Introducing Students to Social Analysis and Theological Reflection:

Foundations for Facilitators of Service-Learning at Colleges and Universities Founded or Sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy

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Introduction

Service-learning holds great promise to develop students’ understanding of their academic disciplines and commitment to civic responsibility, as well as to foster engagement between colleges/universities and the communities in which they exist. Yet in order for service-learning to realize its potential, facilitators must be skilled in mining the depths of the service experience in order to bring forth the gems of student understanding and commitment. Otherwise, students engage in service experiences but risk not really understanding them. This can lead students to stereotype and even harm the people they meet while engaging in service-learning.

Defining the Terms

Curricular service-learning is a pedagogy that integrates community service into academic courses to meet specific learning goals for students. Faculty, in partnership with representatives of community organizations, design service-learning projects based on two main objectives: advancing the students’ understanding of specific course content and related civic learning objectives, and responding to community-identified needs and assets. Strong reflective and analytical components are built into the course to help students consider relationships between their service, the course’s curriculum, and its impact on their values, vocations, and professional goals.

Co-curricular service-learning differs only with regard to a link to course content. The service has specific learning goals for participants, the service responds to community-identified needs and assets, and the process includes strong reflective and analytical components. Generally these service-learning activities are directed under the leadership of student organizations and groups.¹

Both curricular and co-curricular service-learning can occur in a compressed form (such as a seminar in which students travel during spring break to offer service) or an extended form (such as a semester-long course).

The term “service-learning” can be somewhat misleading, in that its practice includes not only service but also the

¹ These definitions are slightly modified versions of the definitions offered by the Midwest Consortium for Service Learning in Higher Education. See http://involved.unl.edu/midwestconsortium/mcmission.htm.
work of justice. Both are integral to service-learning. Service (or charity) implies that someone with sufficient resources and power to live well meets the immediate needs of someone lacking sufficient resources and power to live well. Resources and decisions about distribution generally remain with the provider. Service is usually limited in time and impact. Little attention is paid to structural causes of the inequity in resources and power. For example, someone acting in the paradigm of charity recognizes that someone else is hungry now, and therefore feeds her.\(^2\)

Service-learning also includes the practice of social justice. For the purposes of this guide, the terms justice and social justice are synonymous. Social justice seeks long-term solutions. Those doing justice develop relationships among stakeholder groups, including those “in need of service.” Doing justice entails a learning environment that continually uncovers structural (or “root”) causes of inequities or injustices. For example, those engaged in doing justice ask why people are hungry now and then seek to change the social and institutional structures that contribute to hunger, through advocacy regarding public policies, community organizing, and other forms of civic engagement.\(^3\)


\(^3\) Ibid. See also Jennifer Reed-Bouley, “Service and Justice: Understanding the Relationship through Community Service-Learning,” *Issue on Teaching and Doing Justice in Higher

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*Purpose and Audiences for this Guide*

This document is a guide to theological reflection and social analysis for facilitators of service-learning at colleges and universities founded and/or sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy. Several comprehensive guides to service-learning have already been published, and other information is readily available via websites.\(^4\) This guide avoids duplicating the good work others have already accomplished regarding many dimensions of service-learning; instead, it provides for Mercy constituents only theoretical background on theological reflection and social analysis, as well as a sample plan for facilitating such reflection and analysis. It is intended to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. While this handbook highlights the method of social analysis proposed by Henriot and Holland, some colleges and universities may choose to use David Kolb’s model of the learning cycle or that proposed by others.\(^5\)

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\(^4\) See, for example, the National Service Learning Clearinghouse website at http://www.servicelearning.org/ and the Campus Compact website at http://www.compact.org/.

It is not expected that all faculty and staff at colleges and universities founded and/or sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy would have the necessary theological background to facilitate theological reflection. This guide provides background information as a point of reference, so that faculty and staff who are experts in a variety of disciplines can appreciate the distinctive resources that can be brought to bear when analyzing service-learning in a Mercy context. They may choose, however, not to use these resources or to request the assistance of other colleagues. Our student body is religiously diverse. Although the foundational theology presented is based upon the Catholic tradition, the method of “meaning-making” suggested in this guide can be used with students from various religious traditions.

“The employments which regard our neighbour require that we should be very well grounded in humility and patience -- in order to be truly serviceable to them without any prejudice to ourselves.” Catherine McAuley, “The Spirit of the Institute,” in Mary C. Sullivan, ed. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2004), 459.

For directors of service-learning programs, campus ministers, and other constituents familiar with Catholic theology and social teaching, the foundational principles and practical examples offered here can be applied and adapted to theological reflection and social analysis at any Catholic academic institution, including colleges, universities, and high schools.

