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Assessing Reflection Assignments for Public Affairs Courses: Implications for Educating Reflective Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

Instructors of public affairs courses often ask students to reflect on their experiences in written assignments. The objective is to have students use this reflection to help inform their understanding of course content. In this article, the author reviews his experiences using an assessment tool to evaluate reflection assignments in the context of teaching public affairs courses, draws references to experiential learning theories, and explores implications for educating reflective practitioners.

Civic duty and responsibility were core values in my working class family, and this duty and responsibility extended far beyond the ballot box. Both of my parents, one with a high school degree and the other with a partial high school/trade school education, watched the news, read magazines and newspapers, and kept current on civic affairs and politics in general. My mother served on town committees and was a town representative for many years. With community spirit and politics an active part of my home life, I never thought of bureaucracy "as some kind of alien force" (Goodsell, 1983, 149). Bureaucracy was "very close. It [was] public institutions operating within our communities. It [was] public employees living in our neighborhoods. It [was] programs mandated by government officials for whom we personally voted. It [was] collective action on our behalf. [And] in a meaningful sense...bureaucracy [was] ours" (Goodsell 1983, 159).

Thus begins the reflective essay of Melissa,¹ an MPA student with a rich background as an activist and state agency administrator. Asked to synthesize course concepts with her own experiences, she discusses Goodsell's passionate defense of bureaucracy by recounting the examples that her parents set as active and informed citizens who conveyed a sense of investment in government bureaucracies. Melissa's essay is titled "My Role in Public Administration: Administrator, Advocate, or Both?" Building on her early recollections of bureaucracy and her parents' role in shaping these perspectives, she goes on to render an intricate exploration of her identity as both an administrator and community activist. In the process, she draws links to readings authored by Appleby, Frederickson, Cooper, Stivers, and Hummel. In this culminating exercise in a Fundamentals of Public Administration class, Melissa demonstrates to me, and more importantly to herself, just how the course content relates to her practices as a public administrator, past, present, and future.

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Instructors of public affairs courses often ask students to reflect on their experiences in written assignments, with the objective of using this reflection to help inform their understanding of course content. Experiential learning is not a foreign concept to most public affairs programs; many require their students to engage in cooperatives, service-learning projects, practicum, or internships. In recent years, several articles in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* have discussed course models or assignments that ask students to incorporate their experience into the class in a formal way. Some examples of experiential learning include extensive university-community partnerships leading to applied research projects (Plein, Williams, and Hardwick, 2000), service learning opportunities (Bushouse and Morrison, 2001; Bernstein, Ohren, and Shue, 2003; Reinke, 2003), oral history projects (Donald, and Tribbey, 2002), and extensive journaling (Dede, 2002).

In addition to orchestrating or facilitating new learning experiences for students, public affairs educators may ask students to draw upon their prior experiences, either in a formal or informal manner. Academic programs that focus on prior learning may seek to have students demonstrate their competencies in a given area by explaining the ways in which their past experiences have contributed to their mastery of the subjects at hand. In many cases, particularly in the context of graduate programs that appeal to working professionals, it is virtually impossible to keep the experiences of these adult learners out of the classroom. Thus, we are defining experiential learning in very broad terms to mean reflection on prior experiences as well as experiences currently being had as an integral component of the course as in the case of service-learning experiences, for example.

If student experiences are to be fully utilized in a classroom setting, they need to be reified, meaning that the students need to provide the instructor with some concrete, tangible evidence that they have learned something. Previous articles in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* focusing on different forms of experiential learning have identified several assignments designed to facilitate student reflection.

Writing about the application of service learning approaches to a master of public affairs program, Bushouse and Morrison discuss their use of journaling, observing, "The important goal of the journal is to encourage connections between readings, projects, and life experiences" (2001, 16). Bernstein, Ohren, and Shue explain how their students in a collaboratively taught service learning seminar were asked to reflect on their community-based research projects via structured handouts and an interactive Web site (2003, 122). Donald and Tribbey (2002) discuss how students are required to give class presentations of their oral history projects and write a follow-up report. Commenting on the role of the written report, they observe, "When used as an educational tool, written reports should always include interpretation and analysis" (2002, 78). Employing praxis journals in an organizational development course, Dede discusses the assignment's two primary learning objectives: "First, it allows students to identify a situation, event, or condition in their organizations, to reflect upon that situation or event, to interpret it in terms of the theories they discover over the course of a semester, to determine whether theory tends to hold or not in practice, and then to make some predictions about how they might approach the situation if again presented with it. Second, it encourages students to think critically about their experiences in, and with, their organizations" (2002, 291).

These assignments, whether they take the form of journal writing, structured handouts, interviews, Web discussions or, as we shall explore later in this article, reflective essays, attempt to support the synthesis of theory and practice. Supporting such a synthesis requires a structure to give shape to the assignment and, ultimately, to form the basis for the assessment of their work.

