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Finding our Why: Combining Sinek's 'Golden Circle' with Service Learning and Critical Reflection

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Finding our Why: Combining Sinek's 'Golden Circle' with Service-Learning and Critical Reflection

Introduction

The promise of education leading to a brighter future has led many students into substantial debt in the midst of a global work shortage and recession (Perry, 2012). It seems that those who are surviving and thriving are those who approach situations without a prescribed set of rules and preconceived answers for the problems they face. It seems the successful exemplars of our generation are asking questions, pursuing answers, and evaluating outcomes. Yet, currently it seems to be unclear what it is that sets these thinkers apart from their peers. There are numerous individual accounts of youth finishing their studies dissatisfied with what they chose to do, or uncertain of what to do next (Perry, 2012). What seems to be rarely asked of youth is this: Why do they want to do what they want to do?

Simon Sinek (2009) describes the 'Golden Circle' as a way of thinking and presenting ideas. He believes that we should first identify why we do what we do, then address how we do it, and end with describing what we do. Sinek continues by stating that, 'people do not buy [into] what you do, they buy [into] why you do it'. He cites the likes of Apple and Martin Luther King Jr. as leaders in this manner of thought, and describes his thoughts of how everyone could benefit from it. In this article we discuss what it means to 'find your why', and propose a model of self-development based on critical reflection following service and community engagement centered experiential learning in New Zealand. Moreover, we will explore how critical reflection served as the bonding agent between our service experiences, learning, and finding our greater why.

Jason Pemberton is a recent graduate (May 2012) from the University of Canterbury, having studied Psychology, Philosophy, and Human Resources. Presently he is in a full time volunteer position with the Volunteer Army Foundation, a charitable trust established after the earthquakes in order to continue the momentum of youth volunteerism in the community. He plays music and in all his actions attempts to leave his community better than he found it.

Andrew Chalmers is preparing to graduate from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, having studied Human and Physical Geography. His graduation is scheduled for December 2012. Presently he is serving as President of the Student Volunteer Army, the student volunteer organization established after the earthquakes in order to engage students with the community.

Dr. Lane Perry is a Lecturer in the College of Education at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand and also serves as the Director for the Emerging Leaders Development Program. His key areas of research are in innovative and engaging pedagogies, curriculum design, and experiential learning.

Dr. Billy O'Steen is a Senior Lecturer of Higher Education in the College of Education at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand and has experience in teaching with service-learning and other engaging, innovative pedagogies there and in the United States. Billy has given presentations all over the world on experiential education and has published extensively in this field.
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The Setting: Christchurch, New Zealand

The particular catalyst that fostered the opportunities and ideas discussed in this article came about as a result of nearly 11,000 earthquakes and aftershocks. This period of time for the Canterbury Region of New Zealand began on September 4, 2010, when a magnitude 7.1 earthquake devastated the region. February 22, 2011 saw a significantly more damaging 6.3 magnitude earthquake shake the region and the city of Christchurch to its core. It was a result of these events that the Student Volunteer Army (SVA) was born and provided assistance to thousands of residents throughout the city in their time of need and in Christchurch’s darkest hour. With over 9,000 students responding, in a student-led, managed, organized and coordinated army, they provided over 75,000 person hours and helped clear over 400,000 tons of silt from damaged properties to date. Furthermore, the SVA has provided meals, clean water, and guidance to residents in need, and are continuing to be an influential recovery organization and an inspirational beacon of hope in their community.

For Christchurch, it was an Army unlike anyone had ever seen before. To date there have been six operations in response to earthquakes from the SVA and significant opportunities are being considered by the University of Canterbury (UC) for incorporating service, learning, reflection, and critical reflection into the curriculum. Finally, the SVA’s organizing of nearly 9,000 student volunteers coupled with the creation of a course (CHCH101) designed to connect the students’ service experiences with academic content through critical reflection, served as the catalyst for integrating service-learning and community engagement into the strategic renewal plan of the UC (O’Steen & Perry, 2012). Table 1 presents a timeline of milestones achieved over the past four years with regard to service-learning, community engagement, and UC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Significant Milestone</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 2012</td>
<td>222nd UC student completes CHCH101: Rebuilding Christchurch, the only explicit service-learning course in New Zealand and one that must be taken as an overload because it does not fulfill any degree requirements (yet).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2011</td>
<td>UC Vice Chancellor Dr. Rod Carr states, “I believe there are four components that make a UC graduate stand out from the crowd... thirdly, they should all have the opportunity for a community engagement experience alongside their academic programme” (Carr, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>New Zealand Prime Minister John Key presents inaugural UC Community Engagement Awards to leaders of the Student Volunteer Army.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2011</td>
<td>UC Recovery Plan states: &quot;Expand the service-learning offering to existing and new students and as a differentiator among New Zealand universities&quot; (p. 20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2011</td>
<td>CHCH101 is offered for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>UC Academic Board approves for CHCH101 to be</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol2/iss3/6
Table 1. Timeline of Significant Milestones for Service-Learning at UC.

