Experiential Learning

“A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.”
- Oliver Wendall Holmes

What?
Without judgment or interpretation, participants describe in detail the facts and event(s) of the experience. This is a time to find out what events occurred. Each member of the group may have experienced the activity differently. Each person should report his or her experience. Questions are directed towards gathering data:

- What happened?
- What did you see?
- Describe your experience.
- How did you feel?
- What is your perspective?
- What surprised you?
- What went on in the group?
- Let’s hear from someone who has a different reaction.
So What?

After the participants share their ideas and reactions, it is important to help individuals see and evaluate any trends or dynamics that may be emerging in the group. The leader’s role is to help participants not only notice what happened, but to ask “Why?” The group determines if what went on during the experience was unique or if it happens in other situations. Participants are asked to focus on linking the experience to the real world. Generalizing helps participants transfer their personal learning from the experience to the rest of the world. Questions are directed towards making sense of the data for the individual and the group:

- Why did that happen?
- What caused that particular event?
- What kinds of patterns are you seeing here?
- How was that significant?
- How might it have been different?

- Where have you seen this before?
- What does this remind you of?
- What does this make you think of?
- Does this remind you of anything?
- What does that help explain?

Fishing for Themes:

As the facilitator, your role will be to identify themes during the “So What?” questioning that you will use for your “application” during the “Now What?” questioning. Common themes include:

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Trust
- Leadership
- Power
- Planning
- Resources
- Motivation
- Diversity

Now What?

(How will they think or act in the future as a result of this experience?) Participants consider broader implications of the experience and apply learning. Be aware to strike a balance between realistic, reachable goals and openness to spontaneity and change.

- What do you want to remember from this experience in the future?
- How could you apply that?
- What would you do differently in a similar situation in the future?
- How could you hold on to that feeling?
- How could you make it better?
- What follow-up is needed to address any challenges or difficulties?
Reflection

Why Reflect?
We do not learn from doing, we learn from thinking about what we do. Research shows that reflection has some positive impact on the attitudes of the participants regarding service. However, the lack of reflection has a STRONG NEGATIVE impact on the participant’s attitudes about service and the service activity.

Reflection is: a crucial part of community service, which allows participants to look back on, think critically about, and learn from their service experience. Reflection may include acknowledging and/or sharing of reactions, feelings, observations, and ideas about anything regarding the activity. Reflection can happen through writing, speaking, listening, reading, drawing, acting, and any other way you can imagine.

Benefits of Reflection:

- Gives meaning to the experience (was goal accomplished, how did we do, how is community served by this, how is this part of a larger effort, etc.)
- Provides an opportunity to establish expectations (individually, team)
- Can help participants understand the limitations and opportunities of the service site or community organization
- Relieves tension and provides re-energizing and renewal (especially important when service is emotionally challenging)
- Can create a sense of accomplishment that is crucial, especially where there are limited external rewards
- Can create a habit of appreciating ourselves
- Integration of service into the rest of one’s life — developing a "spirit" of service and civic-mindedness
- Improved service
- Can create a sense of closure, especially important after a long service period, project, or emotional experience.