

# The processes at work in Service Learning.

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The purpose of this article is to examine the psychological processes that are at work as a person engages in Service Learning. There are many names for Service Learning. In some areas it is called Community Service while others refer to it as Community engagement. This article examines the processes at work as a student engages in a structured relationship with people and communities in social situations significantly different to their own. In some cases it may be working at a soup kitchen, in others serving on a hospitality van with the homeless, while others may tutor refugees or Asylum Seekers.

The form that the Service Learning takes will vary significantly from one program to another. Some programs are a once a week immersion into a different social situation while other programs take the form of an Immersion where the participants engage at quite some depth but for a relatively short period of time – one to four weeks with marginalised people often in a foreign country. Regardless of the form the Service Learning takes the psychological processes at work are similar.

The motivation for writing this article stems from the second word in Service Learning; the 'learning'. Just because a student serves meals in a soup kitchen or hands out coffee to a homeless person or plays with small children in a South African shanty town does not necessarily mean that 'learning' is taking place. Without an awareness of many of the psychological processes that this article will address there is a danger that prejudice could be reinforced, false conclusions come to and stereotypes enhanced as a result of the service experience. While this may be the case however there is no doubt that 'learning' can occur during Service Learning and not only learning but learning that can be transformative;

*Our analysis suggests that students made significant changes in their attitudes towards social justice, equality of opportunity, and civic responsibility over the course of the semester (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 15).*

## The Student

Every model of Service Learning begins with the student. Each student comes to a service

experience with prior beliefs and values, experiences, concepts, expectations, hopes and fears and a particular World View. Also each student / participant has different learning styles and come with unique life experience (Pracht, 2007, p. 15). What they experience in the field is then interpreted, made sense of, understood through the lens of their prior frameworks. Cone and Harris begin their model of Service Learning by referring to Learners and end it with "Learners with newly integrated concepts" (Cone & Harris, 1996, p. 34). Green begins his model of Service – Reflection – Learning with reference to the Service Experience and concludes it with identifying the 'new learning' that has taken place; during the process the learner changes (Green, 2006, p. 68). Green's model follows the changes that take place within the learner; emotional reaction, personalization, increased understanding, connection to course content and finally transformational thinking (Green, 2006, p. 220).

Seider (2007) looked at the change in World view possibly experienced by the participant during a Service Learning experience. Seider's work looked at the World View that a student brings to the service experience; the influence of parents and peers, other service experiences, life experiences and other values effecting experiences such as the influence of 'faith'. Seider's work supported the importance of each program having an 'academic experience' that would assist in engaging with the student's Worldview so as to make the Service Learning experience more transformative. The engagement with the student's Worldview would assist in giving students enhanced motivation and the means and a sharpened focus for their service (Seider, 2007, p.629).

The great contribution of Dunlap, Scoggin, Green and Davi (2007) was to invite service learning practitioners to become much more aware of the deeply implanted attitudes and values systems that participants bring to any service experience – often from their own privileged socio-economic background. These attitudes and values – ways of viewing their world are firmly held in the participant's

Semantic Memory and will influence the cognitive emotive dialogue that will take place as the participant attempts to make meaning from what they have experienced.

The quality Service Learning program is certainly not just a jug – mug experience. The student who enters a Service Learning program / experience does so with an existing world view, an existing set of conceptual frameworks, language and relational and reflection skills that will enable them to engage productively or not with the actual experience. The challenge for Service Learning professionals is to develop an authentic, professional and creative Academic Experience so as to provide the best possible learning environment for the participant.

#### **Academic Experience – Concept Map**

The key role of the Academic Experience or Course Content or pre-brief time is to inform and form a conceptual map that will provide concepts for the content of the Semantic Memory to bounce off in the context of what they will experience. Kolb (1984) refers to “abstract conceptualization” while Cone and Harris (1996) focused on the importance of defining the task [that which the students will engage in during the experience – not the nuts and bolts of it but the meaning system, the learning goals and outcomes, the values change hoped for etc], cognitive frameworks, concepts, perceptions and categorizations.

Seider suggested that the academic experience has much to offer in effecting change in how the participant sees their world through service learning. In his study Seider identified three distinct categories types of impact upon their worldview from the academic experience; Replacement of Worldview, Modification of Worldview and Specification of Worldview (Seider, 2007, p. 619).

Students who experience a ‘replacement’ of their worldview describe academic experiences that “lead to the adoption of a new worldview prioritizing community service” and that often the experience is transformative (Seider, 2007, p. 620). Some participants in service learning will experience a modification of their worldview as a result of the accompanying academic experience. While these participants do not experience any change in their motivation for performing service they do experience change is their conception of the best means for carrying out service; how to build truly respectful and

reciprocal relationships that empower. Other students will have particular aspects of the service experience clarified or focussed and or their worldview focussed around a particular element of the more complete picture.

As a result of these changes to worldview some participants will emerge with a newfound motivation for service, others will discover new means for performing service while still others will discover a more sharpened focus of their commitment (Seider, 2007, p. 629).

Prior to and in the early stages of a program that engages with the homeless for example, the Academic Experience may engage with cause and effect, the cycle of poverty, the nature of mental illness, forms of mental illness, the nature of substance abuse, the cycle of violence and more. The instructor is not telling students / participants what they will think but giving them frameworks within which to think more critically and creatively and ultimately – more authentically.