On Reflective and Critical Thinking

While UC's consideration of community engagement was based on the actions of the SVA, its integration into the curriculum is based on the research on the role of critical reflection in service-learning. Kember, Leung, Jones, Loke, McKay, Sinclair, Tse, Webb, Wong, Wong, and Yueng (2000) explored the idea of measuring reflection and reflective thinking in an education setting, ultimately developing a four-scale instrument establishing and measuring four constructs; habitual action, understanding, reflection, and critical reflection. Looking at the comparison groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students, it was found that greater scores on each construct are related to higher levels of education. Meaning, that after a comparison of mean scores (t-test) between the undergraduate and postgraduate groups, there was a statistically significant (at a .05 level) difference identified between the two groups on each of the four scales measured by the questionnaire.

This determined that students who spend more time and effort in the reflection and critical reflection constructs have reported higher levels of learning. Furthermore, it was established that students enrolled as postgraduates were more likely than their undergraduate counterparts to engage in reflection or critical reflection, while the undergraduate research participants were more likely to engage in habitual action. This was attributed to the postgraduate group's emphasis on reflection as an integral aspect of the curriculum and their experiences as practicing nurses outside of class. This connection between academic content, a formal reflection process, and experience is a robust one that will be explored organically within the experiences we had following the Christchurch earthquakes and artificially within the responsive pedagogy of service-learning.
Using this instrument as a framework for the depth and process of learning, there is a fit with the O'Steen, Peny, Cammock, Kingham, Pawson, Stowell, and Peny (2011) service-learning model, which attributed an observed increase in engagement levels from students with the learning process through the integration of service-learning. Furthermore, it is a concern of this article to determine the relationship between the constructs of reflection and critical reflection with the model presented in O'Steen et al. (2011).

**On a Model of Service-Learning**

O'Steen et al. (2011) investigated the area of student engagement within UC through the teaching method of service-learning. By looking at two existing courses at UC that based a large portion of their teaching methods around service-learning, they were able to establish an understanding of the impacts that service-learning had on the levels of engagement students encountered throughout the learning experience. It was found that as levels of real-world interaction increased in the teaching environment, the process of learning took on a new form, and the resultant learning was discovered to be longer lasting, of greater impact, and overall more meaningful and engaging for students. Seeing this model brings into question the role that critical reflection may have had on the students' experiences. For example, the O'Steen et al. (2011) and Peny (2011) model determined that students had different experiences in the service-learning courses than in their other courses and that these different experiences led to personal growth. The experiences that were identified as different, and subsequently fostered these students' personal growth were: being part of a group or purpose (internal and external to university), active learning (hands-on and creative thinking), and what they were doing was worthwhile, needed, and intrinsically valuable (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. An Emergent Model of Service-Learning in a New Zealand Context (Peny, 2011, p. 255).](https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol2/iss3/6)
It appeared that the students were able to identify and support the emergent themes of O'Steen et al.'s (2011) and Perry's (2011) model through reflection on their service-learning experiences through reflection papers, reflective interviews, and group reflections. The themes were extrapolated from those sources of data and therefore are essentially based on guided and unguided reflection. For example, when the participants were being interviewed, this was a form of reflection as dialogue and through these interviews and focus groups students were able to come to these themes in a reflective way. This aligns with findings that reflection is a key component to successfully facilitated service-learning environments (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000).

**Connecting Reflective Thinking and Service-Learning in a New Zealand Context**

The process of taking students beyond the classroom and engaging them with the community through service in real-world situations provides opportunities for learning to occur independently of a specific curriculum. This provides a student with the potential to engage more with the learning process and learning outcomes and subsequently ensures room for reflection and critical reflection to occur throughout the learning experience. The asking of more complex questions versus the acceptance of simplistic answers makes the CHCH101 service-learning course framework relevant, applicable, and valuable. This course framework is one that is fundamentally designed around the tenets of reflection and critical reflection presented in Kember et al. (2000). Furthermore, it seems to be the elusive and ambiguous component to the model presented in O'Steen et al. (2011). Again, there is no direct recognition of the role of reflection or critical reflection in the O'Steen et al. (2011) model, though there is a link between the research methods and opportunities for reflection and discussion of the students’ experiences. These two ideas are the theoretical underpinnings for our experiences as SVA leaders in the student movement of community engagement in New Zealand.

