of civic responsibility
Many students have volunteered with organizations such as 4-H, Big Brother Big Sister, local community boards, and youth groups. Most often, volunteerism refers to people who freely give their time to provide some level of service or assistance relevant to their community. Volunteers are the service recipients. For example, once a year Adam volunteers with the Special Olympics event in his town. He registers contestants and participates as a finish-line encourager. Though Adam may feel good about his volunteer work, this feeling is a consequence, not a specific learning objective.

For some people, the term community service refers to community-oriented volunteer work. For example, as part of a court-ordered sentence for a drunk driving conviction, others have a different understanding of the term, which suggests opportunities in the broader community for individuals to work to meet real community needs. For example, clearing litter from roadside ditches through the Adopt-a-Highway program is community service. As with volunteer work, the service provider is not the main beneficiary.

Students may be beneficiaries of community-based learning experiences in programs such as internships and cooperative education. Participating in an internship or cooperative experience means receiving supervised practical training at a work site. Most internships and co-op opportunities emphasize the application of a particular skill set related to a major field of study. For example, if you are an accounting major, you might engage in an internship or co-op experience at a national accounting firm to learn more about how large accounting firms operate. Most often, the purpose of your internship or co-op experience in career preparation or the opportunity to explore a particular career possibility. Internships and cooperative experiences are varied, and participants may work in paid or unpaid positions and serve in either for-profit or nonprofit organizations. In some instances, an internship or co-op learning position might be considered a service-learning experience if it meets the four traits that characterize service-learning (see sidebar), but in most cases, the emphasis is still on career preparation.

While service-learning incorporates acts of volunteerism and community service and may even be undertaken during an internship or co-op experience, it is different because it emphasizes benefits to both the served and the service provider. Quality service-learning experiences reflect a balanced reciprocal relationship between you and the community partner based on mutal respect for the assets and resources of each.

Another important distinction is that service is always directly connected to specific learning objectives. These objectives are formulated for a particular course, major, core college requirement, or cocurricular activity. They are a chief consideration by both the learner and the community partner, which ensures equal responsibility and a balance of benefits through the service-learning partnership. This concentration on learning objectives also separates service-learning from other types of community-based learning.

You may have entered into this experience thinking that you are engaged in service-learning only because of perceived community needs. However, it is important to recognize and appreciate that community-service partners also offer you such benefits as valuable hands-on experiences, practical knowledge, and
insight into yourself, others, and the world around you. For instance, Elise, a first-year college student, was helping provide appropriate early childhood playtime activities at a local government-supported childcare center as she studied how values are imparted to children in various cultural contexts. Her service-learning experience helped her overcome her shyness and even led to self-understanding and a career decision. She came to recognize that she is better at working one-on-one with specific tasks than working with groups, causing her to change her major from elementary education to occupational therapy with an emphasis on children. Also through her service-learning experience, Elise gained a deeper understanding of the importance of subsidized nonprofit daycare for low-income parents. Just as Elise benefited from the service-learning experience, so did the center that she served. As Donna Stark, Director of the Learning Patch, writes.

The staff and children at our childcare center have found that the service-learning that the students do has been such a benefit for everyone involved. We, the staff, receive the extra help and hands that we need with the children, and the children and students benefit from the positive connections that they make with each other.

This is a wonderful way for students to get out into the community to give of their time and receive so much in return.

Elise and her community partner provide a paradigm of the benefits when service and learning are effectively joined: Individuals grow and communities improve because of the assets each offers the other.

The service-learning method offers you the chance to practice critical thinking and problem-solving in complex real-life situations. As you read this text,
you will see how service-learning students implement problem-solving and critical thinking. As you participate in your own service-learning experience, you will find yourself adapting to complex situations and developing your own critical thinking and problem-solving skills. When service-learning is effectively implemented, you not only gain new knowledge and understanding, but you also develop as an individual and a citizen. Continue to keep the four traits of service-learning—commitment to community partnership, learning and academic rigor, intentional reflective thinking, and practice of civic responsibility—in mind.