The Service Learning participant with no Academic framework experience may encounter a homeless person who shouts abuse at them for not serving the coffee in a particular fastidious way and go away with an expectation stored in the Semantic Memory that “all homeless are rude and aggressive” reinforced with little or no learning. The student who has engaged with reflection upon mental illness, cause and effect and the poverty cycle is more likely to bounce what they have experienced off a broader canvas that is more authentic to the reality of life on the streets. In the first place prejudice may well be confirmed – in the second – learning may occur.

The formation that occurs during the Academic Experience is not done in isolation. This element of Service Learning will continue throughout the program as concepts grow and are integrated into the student’s hopefully expanding Worldview and form an integral part of the debrief at its conclusion.

The key ‘work’ in learning associated with Service Learning involves the interplay between the Semantic and Episodic memory. The Semantic memory holds the expectations, images, values, attitudes and cognitive-affective templates that are the ‘map’ that the participant will journey with. The Episodic memory is the immediate storage and sorting house that the actual service experience and the emotive reactions to that experience will be stored in

### **Semantic Memory – Episodic Memory**

Each student comes to the Service Learning experience with their own personal history, value systems, perspectives, attitudes, expectations and cognitive abilities. After acknowledgment of the individuality of each learner the Lens model of Cone and Harris addresses academic and pragmatic issues; the definition of the task and the cognitive conceptual tools to make sense of the experience that students utilize during the course of the program. If this time of preparation and pre-brief is not undertaken there is a danger that

*each student may simply continue to understand their new experiences in the same ways using the tools of conceptualization that already lie within their grasp (Cone & Harris, 1996, p.35).*

The period prior to the commencement of a Service program whether it be a local relationship with a tutoring program for refugee children or an Immersion to a Majority World country is vital. During this period the program mentors or instructors work to engage the students' Semantic Memory. It is in the Semantic Memory that the students' expectations and images, their cognitive-affective template is stored that will focus attention on pertinent aspects of the experience (Sheckely & Keeton, 1997, p. 37). A student about to volunteer in an after school refugee tutoring program will for example bring with them images of what a refugee is, what has caused them to come to this new land, their work habits, academic abilities etc. They will come to this experience with expectations, images, stereotypes, reactive patterns, problem solving approaches; attitudes to 'the other' and more, already firmly entrenched in their cognitive-affective template. Each experience that they then encounter will bounce off / engage with that template.

A student who has come from a family where there is a strong work ethic and you "have to earn your keep", who may have overheard comments like, "those homeless people are lazy, there are jobs out there if they really wanted them" will have their template, their Semantic memory already clearly differentiated. The person with these attitudes as part of their Semantic Memory will notice, will react to, will see the homeless person with the expensive mobile phone, will react to the homeless person who is well dressed or with good language skills.

### **Psychological Processes**

For effective service learning outcomes it is important to unpack the processes at play

when the Semantic Memory and Episodic Memory engage for hoped for learning. No one can be attentive to all stimuli in a particular setting. The role of the program mentor and the Academic Experience [course content] will be to assist the participant to focus attention on pertinent aspects of the situation. By doing so learners pre-shape a service learning situation before they even begin to attend to the stimuli immediately present within it (that will be held in the Episodic Memory). The cognitive-affective template sets up a 'search strategy' that influences the images, information and stimuli to which individuals will pay attention (Sheckley & Keeton, 1997, p.37).

This focussing of attention does not 'just happen'; it needs to be deliberately chosen. This choice for focussed attention will be linked to an increased motivation to participate in the service experience (often linked to the authenticity of the actual experience and the quality and relevance of the Academic Experience) and to increased awareness and reflection skills. This energy to focus on particular stimuli will enrich the information held in the Episodic Memory; the same information that, with reflection, will ultimately lead to change in Worldviews / Concepts. The quality of awareness and reflection skills will aid the participant to grow in their ability to 'attend' to the focussed information at the heart of this experience.

### **The Experience**

Service Learning has its Educational basis in the world of Experiential learning. The student literally learns by and through experience but as we shall see the experience can never be an end in itself nor in isolation. Learning occurs in the interaction between what is held in the Semantic Memory – informed by the Academic Experience – and the experience held in the Episodic Memory. The key word here is 'interaction'.

### **Phases**

As a participant enters a Service Learning experience they go through certain phases.

The phases are;

1. Expectations
2. Initial exposure
3. Awareness of the different aspect of the experience
4. Interpretation or reframing of the experience.

Every student has Expectations prior to their involvement and every student has a period of initial Exposure to the sub-culture; that initial

feeling when one enters a shanty town for the first time or walks into a drop in centre for the homeless. This quickly leads to bringing to conscious awareness the initial presenting data of the service site; an old people's home would be very different to visiting Asylum Seekers in a detention centre, a coffee van or a home for handicapped children in a Third World Country. This awareness of the physical environment, the norms, the sub-culture, the language, the rites and rituals etc. is important for the meaning making process. Fairly quickly the participant will begin to reframe or at least engage with the frames held in the Semantic Memory as they "feel welcomed by the homeless" or "begin to tutor a small refugee child" or "get to talk to an elderly lady!" The identification of these phases speaks also to the danger of service just being a 'one off' experience.

