

## Toward a Theory of Engagement: A Cognitive Mapping of Service-Learning Experiences

**Kerry Ann Rockquemore**  
*University of Connecticut*

**Regan Harwell Schaffer**  
*Pepperdine University*

*Service-learning in higher education is intended to increase students' civic responsibility and enhance learning. While quantitative assessment of these two outcomes has dominated the existing literature, this article explores the oft-ignored cognitive processes that students undergo during the community service learning experience. Data from 50 daily reflection journals is used to draw a descriptive map of the social-psychological stages that occur during service-learning. In addition, textual analysis reveals that students progress through three identifiable stages of development: shock, normalization and engagement. To increase the effectiveness of service-learning outcomes, faculty members must understand these specific cognitive processes that accompany community-based learning.*

### Service-Learning and Cognitive Processing: Opening the 'Black Box'

At most colleges and universities, service-learning has two pedagogical goals: increasing civic responsibility (Myers-Lipton, 1998; Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998) and facilitating academic objectives (Astin & Sax, 1998; Claus & Michel, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Current research on service-learning has focused on these two principle outcomes, using quantitative analysis to measure students' attitudes and substantive knowledge before and after engaging in service-learning (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, in press; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles & Braxton, 1997). From these studies, we have learned that service-learning is, in fact, an effective pedagogical technique for meeting these goals. However, little is known about the actual cognitive processes that students undergo during the community learning experience. Students' pre-service and post-service attitudes provide important documentation that learning has occurred over time, yet we are left to wonder what happens to students during this time period. As researchers and educators, we must ask *how* the learning occurs and how that *process* is unique to the service-learning experience.

In attempting to answer the process-related questions involved in service-learning, this research project demonstrates, using quantitative data, that learning has occurred for a sample of 120 students at Pepperdine University. Based on the demonstrated attitudinal change, we attempt to unpack the com-

plex social and psychological experiences through which students progress during this learning process. Qualitative data, in the form of daily journals, were used to create a descriptive map of the cognitive stages that occur while students engage in service-learning. Because the integration of service-learning experiences and substantive, disciplinary-specific learning remains the "missing link" for many service-learning courses (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999), a better understanding of students' cognitive processing is critical to improving the effectiveness of service-learning as a pedagogical tool.

### Procedures

#### *Sample*

Our sample consisted of 120 students enrolled in "service-learning courses" at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. These courses include Religion 101, Sociology 200 and two freshman seminar courses entitled "The Call of Service." The courses are required as part of the general education curriculum; however, not all sections of these courses utilize service-learning. Consequently, most of the students in our study did not know of the service-learning component of the course until after they were enrolled. Service-learning courses at Pepperdine are those that fulfill the criteria outlined by the National and Community Service Act of 1990.<sup>1</sup>

Within our overall sample, students were 69% female, 31% male, and disproportionately from affluent families: over half were from families with

average yearly incomes of at least \$75,000, and one fourth were from families with yearly incomes of at least \$150,000. All respondents were between 18 and 22 years of age. These students may be considered representative of the student population at Pepperdine University (Fischer, 1999) and of private Christian liberal arts colleges in the U.S. (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Mahoney, 1998). Pepperdine students differ significantly, however, from the general population of college students in that they are more racially homogeneous and higher in parental socio-economic status (Fischer, 1999; Sax et al., 1998).