Commitment to Community Partnership

Advocates of service-learning believe that individuals are integrally connected to broader communities and that all citizens have a responsibility to serve, support, and work toward positive change and social justice in those communities. That is why the first essential trait of service-learning calls for meaningful service in a community-based setting. Most often community-based means that the learning partnership occurs at the local level; it may even be in proximity to the classroom or conventional setting. However, based on a broader understanding of community, even the college campus can become the service-learning community partner. For example, a college environmental studies class or an environmental club can engage in meaningful service within its own college community by recycling and documenting campus recycling efforts and then presenting scientific findings to the college administration to effect positive change in policy. A flexible definition of community is possible as long as the learning partnership meets the other three criteria that characterize service-learning—learning and academic rigor, reflective thinking, and civic responsibility.

To understand the ways in which communities may be flexible, consider that communities are most often constructed with regard to commonality, retaining that members of a community share certain aspects of life. They may be based on geography, such as neighborhoods, culture, such as nationality or ethnicity; principles, such as political or religious beliefs, interests, such as hobbies or social organizations; or physical characteristics, such as age or gender. Communities offer people the opportunity to connect with each other and to enrich their lives through these connections.

Consider Sergio and the many communities with which he identifies. He lives in the International House on campus, which has created a geographical neighborhood for him. As a Brazilian from São Paulo, he identifies ethnically with other Brazilians and South Americans and also with other Portuguese speakers. His religious community is large because he is a practicing Catholic, though he appreciates a smaller sense of community with his local parish. Sergio is active in the intramural soccer program and enjoys both playing and watching soccer with his teammates, establishing a community based on both interest and peer group. As you can see, Sergio experiences community at many levels, from the worldwide Catholic community to his small group of soccer players.

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communities. He feels a sense of connection in all these communities because of what he shares with others in each group.

Though communities often share some commonality, individuals within a community may differ widely. This variety within community also enriches even any sometimes challenges. In the international house, Sergio lives among students who come from different parts of the world, practice different religions, speak different native languages, and prepare foods that are foreign to Sergio's experience. For instance, his roommate, Surekha, comes from Nepal, practices Buddhism, and cooks vegetable meals. Even on his soccer team, Sergio must learn to appreciate teammates with varying techniques and ability levels. When Sergio embraces not only the similarities but also the differences of community members, his own life is enriched. He now has a wider set of friends who have taught him much, from new recipes to new ways of coordinating team play. Individual differences in community provide essential and enriching variety.

As you think about community, try to identify the wide variety of communities to which you are connected. Not just those whose members are similar to you, for example, you are part of your college community because you have many similarities with others who also have chosen to attend your institution, but you are also part of the broader communities in which your college resides. In the future you will find more communities to your life, and not all of them will be based on similarities. Your service-learning experiences may place you among neighbors and friends or among people with whom you are less familiar, but all are part of your community. Before you begin
service, it is helpful to understand your consciousness of community and how community is formed. Take time to complete the focus exercise that helps you explore communities.

Once you recognize all that community has to offer you, you are more likely to want to serve on behalf of community. However, your desire is not enough to establish a good service relationship. It is essential for your service to be meaningful and valuable to the community, to provide something that the community desires. To create a successful service-learning experience, you must respect the community-service partner for its voice—for the strengths and benefits it brings to the wider community. Service learning is partnership-based, and you should consider not only your own goals and objectives but also how you can help support the community partner's goals and objectives. Look through the eyes of your partners and listen to what they say about their mission, what they see as their voice of democracy. Then you will be ready to determine how best to meet a specified need that originates with the community and is a part of its voice.

The community partner determines and expresses particular needs; service providers do not suggest what the partner needs. For example, students serving as a community theater expected to be needed to build sets and sew costumes. However, the theater's mission goes beyond technical entertainment—a responsibility for enriching the entire community through educational and service opportunities. To fulfill that mission, the nonprofit theater most needed a successful annual fundraiser. Thus, the Chief Underwriting Officer worked closely with the students, turned a liberal arts seminar focused on the theatre of community, the business objective dealt with recognizing and meeting community needs. Consequently, the
Focus Exercise: Considering Community Partner Issues

Look at the tip box. Information you need to learn about your service site, to help you complete this exercise. If your community partner is already selected, what do you think the partnership has to offer you? Who needs do you think you will primarily be meeting through your service? Learn more about your community partner by searching the Internet, attending a site orientation, obtaining materials from the community partner, and/or interviewing a staff member at your service site to determine the mission, assets, and needs of the agency. What new information did you learn? How will this affect your understanding of your service and your appreciation for what the experience may bring to you?