I have served as a facilitator of many professional development seminars for college faculty and high school teachers, working with them to develop service-learning and other experiential learning components for their courses. At a certain point in the seminar, our conversations necessarily turn to the assignments faculty make in their courses. We explore the

issue of grading and evaluating these assignments and end up sharing similar concerns: "How can I evaluate a student's experience?" "Students have such varied experiences, how can I possibly compare one against the other?" We inevitably end up with the same conclusion: "The function of reflection in the context of an assessment context isn't entirely clear" (Yancey, 1998, 146).

This article sets out to explain my own experiences bringing a level of rigor to the assessment of assignments that call on students to synthesize the course content with their experiences. An assessment matrix designed specifically for assignments that call for the integration of experiences with course concepts, issues, and ideas will serve as the focal point of the article. The matrix will be brought to life by drawing upon excerpts of reflective essays from some of Melissa's peers from the Fundamentals of Public Administration course. Before introducing this matrix, it is important to explore the theoretical foundations of experiential education in an effort to better understand the ways in which a student can demonstrate that an experience has been educative in nature and to examine why it is important for public affairs educators to develop a habit of reflective thinking as an intended outcome of an academic assignment.

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

John Dewey, arguably the most noted American philosopher of the twentieth century, wrote extensively on the importance of experience to learning. Dewey's work laid the foundation for the development of the field of adult education (Finger and Asun, 2001), the theory of learning organizations (Argyris and Schön, 1978), and the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983). "What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about [a given academic subject]....," Dewey wrote, "if in the process the individual...loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?" (1963, 49). Dewey was concerned with the relational and

associational character of education. He believed that education can and should only occur in the context of active relationships—as instances of communication with others. He saw all communication as potentially educative in nature. In his classic text, *Democracy and Education*, he asked,

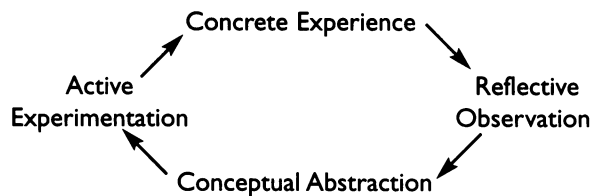
Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing.... The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning (1966, 5-6).

Dewey asserted that, in order for an experience to be educative, there must be an intentional effort to communicate the value of the experience to a person's learning. In the essay "Experience and Education," which he wrote later in life, Dewey identified the role that reflection plays in this process:

We rarely recognize the extent in which our conscious estimates of what is worth while and what is not are due to standards of which we are not conscious at all. But in general it may be said that the things which we take for granted without inquiry or reflection are just the things which determine our conscious thinking and decide our conclusions. And the habitudes which lie below the level of reflection are just those which have been formed in the constant give and take of relationship with others (1963, 18).

David Kolb, building upon the works of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, synthesized the work of these thinkers into a comprehensive theory of experiential education. In Kolb's experiential learning cycle, experiences are continually filtered through a cyclical process that includes the movement between

concrete experiences, reflective observation, conceptual abstractions, and active experimentation.



Kolb (1984) placed value and importance on the cyclical nature of the process, recognizing that it was the role of the educator to facilitate the learner's transition between these phases. Kolb's theory has been widely accepted by experiential educators as an important theoretical construct to draw upon, particularly when efforts are made to formulate a formal reflection process (Miettinen, 2000; Terry, 2001; Zorga, 2002).

A learner, supported by an educator, can enter into this cycle at any point. The learner may begin with a current or prior experience, observe it, and link it to abstract concepts introduced in the class. Or the learner may begin with an abstract concept and seek out experiences that help her or him come to a deeper form of comprehension of the concept. In order for the experiential learning cycle to function effectively, the learner must be given an opportunity to "reflect-on-action" (Schön, 1983), and, in effect, "freeze" (Lewin, 1951) the experience in order to objectify and learn from it.

Argyris and Schön have made their own contributions to experiential learning theory, applying the notion of learning from and through experience to organizational development, management practices, and professional development (1978). In laying out their vision of a learning organization, they assert the importance of having practitioners possess the capacity to question and analyze their taken-for-granted-assumptions about the world, their organization, and their practices in that organization. Argyris and Schön help to explain why it is important to develop our students' reflective capabilities. We only need to turn our attention to the ongoing discussions within public administration and public affairs

circles regarding the relationship between theory and practice and, specifically to the question, "how should our educational programs prepare students to bridge the two?" (Denhardt, 2001; Englehart, 2001; Dede, 2002), to identify an adequate rationale. Public service professionals are producers and consumers of knowledge. The degree to which they are cognizant of their relationship to knowledge hinges on their abilities to be reflective practitioners. Throughout most of his career, Donald Schön attempted to articulate problems associated with the taken-for-granted world. According to Schön, professionals need to make reflection habitual. He lays out a continuum of reflection: beginning with "reflecting-on-action" and eventually progressing to "reflecting-in-action." Effective professionals, he asserts, consistently question their assumptions (1983):

Schön argues that it is by reflecting on our own work—by knowing it, by reviewing it, by discerning patterns in it, by projecting appropriately from those patterns, and by using such projections to hypothesize a new way of thinking about a situation—that we theorize our own practices; that we come to know and understand our work and perhaps thus to improve it (Yancy, 1998, 12).