During the Expectations and Exposure phases of Service Learning the participants' experience is completely new and for an adolescent possibly 'exciting'. A new world may be opening up to the participant with its own language, symbols, and ways of relating and power relationships. At this early point in the process participants from economically privileged backgrounds may struggle to view their privilege relatively objectively and possibly part of the problem (Dunlap et.al, 2007, p. 19). Privilege may well still be so close to their skin that it is the 'way things are', the way things are done and the clients are 'the other', victims of their own laziness, corruption or self-inflicted poverty cycles. Attempts at social analysis at this early point will probably be futile if not even counterproductive due to a natural tendency for internal attribution prior to personalisation (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 19). We will examine Individual (internal) attribution and Structural (external) attribution later in this article.

Rockquemore and Schaffer (2000) have identified several distinct processes undergone by participants in these initial phases of the service experience. By experiencing 'poverty' directly through their relationship with the homeless, students may be forced to open themselves up to the realization that their perceptions of the social world may be severely skewed by their affluence. This may lead to some degree of 'shock' during the Exposure Phase of their experience;

*Shock induced uncertainty while frightening and upsetting, created in them an ideal state of cognitive openness toward the substantive course material. This stage of shock enabled*

*students to examine the inconsistencies in their lives and in the community around them (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 17).*

#### *New data tested*

Sheckely and Keeton saw 'shock' and the other processes at play in the early stages of the service experience in the context of the participant's meaning making responses to that which was outlined during the Academic Experience. This meaning making is couched in terms of confirmation and disconfirmation. For the new information to be transformed into durable 'new' knowledge it needs to be tested through interactive processes.

*That 'test' the compatibility between information about the service learning experience as attended to held in the episodic memory and models of meaning stored in semantic memory. This compatibility test can yield a full or partial match (confirmation) or mismatch (disconfirmation) of these expectations. The outcome of the matching process influences the nature of the learning that occurs from the service learning experience (Sheckely & Keeton, 1997, p. 38).*

#### *Confirmation or Disconfirmation*

Confirmation or disconfirmations are important aspects of the learning process. As learners interact with the world, their experiences rather conveniently tend to match the expectations they have for these experiences. With each confirmation the concept (held in the Semantic Memory and hopefully engaged and developed by the Academic Experience) becomes more robust and its expected properties become more clearly refined.

During the Academic Experience a student may be introduced to the concept of 'coming as a guest' to the clients they will meet. Coming as guest will require an openness, a humility, a willingness to learn from the other and be totally present to the other in a non-judgmental way (Nouwen, 1975). At first, as the concept of 'guest-ness' is introduced in the Academic Experience there will often be some assent to its validity from past life experience. For many participants it will "make sense". As the Academic Experience wraps an ideology / meaning system around 'guest-ness' it grows stronger as part of the conceptual framework held in the Semantic Memory; its strength linked to its match with prior life experience. Upon entering the service site (if program mentors have pre-briefed participants to be aware of 'coming as guest') it will be more attended to. This attendance will also show itself in choices to be present, choices to attend to some verbal / body language reactions (stimuli) rather than others, choices to let go of some thought reactions and to

attend to others. Within this interplay there will be some 'confirmation' of guest-ness as a valuable part of this experience. In time the strength of the concept will grow as will a wider range of properties linked to the concept.

Often, however, deeper learning will occur through disconfirmation (if reflected upon).

*Adults report that they 'learned more' from experiences in which their expectations were disconfirmed than from experiences where expectations were confirmed even though the disconfirming learning projects were more frustrating, anxiety producing and stressful.*

When what is experienced does not match expectations the participant is faced with a choice to either attend to the disconfirming evidence but deny it or accept the evidence and change the model of meaning used to construct the experience. Often in changing their model of meaning participants will begin to rethink, reconceptualise and even transform Worldviews. Change linked to disconfirmation is assisted by the richness and authenticity of the concept map presented in the Academic Experience. If, for example, the participant working at a homeless shelter has experienced the homeless as "welcoming and friendly, just like us" and then experiences verbal abuse or witnesses violence at the shelter the Academic Experience material around the poverty cycle or the nature of mental illness or substance abuse and its effects will assist the learner 'change'.

While Sheckely and Keeton focussed on the confirmation or not of what was being experienced in the context of the Academic Experience / World View, Rockquemore and Schaffer focus on the feeling, personal response level of the interaction.

#### *Shock and the Clash*

During their initial exposure at a service site many participants will experience some degree of **shock**; in fact if they do not experience some unsettling out of their comfort zone it is questionable whether the experience will be of much value. Shock is that natural feeling response to the presenting data of a sub-culture significantly different to their own. In their journaling participants may refer to extreme unease, fear, being awkward, out of their depth or confused. What is happening is that their experience – held in the Episodic Memory is clashing with stereotypes, with prejudice, with comfort creating expectations or the idealism of their charity model sense of duty to the poor held in the Semantic memory.

*The shock stage of service-learning is important because it provides a sharp emotional and*

*psychological jolt to students' perceptions of reality (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 16).*

Many participants have an inbuilt concept that "most people" can read or write, have access to clean water, go to University and playing sports with nice uniforms and good equipment. Images of small children not at school, communities where no-one has gone past primary school and children kicking substitute footballs around in dirt and grime shock the participant into reality. Part of the shock reaction has a romantic element to it that can hook the participant into the wow reaction of the adventure that they are venturing into. The reality is that what they are seeing **IS** the daily life of these people but is only one small part of the complete picture. The reality is also that the participant constantly has at the back of their mind the notion that they can and will 'go home' – go back to their lives away from this fascinating experience. The danger is that if not reflected upon the shock can either lead to a hardening of stereotypes, the creation of prejudice or a 'notch on the belt' feel good reaction that ultimately empowers no-one!

