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The Narrative Approach in Service-Learning Methodology: A Case Study

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The U.S. National and Community Service Act (1990) defines service-learning as “a methodology that extends classroom learning into real-life situations through participation in service experiences organized by collaborating schools and communities.” Reflection represents a very important phase in this methodology; indeed, students build the meaning of their experiences through reflection. For this reason, teachers, instructors, and professors need effective methods for improving student reflection. Can the narrative approach help students to reflect on service experiences? This article presents part of a research project on how the use of the narrative approach in the reflection phase of service-learning can improve critical thinking in students. In particular, it describes a case study of the Freshmen Honors Symposium and service-learning experience at a U.S. university and presents a qualitative analysis of 40 student narratives.

Keywords: *reflection, narrative approach, critical thinking, service-learning*

In the 1830s, Tocqueville observed that the ethic of service inclined Americans toward a willingness to sacrifice a portion of their time and property to the welfare of the state. Through this ethic of service, Americans expressed their belief in the importance of assisting one another. One way in which this value has been passed on to younger generations is through the inclusion of community service and service-learning opportunities in schools, where young people begin to develop their roles as active members of the community who address community needs. The idea that the nation's schools serve as a crucial place for young people to learn this ethic has been corroborated by scholars such as John Dewey (1916), who found that the habits of democracy are most effectively achieved when students, educators, and community members actively work together to address society's needs. Dewey (1916) wrote extensively about the importance of experiential learning: “Experience is better than a ton of theory because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable experience” (p. 144). The development of service-learning as a pedagogical method that integrates community service into the course curriculum began to crystallize in the 1970s. There are various definitions of service-learning, one example being that of the Community College National Centre for Community Engagement, which defines service-learning “as a teaching method which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility” (Campus Compact, 2003, p. 9).

Based on experiential learning and democratic education, different methodologies focusing on the community and service developed in the United States beginning in the 1990s (Giles & Eyler, 1994). Schools started to embrace the notion that the public education system had a responsibility to promote awareness in young people of the obligations to and value of active citizenship. Certain methodologies were introduced in specific school programs in which students learned a sense of participation through their service in the community.

Specifically, service-learning integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, encourage lifelong civic engagement, and strengthen communities for the common good.

This article describes part of a larger research project focusing on service-learning methodology and reflects on the service experience.

Theoretical Framework

Dewey (1938) is recognized as the originator of a theoretical foundation for academic service-learning (Giles & Eyler, 1994). The U.S. National and Community Service Act (1990) defines service-learning as “a method that extends classroom learning into real-life situations through participation in service experiences organized by collaborating schools and communities.” The National Service-Learning Cooperative defines service-learning as a teaching and learning method that connects meaningful community service experience with academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility. Hence, service-learning has as its foundation Dewey’s (1938) experimental learning theory, which argued the importance of offering meaningful experiences through which students can acquire knowledge and develop skills to solve real-world problems. Dewey’s premise was that learning occurs due to the mixture of theory and practice, and therefore it is important to incorporate concrete experiences which can be tested directly and then reflected on. Educating means providing meaningful experiences and the theory of education has the task of identifying such experiences (Dewey, 1938). Kolb and Fry (1984) maintained that learning is a social process and that teaching is no longer exclusive to the school but also part of non-formal and informal educational situations—that is, situations of everyday life.

In particular, service-learning connects learning and service in the community through the development of a greater sense of responsibility and attention to others. It uses knowledge and skills in the real world, it has to be included in the curriculum, and it includes a structured reflection on the student’s experience.

Service-learning methodologies build much-needed connections between universities or schools and their communities through which academic subjects, skills, and values are taught. It involves active learning, “drawing lessons from the experience of performing service work” (Campus Compact, 2003, p. 7). “The emphasis in service-learning on applying knowledge to community problems and the reciprocal application of community experience to the development of knowledge meets many of the concerns about this lack of connectedness” (Eyler & Giles, 1999, pp. 12-13). Academic work and service are completed together so that students study specific issues that are then addressed in a particular community setting (Speck, 2001). An overarching goal of service-learning is to foster the development of citizenship by integrating theory and practice so that students can begin lifelong involvement in social issues and public life. The success of service-learning as a powerful strategy for teaching and encouraging engaged citizenship is well-documented (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Sax & Astin, 1997), and service-learning has been shown to provide distinct benefits for students. Indeed, research has demonstrated that students who participate in service-learning display positive outcomes in a range of areas: personal social development, academic achievement and citizenship, increased self-efficacy, resiliency, multicultural awareness, and self-confidence (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Students who take part in service-learning activities have higher attendance, achieve higher grades, become engaged in their communities, and are more knowledgeable about their civic and ethical responsibilities and about the sociocultural contexts in which they live.