The relevance of reflective practice to the study and execution of contemporary public administration has received increased attention in recent years (Schmidt, 2000). At its core, the notion of the reflective practitioner helps us to establish a firm link between theory and practice.

THE ASSESSMENT MATRIX

If the development of reflective practitioners is to be an objective in our public affairs courses and programs, the role and value of student experiences in the classroom needs to be rigorously incorporated into course expectations. In one faculty development seminar that I facilitated, involving a group of high school teachers, we set out to create a matrix to assess reflective essay assignments. The matrix format, sometimes referred to as a rubric, usually lists

specific learning objectives on the vertical axis, and a proficiency scale on the horizontal axis. This format for assessment of student learning has become a standard tool in most K-12 school settings and is beginning to appear in higher education. For instance, Martha Dede, in her recent *Journal of Public Affairs Education* article recounting her use of the praxis journal, includes a grading rubric in an appendix (2002).

In contemplating possible outcomes inherent to any piece of structured reflection offered in a class-

room setting, we reviewed the essential elements of experiential learning theory. We gravitated to Kolb's experiential learning cycle, focusing on the need to connect concrete experiences to abstract conceptualizations. Jean Berthiaume, Tom Fluery, Mary Town, Mary Whalen, and I derived the following assessment matrix:²

Across the assessment matrix students may be rated from "No effort" to "Distinguished." We labored a great deal with these terms and all felt a little dissatisfied with them. I have begun to simply ascribe a

Matrix for Assessment of Reflection Assignments

Reflection Assessment Matrix	No Effort 1	Novice 2	Proficient 3	Advanced 4	Distinguished 5
Academic Concepts/ Content/ Issues/Ideas	Little to no evidence.	Vague allusion to concepts.	Accurate knowledge of concepts.	Explores concepts in depth.	Establishes original thoughts in content/concepts.
Experience	Little to no evidence.	Vague description of experience(s).	Provides detailed description of experience(s).	Explores experiences in depth.	Establish original thoughts and insights about the experience(s).
Connections: Synthesis of Concepts and Experience	Little to no evidence.	Vaguely linked concepts to experiences.	Clarity in making connections between concepts and experiences.	Explores connections in depth.	Establishes original thoughts and insights about the connections.
Communicate with Audience	Little to no evidence.	Vague awareness of audience. Lacks clarity of presentation.	Clear awareness of audience. Presentation is direct and to the point.	Engages audience in subject matter.	Influences and inspires audience thinking about subject matter.
Verve: Energy and Enthusiasm in the Expression of Ideas	Little to no evidence.	Some effort to project energy and enthusiasm.	Clear efforts to project energy and enthusiasm.	Effort to project energy and enthusiasm sustained throughout.	Energy and enthusiasm expressed with eloquence, creativity, and originality.

number from 1 to 5 to each column. The purpose of a matrix of this sort is to clearly articulate a learning objective and the stages or levels of proficiency that a student gains in that learning objective.

In designing the matrix, we adapted Kolb's experiential learning cycle to account for the interplay between concrete experiences and abstract conceptualizations. The learner can enter into the cycle at various points—by beginning with concepts and working back to experience, or by beginning with experiences and linking to concepts. As we shall see later, the instructor can often define this point of entry via the outlining of an appropriate framing question. At this point we will examine each component of the matrix in more detail.

Academic Concepts/Content/Issues/Ideas

Success is determined in the context of the typical term paper assignment by students' abilities to demonstrate a mastery of specific academic content. In public affairs courses, this content can be understood as concepts, theories, themes, issues, or ideas raised in assigned readings, lectures, or class discussions. We will be using the term concept or concepts to refer to this content, although it should be noted that we may interchange this term with theories, themes, issues, or ideas. Embedded within any academic content are a finite number of concepts that may be identified by the educator, students, or preferably, all of them. Of course, these concepts can be categorized, classified, and otherwise connected to, or broken down into, many other concepts. Sometimes, these concepts, theories, themes, issues, or ideas are outlined in the course syllabus as course objectives. Other times, they may appear as vocabulary lists or terms that appear at the end of a chapter in a textbook.

For example, consider how Craig, one of Melissa's fellow classmates, demonstrates his comprehension of Woodrow Wilson's role in shaping the field of public administration as we know it today:

Public administration, as an area of study, it turns out, is a relatively new idea. Of course

these have been historic examples documenting the governments of man (Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, etc.), but they are awkward when applied to the American style of government. It was Woodrow Wilson who first recognized the need to develop the field of public administration into a professional discipline (both for study and practice): "we have reached a time when administrative study and creation are imperatively necessary to the well being of our governments..." (Wilson, 1997/1887, 18). Prior to that, it turns out, most public administration posts were more about *who* you knew more than *what* you knew [italics added].