**Methodological Disclaimer for the Data Presented in this Article (auto means self; ethnos means people; grapho means to write)**

According to Marechal (2010), "autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing" (p. 43). This is similar to what was once referred to as insider ethnography where a researcher's personal experiences are explored in connection with the phenomenon being investigated. Within education research, a connection is made between personal experiences and the wider educational meanings and understandings that emerge from an inquiry. In subscribing to this type of inquiry, it is hoped that as "insiders" to the phenomenon being investigated, we can provide insight and perspectives that are inclusive of the culture being investigated and the themes that emerge. We were insiders and a part of this experience. Now, upon reflection, we can analyze our experiences and offer a new interpretation, authentic understanding, and perspective on the relationship between critical reflection and service-learning.
Data was acquired from personal interviews and discussions between two researchers/participants (Jason Pemberton and Andrew Chalmers) and reflection upon artifacts collected during our time immersed in the field where the phenomenon occurred. The data collection and analysis process was then audited and confirmed by Dr's Perry and O'Steen. In this following section, data from Jason will be presented and analyzed by Andrew and the data from Andrew will be presented and analyzed by Jason.

The Relevance of Kember 's Four-Scale Construct of Reflective Thinking: Establishing the Orbits of the Critical Reflection Loop

The Critical Reflection Loop is a proposed model of experiential learning and self-development. It has been created from the ideas of O'Steen et al. (2011) and Kember et al. (2000) alongside and from the experiences of participants in this study.

By using this model as a metaphorical description, a person is in an ongoing state of clockwise circular motion, whereby the diameter of the circle is proportional to depth of thought on a particular topic or behavior and the thickness of the path demonstrates the frequency this person would spend in a particular orbit. The model also allows for the possibility that no learning is occurring, whereby the point would be static. Typically, a learner moves in a small circle, passing over habitual action (HA) and understanding (U), where only minor amendments are being made to thoughts, behavior, perspective, or action. Occasionally, a series of minor understandings may culminate together; thus triggering a deeper thought process of reflection (R). In practical terms, this can be considered an "Aha moment", whereby seemingly unrelated pieces of information are discovered to be part of a bigger picture or key elements within the learner's new knowledge. This is primarily concerned with a formal reflection process (e.g., Kolb’s What? So What? Now What?, Clayton’s DEAL Model, etc.) and the questions and
dialogue that would guide this process. A subject may move around the HA-U-R loop several times in some reflective experiences before resuming a HA-U state. As a result of the R experience, the subject may markedly change their HA and U processes and subsequent interpretations of previously established processes. This reflection process is probably the most extended experience by Kember's undergraduate students and not even necessarily reached by all.

On exceptionally rare occasions, an R experience may result in further depth of thought where the learner may undertake critical reflection (CR). CR is characterized by dramatic re-evaluation of fundamental thoughts or beliefs, and can result in life changing decisions, or exploring whole new domains of thought or understanding that was previously uncharted by the learner. Moments of CR may take place over large periods of time and involve cycling through HA, U, R and CR. These episodes can be triggered by unprecedented exposure to new information, extreme circumstances, or changes in an environment; such as, intensely traumatic or emotionally involved experiences. This is the level of reflection reached occasionally by Kember's post-graduate students.

Andrew's Analysis: Jason on Experience and Critical Reflection

For us, who were both undergraduate students at the time of our key experiences, the triggers have been multifaceted and arguably continual. Initial experiences with the earthquakes and subsequent response operations (see www.sva.org.nz for background information; O'Steen & Perry, 2012), in conjunction with relationship breakdowns and challenges against faith, sat on top of opportunities to analyze the things we had seen, done, and thought. Jason describes the effect that this process has had on his life:

After being directly asked to discuss my experiences through the earthquakes, I began to inadvertently fall through the reflection process. By simply collecting my scattered thoughts and memories, I found myself able to derive surprisingly large amounts of value from them. Not only from these thoughts, but subsequent thoughts about my thoughts. By taking the time to think about what I had been thinking and doing, I pulled the plug on a lot of stuff in my head that I didn’t realize was in there. Until this moment, this type or level of thinking was uncharted territory for me. It wasn’t long until this ‘self-meta-analysis’ began to overflow into other areas of my life, greatly improving my interpersonal communication, cooking, guitar playing, and speaking. My reaction to the earthquakes has changed the lives of others...talking and thinking about the earthquake experiences has literally changed my life-for the better.