In particular, first-year courses have been identified as excellent venues through which students can enhance learning, character development, and civic involvement (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Whiteley, 1989). Generally, a first-year course is seen as an introduction to college survival skills or as a foundation for future disciplinary studies (Stewart, 2009). The [college redacted] at the [university redacted], where the research project took place, offers a special course of study, the university honors program, designed for the most promising undergraduate students who have demonstrated an aptitude for academic excellence (Stewart, 2009). This four-year program admits 500 honors freshmen each year and requires each student to complete a minimum of 21 hours of honors courses, including honors sections of the university’s General Education Program, upper-level honors courses, and interdisciplinary seminars. Students are also required to attend the Freshman Honors Symposium (FHS) during the same semester in which they are admitted (Stewart,

2009) and are asked to participate in the service-learning experience to create a sense of social and civic responsibility. Due to budget reductions in K-12 schools, honors students serve as academically talented models for younger students, thereby supporting the development of their own academic self-image (Stewart, 2009).

Reflection

Dewey (1910) described reflective thought as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). Structured reflection represents a very important phase in the service-learning process, linking community experience and academic learning. Students can use real-world experiences as a point of departure for reflection, thus calling upon their inner world of ideas, prior experiences, and beliefs to help make sense of their service-learning experiences.

Schön (1983) argued for “reflection-in-action” (p. 49) as a process and recognized the gap between realities of practice and knowledge of the academy. In his view, reflection facilitates the continuous integration of knowledge, experience, and action—an important resource for students not only at the moment of action but also for future action. Similarly, Kolb (1984) maintained that reflection is a key element in learning, enabling the learning cycle to continue so that learners can continually develop and change. Reflection therefore is essential for learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999) and should be linked to action. It is an opportunity to think over, examine, talk through, express, or write about events and helps deepen students’ understanding of the service-learning experience. Reflection helps students to learn not only for their present but also for the future and becomes a necessary tool to make sense of other life experiences. Teachers and educators generally have to encourage students to use reflection to connect their experiences and worldviews with those of others. There are a number of models and tools that provide a foundation for organizing reflection, which must be designed to encourage critical thinking. It is important to use a variety of reflection methods; however, studies on methodologies used in the reflection phase during service-learning remain limited. Eyler et al. (1996) defined reflection activities in terms of journals, small-group discussions, and essays, without describing which methods can lead to improvement in such activities. Reflection activities need a guiding methodology that creates a bridge between classroom theory and service in the community, an objective that could be served using the narrative approach. In particular, Ash and Clayton (2004) described three key requirements for effective reflection: (1) Reflection ought to be descriptive; (2) students should be asked to analyze their experience from a personal, civic, and academic perspective; and (3) quality reflection must include the answers to the following questions: (i) What did I learn? (ii) How did I learn it? (iii) Why does this learning matter or why is it important? and (iv) How will I use this learning?

Students have a significant impact on their communities by participating in service-learning programs. Schön (1983) suggested that reflective thought offers an important resource for students not only at the moment of action but also for future action. It can help them to become conscious of themselves, of others, and of the community, and may challenge them to utilize and improve their critical thinking skills. Through reflection, students can learn the complexities involved in addressing different social problems, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of community and lending deeper meaning to social issues. Chambers and Lavery (2012) described two specific aspects in service-learning reflection: self and societal reflection. In particular, they distinguished between self-reflection, “an insight into some aspect of individual development, indicating a change in values, thoughts, or understandings,” and societal reflection, which “entails looking beyond the immediate experiences and examining how these experiences impact society as a whole” (p. 133). Indeed, “reflection enables students to consider how the experience, knowledge and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their communities” (p. 129). This reflection process helps students gain greater self-awareness and clarify their values and their beliefs about others during their experience in the community.