Information You Need to Learn About Your Service Site

Use the following questions to help you discover what you need to know about your service site. Use your research and interviewing skills to compile the answers to as many questions as possible.

1. What is the community partner’s mission? Does it have a mission statement? If so, make note of the statement. Ask if informational brochures about the organization are available.

2. What is the history or background of the organization?

3. What services does the community partner provide for the wider community? What needs do they serve? Fill out a report for supporting statistics from informational brochures and/or a site orientation.

4. How does the local need compare with the national need?

5. What major issues, obstacles, or challenges do individuals served by the community partner face on a day-to-day basis?

6. Where does the money to fund this organization come from? Does the organization receive corporate funding at the present time? What does the funding for the future look like? Does it have tax support, what other ways do they receive funding?

7. How many paid staff members are employed at the agency? What role does the staff seem to play on a regular basis for those served by the organization?

8. How many unpaid volunteers serve at the agency? What are different ways unpaid workers serve the organization?

9. How will you spend your time assisting your community partner?

10. What are the special issues you need to be aware of in your role at the service site?

11. Is there additional information you would like to note?

12. What additional questions do you have about your community partner, its clients, and the issue area?
activity was negotiated to fit both the partner's need and the learning objectives, and the students spent their time stuffing envelopes with letters requesting support. The students learned a valuable lesson about the difficulty of obtaining funds to support the arts. Through thoughtful communication, careful planning, and effective negotiation of needs, a successful partnership between learners and community can be established so both benefit. A mutually respectful reciprocal relationship is a central tenet of successful service-learning.

Learning and Academic Rigor

The second trait that characterizes service-learning is academic rigor. The name service-learning makes it apparent that learning is an essential component of this community-based educational philosophy. In fact, when facilitators—teachers or other directors—consider incorporating the service-learning approach to teaching and learning, they begin by identifying desired learning outcomes. For example, instructors ask: "What do I want students to know, to do, and to be like by the end of this course? What kind of community-based service experience will provide opportunities for students to accomplish the course objectives and will also address genuine community needs?" By answering such questions in collaboration with community partners, educators begin to shape proven and effective academic service-learning experiences. You may want to think about the personal goals and objectives you would like to achieve from service-learning.

If service-learning is to be recognized as a legitimate method of teaching and learning, the service-learning experience must provide a rigorous academic challenge. This is why most service-learning is connected to a formal learning experience such as a class setting, where academic credit is earned for the learning that takes place. Instructors who choose service-learning as a teaching method are aware of the limitations of traditional methods. As early as the 1960s, the National Training Laboratories studied the most effective teaching methods and developed what is now called the Learning Pyramid.

**FOCUS EXERCISE**

Identifying Learning Objectives

Look at your syllabus and go over your notes from the introduction (if any) to service-learning or the overall course. Identify learning objectives. How do they relate to the decision to use the service-learning method? How might this pedagogy enhance your learning? Contemplate what you would like to learn from service-learning. What do you want to know, do, and be like by the end of the experience? Write at least two personal goals for the service-learning experience. How might the process of serving your community partner and reflecting on the experience help you meet these goals?
The pyramid illustrates the average retention rate of information based on various teaching methods. Look at Figure 1.1, and note that the most effective methods, those that ensure the highest retention rates, depend on active experience.

All the teaching methods included in the Learning Pyramid are important and may contribute to your learning. It is likely that your instructor will sometimes give lectures. You are involved in reading by virtue of engaging with this and other texts. Your instructor may also include demonstrations or employ audio or visual technology. However, these methods account for successful retention rates of 30 percent or less. While each provides valuable learning experiences, more active strategies are also necessary.

Your professor has recognized the power of active learning and has integrated the service experience. With your peers and community partners, you will engage in discussion that increases recall and solidifies the learning experience. Most significantly, your retention rate will improve dramatically when you practice by doing at your community site, putting the theories and skills you are learning to immediate use. Because service-learning is an active pedagogy, it will assist you in achieving your current objectives and will make the learning transferable and long term.

