Section 5 – Assessing of Students

Faculty often have questions or concerns about the assessment process for courses with a community-engaged component. However, the assessment of students in community-engaged courses can be very similar to that in traditional courses. As was mentioned before, if we treat community-engaged experiences as just another part of the course material such as the ‘text we may be using’, then it becomes just another a source of information that students must integrate with other aspects of the course such as lectures and readings.

We don’t grade students on how well they read a text or take notes on our lectures, but rather on how they use what they have learned in the text in various ways in their submitted work. If you focus on what students are learning from the experience rather than the experience itself, assessment becomes easier to conceptualize. On the other hand, community-engaged experiences can open up new forms of assessment in addition to traditional ones.

Assessment in a Community-Engaged Course?

There are a number of to assess students’ learning in a course that includes community-engaged learning. They range from the more traditional methods of assessment, such as essays, to some interesting and innovative evaluation techniques such as project and portfolio based assessment which present students with the opportunity to demonstrate what they know, what they have done and what they have learned.

Student Reflection

Having students reflect on their experiences in engaging with communities in an ongoing manner is a central aspect of experiential education. Reflection allows students to investigate and evaluate their experiences, connect this learning to their academics and then build on this learning to expand their understanding of the not only the course material, but the broader world around them (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Elyer & Giles, 1999; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004).

Strong reflection assignments usually include:

- regular opportunity for reflection
- clear student expectations
- clear connection to course content
- instructor feedback and coaching
- challenging questions that encourage students to clarify their values

Such reflection assignments ask students to observe, try to understand what they observe, ask pertinent questions, connect their observations and understandings to course material, and then go beyond their current knowledge and understanding to form new theories and ideas. Of course, as we know, this is the
process of learning but having students examine their own learning process through documentation adds another layer of learning and development (Eyler, 2001).

There are many resources, both written and on-line that will assist you with the development of your reflection assignment(s). You can find a number of these on the CLL website at cll.mcmaster.ca. Here is one model that works both for assessment and evaluation. The DEAL model is an adaptable, three-step structure for guiding reflection integrated with critical thinking (Asch, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005)

1. Students move from Description of their learning experiences to;

2. Examination of those experiences in accordance with specific learning objectives set out by the instructor.

3. Articulated Learning the written product, is structured to answer the following questions; “What did I learn”, “How did I learn it”, “Why does it matter”, and “What will I do in light of it”.

**Contexts for Reflection**

The process of student reflection is very flexible. It can be done individually or with a group. It may or may not include consultation with communities. It may happen before, during or after the community-engaged experience. There may be a product or it may just occur in discussion.

**Types of Reflection**

Many effective methods for assessing students are based upon written work. Reflections can be presented in written form, either on a periodic basis or as a culminating essay. Journals can be helpful for students to record their impressions, ideas and feelings. Again, you can ask for these to be submitted on a regular basis or ask students to use them as a data source for their final paper. There are also many alternative ways that students can create and present their reflections on their experience. They may wish to use a multi-media approach with the help of their learning portfolio through Avenue to Learn or they might develop a video, blog or website. Students can also present in groups, particularly if their experience was in a group format. Group presentations can be made in class or to the larger university and/or surrounding communities.

Some examples of reflection activities include:

- Students write a letter to themselves when they begin a class examining their expectations of the experience, to be opened when they complete the experience.

- Blogs can be used to reflect on student experiences during their community engagement. These can also be shared with whomever the student chooses, including community partners and participants.

- In some classes students make presentations of their work and reflections as a culminating activity that is then shared with the university and wider communities.

**Questions for Reflections**

Most students will need direction in creating their reflections. Providing clear questions is an effective way to ensure that students connect what they are doing to the course material. Questions can be general, such as “what was the most interesting thing you observed this week?” to very specific such as “did the students you were working with feel comfortable using the resources provided in our literacy kit?”
Teaching and learning expert Stephen Brookfield developed the “Critical Incident Questionnaire” which includes a series of questions to encourage students to think deeply about a learning experience. These questions can be used as he has written them or they may be adapted to suit the individual needs of your class.


**Creating a Product**

If you are using a real-life problem as the community-engaged component in your classroom then part of the assessment can be evaluating how well the students solve that problem. For example, if you are working with a community group that would like to know what their service users think of them, then you could have students create, facilitate and report on a focus group of users to both you and that community. Perhaps another group needs an improved website or as mentioned before, students are asked to design an assistive device. While it is difficult to assess students’ effort and input into their experience, we can often assess the impact they have had or the products they have created.

**Research Papers**

Assessment can also include traditional research papers or essays where the experience and learning earned in the community-engaged component of the course are considered to be part of the research required to write on a particular topic. For example, social work students are required to spend 390 hours in a practice setting in their first practicum. The final assignment for the seminar that accompanies the practicum is a 10-15 page paper where students are required to research a topic or case that they found puzzling or problematic. They are required to combine their firsthand experience with academic literature in their area of interest.