In some cases 'shock' can lead to a questioning of values, a questioning of one's faith stance or even a questioning of the value of the service learning experience itself. This questioning has, in itself, much value if reflected upon, if mediated by a mentor's questions and reflections and if linked to a longer more complete experience.

The significant value of the 'shock' phase during exposure is that it can lead to a heightened awareness. From this heightened awareness the participant can be drawn further into the natural energy that surrounds questions and from this aroused state true and deeper learning can occur.

*This shock-induced uncertainty, while frightening and upsetting to some students, created in them an ideal state of cognitive openness toward the substantive course material. This stage of shock enabled students to examine the inconsistencies in their lives and in the community around them (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p.17).*

In his 'Recurring Stages of Reflection' in a Service Learning Course Model, Green (2006) names "Emotional Reaction" as the first important stage that participants needs to go through before they can arrive at "transformational thinking."

*Students revealed a number of emotions in the early stage of the service work. In the initial reflection, students expressed guilt as well as discomfort with the unfamiliarity of the situation. After the first service experience, student*

emotions varied from sadness and guilt to shock, from fear to anxiety, and from anger to expressing gratitude for the student's living situation. The emotional reaction was the most common theme among the students during the initial service-experiences. In the *Recurring Stages of Student Reflection*, the emotional reaction is the beginning of their meaning-making process (Green, 2006, p. 5).

The exposure phase of a service experience and especially the shock element of it speak strongly to the importance of the mentor's duty of care. The heightened emotional state can also be unsafe for the participant if it is not 'held' by the mentors working with the participants, talked through, reflected upon, feelings identified and named and some sort of immediate (but partial) resolution reached.

Another of the processes that each participant will encounter that will enable learning to occur will be that of the **'clash' / trigger event**. In almost every Service Learning experience there will be **trigger events** – there will be a clash that will hook prior prejudice and values held in the Semantic Memory. The clash or the trigger event is *an incident in itself* that draws forth a heightened emotional reaction that 'clashes' with expectations; it creates cognitive disequilibrium. The Immersion participant sees a satellite dish on top of a slum shanty shack, will observe apparently gross patriarchal behaviours, will be sworn at by the very people they are "trying to help", will witness corruption, may feel physically threatened and more. The trigger event in isolation and left without reflection [debrief] is not only a lack of adherence to our duty of care but could cause psychological damage, loss of confidence and cement prior prejudice or create new prejudicial attitudes and beliefs.

Dunlap et al, (2007) have noted the significant potential for learning in trigger events. A trigger event can take the participant out of their comfort zone, increase awareness and likelihood for valuable reflection upon experience. Firstly the participant is encouraged to grapple with the experience and their feelings around it. What did they experience? Why do they think it happened? What might be other elements in the more complete picture? Where does this experience fit into the cause – effect matrix around this element of the experience? These and other questions will assist the participant to grapple with the 'experience'. The processes at work in 'grappling' are accommodation and assimilation.

*These 'trigger events' tend to create cognitive disequilibrium. That is, a discomfort or confusion*

*brought about by new information that must either be assimilated or accommodate into one's cognitive structure One goal of critical reflection is to facilitate the 'accommodation' process: grappling with new information and potentially changing one's view so that new learning may occur about others and oneself. This contrasts with 'assimilation', in which new information is made to fit one's existing view, potentially precluding learning (Dunlap et al, 2007, p. 20).*

Part of the grappling and handling of the trigger is the process of personalisation. In personalisation 'it' or 'them' become people – often with a name and a story. When "the person who shouted abuse at me" from one service experience two weeks later becomes "Noel who left home when he was eight!" personalisation has occurred. Like all elements linked to the processes we are looking at there are varying levels and degrees. For some time there will be a 'divided self' as the prior values, beliefs, experiences and more held in the Semantic memory 'grapple' with – bounce off – the concepts and processes presented in the course content and in the Ideology [which we will come to later]; a conflict between the intellectual and experiential self and the emotive responses around this (Dunlap et al, 2007, p. 20). Eventually through the active presence of mentors, reflection tools and time, the divided self will give way to a resolution of the initial clash; and learning will occur. Dunlap et al call this 'Disequilibrium Resolution'.

#### *Disequilibrium resolution*

Disequilibrium resolution continues the processes of reframing. During this phase the learner reconciles / resolves the emotional confusion by cognitive "accommodation" or "assimilation" of the interplay taking place between the Semantic Memory and the Episodic Memory. Participants tend to resolve the disequilibrium that often accompanies the service learning process by either cognitively assimilating or accommodating their experiences (Dunlap et.al, 2007, p. 25). When they 'assimilate' participants simply fit their new experiences into the stereotypical cognitive concepts they already have; the reframing is shallow or non-existent. Accommodation however is a more in-depth form of cognitive processing whereby the participants revise their stereotypical ideas and develop them into more open, complex and accurate concepts; true learning linked to service is now occurring (Dunlap et.al, 2007, p. 25). Central to accommodation is the grappling with concepts, with 'clashes', with disconfirming evidence, with prior stereotypes and more in the context of their actual lived experience in the field. The process of

accommodation is often linked to the quality of the reflection upon experience and the active presence of program mentors.