Critical Thinking

Teachers and educators generally agree on the importance of teaching critical thinking skills in higher education. There are several published reviews of studies on teaching critical thinking skills (Facione, 1990; Lawrence & Butler, 2010; Lipman, 1988); however, few of them have focused on how teaching critical thinking skills in higher educational settings affects student outcomes. Philosophers, psychologists, and researchers have explored whether critical thinking is a developmental process regulated by motivations, dispositions, and personality traits or if it can be learned. So the first question that needs to be asked is, what is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is a process that improves new ideas and concepts starting from an experience in the real world. During service-learning, critical thinking occurs when students reflect on their experiences, interpret what they have learned, create new knowledge, and use this new knowledge in future learning situations. Students need help connecting their experiences to course material, challenging their beliefs and assumptions, and deepening their learning.

In particular, cognitive development is linked to intellectual potential and environmental experiences, and if learning environments are crucial to developing students' critical thinking skills, what instructional strategies should be used to promote it? Teachers need to understand the processes that constitute critical thinking and use instructional activities aimed at developing these processes.

Narrative Approach

Connelly and Claudinin (1990) described narrative inquiry as a pedagogical methodology. They were influenced not only by Dewey's (1938) theory of experience, particularly his idea that social context influences one's experience and produces an effect on one's future experience, but also by Bruner's notion of the use of language. Language is very important in a narrative inquiry because humans represent their reality and construct their experiences using storied forms. The stories told by people are the vehicles through which experiences are studied. This form of inquiry is based largely on the assumptions that stories are a form of social action and that the telling of stories is one way that humans experience life (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin, 2006).

Indeed, "narratives are about people acting in particular settings, and the happenings that befall them must be relevant to their intentional states while so engaged to their beliefs, desires, theories, values, and so on." (Bruner, 1991, p. 7). Narratives, as social constructions, cannot be independent of their contexts, so people talk about their cultural context, and in the telling of their stories, they reaffirm that context (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Ricoeur (1988) examined narrative as a critical form of human consciousness and conceptualized the relationship between narrative and time within a three-stage temporal sequence of mimesis whereby humans represent and understand their world. Several other research studies have produced supporting evidence of the importance of narrative and its development (Bruner 1991; Claudinin & Connelly, 1994, 1995, 2000). Writing about service-learning experience may be instructive for students, it may help them to interpret this experience in more expansive ways. At the same time, reflective writing provides opportunities to integrate students' thoughts and experiences with academic content. Narratives can help to illuminate individual experiences located within broader social and cultural structures, facilitating self-reflection (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), while narrative assignments may also allow students to focus on reflective writing, promoting critical thinking.

The research described in this paper starts from this theoretical framework and focuses on the use of the narrative approach during reflection activities among students in the Freshman Honors Symposium at the [university redacted].

Aims and Objectives

The study employed an exploratory interpretative research design, with the purpose of understanding if the narrative approach is an effective strategy for service-learning reflection and whether it helps students to improve their critical thinking about social problems and the importance of community. The research project examined intermediate and final reflection assignments of 40 students (20 female and 20 male) who participated in the Freshman Honors Symposium at the [university redacted] during the fall semester of 2010. Reflection assignments captured, through narrative texts, the students' experiences before and after the FHS and service-learning in a local elementary school.

Students were instructed to use written narrative to record their emotional reactions, as well as any theoretical connections, beliefs, or feelings they had developed toward the service-learning events.

Method

The [college redacted] at the [university redacted] was founded in 1992 with the intention of combining activities encouraging excellence and creating a learning community whose priorities are the development of a sense of social responsibility and civic passion for learning throughout life. The specific objectives of the college are to:

- (1) encourage the study skills, academic excellence, personal growth, and responsibility of students;
- (2) promote learning programs and academic research;
- (3) be more inclusive; and,
- (4) facilitate the active participation of students in local community and campus life.

The college organizes the Freshman Honors Symposium, an interdisciplinary course that examines the historical, cultural, and psychosocial development of “community,” with a particular emphasis on how traditional notions of community have been defined and redefined in the context of American history (Stewart, 2009). The course also focuses on the responsibility of the individual citizen in a democratic society and how the proper exercise of such responsibility is important for those who contribute to society and those who receive the benefits of community service (Stewart, 2009). All students meet weekly for a two-hour lecture with their professors and team leaders.