From this sample, we purposively sub-sampled (Berg, 1995) a group of 50 students for qualitative analysis. The sub-sample was 32% male and 68% female. They were 80% White, 14% Hispanic, 4% Black and 2% Asian. These students were placed in agencies that engaged in the following range of service activities: food delivery, residential geriatric care, youth mentoring, public education, juvenile detention, free health services, free legal aid, shelter for the homeless, and after-school mentoring.<sup>2</sup>

*Analysis*

All respondents in our sample completed a 26-item questionnaire (see Appendix A) before and after their service-learning experience. In addition, we required all respondents in our smaller sub-sample to keep a journal that addressed the following questions: 1) What happened today? and What did I do?, 2) What were the effects of what I did?, 3) How did my service today make me feel?, 4) What relationships am I building?, 5) How does what I am observing at my placement relate to the concepts and ideas we are currently learning in class? Students were required to write one journal entry for each day of service. The number of journal entries ranged according to the individual student and the frequency of their service, resulting in a range of 10-30 journal entries per student. The journal questions were intended to encourage students to generate three types of data: 1) a descriptive account of the actual events that occurred

during the process of respondents' service-learning experience, 2) an ongoing report of their emotional reactions to the events they encountered in their placement agencies, and 3) an unstructured description of the overall integration of the course content and service experiences.

In order to analyze the qualitative data, we took a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and performed content analysis of the daily journals. Specifically, we immersed ourselves in the relatively unstructured data provided in the individual journals in order to identify the common themes that seemed to be meaningful to students' accounts of their service-learning experiences (Abrahamson, 1983). Using this inductive approach to the data, we followed the data analysis procedure outlined by McCracken (1988). This includes five basic stages of analysis: 1) initial sorting of important from unimportant data; 2) examination of the various pieces of data for logical relationships; 3) confirmatory review of the initial documents to assist in recognition of general properties of the data; 4) description of general themes and hierarchical organization of those themes; and 5) determination of how existing themes may be synthesized into these. The major themes are presented below.

**Results**

Using pre-service and post-service questionnaires, we were able to observe student attitudes at two points in time. Our analysis suggests that students made significant changes in their attitudes toward social justice, equality of opportunity, and civic responsibility over the course of the semester. We were most interested in the questions that focused on equality of opportunity as all instructors had, as a basic course goal, for students to understand that inequalities exist within the United States and that they are inherent in the social structures of American society. Table 1 illustrates some of the positive changes that were observed from the pre-service and post-service questionnaires. We interpret this change

TABLE 1  
*Percentage of Students Showing Positive Change On Select Items from Pre- to Post-Test*

SURVEY QUESTION	POSITIVE CHANGE IN POST-TEST SURVEY
In the United States, people basically have equal opportunity to do what they want in life	28%
I feel that I can have a have a positive impact on local social problems	43%
It is important that I work toward equal opportunity for all people.	44%
I feel that I can make a difference in the world	48%

*Note.* N = 120.

of attitude in the direction of established course goals to be indicative of the fact that learning took place among our sample of respondents.

### *A Stage Theory of Engagement*

We are encouraged by the fact that we can empirically demonstrate the fundamental premise that service-learning, as a pedagogical strategy, facilitated student learning in our overall sample of Pepperdine University students. This is consistent with findings in the extant literature (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Elyer & Giles, 1999). Our research question, however, is *how* do students learn while they are engaged in service-learning. In other words, what cognitive processing occurs between the pre-service and post-service assessments? Our data suggest that among the students in our sub-sample, individuals progressed through three distinct stages of development: shock, normalization and engagement.

#### Stage 1: Shock

The first stage articulated in student journals can be described as “shock.” As previously stated, the students in our sample came from economically privileged home environments. Many were raised in suburban communities where they attended private schools and were embedded in demographically homogeneous social networks. For middle and upper-middle class students with limited life experience, their first close encounter with poverty is, by their own description, a shocking experience. After one students’ first trip to a maximum-security juvenile detention facility, she wrote:

On my way to Camp Kilpatrick, my friend and I didn’t really know what to expect. We met up with some other volunteers in the parking lot and carpooled there. It went pretty smoothly. When we got there we noticed the fence that was about 25 feet high, with barbwire wrapped around the top and the dirty brick buildings, and I got a little nervous. I guess I just assumed that the boys we would meet would have stolen a candy bar or got in a fight at recess. This looked more like prison to me! ...