These various coat-hangers simply allow us to unpack and grow in awareness of the experience more effectively. In addition to their reflections upon 'shock' Rockquemore and Schaffer (2007) and Pracht (2007) suggest other ways of unpacking and being more aware of what is happening within the experience especially during the exposure phase. Rochquemore and Schaffer also speak of the importance of guilt in experiential learning.

### *Guilt*

Rochquemore and Schaffer's **guilt** is another facet of the initial experience a participant would have in the early stages of the service experience. Often there is a cultural clash between the lived experience and culture of the participant and that of the people they are in a service relationship with. In the case of a Majority World Immersion this clash will be much more profound. In reflection upon their experience you will often hear the participant make reference to the elderly person with no visitors or the homeless person who sleeps rough in the middle of winter or the Asylum Seeker trapped in a detention centre with no idea of why they are being treated this way. Often there is a guilty reaction to this experience as the participant naturally compares their life with that of the people at the service site. This guilt may be magnified in the context of an Immersion Experience as the participant ventures into a slum or shanty town, observes schools with no electricity or children playing in a sewer.

The guilt emotional response is natural and is, in itself neither right or wrong.

*While reconciling the intellectual and experiential selves, guilt is one of the emotions with which students may grapple the most. Guilt is a distinct emotion that grows out of the experience of realising one's privilege. The emotion of guilt is complicated and best described by Walbotto and Scherero (1995) as a specific type of anxiety stimulated by the fear of one's own conscience either before or after an event has occurred (Dunlap et.al, 2007, p. 24).*

What happens with that emotional response and how the program mentors process it is vital. Unprocessed guilt may twist into reinforced prejudice as the energy looks for someone or something to blame. Local corruption, apparent laziness, the presence of substance abuse and other factors may lead to

the guilt response being hijacked by uninformed judgement. Another possible response to unprocessed guilt may well be an increased sense of powerlessness; a sense that the wall of problems is too high and there is nothing I can do about it (Dunlap et al, 2007, p. 20). Sometimes this powerlessness may lead to a charity response where one can throw money at a situation; at least you are doing something. Other times this powerlessness can lead to an emotional disengagement and a putting of this [and often other issues] into the too hard basket.

Guilt like all emotional responses is a form of energy and this energy can also be worked with; reflected upon and channelled into an ever deeper engagement with one's own worldview. If reflected upon these moments of heightened emotional response may open a doorway to deeper insight to previously untouched elements of one's unconscious world view; eg White Privilege. Guilt is a natural response that says, "Something here is not right, not the way it should be!"

But the service learning experience does not and certainly should not remain at this point. The significant question for practitioners that place students in short term placements is how they deal with the natural shock, clash / trigger events and guilt that will occur in a safe and healthy way that leads to learning.

As the service experience lengthens, whether this be after several days of an Immersion or after several visits to the service site in a locally based program the participant, especially if they have reflected upon their experience moves to another phase in the experience.

### *Normalization*

The learning window that surrounds the guilt response only remains open for a short period of time. Quickly the presenting data that has clashed with your life culture becomes part of the landscape; part of what you 'expect' and the level of the emotional response around it is lowered. Rochquemore and Schaffer refer to this as '**normalization**' (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 17). During this period the participant goes through the stage of reframing what they have held in their Semantic Memory. In some cases what was held there was confirmed while in other cases adjustments now need to be made.

*No matter what level of shock they may have experienced in the first two weeks of their placement, they quickly became accustomed to the sight of poverty and viewed the deprivation*

of their clients as 'normal'. During this period student began to feel comfortable with their role in the community organisation. It is here that they began to develop relationships with the staff and regular clients. These relationships were crucial to the learning process because they were based on common human bonds as opposed to pity (Rockquomore & Schaffer, 2000, p.17).

An astute mentor accompanying participants through their experience will pro-actively encourage them to get to know names, spend longer periods of time with particular individuals and gently build trust through conversation. These practices have the indirect effect of addressing the awkward and fearful reactions participants may be experiencing while at the same time giving them something real and tangible to do. In the midst of an 'out of the comfort zone' experience many seek small practical things to do that provide a bridge to relationship and in doing so ease the tension. The effect of this normalisation is that the heightened emotional awareness of the exposure phase that will motivate participants to engage more effectively with the course material now changes focus to the building of relationship. The building of relationship with the choice to focus on particular people, their names and story keeps the emotional energy high and open for learning.

#### *Personalisation*

An essential element of normalization is the process of personalisation. As the experience continues 'those people' and 'them' / 'they' begin to give way to personal names and communities. Otherness gives way to personal descriptors. Sometimes without even being aware of it participants in their conversations and reflection begin to go past labels to the humanity of the clients.

*Once the students interacted with the volunteers and especially the guests of the homeless shelter, they began to understand the different issues surrounding homeless. This process of personalization, relating to an issue through talking with and learning from the stories of individuals, allowed students to understand the multiple dimension of the homeless situation. As students observed and talked with the individuals in a homeless situation, they humanized the individual and related to them on a personal level. This is indicative of the need for service-learning experiences to include direct contact with people in order to engage student in personalization (Green, 2006, p.5).*

It will be through reflection upon personalisation that stereotypes will be challenged. What had been "homeless bums" may in time become "normal, friendly, everyday people". When coupled with an

effective Academic Framework / Course work around relevant issues linked to the particular client group [eg. Mental illness and substance abuse – the homeless or the poverty cycle or causal factors with a majority world slum population] participants can more effectively engage in social analysis and build respectful and reciprocal relationships. The service participant is now quite 'engaged' in the learning process as they;

*begin seeking answers to their causal questions ...engaged in the learning process because the people and situation they were studying in their course readings were not hypothetical example, but real people with whom they had develop personal relationships (Rockquomore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 19).*

Rockquomore and Schaffer called this Stage 3 or Engagement.