Recognize here how Craig is demonstrating his understanding of Wilson's role in the birth of the field of public administration, a point raised by me and in the readings. His writing on this subject, if sustained throughout an entire essay, would account for a solid term paper, in which secondary sources serve as the primary references.

A student achieves a high level of proficiency in the concepts area by employing particular issues, ideas, or concepts in an appropriate context. For instance, I can understand whether students understand a concept by looking at how they use it to illustrate or make a point. Adequately citing references to concepts is also an integral part of demonstrating that the student has comprehended the concept. In the example above, Craig identifies a quote from Wilson's "The Study of Administration" as a way of documenting Wilson's legitimacy as a founder of the discipline.

Experiences

When asking students to draw upon their own experiences for a course assignment, we may choose to place boundaries on the kinds of experiences from which they may be able to pull. We may require our students to have a certain kind of experience, even going as far as to facilitate the experience for them. For instance, I have taught courses with a service-learning component requiring that students

either work as a group to address some community need or serve independently with a community-based organization. My expectation in such courses is to have the students draw upon these experiences in their course assignments. I have heard colleagues share other examples of facilitated experiences that they helped to create for their students, including role plays, group project work, and community-based research.

Students may also be asked to pull from past experiences accumulated over their lifetimes. Although younger students tend to have fewer experiences to draw from, they are rarely bereft of meaningful experiences. Older students have more experiences from which to illustrate; I have asked graduate students to draw upon their experiences at their workplace, in the context of their careers, their roles as parents, and so on.

Not only can the type of experience be identified, but the volume of experience(s) can be controlled for as well. Students may be asked to refer to a single experience or event, sometimes referred to as a critical incident (Cooper, 1998), in their past. Other times, they may be asked to think in terms of their cumulative experiences over time.

Below, Thomas demonstrates how a critical incident in his past helped to bring his commitment to public administration into focus:

When thinking about where I have been and where I am going, I find myself inextricably linked to the field of public administration. I first gained an interest in it when I was a young reporter, fresh out of college, and very unaware about what the world held in store for me. However, I knew from the very first moment I walked into a municipal building, ready and anxious to make a living based on the words I produced, that I would always somehow, some way, be connected to that. It was the small brick Town Hall in Weathersfield, VT. A daily newspaper out of the "Upper Valley" (Hartford and White River Junction in Vermont; Hanover, Lebanon, and West Lebanon in New Hampshire) had hired me on as a stringer—in other words, I had to

go where they said when they said, and I was paid on an article-by-article basis (certainly not lucrative, but a nice way to start). Weathersfield had recently seen a turnover at the top of its town administration, and was now seeking a new head man/woman.... The selection process had been one a number of people had watched with great interest, and the moment of choosing between three candidates was now at hand. The first candidate was a multiple term selectman, the second was the chief of police, and the third was a young guy from Windsor (about five miles up the road) fresh off receiving his own Master's in Public Administration. The selectman was given the job, after a private session that lasted more than two hours. I filed my story from a pay phone outside a Sunoco station that stays open 24 hours, rain or shine, holiday or Wednesday night.

I was hooked. I knew I wanted to be involved in government at some level, but at this point I had no idea how or where. My MPA vision was beginning to take form.

In terms of the assessment matrix, student proficiency in the area of experience is gauged by the degree to which an experience, or given set of experiences, is described in a thick way. By including rich details of his experiences, some essential to his analysis of the experience—the young candidate for the municipal administrator position "fresh off receiving his own Master's in Public Administration"—some less essential (the detail pertaining to the Sunoco station) but nonetheless important for bringing the experience to life, Thomas provides the reader with a relatively thick description of his experiences.

Although I could not do it for Thomas's class, I usually try to explain to students assigned a reflective essay what I mean by a thick description. I borrow the term from anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), who first used the term to describe what ethnographers have come to appreciate as an essential outcome of their qualitative data collection meth-

ods. Metaphorically, a thick description of experiences treats them as onions, with successive layers of underlying meaning and structure. In a reflective essay assignment, sufficient details regarding the experience should be given. These details should provide some level of depth and/or breadth.

Connections: Synthesis of Concepts and Experiences

A common critique of the experiential learning field (internships, field studies, service-learning, etc.) is that the learning from these kinds of opportunities is somehow less academically rigorous than traditional means of education (Zlotkowski, 1995). An experiential learning activity may lack clear learning objectives. If objectives or outcomes are presumed, they may not be understood as valid learning objectives for the course. For instance, in the context of service-learning, the development of civic or social responsibility is often touted as an important outcome of a service-learning experience (Reinke, 2003). Zlotkowski reminds us that the vast majority of academicians may “agree that moral and civic growth is indeed important, recognize its place in the undergraduate (and graduate) experience—and deny that such concerns have anything to do with their own professional responsibilities” (126). In the case of internships, cooperatives, or practica, faculty may rail against their role in promoting these forms of applied education (Murphy, 1992), claiming that the courses they teach transcend mere vocational training.