As part of the research into the FHS and service-learning carried out during fall 2010, it was observed that for the first hour of each session, all students met for a combined lecture. They were then divided into small groups, each led by a team leader, for discussion about the lecture and its connection to the service-learning experience in schools. The role of team leaders was to help freshmen to integrate into campus and college life, facilitate post-lecture discussions, and encourage student involvement and reflective practice in relations to their service experiences (Stewart, 2009). Fifteen hours of service in an elementary school were requested of the students, including teaching lessons, visits to the schools, and preparation. Students who participated in the FHS taught children the importance of studying and attending college to become socially responsible people who understand the value of civic engagement. The second aspect concerned the importance of participation in the social life of the students’ community and attempted to develop civic responsibility in young people. Six lessons were taught to ensure students’ understanding of class readings, and weekly online postings were required. Participating students involved in the FHS program were awarded 12 credits by the university after completing the course and carrying out the activities in the elementary schools.

At midterm and at the end of the semester, the students were required to complete a narrative reflection paper synthesizing their experiences, reactions, and emotions during the service-learning component. As part of this research project, I participated in a number of different FHS activities and at the end of the semester compared intermediate and final assignments by analysing the students’ reflection papers. A qualitative research approach using content analysis of two key questions guided the research: (1) Is the narrative approach a method that produces effective reflection? and (2) Could the use of the narrative approach improve students critical thinking about community and society?

A qualitative approach was utilized because the research questions associated with this study required a method of inquiry that facilitated a contextual understanding of the experience of service-learning and an understanding of the participants’ perspectives. This perspective allows for a greater understanding of students’ service-learning experiences while giving a voice to them in their own words.

The study paid particular attention to the language used by students in describing their experiences of the Freshman Honors Symposium. Language is very important because it represents culture and expresses people’s ideas and values (Bruner, 1991, 1996). For these reasons, the investigation focused on the words and phrases that individuals used in talking about their service-learning experiences. In reviewing the narrative assignments, I analysed the participants’ words using content analysis with a qualitative approach. This process involved line-by-line coding and subsequent grouping into categories of meaningful units after reading each narrative paper three

times and applying an inductive and deductive analytical approach. Theories on reflective practices guided the analysis, namely Ash and Clayton's (2004) theory of effective reflection in service-learning. Finally, I prepared different tables combining the collected data and offering an interpretation of the results.

Results

The results of the study were organized into two different categories: (1) topics and (2) student descriptions of their experiences.

Topics

The study found two important recurrent topics within the student narratives: (1) awareness of social issues, awareness of others, self-awareness, and self-esteem, and (2) participation and engagement in the community.

Awareness of social issues, awareness of others, self-awareness, and self-esteem. Students described their civic responsibility and moral obligation to work together for the community. Indeed, students who participated in the FHS service-learning wrote critically of their experience and their awareness of social issues, awareness of others, self-awareness, and self-esteem. In particular, through narrative, students expressed their personal experience, helping them understand what community means and what it means to be civically engaged: "I believe service-learning provides us with an amazing experience. It encourages us to be civically engaged"; "Everyone is a part of a community, and this class has expanded my awareness about what these words mean"; "Service-learning is a perfect way to create community." For some students, "a community is like a family. A community should help each other, especially when a person is sick or needs help." Through their narratives, students described their experience and awareness of others: "In our world, no man is an island, we are all interconnected"; "The service learning experience has really opened my eyes to all of the realities of social struggles." A number of students highlighted the importance of becoming responsible—"I have learned the necessity to improve the community through responsible actions"—and communicated their belief that civic engagement in the community is a moral duty: "I do feel there is a moral imperative to be civically engaged." Students also described their experience in terms of self-awareness and self-esteem:

Throughout the weeks of this service learning experience, I have learned many things about myself, my peers and the students whom I have taught. Upon walking into a classroom full of third graders I was nervous and had no idea what to expect.

Personal and social transformations become intertwined in service-learning. In this way, students can use this experience to discover who they are capable of being and what they are capable of doing. "Everyone on the earth is a part of a community," one student wrote, "and this class has expanded my awareness about just what this word means."