While most students in the sub-sample expressed shock and disbelief at the social and economic circumstances they were expected to work within, the level of shock, and the articulation of it, varied considerably. Some students expressed awe at the profound similarities and differences between their own neighborhoods and those in which they were expected to serve. The following statement was written by a first year student after her first trip to El Rescate, a free legal clinic in downtown Los Angeles:

Before going to El Rescate, I had expectations in mind. I thought it would look like any other law office. I was not expecting anything fancy, but I was expecting something clean and professional looking. I was in for a shock. I began to realize that the office would be different from what I imagined when the map we had took us into the ghetto. I thought to myself that we were in the wrong place, but then a sign on the side of a run-down looking red brick building proved me wrong. My first thought was that my dad would kill me if he knew where I was!

This statement is revealing in various ways. The idea that, “...my dad would kill me if he knew where I was!,” reflects the high level of isolation that is normative among these affluent students. This should not be dismissed, however, as a safety issue. The same student later clarified, “My grandma would die of embarrassment if she knew I was helping ‘foreigners’ become citizens.” Both statements are indicative of deeply rooted negative attitudes about the poor and disenfranchised in our society. These two respondents’ experiences in the shock stage revealed both their social isolation and their preconceived ideas about poverty. Another student wrote:

I admit that I live in a bubble settled away from the harsh reality of the world. I heard of what goes on with the rest of the world, but I cannot relate to that part of the world. Before today, I have never gone into a poor minority community. The closest I have been was through movies and television shows. The drive to El Rescate was quite frightening for me. I was beginning to convert my plan of service-learning elsewhere. There were many things that seemed similar to my hometown, but yet, they contained contrary meanings. I saw bars made of iron on every window and door in the ghetto. Those iron bars were there to protect the owners of those stores and houses. The bars underlined the danger, which was always right around the corner. Captiva Island, where I lived in Florida, had gates made of the same material... iron. However, the main purpose of those gates was for decoration. The only protection those gates might give us was preventing tourists from driving onto our private properties.

The shock stage of service-learning is important because it provides a sharp emotional and psychological jolt to students’ perceptions of reality. College students, like most humans, tend to generalize their own individual experience to the rest of society. Raised in affluent families with homogeneous social networks, students tend to think that “most people” attend college and “most people’s

lives” are similar to their own. As the respondent above indicated, she was generally aware that less fortunate people existed, but her perceptions were largely media-derived because of her lifelong geographic separation from low-income housing. The realization that there are many people in American society that have significantly fewer resources than our respondents was, to them, a profound revelation. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that most students expressed a newfound thankfulness for the most basic privileges they had in their own lives. A student working at the legal clinic wrote:

My client was grateful for the possibilities that the U.S. provides. Possibilities that I have taken for granted my entire life. I did not have to grow up in the United States and be blessed with all of these freedoms, but I was. And now I'm thankful for something that I have had access to all my life. I appreciate what I have; I appreciate that the state paid for my high school education, and that I have the opportunity to go to college. I appreciate that I live and go to school in a safe area.

One additional finding that is unique to the context of faith-based institutions is that the shock stage caused many students to offer unsolicited reflections on their faith. At Pepperdine, 60% of students come from an evangelical Christian background and 73% claim “Christian” as their religious self-identification (Fischer, 1999). In this way, our sub-sample is representative of the Pepperdine student population, although drastically different than most institutions of higher education. The shock-induced inquiries about spirituality were most frequent for students who were self-identified Christians working in faith-based organizations. The following excerpt from a student journal provided an illustration of this tension and questioning:

Through my afternoon in L.A. I learned that serving people like that is not without its disappointments, and that lessons can come from unlikely sources; the odd individual who expresses no gratitude . . . or the person we met who loudly objected to our activities. The indignant lady refused to accept a bag of chips, soap and tampons, and she jumped up and chased the student who offered it to her back to our tables. The lady was shouting angrily, expressing her displeasure at our presence, saying that if we really were Christians like we called ourselves then we should experience what she experiences every day. We cannot just go and offer assistance once a week and go back to our own personal lives in Malibu for the rest of the time, she informed us, but we could only be qualified to help if we experienced first hand the kind of life she lived every

day. What an interesting thought . . . how many of us who spent our Sunday afternoon feeding the homeless would be willing to dedicate every aspect of the rest of our lives to serving others, to serving the Lord, even if this involved living in an environment, a culture, entirely foreign to us, one which we might possibly consider “below” us?