These concerns give added credence to the need for devoting sufficient emphasis on the ways in which experiences can be applied to the mastery of existing academic content. Instead of taking away from the core academic content, experiences can help students develop a deeper appreciation and understanding of the content. It is this nexus or synthesis of experience with concepts that makes a concept tangible to the student. Referring back to Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, the synthesis between experiences and concepts occurs within the analysis or conceptual abstraction phase. Experiences—either past or current—that are first observed and represented as the experience compo-

nent in the assessment matrix are then related to the conceptual abstractions inherent in course concepts, issues, ideas, or themes.

The most common form of synthesis that I come across is when students illustrate how a particular concept relates to a given experience. Take, for example, the use of Levine’s concept of coproduction that Andrea uses to describe her current role with the state Department of Health:

The article by Charles Levine provided the best description of my current role as a prevention consultant for the Vermont Department of Health. Levine discusses five alternative methods for the government to deliver services, one of which is “devolving service responsibility” or coproduction: “the joint provision of public services by public agencies and service consumers” (Levine, 2001/1984, 287). In my current role in government I consider myself to be a community organizer working to increase the community’s capacity to deliver effective substance abuse prevention services. The role consists of partnering with the community; training and mentoring; and assisting in the development of coalitions. Another part of the position is giving out community grants to financially support effective prevention programming.

Here Andrea defines coproduction and then articulates how this definition fits with her own job definition. In conversations with me over the course of the semester, I knew that Andrea was having a hard time, in her own words, “finding myself in these readings.” When we came around to the readings relating to role of citizen participation, particularly Levine’s “Citizenship and Service Delivery: The Promise of Coproduction,” she came up to me at the end of class to let me know she had made a connection, which eventually appeared in her reflective essay.

In another example, Craig, a dispatcher for the city’s emergency response department (police, fire, ambulance), takes Lipsky’s concept of the street-level

bureaucrat and relates it to his need to have more discretionary authority in future roles:

Currently I am in a position that Michael Lipsky termed a “street-level bureaucrat” (Lipsky, 1997/1980, 401). He defined the street-level bureaucrat as those “who grant access to government programs and provides services with them” (Lipsky, 1980, 401). That’s me. But, I don’t feel bureaucratic. However, I can understand why my clients (I don’t believe I have ever thought of them as clients, either) might view me as such. After some analysis, it turns out that I actually have little bureaucratic authority after all: although I rarely get to choose as to whether or not someone gets service, I am often involved with many things that directly affect the delivery of that service. Often, my discretion is limited to deciding who gets that service ahead of others, or how much of what kind of service they will get. This seems a small part of the job to me, but for the person who has an emergency, I become the gatekeeper needed to help.

But much of that help is prescribed to me. I have little discretion sometimes. The form and function of my job has been pre-determined by those who are higher up the organizational chart. So, if I am to remain interested in the field, and put my work experience to best use in order to pursue a career path, I will need to find a way to get to those places within the bureaucracy that makes those kind of decision. Rather than make choices that affect one person at a time, I could be making those decisions that affect hundreds, or even thousands.

Craig begins this excerpt by defining the street-level bureaucrat. He then links this concept to his own position as an emergency response dispatcher, alluding to conversations we had been having regarding the whole issue of treating citizens as

clients and consumers. In the second paragraph, he explores the issue of discretion vis-a-vis one’s place in the organizational structure, a topic covered early on in the course. Craig concludes the paragraph by expressing his future intentions to be in a position that will allow him to exercise greater discretion. Craig’s excerpt illustrates how students can analyze their experiences by developing links between two or more concepts—in this case the relationship between street-level bureaucrats, discretionary authority, and organizational structure. Craig’s excerpt also demonstrates how concepts can be used to link two or more experiences; he compares his present and future jobs in public administration.

Using experiences to link concepts together and concepts to link experiences together, students articulate a deepened form of synthesis. Referring again back to Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, the use of abstract conceptualizations to make sense or meaning out of a series of experiences—and vice versa—is an expression of the cyclical nature of the learning process.

Returning to the issue of assessment, students who merit more advanced or distinguished evaluations in the area of synthesis on the assessment matrix are likely to use the assignment to establish some original thoughts about and insights into the often intricate relationships between concepts and experiences. All of the student excerpts represented above merited high marks in the first three rows of the matrix: concepts, experiences, and the synthesis of the two. They demonstrated a mastery of the concepts, and clearly were able to employ them in a variety of complex situations and contexts.

Despite the quality of these students’ work, we must guard against having students draw upon their experiences inappropriately by giving over too much authority to them. The term *exemplification* is used in qualitative research to describe instances in which researchers inappropriately use singular or thin examples drawn from observations or transcriptions to enforce a previously held or deduced theory. In cases of *exemplification*, “one receives the image of

a proof when there is none, and the theory obtains a richness of detail that it did not earn" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 5).