Part of the process of personalisation is the possibility of personal relationship responses where by the client is regarded as holding a level of friendship. Through personalisation a more empathetic response may be engendered as the participant reflects "this could happen to anyone" and the possibility for deeper personal life lessons – separate from the service experience is increased.

*This shift from a stereotypical perspective occurred through 1) breaking bread with them, 2) thereby, relating to them individually, 3) and breaking from initial impressions, and 4) forming a personalized perspective on the issue. Their experiences allowed students to see some homeless as educated, skilled people with working experiences, the direct opposite of their initial impression and stereotype. The issue of homelessness was contextualized, and the guest became people in a situation, rather than a generalized population. In the process, they also began to discuss homelessness as an issue, as well as intermediate variables impacting homelessness, more directly in their reflections (Green, 2006, p. 5).*

#### *Interpreting and reframing the experience*

Normalization and personalisation are both parts of the interpreting and reframing phase of the service experience. An important by-product of this phase is that students, if they had not already done so, begin to see the long term importance of service and frame changing for their future lives. As participants begin to experience a commitment to the clients and to the sponsoring communities aided by personal bonds and deeper understandings of the true nature of service learning they, especially if assisted by mentors, reflection upon experience and a credible ideology, begin world view shifts from charity to change. These shifts are important if participants are to grow in their sense of civic identity and service (Youniss, 1997).

The energy of interpreting and reframing will counter tendencies towards stereotyping, shallow analysis and a 'tick and flick' approach to service and yet another 'thing' you do and then move on.

*We consider this stage crucial to the learning process because, while students may be shocked into questioning their own perceptions of reality in the first stage of development, they also had the tendency to marginalise those they observed. In the first stage, respondents characterized their clients as fundamentally different from themselves. They consistently described the poor in ways that provide both linguistic and cognitive distance. It was important to the learning process that students developed the capacity to see the poor as human being, not unlike themselves. In addition, they recognised their preconceived stereotypes and negative perceptions (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 18).*

#### *Age Group for Service*

It is difficult to name what age grouping is best for service learning. The adolescent is in the middle of that natural asking 'why' phase crucial to their identity development and this is core to the learning in service learning. The older adult may be more conscious of and more inclined to critique their world view while acknowledging that the Semantic Memory is more firmly entrenched and reflection, awareness and analysis processes may not have been a part of their lives.

If deliberately linked to a variety of reflection techniques this phase of the service learning experience has great potential for learning. The intensity of participant's experience if linked to Academic / Course programs and parallel reflection upon experience will provoke critical questioning;

*They begin asking causal questions because they had developed relationships with people in their organisation and they wanted to know why and how their clients ended up in their current circumstances (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 18).*

Green refers to this phase as 'increased understanding' and 'connection to Course Content' and it parallels Cone and Harris' "mediated learning" (Cone & Harris, 1996). The participant's meaning making processes here are quite cyclical. The personalisation and normalisation lead to the breakdown in stereotypes and to 'ah ha' moments of insight and understanding. As the jig-saw puzzle pieces of the total experience fall into place participants begin to naturally make links; causal links between different elements of the total experience. There is here, an obvious link with Course Content providing the coat-hangers for meaning while the experience supports and verifies the course content

leading to greater learning, empathy and more sophisticated thinking.

*Through interacting with the individuals, students were able to identify a number of issues related to homelessness. They were able to articulate social structures that contributed to homeless situations of individuals. In the process, students expressed an increased understanding of the multiple layers of homelessness, the multiple causality of this issue, and the complexity of the situation (Green, 2000, p. 5).*

Several theorists in the area of Service Learning speak about the learning energy that begins to build once the experience – reflection – course content cycle is well underway and personally owned. Rockquemore and Schaffer speak about 'engagement' where by participants began to be personally engaged in the learning process; it was now personal due to the relationships developed with clients and the personal effects the experience were having upon them. Many participants experience this type of 'learning' as different to any other they have experienced; it is more real, more relevant and significant both for them and for their world.

For Green (2006) this level of engagement points to "transformational thinking". As a result of their reflection upon experience in the context of the course content students may now identify a change in perspective, a change in their thinking, a never before experienced synthesis in their learning, an increased ability to think abstractly about multiple causes, the ability to think conceptually about connections between elements of the experience, the ability to express criticism of structures and organisation, identify solutions and articulate strategies for change (Green, 2006, p. 6). Much of this can lead to an increased energy and motivation for involvement in future service

#### *In and Out Groups – attribution.*

One element of engagement; the interplay between the concepts introduced through the course content and the credible assent to it through their experience in the field is that of in and out groups. Individual (internal) attribution attributes the poverty experienced within the social context of the Service Learning experience to personal characteristics of the poor [greed, laziness, lack of talent etc]. Structural (external) attribution will look to social factors external to the individual [discrepancies in the economic system, lack of political power, educational inequalities etc] to explain the identified behaviour / situation (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 19).

The importance of this element of the internal processes going on in the midst of the service experience is that its identification provides the participant with another tool for self-awareness and reflection.