With this passage and particularly this statement, "...not only from these thoughts, but subsequent thoughts about my thoughts..." Jason has clearly identified a key ingredient needed for the critical reflection orbit to extend to that point. Thinking about his actions is aligned with his perspective of reflection, but an intentional thinking about his thinking or thought process is an alignment with his perspective of critical reflection. For that time spent considering his thought process and what he truly valued, Jason was able to enter “uncharted territory” cognitively speaking. Furthermore, Jason has attributed much of his formalized reflection on his experiences to his time spent as a tutor in the CHCH01 service-learning course.
Jason’s Analysis: Andrew on Experience and Critical Reflection

Andrew offers similar perspectives and sentiments on the influence his involvement with the SVA, earthquake recovery, and CHCH101 has had on his life.

It is in day to day life that I feel I am just existing, passing from one day to the next not learning much, not really digging or developing myself…this can be perceived as an interpretation of habitual action. Consider for a time, that you are at the computer typing; the typing is a habitual action, nothing new, just a simple process on repeat. It is assumed that you are essentially in a loop of repeating a process with no new learning occurring. However you learn a short cut key that increases your efficiency. It is this learning that takes you from the orbit of habitual action and transports you into the orbit of gaining understanding. I see the value in using that new understanding to ask questions that can only be answered with the acquisition of new information. It is this level of contemplation that can be equated to reflection. This phase of question asking and meaning making is essential to my process of learning and also establishes a more thorough and robust level of cognition.

It is easy to get stuck in the loop of habitual action, gaining some understanding, followed by developing that habitual action slightly, building understanding and then back into the loop of living each day the same. However, for me, being in Christchurch following the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 the habitual action cycle was dramatically thrown into a new loop with regard to the learning opportunities that developed outside of the typical classroom setting along with the reflective process that occurred.

For me, being a part of a team of students that over a six-month period deployed 9,000 volunteers to the streets of Christchurch to assist, there are tremendous amounts that can be learnt, built on, and utilized in my everyday life. Some of this was achieved through habitual action regarding the knowledge that already existed, but knowledge was quickly gained through my experience of being a cog in a wheel of a rapidly growing machine, or army, of volunteers.

At the end of each day of service, time was taken to reflect on the activities, processes, successes, and failures of the day. This was critical in maintaining an effective mechanism to provide support and assistance to the people of Christchurch. It is this process of taking time to reflect on the understanding that has been gained, and reassessing the habitual action that has been quietly churning away in the background. Interestingly, this was one of the first times I had to formally reflect upon the greater meaning my experiences had on my life’s purpose. It is in these moments that we can re-order, streamline, and make efficient the processes, and habits in our lives. Overall, creating a more engaged learning process, with intentional learning outcomes clear to each student, opportunity for active reflection on what has been done, and how it was achieved is the penultimate level of the critical reflection loop. For me, this ultimate level of the Critical Reflection Loop is reserved for understanding why the process, challenge, endeavor, experience was even undertaken in the first place.
Andrew illuminates many points in his journey through the Critical Reflection Loop. He determined that his experiences reflecting during his volunteer service, “was one of the first times [he] had to formally reflect upon the greater meaning [his] experiences had on [his] life’s purpose. It is in these moments that we can re-order, streamline, and make efficient the processes, and habits in our lives... for me [the] ultimate level of the Critical Reflection Loop is reserved for understanding why the process, challenge, endeavor, experience was even undertaken in the first place”. From these experiences and subsequent reflection, demonstrated in the Critical Reflection Loop, Andrew was able to establish his “Why?” while learning more about himself.

This is our interpretation of the Critical Reflection Loop. It was from our critical reflection on the model offered by O’Steen et al. (2011), Kember et al. (2000), and our personal experiences as leaders of the SVA, our response to the 2010 and 2011 Christchurch earthquakes, and our roles as tutors for CHCH101.

Looking Back... Moving Forward

Having been a part of the experiences of rebuilding the Christchurch community since September 2010 and being exposed to a time of national emergency, trial, perseverance, and triumph as students, we were able to make a positive difference to so many. In addition, the use of a service-learning framework for the process of reflection and critical reflection has been effective in our personal growth. Now, we look back, reminisce, and we are reminded of all the events and challenges we faced. We are reminded of the opportunities we have had that have taken us out of our respective habitual action loops, added understanding, and given us time for formal reflection. These situations or questions we have faced have made us stop, and ask, Why? It is in these moments that our life has changed, been developed, reassessed, and essentially given a therapeutic overhaul. It is from these moments of critical reflection that we are now better prepared for what is next. We are more aware of the effectiveness of reflection, and will seek to step out of our habitual action loop more often to develop ourselves into the best that we can be. The point of connection between service-learning, reflective thinking, and finding our greater why was evident in our experiences as SVA leaders following New Zealand’s most devastating natural disaster to date. From this experience and subsequent reflection, we have been changed for the better.
Works Cited


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