In student reflective essays, in which the burden of empirical proof is less rigorous, exemplification is most problematic when the student's example reinforces previously held stereotypes. In past undergraduate service-learning courses, I have come across instances in which a student's encounter with, say, a homeless person, leads him to reinforce a stereotypical image of homeless people. In this case, I tried to engage the student in a discussion of his assumptions going into the encounter. I asked him to consider how generalizable his limited experience could be, and I believe I got him to understand the need to at least qualify his comments.

Communication with Audience

A student's ability to synthesize experiences and concepts can be couched in terms of his or her abilities to communicate ideas coherently. Thus, the fourth row of the matrix is oriented toward the student's capacities to express thoughts effectively in writing. I have a high regard for students' abilities to communicate with their intended audience, be it in an academic, professional, or personal context. Grammatical mistakes can sometimes be numerous enough to begin to distract me from comprehending the content of the essay. Ideas may be expressed in a confusing or haphazard manner. An assignment that effectively communicates with its audience will ultimately have an effect on the reader, who may become persuaded, inspired, or otherwise influenced in some way or another.

I believe one of the great joys in working with adult learners is being in a position to learn from them, especially when they have effectively communicated their thoughts and ideas to project some keen insight into the nature of topics under study.

Verve: Energy and Enthusiasm in the Expression of Ideas

Before joining up with other teachers to design the assessment matrix, I employed very loose criteria for judging the quality of reflective assignments. Student work needed to be written well, with ideas

clearly expressed; it needed to address the question at hand; and the student had to have put some thought and energy into it. My desire for any kind of learning enterprise is that learners take an active role in their education, a decidedly constructivist, student-centered position. Dewey (1963/1938) referred to the active role that learners must take as the "internalization of authority," meaning that learners need to intrinsically comprehend and essentially own their motivations for learning. In the reflective essay, this gets translated into a student's ability to establish his or her own motivational reasoning for writing and ultimately learning from the assignment. As subjective as it sounds, I have come to derive a kind of intuitive appreciation for the amount of effort, energy, and enthusiasm a student puts into a reflective essay assignment. Ultimately, I want my students to carry out these assignments not simply to succeed in class to please me, but in order to learn something that is important to them. I find graduate students more apt to understand this; as fully realized adult learners, they are most often pursuing their studies out of a genuine desire to learn and/or a strong sense of the ultimate utility of their education.

In sharing this sentiment with my colleagues, I was excited to find that one person, Jean Berthiaume, uses the term *verve* to describe this and employed this term in his assessment matrices. It is important to note that the level of enthusiasm in the expression of ideas is not employed to ensure that my students have to agree with a given perspective. It implies that students find a way to express their internal motivation for engaging in the assignment. Essentially, the *verve* variable comprises an assessment of an attitude. Attitudes are interpreted and cannot be derived objectively. Thus, I generally err on the side of giving my students the benefit of the doubt, giving full marks at the outset in this area and only taking points away when their lack of effort is obvious.

THE REFLECTIVE ESSAY ASSIGNMENT AND ITS USES

Over the past nine years, I have experimented with the five-page reflective essay format in a variety of courses for undergraduate and graduate students.

These reflective essay assignments are often used to complement more traditional assignments such as research studies, group project work, and term papers.

Some of the courses in which the reflective essay assignment has been applied have had a service learning component to them, usually a requirement to complete a certain number of hours in some community-based organization or institution or the completion of some complex research for such organizations. For example, in an undergraduate course on Civil Society in the United States, I asked my students to link their service-learning experiences in various nonprofit organizations to such topics as social capital theory and trends in the nonprofit and government sectors. I have used service learning in an undergraduate ethics course in which students explored their own value and belief systems in light of community internships they were in across the city. The reflective essay assignment has also been applied in an undergraduate curriculum development course for service learning teaching assistants, a graduate-level educational theory course, and an experimental course titled *The Reflective Practitioner*, geared toward current Volunteers in Service to America (VISTAs).

I have also offered the reflective essay assignment in graduate-level courses in which the content is particularly applicable to at least some part of a student's past, present, or future experiences. For example, in the *Fundamentals of Public Administration* course highlighted earlier, I ask my students to write a reflection paper exploring the nature of their identity as a current and/or future public administrator, with specific references to the literature we have been reading in the class. In an *Introduction to Research Methods* course for students in public affairs, social service, and educational leadership master's degree programs, I ask my students to write an essay exploring how three paradigms of social science research relate to their professional practices. In these essays, the practicing administrators, counselors, or teachers in the class are likely to discuss the dominance of a particular social science paradigm within their chosen professional field by providing examples from their own practice.

Framing Questions

The reflective essay is brought into focus by a framing question or a set of framing questions that give some structure to the essay, providing students with guidance on the particular concept or concepts they are to address, and/or the nature of the experiences to draw from. Some generic framing questions that I have used in service learning courses include:

- Choose a concept, an issue, or a problem that has been emphasized in your class and relate it to your community service work as specifically as possible. Your experience can reinforce or somehow discredit the concept, issue, or problem.
- Describe an internal or external conflict that has surfaced for you as a result of your community service work. Explain the factors that contribute to the conflict and how you might resolve the situation.
- Discuss a social problem that you have come into contact with during the course of your service work. Explain what you believe to be the root causes of this problem, and how your service may or may not contribute to its alleviation.