Experiencing other people living in poverty, students were forced to open themselves up to the realization that their perceptions of the social world may be severely skewed by their affluence and/or Christian worldview. This shock-induced uncertainty, while frightening and upsetting to some students, created in them an ideal state of cognitive openness toward the substantive course material. This stage of shock enabled students to examine the inconsistencies in their lives and in the community around them.

### Stage 2: Normalization

For most of the students in our study, the shock of seeing poverty wears off within the second or third week of their service-learning experience. By the end of week three, the majority of students ceased making comments in their journals that indicated surprise about the circumstances they observed. Students then entered the stage that we have termed “normalization.” We use this term because students were quick to adapt to their new circumstances. No matter what level of shock they may have experienced in the first two weeks of their placement, they quickly became accustomed to the sight of poverty and viewed the deprivation of their clients as “normal.”

During this period students began to feel comfortable with their role in the community organization. It is here that they began to develop relationships with the staff and regular clients. These relationships were crucial to the learning process because they were based on common human bonds as opposed to pity. In the previous stage, students refer to the poor as “those people” or “them.” In the normalization stage, the ‘other-ness’ gives way to personal description. Three students working as tutors at a juvenile detention facility made the following representative comments:

After initially being a little intimidated by Joe, I now see he is a normal person just like me. He just had a little tougher upbringing than I did. We relate to a lot of the same things, like how we miss our families, worrying about school and especially our future.

I'm learning to find common ground with people I thought I had nothing in common with.

I felt good about today, because I feel that we

really bonded and that we are actually like good friends, rather than me just being his tutor. He is even going to come hang out with me when he gets out.

While students began to realize the humanity of their clients in the process of relationship building, they simultaneously started comparing their clients to others in their environment. Comparative assessments were common in this stage and were made to illustrate the similarities between the student and their client. One student, favorably compared an 'inmate' at the juvenile detention facility to other students he had encountered at Pepperdine: "Eric, on the other hand, wants to learn. He seems to appreciate and respect what all of the Pepperdine volunteers are doing. Eric seems more mature to me than a lot of people I know at Pepperdine."

One final commonality in this stage was for students to express an understanding of the importance of service. Many were surprised that they began to feel committed to the people and the institutions they served. They cared for their clients and began to better comprehend the missions of their community organizations. This sentiment was most commonly expressed among students working with children. Two respondents who tutored homeless children made the following statements:

When I go home for Thanksgiving I'm going to bring him some of my childhood books, and we can read them together. I think that I will still go to the shelter even after the class requirements are over."

Throughout the course of my service I realized that I couldn't just stop going when the assignment was over. The kids have become much more than an 'assignment.'

We consider this stage crucial to the learning process because, while students may be shocked into questioning their own perceptions of reality in the first stage of development, they also had the tendency to marginalize those they observed. In the first stage, respondents characterized their clients as fundamentally different from themselves. They consistently described the poor in ways that provided both linguistic and cognitive distance. It was important to the learning process that students developed the capacity to see the poor as human beings, not unlike themselves. In addition, they recognized their preconceived stereotypes and negative perceptions. One respondent described this process as a natural result of her service.