*People tend to make individual attributions to explain other people's failures, yet make structural attributions to explain their own. In addition, existing research illustrates that individuals are likely to make individual attribution to out-groups (groups of which they are not members of), and to make structure attributions for in-group members (Rockquemore & Schaffer, 2000, p. 19).*

The dynamics of attribution are yet another reason for honouring the length of time in a quality service experience. Awareness of individual and structural attributions requires a maturity of reflection and an honesty of reflection assisted by program mentors that can only fully be realised once defences are down and the participants are fully engaged in normalisation, personalisation and reflection upon course content. The realisation that I personally may be part of the problem is never an easy point to come to but does provide the participant with a level of personal freedom within the experience that can be truly personally transformational.

### **Episodic Memory**

It is in the Episodic Memory that the immediate experience in Service Learning is held. This is where the stimuli, reactions to the stimuli, the selection of stimuli, the various facets of the 'experience' are noted, become aware of and reacted to. It is in the interplay between this and the expectations, mind map / Worldview stored in the Semantic memory that learning occurs. These point then to the importance, the vital importance of awareness and reflection.

If we are not aware and growing in awareness we can be in a Service Learning experience but not present to it. The presence of the participant to the service experience hangs on the coat hangers that the mentor has introduced them to as well as to the quality of the reflection processes. This is especially the case with the various elements that come to make up the particular course work or Academic experience relevant to that particular service experience. It is also especially important in those processes that enable the participant to make sense of their response to the stimuli and to make sense of their emotional reactions to the interplay between the Semantic Memory and the

Episodic Memory. As the participant grows in awareness of internal and structural attribution [in and out grouping], accommodation and assimilation and the cause – effect dynamic so present in service situations they are more and more able to stand back and truly critique their previously held world view, values and assumptions.

### **Reflection**

Obviously the experience itself is highly emotional in that the emotions experienced may be different to those experienced in the participants every day; certainly the context of them will be significantly different. The emotional response is the doorway to deeper learning but the emotional response is not an end in itself. Too often practitioners may be tempted to evaluate the worth of an experience by the depth of emotional response it engenders. The emotional response is held in the Episodic memory but the deeper levels of meaning and understanding – even of the emotion itself need to be worked at.

Skills that develop heightened awareness, that unlock the feeling behind the feeling, that allow space for 'truer' feeling to surface are all of great importance to make the episodic memory ready for a richer interplay with the semantic memory. Reflection skills must be user friendly. Just as Cone and Harris begin their model by reference to the unique learning styles and life experiences of every learner so too do we all have different reflection styles and levels of skill. While some respond to photo language, others like to sit with a single feeling word and then build upon it. Other learners will journal at length while others like to draw. Some will find that an informed discussion with other participants and program mentors will 'till the soil' of their emotional response so that upon conclusion of the discussion they are ready to 'name' and 'make sense of' their responses to the stimuli.

There is no right or wrong way to reflect upon experience. Facilitators need to be flexible and responsive to individual participant's needs in this regard. If program mentors take the reflective process seriously and continuously then over time the awareness bar in each participant grows higher and participants will enter the service site with a much higher emotional readiness to 'experience' and to learn. Over time each participant will be sensitized to verbal cues, to facial expression, to their own reactions, to the other players at the service site apart from the person they are in relationship with. There is, at times, almost a

dance going on within the participant between the self, aware and present to the person in front of them and another sense making and meaning making self within that is interpreting and engaging with the experience at a deeper level. The learning and reflections of both of these selves are important and need to be captured in the reflection processes.

#### *Mentors*

Similarly too, the mentors have a very similar process taking place as they observe the service site. They, to some extent, stand back from the experience and are sensitive to, aware of, present to particular academic and journal questions they may ask, individuals they will follow up, interventions they may make and particular learning situations they may need to manage. At one level they are observing the dynamics of the experience, at another level they may actually be participants while at another level they are actively identifying the nature of the mediated learning they will facilitate from the experience.

The role of the program facilitator / mentor cannot be underestimated in service learning. In Cone and Harris' (1996) model of Service Learning the instructors define cognitively pragmatic tasks, assign the service experience, and facilitate critical oral and written reflection utilizing both academic and journal questions. In this model the instructors mediated learning; and evaluated learners on applications of their newly integrated concepts.

Without becoming too much of the 'experience' that the participants are having at the service site it is important for program mentors to be pro-active in their interventions in the learning process. While not telling the participants what they could or should learn the program mentors do hold the core values and philosophies of the program, the nature of the relationships they wish to see develop and the interface between the experience and the Academic Experience they have developed.

One of the significant advantages of Service Learning being facilitated by local mentors and not outside professionals is that these mentors continue to journey with the participant long after the service experience, in itself, is concluded. The learning window is of its very nature pliable, elastic. While some learning will occur almost immediately, other learning linked to an 'ah-ha' light-bulb moment, other learning may be associated with a 'trigger' event or interplay between Semantic memory and episodic memory months later. There is

much value in 'revisiting' the service experience after a length of time has transgressed. This is especially the case if there were heightened emotional reactions associated with the original service experience. The other value of a local mentor 'touching base' with service participants months (even years) later is that it strengthens the Semantic Memory understanding is that the service and its associated values and beliefs are part of life and were not just for one moment in time.