The framing question used by Melissa, Craig, Andrea, and Thomas in *Fundamentals of Public Administration* reads,

- Drawing upon your own past experiences and/or future ambitions explore the nature of your identity as a current and/or future public administrator. Some possible avenues to explore these themes include:
 - a. Your identity as a professional, be it a sense of external affinity with a profession or as a professional public administrator.
 - b. Your identity as a leader and the role that your ethical and philosophical dispositions play in shaping your sense of yourself as a leader.
 - c. Your identity as a citizen administrator, as one who is responsive and accountable to the public at large.
 - d. Other approaches are certainly welcome.

The framing question provided to my Introduction to Research Methods graduate students reads,

Given the three paradigms of social science discussed in class and the text, which paradigm do you personally find most suitable to you and your interpretation of knowledge and inquiry? Compare your personal disposition to the disposition(s) of your chosen profession and discuss which paradigm of social science tends to dominate your profession's discourse. Explore the factors that make this so. Draw upon the characteristics of each paradigm as raised in the text and your own experiences in your response.

The framing question can be articulated in a way that gives students guidance about the kinds of experiences on which they are to draw. Students in one undergraduate class were asked to link the research on the development of social responsibility to their own experiences. For one essay assignment, the students were given the choice of one of two ways to incorporate their experiences:

- Draw upon a "critical incident" that occurred in your life in which, upon reflecting on it, you had an "ah-ha" experience that either set you on a new/different path or affirmed the path you are already on. Explore the role that any of the characteristics, factors and processes identified by [the author] played a role in this moment of critical insight.
- Focusing on one or more characteristics, factors, or processes raised by [the author], explore how your past and present service experiences have helped to give shape to your sense of social responsibility.

Ensuring That Students Are at the Center of the Learning

Over the years, I have tried to impart to my students a sense that the reflective essay should be viewed not only as an assignment from me, but as an

opportunity to investigate the relevance and meaning of the content matter. "A good reflective essay," I tell them, "is written for you as much as for me." I try to place the reflective essay in the context of my own teaching philosophy; a philosophy that values an active, adult approach to learning.

A key to ensuring that students take an active role in their learning is for instructors to be transparent in their expectations. The education field has recognized this approach as the constructivist (Brooks, 1993; Laroche, Bednarz, and Garrison, 1998) or student-centered education (Glasgow, 1997; Phifer, 2002). Constructivist or student-centered approaches to education view the student as imbued with a certain authority for directing and understanding their own learning process.

In an effort to have students engage in such epistemological contemplations, I recommend the following practices accompany the reflective essay assignment:

- The assessment matrix be reviewed with the students at the outset.
- After presenting the framing question for the essay, have the students break into small groups of two or three and have them discuss how they might approach the question at hand.
- Shortly after they turn in the essay, debrief the process of writing the essay. Compare the reflective format to other kinds of assignments they have had. Discuss the process they undertook in writing the essay and collectively develop strategies for improving their work.
- Draw in the content of the students' reflective essays into class discussion, especially shortly after the assignment has been completed. Sharing their work with the group provides yet another opportunity for reflection, this time with the students and their accounts of experience and synthesis dictating the direction of the conversation.

In some classes, where a series of reflective essays are assigned, we may routinely spend time generating a list of concepts, theories, issues, or ideas

already raised in class and the texts and think collectively about the ways in which the students' experiences may be related, connected, or synthesized with them. Sometimes these class exercises lead to the generation of a framing question for the essay assignment. In essence, the process undertaken to prepare for and debrief the reflective essay lends to the creation of a "reflective classroom" (Yancy, 1998).

Reading and Assessing the Essays

I read each essay at least twice, the first time for content and grammar. During the second pass, I usually note the areas in which concepts are raised (underlined), instances in which experiences are shared (a squiggle underline) and points of synthesis (with the appropriate text getting a box around it.) This gives the students and me a sense of the frequency and relationship between the interplay of concepts and experiences.

Despite the existence of the assessment matrix, I still possess an apprehension toward grading and resist assigning a letter grade to my students' reflective essays whenever possible. However, I often return a copy of the marked-up assessment matrix, complete with my ratings of their proficiencies across the categories. I tally up their total score, but only use this score as a way to provide a benchmark for the student. In some instances, as in the case of the Fundamentals of Public Administration assignment highlighted in this article, students are given the opportunity to revise and edit their pieces.

I write comments in the margins and summary comments at the end of the essay. Part of my reasoning for requiring a five-page reflective essay, over, say, journaling, is that with the more structured, usually briefer assignment that the essay format provides, I am able to spend more time commenting on the essays.