If there is just one thing that I have learned from typing up numerous itineraries [pre-visa documents], it is that immigrants are hard-

working people. I type up employment history, and I have yet to see one lacking a statement of good attendance and excellent work. I think that by placing the stereotype of the 'lazy immigrant' on Latino immigrants, it makes it easier for Californians to pass laws against bilingual education and health care. If people had to wake up and realize that the reason these people are here is just so that they can have a chance at the basic rights we are born with, I bet their views on immigration laws and foreign policy would change. I know mine have.

Acknowledging and facing stereotypes is not a painless process. Students bring a variety of life experiences and psychological baggage to the service-learning experience. Their preconceived, sometimes negative, attitudes may derive from salient personal experiences. For students in our sample, addressing prejudicial ideas about various racial groups provided the greatest challenge to learning. After a disturbing event at the free legal clinic, one respondent wrote the following:

My hands were shaking and I felt like crying. Some Mexican guys shot my dad last summer, and I thought I was over it, but I guess not. I couldn't quit thinking that maybe I had helped someone like those guys stay here. Part of the reason I wanted to work at El Rescate was to get over my negative feelings towards Hispanic people, because I know it's wrong for me to want to hate an entire group of people for any reason. But I still felt like throwing up.

The normalization stage is critically important to learning because the intensity of our respondents' experiences provoked critical questioning about attribution. They begin asking causal questions because they had developed relationships with people in their organizations and they wanted to know why and how their clients ended up in their current circumstances. The illustrations provided below give a clear idea of how students' questions emerge from their intimate relationships with individuals in their organizations.

Jeff showed me some new drawing he had done, and sang me a rap song he had just composed. He has a lot of artistic abilities. If he had the right training he could be a phenomenal artist. This made me wonder, how many great would-be doctors, scientists, and artists might have been brushed aside and not given a chance because of their place in the world of social stratification.

I basically just listened as he shared his family history with me (Mom alcoholic, dad deceased). It was the first time that I actually

was able to see how much a person's childhood affects their adult life. Frank believes that he will be in jail for the rest of his life...Tonight was a real eye-opener for me. I came to wonder about how Frank ended up where he is and why he has such a sad view of life.

### Stage 3: Engagement

Students began seeking answers to their causal questions in the final stage that we have termed "engagement." In the sixth through eighth weeks of the course, respondents wanted to know why their clients were in poverty and needed the services that their organizations provided. Students became engaged in the learning process because the people and situations they were studying in their course readings were not hypothetical examples, but real people with whom they had developed personal relationships.

Answering these difficult questions requires students to make attributions. The research literature defines attribution as being either individual (internal) or structural (external) (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1972). Individual explanations attribute economic inequalities to personal characteristics of the poor (i.e. lack of talent, drive, effort, or loose morals). In contrast, structural attributions draw on social factors external to the individual, such as discrepancies in the economic system, lack of political power, educational inequalities, or job discrimination (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). People tend to make individual attributions to explain *other people's* failures, yet make structural attributions to explain their own (Watson, 1982). In addition, existing research illustrates that individuals are likely to make individual attributions to out-groups (groups of which they are not members of), and to make structural attributions for in-group members (Kluegel, 1990; Pettigrew, 1979).

There is a profound tension between the previously described social-psychological patterns for attribution and the course objectives because the stated goals required students to transcend these common ways to explain inequalities in society. In the shock stage, students interacted with people who were different than themselves in every demographic way imaginable. This provided a context of cognitive openness that enabled a reconsideration of their initial construction of reality. In the normalization stage, individuals began to view the poor as individuals like themselves, as opposed to classifying them as an out-group. Relationships were built and adjustments were made in how respondents cognitively classified their clients. Then it was in the final stage that students were forced to reconcile the content of the coursework, which heavily emphasized the size

and scope of structural inequalities in American society, with their previous propensity toward individual attributions. If students perceived their clients as similar to themselves, then they began to consider structural attributions. If they viewed their clients as dissimilar, undesirable, or unpleasant, they tended to retain the individual level attributions that they brought with them to the course.

