

Assignments to Deepen Place-Based Learning

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A Pattern for Designing Reflection on Experiential Learning

(Karen) Scenario: In Tacoma, St. Leo's Food Connection supports children in the community via a "Backpack Project." This project provides week-end food for students who receive free/reduced lunch at school during the week. College students enrolled in a Lifespan Psychology (Psychology of Development) class repackaged bulk foods such as pasta, rice and oatmeal into family size quantities, so that these items could be included in the backpacks provided each Friday to the K-12 students.

Possible Reflective Prompts

What?

- What questions arose for you about this backpack project?
- What feelings arose as you packed food into bags?
- What might day-to-day life be like for a student facing food insecurity?

So What?

- What are some of the positive consequences of this backpack project?
- What drawbacks might there be to a project like this?
- How would you expect a 9 year-old to respond to receiving this week-end backpack?
- How might that differ from the response of a 17 year-old?

Now What?

- Assume that you have been hired by St Leo's Food Connection to write the food-related instructions that will be included in the week-end backpack. Write one set of instructions for a 9 year-old and one set of instructions for a 17 year-old. Based on your understanding of human development, how should the instructions for a 9 year-old differ from the instructions for a 17 year-old?
- What do you feel called to do in response to the issue of food insecurity in our community?

Reflection, Writing, and Synthesis Assignments in Community-Studies Courses

(Jean) I used these in courses for general education credit and in senior-level environmental studies programs where the academic goals included community-based research, writing, synthesis, and "synoptic knowing." Students worked in small 3-person research teams to identify a community issue, research it, design and lead a class seminar (2 hours) and a class field-trip (4-6 hours), and write a term paper on that issue. Besides the term paper, additional writing assignments included:

1. **Home town paper:** at the beginning of the course, an 8-10 page paper on "your home town." The assignment was totally wide open, to write about "what you know and what you think about your home town—however you identify it as your 'home town.'" The purpose was for students to call upon their mind-store of knowledge and experience and to present it in an organized fashion, and to reflect as well on what they did and did not yet know about their home town.

2. **Weekly end-of-field trip “5-minute write.”** At the end of each field trip, students wrote short papers on index cards, on what questions that learning-experience stimulated for them. I would collect these, file these by student, and give them back to the students for their final assignment.
3. **End-of-course synthesis:** In a final integrative paper, students were asked to reflect on their home-town paper, their class-notes and field-trip notes and “5-minute-write” papers, and the community problem they researched in depth, A prompt asked, “What are the patterns you are noticing? Can you identify and discuss some intersecting themes? How has this course influenced your perspectives on your home town, on Asheville and the southern mountain region (or on Olympia and South Puget Sound)? How has the course influenced your thinking with regard to how communities function and address their needs and problems?”

Resources for Designing Assignments to Deepen Place-Based Learning

As you design your place-based assignments, it may be helpful to ask:

1. How does this assignment allow students to demonstrate competence related to my goals/student learning outcomes for the course or program?
2. How does this assignment deepen and extend student learning especially with respect to their experiences of place and their “ethic of place?”
3. How does this assignment help students make meaning? How does it help them consider and reflect on their own perspectives?
4. How might this assignment (and my evaluation of students’ performance) help me improve my own teaching?

Other Resources:

Activities

WSU Center for Civic Engagement Resources Page on Reflection builds on the “What? So what? Now what?” sequence. <http://cce.wsu.edu/about/reflection/>

The Curriculum for the Bioregion’s Activity Collection

(<http://serc.carleton.edu/bioregion/activities.html>) has a variety of place-based activities and assignments, which are sortable by disciplinary focus, scale (campus, neighborhood, regional, global) and by topical emphasis. (You are welcome to add your activities to this collection!)

Relevant Learning Outcomes Frameworks

The Curriculum for the Bioregion Sustainability Courses faculty learning community (2011-12) identified an array of “big ideas” and learning outcomes for sustainability-learning; a member of this faculty learning community, Rob Turner at UW Bothell, built a terrific website around these outcomes with a broad array of associated resources.

http://faculty.washington.edu/rturner1/Sustainability/Big_Ideas01.htm

Learning Outcomes Associated with the Degree Qualifications Profile: (“DQP”)

<http://www.luminafoundation.org/files/resources/dqp.pdf> provides a well designed and well vetted framework of learning outcomes for the associates’, bachelors’, and graduate levels of learning that especially focuses on integrated and collaborative learning. Numbers of colleges through the U.S. are using this profile for curriculum planning, course development, and assessment. One of the five dimensions of the profile is “civic and global learning.” The DQP does not specify outcomes for study-in-the-major or specialized degree programs, nor does it specify any affective learning outcomes.

Informal Assessment of Students’ Learning

Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers, by Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross. Jossey Bass, 1993. Still the most comprehensive collection of informal strategies for gathering student feedback on their learning.