#### *Conduit or Accordion Effect*

One of the key roles of the mentor is to attempt to establish learning based Conduit and Accordion effects.(Sheckley & Keeton, 1998). The Conduit Effect is a convergent, minimally reflective path joining a learner's expectations for a Service Learning experience and the attributes of the experience to which the learners pay attention. In the Conduit effect "perceptions that conform to the model of meaning used to pre-shape the service learning experience are processed automatically along this conduit path" (Sheckley & Keeton, 1998, p. 40). The conduit effect asks much less of the participant. The role of the mentor will be to be aware that participants will arrive at the service experience with "durable models of meaning and expectations for situations" and through reflection upon experience, the informing of the boundaries of their models of meaning and engagement with a credible Academic Experience move participant beyond this comfort [and non-learning] zone.

The main value of the conduit effect would be in reinforcing through confirmation newly acquired concepts and language tested out in the field of experience. As each confirmation of the concept introduced as part of the Academic Experience takes place learning will occur in that the expected properties of a rule, model or abstraction are reinforced. If the conduit effect leads to confirmations that maintain a coherent, unified, expectation-confirming and knowledge-consistent view of the world consistent with the sponsoring ideology then we are progressing further towards deep values change / transformational thinking (Mezirow, 2000, Green, 2006).

The program mentor will also attempt to produce the Accordion Effect whereby learning is enhanced through 'surprises' that do not fit within the existing models of meaning, expectations, images, values or constructions the learners have used to make meaning in

their worlds. All of the above reinforces the critical role that the mentor and their facilitation of the reflection processes plays.

### ***Ideology and Meaning Making***

The purpose of this article was to examine the processes at work in the Service Learning situation. However it is important to at least name the key elements of the 'meaning making' processes that parallel the experiential learning processes.

#### *Ideology*

The role that a clearly defined ideology places in experiential learning is significant. The sponsoring ideology has much to say to the Semantic Memory and to the values and expectations held there. I would briefly like to examine this through reference to my own approach to Service Learning.

I operate within the context of the Catholic Christian Community. Central to Catholic moral theology is the concept of the innate dignity of every person. This innate dignity is not earned, it is not given to some and not to others, it is not a reward nor is its loss a punishment; in fact – it cannot be taken away. From this deep belief in the innate dignity of every person comes our motivation to make a more just world where all live a quality of life that reflects their inner dignity. From this belief flows a profound respect for race and religion, value and beliefs, gender, physical and intellectual abilities or lack thereof.

As a result of this belief my approach to service means that each service experience is wrapped in a simple ideology. Firstly, aware of the innate dignity of each person – we enter into that other person's life as a guest; gently, respectfully, slowly – honouring the other and their life circumstances. From this approach [this 'how'] we make the choice to be deeply present. Our deliberate presence; the choice to listen deeply, to touch respectfully, to speak encouragingly, to look non-judgmentally – will say to the 'other' – you are truly beautiful, you are special – just as you are.

From guest-ness and presence will then flow compassion and an inner freedom. This ideology or theology [as we name the sacred ground of the other as the dwelling place of God's Holy Spirit – and self as same] will be the belief system that all of the elements mentioned above will bounce off – make sense from and lead to a greater depth. This ideology provides a language as well as meaning

making concepts to depth one's experience from.

#### *Meaning Making*

Several of the theorists' referenced in this article speak of the dynamics of service learning being spiral in nature. The inner growth and learning are not linear; life is not linear so nor should learning about life be!

Alison Le Cornu (2006) puts forward a simple model for meaning making that I believe can be linked to service learning successfully. Within the context of experience some participants will elicit from their experience a 'surface' level of experience – others will go deeper while others will go to a tacit level of meaning and some few to existential change.

Surface ➡ Deeper ➡ Tacit ➡ Existential  
Change

The following statements from participants working on a street van with the homeless will suggest these different levels of meaning making.

**Surface:** "We go out and work with the homeless. I work on the BBQ and after giving out the sausages and eggs on bread we come home. There are about thirty of them there at the site."

**Deeper:** "We go out and work with the homeless. They are really friendly and welcoming. I work on the BBQ cooking the eggs. I have to go to know some of the blokes names."

**Tacit:** In tacit the psychological energy of identifying "they are really friendly and welcoming" is 'normalised' and now this level of meaning – has become tacit. Thus a deeper level of meaning again can be opened up. "We go out and work with the homeless. They really welcome you and make you feel so accepted. They don't care that we are in our school uniforms etc they just accept us for who we are."

**Existential Change:** This is the level of meaning making that most reflects the core ideology / philosophy of the program at its deepest level. "I have been going out and working with the homeless for some time. I used to think I was helping them but now I know that I receive as much, if not more than what I give. Sure, many of them are broken people but their acceptance of their life condition and ability to work with it has led me to become more aware of my own – by different brokenness – and accept it too!"

The progression to deeper levels of meaning just does not happen by accident. While time of itself does not necessarily lead to deeper levels of meaning making it certainly contributes to it as the maturation of the relationships and the experiences themselves lend themselves to deeper meaning making past possible honeymoon or 'shock' experiences. Furthermore;

1. Reflection upon experience
  2. Service within the context of a rich and credible ideology
  3. And the active present of mentors;
- all contribute to deeper meaning making.

### Conclusion

Service Learning can be one of the most powerful and lifelong learning experiences that we can offer our youth. Importantly it can be frame changing, world-view changing and free and equip our young men and women to make a difference in a world so desperate for it.

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