Several examples may help to illustrate this process. Students tutoring juvenile offenders developed strong one-on-one relationships with their tutees throughout the semester. They initially described them as lacking in individual traits that would help them to be successful as an explanation for their current circumstances (i.e., they made individual attributions). Upon entering the engagement stage, they began to focus on external factors in their journal writing. The following comments are illustrative of students questioning family composition, educational inequalities, and political policies (all central elements of the course reading) as causal factors for their tutees' current incarceration and as significant limiting factors in their future mobility.

I wonder where John's father is or what happened to him. With the guidance of a father I do not think that he would have been led astray...The masculine love and affection that was lacking in his family, he found in his gang. When his mother could not be there, his gang was there for him.

I know how important the SAT's are and it doesn't look like he has much of a chance at passing...He seems very eager to learn, it is just that he doesn't have the tools given to him in order to learn what he needs to.

The reading we had about dismantling the welfare state directly affects [the mentee] because the cutbacks that are being proposed will negatively impact him and others in his same position. On the other hand, the things called for to help solve the crisis of poverty in America will help Terry and his family, and give him a chance to exceed any expectations that he has for himself right now. Cost free college would be the only way he could live his dream, which is to attend college.

## Discussion

This article began as an inquiry into the cognitive processes that take place during the service-learning experience. Previous research has illustrated that service-learning is effective in facilitating student learning, yet we know little about *how* students actually learn. By placing the voices of students at the center of our analysis, we were able to observe their

thought processes as they move through a semester of service-learning. This enables us to identify common trends in their cognitive development because the students in our sample progressed through similar stages at clustered times during the semester. In detailing the cognitive map of students' experiences, we have attempted to provide a tentative theory of engagement. Our findings, however, focused exclusively on the student as the unit of analysis. At this point we state the limitations of our study and then consider how our theoretical model of engagement provides practical applications for faculty using service-learning in liberal arts institutions.

#### *Limitations*

While our findings suggest that important practical applications can be derived from placing the voices of students at the center of developing effective service-learning strategies, there are several important limitations inherent in this study that provide rich avenues for future research. First and foremost, the Pepperdine student population is demographically unique. Our respondents came from affluent backgrounds, were racially homogeneous (i.e., predominately White), and lacked exposure to various ethnic cultures (Fischer, 1999). The stage theory we have presented should be tested in various types of institutions in order to discern what aspects of the process may be unique to affluent White students. What would be the initial reactions of individuals who are socioeconomically diverse, who do not experience shock in the face of poverty? How would their initial experiences be processed in light of their particular biographies? Second, we did not disaggregate the data by race to see if the processes differed between groups. While only 20% of those surveyed were Latino, Black, and Asian, a larger and more diverse sample could have explored potentially interesting racial group differences in the proposed stage theory. If differences do exist, the implications for practitioners designing service-learning courses would also be important. Future research should provide a comparative design between various institutions of higher education and different student populations.

#### *Practical Applications*

In order to improve the service-learning experience, educators should consider both our student-centered perspective and the existing research on organizational effectiveness. Researchers have identified several key organizational elements that facilitate student learning in a service-learning course, including the type of program, the quality of reflection and integration, matching placement agencies and activities with learning goals, and the duration

and intensity of the experience (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1997; Waterman, 1997) These organizational elements are consistent with the critical components identified in our analyses, and are particularly salient for faculty members so that they may guide students through the stages from shock to engagement. Because students pass through the cognitive stages we have identified at roughly the same times, the class environment should be structured in such a way as to maximize the learning in each stage. Below, we have identified several organizational elements that emerge from our analysis of student journals.