If there is time to permit revisions and edits, scores on the assessment are bound to rise. If I have assigned multiple reflective essays throughout the semester, the students and I can track their scores. Hopefully, as the semester progresses and they become more familiar with the format, the scores rise. If several reflective essays form the basis of a major component of the course grade, I review the

series of essays that a student has written in total. In essence, a series of four or five essays serves as a portfolio of the student's work and progress over the semester.

Student Perceptions of the Assignment

Despite my efforts to ensure that students succeed with the reflective essay assignment, I still come across those who struggle with the format. I have had students who have never been given permission to write in the first person. "Can I use 'I' in this essay?" ask some of them sheepishly. Some excellent writers struggle with the format. Having perfected the term paper genre, they have learned to write a good term paper by discussing concepts, issues, and ideas at the level of abstraction, or have come to use secondary materials to back up their arguments or perspectives.

With every student who struggles with the assignment, I inevitably come across a student who really succeeds with this genre of writing. More comfortable with writing in the first person, these students tend to excel with more hands-on learning. When asked to think and write about their experiences, they are capable of relating the concepts, issues, and ideas they have been asked to think about in class to the real world.

Kolb's learning style inventory, developed to coincide with the experiential learning cycle, provides a useful explanation of the differences in student dispositions toward reflective assignments. Without going into too much detail about the inventory, Kolb's theory, which has been turned into a self-assessment instrument (Kolb, 1999), articulates the ways in which people are predisposed toward one form of learning or another. Students may come into the classroom predisposed toward concrete experiences, rather than conceptual abstraction, or active experimentation over reflective observation.

I have colleagues in human development and social psychology who have their students complete Kolb's learning style inventory early on in the semester. The students' learning styles are then transparent to the faculty and the students, with this knowledge used to support the students' learning in the course.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATING REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS

The assessment matrix provides me with an entry point into discussing the importance of reflection to practice with my students, providing a basis from which to formally assess the quality of student work. Through my reflective essay assignments, students are asked to critically examine their taken-for-granted assumptions about their experiences as well as the concepts raised in the class.

The notions of transparency and intentionality should lie at the heart of any effort to develop an assessment process that is effective and meaningful. The introduction of the assessment matrix into my classes has provided an opportunity for us to talk about the relationship between their lived experiences and the concepts, theories, issues, and ideas we are addressing in the class.

By teaching students how to write good reflective assignments, and other expressions of experiential learning, we can provide them with opportunities to model effective, reflective practice. One of the overarching, meta goals for the reflective essay format and assessment matrix presented here lies in the opportunities they provide for students to think about how they come to know what they know. By doing so, they come to appreciate how they learn, and in the process, how they integrate the academic content they are exposed to in my courses with what they will be, or currently are, practicing in the public sector. Thus, by paying increased attention to the ways in which we assist students in linking their lived experiences to course content, we are, out of necessity, supporting their development as reflective practitioners.

Such development, however, requires that students take advantage of these learning opportunities. Ultimately, reflective practitioners need to possess a commitment to learning. A fellow MPA student and classroom colleague to Melissa, Craig, Andrea, and Thomas, Aaron writes of his budding awareness of his commitment to public service, and in so doing, firmly establishes himself on the path of reflective practice:

Vowing to never again enter the business world, I considered exploring public service. Having my days free and my intellect otherwise unoccupied, I began volunteering at a local high school in an alternative educational program for teenage mothers. My enthusiasm for and investment in the position must have been apparent, for I was soon hired as the paraeducator for the program. Though "finding your calling" seems to me trite and over-romanticized, I can think of no other words to describe this experience. The calling I experienced was grounded in a sense of service; I believed that I was empowering people who faced daunting social and economic barriers. McSwite describes a vocation as, "a calling to a specific line of work to which one devotes oneself and which functions as a connection to a transcendent level" (McSwite, 2002, 19), and the transcendent value I now placed on my work, and the positive sense of mission and service which inhered to it, called me to public service and education. Again I packed my car, this time sharing it with my wife and newborn son, and drove to Vermont to pursue a [master's] degree....

By equating his commitment to public service to the notion of vocation, a concept discussed in our class, Aaron was able to come to comprehend and appreciate a deeper meaning behind his actions. He and his colleagues in class accomplished this and other feats of learning because they possessed a desire to learn. What greater learning objective is to be achieved?

By requiring course assignments that call upon students to link experiences to concepts raised in class, we are helping them establish a foundation from which to carry out reflective practice. Although they may not always be in a position to stop and reflect on action, they may be better prepared to reflect in action, reacquainting themselves with issues, ideas, theories, and concepts introduced to them in their public affairs courses to inform their decisions and bring deeper meaning and appreciation to their work.

NOTE

1. Students' names have been changed.
2. The author wishes to express his deep appreciation to Jean Berthiaume, Tom Fluery, Mary Town, and Mary Whalen, who, along with the author, first developed the assessment matrix presented here. He also wishes to thank *J-PAE's* editor and peer reviewers for their feedback on earlier iterations of this article.

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