Participation and engagement in the community. Considerable research has identified the importance of students moving from the theory of the classroom curriculum to practical involvement with their communities, while at the same time reflecting on their experience to understand the importance of being civically engaged and participating in community life (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Furco, 1996). Consequently, service-learning provides students with opportunities for active involvement in democratic processes. "After the Freshman Honors Symposium my perspective on community, what [it] means, why [it] is important has broadened my outlook significantly." Additionally, many students indicated that education is a key factor in building a community: "Education is a major component in this process."

Students demonstrated willingness to work together and participate in new experiences to support the common good, giving support to previous research suggesting that participating in service-learning may open minds to new initiatives within the community (Jones & Abes, 2004): "I learned that working together is part of life because nobody can do everything by himself"; "A good citizen

is one who makes the right choices for [oneself] and for [the] community.” In the process of service-learning, students actually developed greater feelings of individual well-being and demonstrated a range of positive outcomes:

I have learned about many things: the necessity for taking responsibility for action to improve the community, the great potential for mutual benefit gained from community action, the dramatically increased efficiency that a well organized community can achieve, the effects of technology on community, and the necessity for change in education to increase social participation and foster a more informed, active community.

The role of the school was recognised as central in this process, namely in its use of a new approach combining formal and informal education. As Dewey (1909) wrote, “school is fundamentally an institution erected by society to do a certain specific work, - to exercise a certain specific function in maintaining the life and advance the welfare of society” (p.7), we must ensure that the social aim remains in focus.

How students described their experiences. These types of reflection assignments help students ponder and evaluate their experience in the social activity created through service-learning and transform it into knowledge they can use at a future point. Students become more aware of themselves and of others when they reflect using a narrative approach. They improve their critical thinking about who they are and who they want to become and understand their civic responsibility and moral obligation to work together for the community.

The process of learning through critical reflection permits a transformation of people and their perspective (Mezirow, 1991). In this study, students described their experience in critical ways—“as a member of the community I feel that it is my duty to offer my skills for others”—and reflection helped students to link service experience with academic studies, making them more conscious of their attitudes and their skills. “I have learned about many things, in particular the necessity for taking responsibility for action to improve the community, the great potential for mutual benefit gained from community action.” As one student wrote:

I know I am only one person in a city of millions; however, this is not to say that my actions cannot affect the community for the better. Building a stronger community is an ongoing process, and every contribution counts, including my service-learning in a local elementary school. But how exactly is it that I can make a difference? What role do I have in sustaining this community? What is and what is not my responsibility? As I am a new member of the community, I believe I now have a personal responsibility to participate in and give back to the community.

In different situations, students can grow as people and extend themselves personally and cognitively. By learning new skills, they develop an identity as a foundation on which they can build the rest of their life, helping them prepare for a future career path. Service-learning can teach both individual development and community responsibility and increase the student’s abilities by dedicating himself or herself to others. Personal autonomy increases, and, at the same time, service-learners can become involved in interdependent activities guided by collective goals.

Discussion

This study contributes to the growing body of research in service-learning. In particular, it supports the observation that the narrative approach and critical thinking are effective strategies for reflecting on experience because both approaches help students to open their minds, offer a new view of the world, and improve their personal development. Generally, the students’ narratives focused on social and service issues, awareness of social issues, increased knowledge about the community and its needs, and the development of social skills. The reflection papers had a clear role in facilitating respondents’ self-awareness, fostering exploration of ethical issues, and, in general, encouraging deeper thinking on service-learning. However, the study showed clear differences between males’

and females' identity narratives. It was found that females had richer narratives about their experiences than males, and in particular females described their experiences with more emotional emphasis than males, while males were more concrete than females in their narration. These differences were important in analysing whether between the emotional or cognitive sphere males or females were more used to using the reflection process and understanding implications relating to their behaviour. This could become the focus of future research on the link between gender and different approaches in narration and reflective practices. Students in the FHS program wrote reflections in which they linked personal life experiences to the service-learning experience and made connections that challenged their assumptions, expectations, or attitudes. One overarching theme centred on the moral duty of becoming civically engaged.