*Shock Stage.* In order to absorb initial shock, a baseline of beliefs and feelings must be established and an environment created that fosters a response to those beliefs. Faculty, as part of pre-course preparation, should ensure that activities within the agency not only correspond with the course learning objectives, but also provide meaningful inter-personal experience and learning opportunities that are intellectually challenging for the students. Careful thought should be given to seeking service organizations that place students in situations in which their previous experiences, understanding, and beliefs of society can be challenged and that serve as fertile ground for cognitive growth throughout the semester (Eyler & Giles, 1999). The students in our study entered this stage of shock because of the cognitive dissonance they experienced when placed in a service situation that allowed them interaction with people and situations very different from their own. Because of the importance of student relationships in the learning process, they must have personal interactions with the organization's clients and be engaged in activities that meet the learning objectives of the course (Eyler & Giles, 1997; 1999). The service activities should include tasks that allow student initiative, responsibility, and collaboration with staff and clients so that the students can develop personal relationships. It is essential that the faculty member communicates clear expectations for the learning experience and ensures that service activities are tightly linked to classroom content and reflection. Once expectations are established, the faculty member should design appropriate reflection tools for this stage in the learning process so that baseline feelings can be addressed.

Oral and written communication and application are all reflection tools that promote cognitive development; however, it is the content focus of the reflection activities that enables students to progressively move from shock to engagement (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Welch, 1999). Our analysis suggests that it is not important in the shock stage for students to make connections between their service and the

course objectives. More important to the overall learning process is for them to recognize their own beliefs and pre-conceived ideas about the population they will be serving and establishing a foundation from which to grow. Reflection at this time can be purely descriptive, allowing the students to report factual information regarding the service experience while sharing their feelings. During the initial shock stage, students should feel comfortable freely expressing their authentic reactions in a nonjudgmental environment (Welch, 1999). Reflection should be both private, in the form of a journal or paper, and public in a class discussion atmosphere. For many students, this may be the first time articulating their beliefs. At this stage, as we found in our study, it is useful to allow students to recognize that their perceptions of the social world may be skewed. Reflection also enables students to share the shock that they are experiencing with others and create a classroom environment conducive to open dialogue. At this beginning stage, faculty should clarify the link between the service-learning experience and the overall structure of the course. If the placement is not meeting the course objectives, the cognitive thought process will be hindered despite the faculty members' best efforts encourage student reflection (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Welch, 1999). Therefore, program quality is essential in ensure that cognitive growth takes place.

*Normalization Stage.* This stage occurs approximately the second or third week of the service-learning experience. As previously described, students in this stage become more comfortable with their community organization, take on more responsibility, and begin forming relationships with co-workers and clients. In the normalization stage, faculty should move reflection from a descriptive to an integrative format. Reflection should ask the students to draw upon their experiences at their service site and begin connecting their experiences to the classroom content. The reflection content should challenge the students to understand the social problem that the community agency at which they are place is addressing. In addition, the reflection questions, both for written and oral response, should be confrontational and require students to focus on causal questions (Welch, 1999). The students at this stage have more personal relationships with their clients. The reflection questions should take on a more personal nature as well, asking the students to reflect on those people they know by name and humanizing the experience, so that their interactions are not with a nameless "client," but a person similar to themselves. Such reflection questions challenge students to make attributions toward their clients. As time

progresses, the students themselves should no longer be dependent on the faculty member to ask the questions, but their experiences should provoke critical questioning on their own.

One cautionary observation is that the faculty member and students can fall into the trap of believing that the normalization stage is where the service-learning experience has reached its full potential. At this stage, students recognize the social problem being addressed and consequently are more aware of social problems. However, it is in the final stage of engagement where students make the cognitive connection between their service-learning experience and the class content. If the students remain in the normalization stage, it is easy for them to become reconciled to the fact that inequalities exist in America and slip into viewing those impacted by these inequalities as an out-group. The faculty member wants to ensure that the learning process continues and may want to integrate class lectures, guest speakers, and specific reflective activities during weeks when the students are in this stage. Otherwise, it is possible that the reflection will remain focused on what the students have learned through the service, devoid of higher level cognitive processing.