Service-learning provides meaningful learning experiences that deeply, enrich, and expand your knowledge and understanding in multiple ways beyond the course for which it is assigned. It forces you to think critically and to apply your learning in a public situation. Teachers in classroom settings require and encourage critical thinking and active learning, but the public
FOCUS EXERCISE
Contemplating the Learning Pyramid and Your Experience

Think back over your entire education. Select a class that you enjoyed and from which you learned a lot. What teaching methods did your instructor use? Can you recall certain lectures, texts, dialog, or visual presentations, demonstrations, discussions, or hands-on experiences? Of these, either in your favored or with a group of peers, describe the strategies that helped you most as a learner. What do you retain from that learning experience? How does consciously reflecting on the learning pyramid help you consider your past learning experiences as well as the benefits of the service-learning philosophy and methodology?

sphere adds a new dimension and new possibilities for applied learning. Community partners become co-educators, sometimes reinforcing learning and other times exposing tensions or inaccuracies and bringing problems with theory to light. Broader, deeper learning occurs through service-learning because the method connects theory from the classroom with practical life in the community.

For example, as part of their course learning, students in a social work class visited new American families to help identify, understand, and assist with socialization needs, such as how to use public transportation and where and how to access free recreational facilities. Issues that students had not considered, such as gender roles and social mores, created tensions about the immigrants’ uses of public transportation and recreational facilities. The students had to negotiate these tensions to appropriately assist the new immigrants in becoming socialized without losing their ethnic identities. In this case, course content was enriched by the service experience. And the social work students gained firsthand knowledge about the life experiences, gifts, hopes, challenges, and needs of a particular population. In the community, students stretched their intellectual capacities by using transferable skills such as problem solving as well as social and presentation skills. They worked to synthesize practical information with their course content to better help their community partners and to take their learning to a new level. In this example, service-learning experience blends intellective, social, and civic opportunities to create a rigorous academic experience.

Higher-level critical thinking skills such as analyzing reasoning, decision making, problem solving, investigating, and synthesizing are an essential part of the learning that occurs in service-learning. The service experiences are designed to enhance and expand the learning and the cognitive retention of important academic concepts. The service experiences, course assignments, and following activities are directly connected to course or cumulative goals and objectives. Evaluation methods are also directly connected to the commitment to academic rigor. Courses that include or are based on a service-learning component may integrate student learning with traditional evaluation methods such as exams or essay assignments or nontraditional evaluation methods such as...
as photgraphic essays or classroom debate, further positioning service-learning as a valuable form of teaching and learning. The community-service partner may be consulted during the evaluation process to ensure that the relationship has been reciprocated. Chapter 5 discusses learning outcomes and evaluation procedures at greater length.

Intentional Reflective Thinking

A third trait that characterizes service-learning is the expectation of intentional reflective thinking. In fact, the expectation of ongoing meaningful reflection to help you prepare for and process the experience is part of what separates service-learning from volunteering or other forms of experiential learning such as internships. Chapter 6 addresses reflective thinking at length, but it is important to understand that you will use this skill throughout your service-learning activities.

Reflection is an essential component of service-learning that helps you draw meaning from your service experience by connecting it to specific learning content. Intentional reflection challenges you to explore perspectives, stories, questions, and feelings that you bring to the service experience, as well as the kinds of insights, stereotypes, and reactions that emerge from those experiences, and then to connect to or even challenge other learning content. Reflective thinking takes many forms, often involving writing, speaking, or another form of expression that helps you make sense of your service experience in a thoughtful, reflective manner.

For example, Whitney F., a student whose service-learning took place in a daycare facility, wrote the following:

1 feel that my patience skills are improving every week I serve at The Learning Patch. Having patience is so crucial around the kids. They need time and space to learn from their own mistakes. I've also found that it is very important to explain why something is wrong or right. The kids don't understand if they are just told not to do something, because they may think that what they are doing is just fine ... until they are told why their actions aren't right. It's just as important to praise the kids and let them know that they are special. My service at The Learning Patch is teaching me a wealth of information about the institution of daycare, kids, and my own personal character.

Whitney was reflecting on both what she learned about the subject at hand—the role of daycare in constructing character values—and what she learned about herself—her need for patience. A next step might call for her to analyze her own values in light of her experience and evaluate whether they are on or off target. Additionally, she could observe a particularly patient daycare employee, attempt to model that behavior, and discuss her growth in this area with a coworker. Following this series of activities, Whitney would once again reflect on what she learned and how she learned it. Ultimately, reflection offers you the opportunity to explore the complexity of service in community from multiple perspectives.
FOCUS EXERCISE

Practicing Reflective Thinking from Multiple Perspectives

Take a moment to reflect on a powerful learning experience in your life that you shared with at least two other people. What happened? What did you learn from the experience? Now place yourself in the position of the other people who shared the experience and imagine how they would describe it. Having reflected on the experience and the differing perspectives, either through writing or drawing, describe or illustrate what you learned from trying to view the experience from multiple perspectives.

