

The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 2

October 2017

Editor's Notes

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Recommended Citation

Fields, Joyce (2017) "Editor's Notes," *The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1.

Available at: <https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol7/iss1/2>

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The Editor's Notes

It is my custom to meet with my intern students first thing Monday mornings in a seminar to receive their reflections, share experiences, and problem solve. I have come to realize even more deeply through this weekly session, that while students may share common situations, locations, and experiences, they do not experience the same, or even similar internships. It is easy to group students so they can all complete service-learning at a single site. This is powerful in that they work with the same regulations, expectations, populations, and proposed outcomes. This unites them so they can share a common language in discussing their experiences. However, the real meaning of service-learning and internships, of any experiential component of classroom pedagogy, is found in the depth of the experience and understanding each student takes away from the opportunity. It is this deeply personal knowledge that we seek as we create, support, and articulate the possibilities of experiential learning.

It is through creating, building and processing these experiences that students demonstrate what Belenky, et al, (1986) define as constructed knowledge. That is, an integration of external input and internal responses. In Piagetian terms, students assimilate rather than accommodate. The role of reflection in experiential learning is to bring to light the beauty of their own personalized understanding. Leijan, et al (2012) wrote, "Developing students' reflection on their learning and behavior is currently one of the major learning goals in higher education. Reflection can generally be defined as a cognitive process carried out in order to learn from experiences through individual inquiry and collaboration with others" (p. 202). Reflection should lead to deeper learning and increased understanding of not only the institution under consideration but also of the individual self.

Reflection is at the heart of both leadership and social justice. The ability to articulate our experiences, connect these experiences to wider social and academic knowledge, and then find our own personal connection to or take away from the combination of knowledge and experience allows us to operate as fully functional human beings. Without reflection, leadership is hollow and social justice a lost cause.

In higher education, we have come to acknowledge the 'self-as-text' model whereby students venture into outside environments and then, in personal dialogue, question their own values and then integrate new ways of thinking and being into their lives. This cycle of go out, do, analyze, and integrate becomes the basis for solidifying ideas, making education personal. Our job as educators is not to turn out machines, robots who methodically repeat the processes of the past. Our job is to foster thinkers, those who are prepared to meet life and use their acquired knowledge to increase their own capacities.

-IX-

Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change Fall 2017

The evidence of accomplishing this goal is found in reflection. Each reflection allows us a glimpse into the student's world; their ability to understand, their ability to process, their ability to apply, and their ability to relate. It is only through such individualized opportunities that students find their own voices and become active agents of social change.

Many of us are despairing at the current state of the world. We hoped to leave a social environment allowing equal and global opportunities for much of our planet. Our dreams have not come to fruition. The hope for the strength to lead and bring justice to ourselves, and our posterity rests in the ability of our students to reflect, not react.

Joyce Fields, Ph.D.

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-X-

Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change Fall 2017