*Engagement Stage.* For faculty using service-learning, the ultimate goal is for students to master course content in a way that meaningfully shapes their understanding of reality and impacts their worldview. This final stage is when students will either reify their original worldview or integrate what they have learned. Reflection at this stage should allow students to question assumptions, gather more extensive information, and then analyze their assumptions using what they have learned through their service and classroom experience. Through this process, the students will be able to reframe their perspectives and beliefs, and determine if their behavior in the future should be modified, based upon what they have learned. The amount and quality of class discussion and reflective writing related to the service are all predictors of students' ability to identify social problems from a new vantage point (Blyth, Saito, & Berkas, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999). It is in this stage that the students are able to articulate external attribution and conceptualize social change (Rhoads, 1998). The goal of service-learning is not charity, but increased citizenship and community involvement (Eyler & Giles, 1999). This last stage of cognitive development enables students to move beyond the mere identification of a social problem, beyond "blaming the victim," and toward concrete solutions. Reflection questions no longer should focus on why inequities exist, but what changes in behavior are



needed and what actions should be taken. Even though this last stage may occur in the final weeks of a course, the reflection should be a significant portion of the class assignments and dialogue. These reflection elements need to ensure that students not only reach each stage, but push past the shock and normalization to engagement, which constitutes a change, not only in attitude and understanding, but in behavior.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'service-learning' means a method: a) under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs; b) that is integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the service activity; c) that provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and d) that enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others. (Willits-Cairn & Kielsmeier, 1991, p. 17)

<sup>2</sup> Students served in the following non-profit organizations: Camp David Gonzalez, Camp Kilpatrick, El Centro de Amistad, El Rescate, Faith in Christ Ministries—Into the Streets Program, L.A.'s Best—School on Wheels, Meals on Wheels, Organization for the Needs of the Elderly, Point Fermin Elementary School, Salesian Youth Center, Santa Monica Boys and Girls—Club Literacy Program, Union Rescue Mission and the Venice Family Clinic.

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### **Authors**

KERRY ANN ROCKQUEMORE is an Assistant Professor of Human Development and Family

Studies at the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on the social psychological effects of various pedagogical innovations.

REGAN HARWELL SCHAFFER is an Instructor of Management for the Business Administration Division at Pepperdine University. Her research focuses on effective institutional models of service-learning in Christian Higher Education. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Institutional Management at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology.

## Appendix A

### Items on the Student Assessment

*Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. Circle the number that best describes your response from 1=strongly disagree, to 6=strongly agree.*

	strongly agree		somewhat agree		strongly disagree	
1. I have a realistic understanding of the daily responsibilities involved in the jobs (career) in which I am interested.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I am motivated by courses that contain hands on applications of theories to real life situations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I am uncertain of what's required to succeed in the career that I want to pursue.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I feel that I can make a difference in the world.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. There is little I can do to end racism.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I learn course content best when connections to real life situations are made.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. It is important to find a career that directly benefits others.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I am an active member of my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. It is important that I work toward equal opportunity for all people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. I make very few assumptions about others.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. I think that people should find time to contribute to their community.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. It is not necessary for me to volunteer my time.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. There is no relation between my real life experiences and what I learn in school.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I have a good understanding of the needs and concerns of the community in which I live.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. The world would be a better place if differences between people were ignored.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. I have a good understanding of the strengths and resources of the community in which I live.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I possess the necessary personal qualities (e.g. responsibility, consideration, initiative, etc.) to be a successful career person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I feel that I can have a positive impact on local social problems.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. The things I learn in school are not applicable to my life outside of school.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. To be effective in the community, all you need is a caring heart.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. I feel uncomfortable presenting/speaking in front of a group of individuals in positions of authority.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. Being involved in a program to improve my community is important to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. I do not feel well prepared to embark on my post-graduate plans (e.g. graduate school, employment, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. I have very little impact on the community in which I live.	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. In the United States, people basically have equal opportunity to do what they want in life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. I learn more when a course curriculum is relevant to my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6