Reflection throughout the service-learning experience helps you prepare more effectively for, and then draw new knowledge and understanding from, the experience. Reflection may be incorporated in your service-learning experience in many ways, but the emphasis always must remain on the learning journey and how the experience challenges and connects to the rest of your course or curricular learning context. Reflection that merely tells what happened during the service experience falls short of authentic, meaningful service-learning reflection. By contrast, effective reflection digs deeper into the meaning of the experience, striving for new insights that can be applied to the practice of service-learning as you continue your work.
Practice of Civic Responsibility

The fourth trait characterizing service-learning is the emphasis on practicing civic responsibility. Rapidly changing demographics, global tragedies such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and terrorist attacks and escalating world tensions challenge all citizens to consider their roles and responsibilities.

The United States has long promoted the principle that citizens have a civic responsibility to contribute to the good of the community. Because a democracy is government of, by, and for the people, it depends on the goodwill and action of the people to sustain it. The U.S. educational system is historically grounded in the principles of democracy. To maintain a healthy democracy, education must prepare citizens to act and live responsibly, which includes forming considered public judgments, breaking down social barriers that hinder social justice, practicing conflict resolution, and developing ethical leadership.

Benjamin R. Barber, an internationally renowned political theorist who is a leader of Democracy Collaborative and a distinguished professor at the University of Maryland, argues that:

"The remedy is not better leaders but better citizens and we cannot become better citizens only if we reinvigorate the tradition of strong democracy that focuses on citizenship and civic competence. This calls for participation as well as accountability, for civic duty as well as individual rights. It demands that we add the constructive use of public judgment and power to the already well established protection of private rights and strong interests." (169)

Service-learning helps you exercise civic competence as you participate in the community. This experience enacts the kind of citizenship that Barber argues is necessary to a democracy.

FOCUS EXERCISE

Examining the Power of the Citizen to Act

Theory: Harry Boyte, director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey Institute of the University of Minnesota, encourages us to reverse the axiom to think globally and act locally, urging that "this phrase should be, instead, something like "think locally and learn to act with impact on the larger world." (178). What does his statement mean to you? What are its implications for your service-learning participation with your community service partner?

Application: List three political issues that are currently of concern at the local level. Are any of these issues beyond the ability of ordinary citizens? Should they be left to professional politicians? Explain your stance. About which of the issues do you feel compelled to reach some kind of public judgment—that is, an informed decision—that would affect your behavior in the wider community? What effect might your public judgment and corresponding action have on the larger world? In a small group, discuss the issues and possible actions you identified. Can any of these issues be addressed during your service-learning experience?
In a democracy, all citizens have an obligation to work for, among other things, justice, peace, and equality. Curricula, texts, discussions, and experiences should challenge you to think critically about a wide range of public issues related to community and responsible citizenship—in short, about your civic obligations. However, reading about and discussing public policies simply is not enough. To truly live up to your responsibilities as a citizen, you should work to achieve and sustain social justice in your community. To act responsibly, to serve, and to lead, you need to develop social and civic competencies. Firsthand experiences based in a vigorous learning setting can help you develop the necessary skills for full lifelong participation in a democratic society. A college education, enhanced by service-learning experiences, directly connects you to your community and others so that you can explore your role in the world. Chapter 5 discusses the role of civic responsibility and in connection to service-learning at greater length.

The Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle

Educators have long been concerned with civic responsibility and making sure that they can actively apply the theories they espouse. Service-learning, which was born out of the marriage of theory and action, is firmly in the category of experiential education. Based on the twentieth-century work of philosopher John Dewey, psychologists Kurt Lewin and Jean Piaget, and others, experiential proponents value firsthand experiences outside of the traditional classroom as the foundation of learning.

Inspired by the work of Lewin, educational psychologist David A. Kolb identified a four-part learning process based on firsthand experience in which knowledge is created. Although Kolb’s landmark work has led to many adaptations, including the CARC cycle to which you will be introduced in Chapter 6, the basic principles identified in Figure 1.2 show how your service-learning experience moves through important stages of learning.