As a result, it appears that reflective writing has the potential to facilitate both self-reflection and integration of theory and practice. However, reflection is not often defined in a way that provides educators and learners with a structure for thinking or clear guidelines for evaluating its effectiveness. Indeed, when asked to write reflectively, educators and learners may associate the exercise with free thinking, without structure or purpose. Although unstructured reflection may be useful, it does not explicitly prepare the learner with the analytical skills necessary to operate in a complex world. Reflection that achieves this goal provides "a process of critical examination that involves challenging assumptions, testing the logic of conclusions, considering multiple perspectives" (Clayton et al., 2005, p. 14). The narrative approach has the potential to achieve these aims and help educators to improve students' critical thinking in relation to themselves and in regard to social issues. One pedagogical strategy for encouraging self-reflection and critical thinking is the narrative paper.

In summary, reflection assignments are an essential component of service-learning. They not only communicate the expectation that students connect field work and coursework but also encourage students to reach inward to bridge these service-learning experiences with their own lives. Students' careful contemplation of their site interactions provides them with a lens for critically examining their attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews. Reflection also permits students to grapple with fundamental social issues, especially when they serve at sites that cater to the disenfranchised. Professors often need to proceed with caution and intention when addressing students' value systems, but reflecting on these topics is wholly consistent with progressive and transformative educational approaches (Mezirow, 1991) and embraces service-learning as a tool to enhance personal and social growth.

Conclusions

Although there is a significant body of research on the effects and benefits that service-learning produces for students (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998), the number of studies examining tools and methods for use in the reflection phase is limited.

This article describes a case study in which professors and instructors used the narrative approach as an instrument to engage students in reflection and to improve their critical thinking. In general, students in service-learning courses need guidance when writing reflections, and instructors can guide them with assignments using the narrative approach. This type of reflective assignment helped students to value their experience of the social activity created through service-learning and to transform it into knowledge applicable to their future. Students appeared to become more aware of themselves and of others, and they improved their critical thinking about who they were and who they wanted to become. They understood their civic responsibility and moral obligation to work together for the community. The Freshman Honors Symposium and service-learning experience offered students the opportunity to become civically engaged and to address major social problems, helping them to become more engaged citizens.

This article illustrates how teachers, professors, and instructors can use the narrative approach in reflection practice because it encourages students to connect their service-learning work with their own attitudes, values, and personal histories through critical introspection. These narrations can widen the impact of service-learning on students' lives, facilitate awareness of social issues, and encourage their social transformation, encouraging students to critically examine their assumptions,

seek out additional perspectives, and ultimately acquire new knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Bruner (1996) argued that narrative is central to creating an understanding of the world in which a person lives and fundamental to the way humans organize experience, not only as individuals but as communities and societies.

The research results confirmed that the service-learning experience enabled students to develop skills, abilities, and values useful for their personal development, present and future life. The evidence suggests that the experience of service facilitates learning, with students becoming more aware of themselves and of others, improving their critical thinking, and understanding their civic responsibility and moral obligation to work together for the community. Another implication emerging from the study is that, through narration, students make connections among the service-learning experience and their ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. These types of reflective assignments helped students ponder and evaluate their experience participating in the social activity created through service-learning and transform it into knowledge to be used in the future.

One limitation of this study could be the fact that it was conducted in a higher education context, in particular in a freshman honors program; it could be expanded into other school contexts. In such a case, it would be especially important to consider the age of students and their writing skills. Indeed, content knowledge can influence students' writing (Knudson, 1992) as well as their ability to describe their experiences. At the same time, another important factor worth considering is executive function, since it can predict the quality of writing of grade school students (Hooper et al., 2002) and thus might influence the decision to use the narrative approach in elementary school contexts as a reflective tool in service-learning experiences. However, future studies could be conducted, for example, in high schools, where adolescents need to improve critical thinking about their experience of creating their own identity and motivation, and in this context the narrative approach may also be an effective method for developing their writing skills. Moreover, future service-learning research on reflection papers could be conducted to evaluate specific outcomes on student learning, particularly in professional education programs such as teacher education. Specifically, studies could seek to understand if the narrative approach challenges students to utilize and improve their critical thinking skills in professional practice. Despite the limitations of this study, the results suggest that the narrative approach enables students to develop their ability to critically examine their attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews.

Some practical implications of the study may reinforce the value of teaching students to write reflections, with the aim of improving their critical thinking. This could be part of an overall course design that educators can use to develop the narrative approach in reflection assignments, using it as an important and practical method for achieving learning objectives in service-learning courses. This study has the potential to serve as a developing pedagogy of reflection applicable to a variety of learning contexts, with particular reference to service-learning experiences.

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