Note that learning cannot be reduced to simple or distinctly separate sequential steps. The cycle does not intend to imply that each step is completed in isolation and leads to the next. Rather, think about how a wheel is continually in motion. Your learning will be similarly fluid and continuous.

The four central points of the Kolb learning cycle are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Kolb’s model suggests that the learner may enter the cycle at any stage of the process and that stages often overlap; for effective learning to occur, the learner must move through all four phases of the process. Learning should focus on small, incremental steps, providing opportunities for the cycle to repeat many times, rather than passing through each of the phases once.

Concrete Experience

This stage of the learning cycle is characterized by doing; that is, you carry out action in a community-based setting. At this stage of learning, you are immersed in performing some kind of task or participating in some kind of
experience firsthand. During the concrete experience stage, learners “must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences” (Kolb, “Learning Styles” 236).

**Reflective Observation**

In the Kolb cycle, concrete experience provides the basis for reflection. However, it should be noted that reflection is crucial throughout the entire service-learning process. Reflective observation is characterized by revisiting—that is, revisiting or mentally revisiting—what has occurred or what you have experienced during the concrete stage. Through writing, discussion, or some other means of expression, you explore the concrete experience and your perceptions. At this stage of the cycle, learners also must “observe and reflect on these experiences from many perspectives” (Kolb, “Learning Styles” 236).

**Abstract Conceptualization**

This stage is characterized by interpreting your concrete experience and reflective observation in light of other learning theories, or related concepts. You now use your firsthand experience and reflection to build new ideas, theories, or understandings. Here is your opportunity to affirm or challenge previous assumptions to develop a better theory, which you will test in the next stage of active experimentation. During abstract conceptualization, you strive to understand the relationship among aspects of the course content.
and your experiences to explain, modify, or frame the events and to connect to or integrate with a broader perspective. Kolb reminds learners that they "must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories" ("Learning Styles" 236).

Active Experimentation

Active experimentation occurs when learners translate new understandings into action or plan what action will occur next. At this stage, newly developed understandings and theories guide new experiences. Kolb believes that learners must "use these theories to make decisions and solve problems" ("Learning Styles" 236).

The Kolb Cycle in Action

To look at the Kolb cycle in an actual learning situation, we apply it to the experience of Sophie, a sophomore student enrolled in a composition course that incorporates the service-learning experience as the basis for research and writing assignments. Because of her interest in psychology and adolescent development of middle school girls, Sophie has chosen to serve for two hours each week in the YWCA Empowerment for Girls after-school program at a nearby middle school. Sophie mentors seventh and eighth grade girls. Discussions and activities focus on topics such as successful leadership and interpersonal skills for young women.

Each week, Sophie immerses herself in the concrete experience by planning, organizing, and leading activities and discussions that will help develop...
leadership skills in the middle school participants. Sophie strives to remain open to all dimensions of her actions and experiences to gain a deeper understanding of adolescent psychology. She then records reflective observations in her field journal, a required writing assignment in which she explores her observations, perceptions, and thoughts about the service experience in order to connect course content and reach new understandings and insights.

Sophie next moves into abstract conceptualization to deepen her learning experience. For class, Sophie recently read Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence by Rosalind Wiseman, an assigned text based on her choice of service sites. By participating in class discussions and writing an assigned critical analysis, Sophie interprets events from her service experience in light of Wiseman’s theories and assertions about adolescent girls. Sophie finds herself modifying her understanding of adolescent development as she challenges Wiseman’s theory and synthesizes her concrete experience, reflection, and abstract conceptualization. For Sophie, new questions and theories about middle school girls’ behavior continually emerge.

Each week, Sophie is eager to return to the YWCA Empowerment for Girls program to check out her new understandings of adolescent girls, which have emerged from action, critical thinking, course readings, writing, and discussion. During the active experimentation phase, Sophie uses what she has observed and learned to effectively interact with and mentor program participants. Throughout the semester, Sophie repeatedly moves through the four phases of the Kolb learning cycle in order to create new layers of knowledge about herself, her service site, and the world around her.

By now, you should have a better understanding of service-learning and of how it creates a balanced and reciprocal relationship with community partners. You have learned initial theory that will soon be put to the test in your service-learning experience. The next step in your theoretical learning, Chapter 2, will help you more fully understand the kind of service-learning experience you are entering.