I. The Context: The Congruence Between Hallmarks of Mercy Higher Education and Service-Learning

In the paper entitled “Mercy Higher Educational Ministry: Culture and Characteristics,” Dr. Maryanne Stevens, RSM, President of College of Saint Mary in Omaha, Nebraska, articulates four hallmarks of Mercy Higher Education. These four indicators are the following: regard for the dignity of the human person, academic excellence and lifelong learning, education of the whole person, and promotion of compassion and justice towards those with less, especially women and children. Each of these hallmarks is congruent with the process and goals of service-learning, and each illustrates the particular context of service-learning at colleges and universities founded and/or sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy. The congruence between the hallmarks of Mercy higher education and service-learning is one resource facilitators can use to explain to students why they choose to use service-learning as a teaching/learning method.

Regard for the dignity of the human person

First, regard for the dignity of the person (including students, faculty, staff, community partners, and other constituents), is grounded in classic

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Catholic anthropology indicating that God created humanity in the *imago Dei*. The Book of Genesis describes God creating humanity in God’s image and likeness, and therefore as good and as social beings. We possess an inherent dignity that cannot be taken away; our dignity is unaffected by our capabilities. God calls us to become collaborators in the creative process of renewing the world.

Creation in God’s image leads to the Catholic understanding of the dignity of persons, human sociality, the common good, solidarity, and human rights. Service-learning is clearly an excellent way to teach students about human dignity—both students’ own dignity, as well as the dignity of those with whom they serve and collaborate in the community. Students should be cautioned against seeing themselves as the “servers” and the community partners as the “served.” Rather, facilitators should teach students that they are collaborating with community partners to meet learning goals while contributing to the community. This view preserves each person’s creative contributions to the process, regardless of role.

**Academic excellence and lifelong learning**

Second, Mercy Higher Education can be characterized by pursuit of academic excellence and lifelong learning that, like the Catholic tradition, honors the respective roles of faith and reason in the process of human understanding. The Catholic tradition emphasizes the goodness of human reason as a gift from God to be nurtured and cultivated. Reason and faith complement and inform one another; they are not viewed as opposing forces. One outgrowth of this view is the following: A fundamental premise of Catholic social teaching is that the natural law, which grounds the documents, is accessible to all persons using human reason. So Catholic social teaching is not sectarian. It is publicly promulgated and can inform the moral reasoning process of persons regardless of their faith commitments. Non-catholic faculty, staff, and students can participate actively in the various ways in which the colleges and universities express their Catholic identity, including service-learning.

Service-learning provides a natural fit with the goals of academic excellence and lifelong learning. A large body of research indicates that service-learning can assist students in learning knowledge, skills and values desired by faculty and other facilitators. Because community assets and needs change over time, service-learning is a lifelong process. Research also indicates that when facilitators structure effective service-learning projects with adequate opportunities for reflection and analysis, students may develop a lifelong commitment to learning through community engagement. Educators, too, may find that they are transformed through the process of service-learning. “By collaborating with others in works of mercy we continually learn from them how to be more merciful.”

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Third, Mercy Higher Education strives to educate the “whole person” in an integrated way. The Catholic understanding of the Incarnation, i.e., God becoming fully human and fully divine in the person of Jesus, affirms the goodness of being human. The whole person is good. No aspect of being human is separated from God’s love and grace. In fact, St. Irenaeus in the second century wrote that the glory of God is the human person fully alive.

One way colleges and universities strive to meet the goal of educating the whole person is by offering a diverse array of academic majors as well as student development initiatives that include attention to athletics, campus ministry, leadership development, and other programs that evoke the potential of students in mind, body and spirit. Service-learning educates the “whole person” by addressing both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. For many students, community service generates compassion for those with whom they work, thus touching their affect and sparking new questions and concerns. This affective learning then animates intellectual questions to which the resources of the academic disciplines can be brought to bear.

Fourth, Mercy Higher Education promotes compassion and justice towards those with less, especially women and children. This is perhaps the most distinctive hallmark of Mercy Higher Education, because it is connected to the unique fourth vow that all Sisters of Mercy take, which is service to the poor, sick and ignorant.

This fourth hallmark allows facilitators of service-learning to teach students how the principle of mercy serves as an “umbrella” for service (or charity) and justice (or structural change). “The habit of mercy and compassion, like all habits, is something we learn. We form the habits of mercy and compassion by practicing over and over again individual acts of mercy and compassion.”

The Latin root of the word “compassion” is “cum,” meaning “with” and “patrior,” meaning “to feel.” So compassion literally means “to feel with” another. Service-learning promotes compassion by offering students opportunities to practice learning what life is like for persons who may have vastly different experiences than the students themselves. By gaining glimpses into others’ realities, by forming lasting relationships with those they might not have otherwise met, and by learning about the situations affecting individuals’ suffering and resilience, students may develop compassion for others’ experiences. As Pope Benedict XVI writes in Deus Caritas Est, “I wish here to offer a special word of gratitude.

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and appreciation to all those who take part in [volunteer] work in whatever way. For young people, this widespread involvement constitutes a school of life which offers them a formation in solidarity and in readiness to offer others not simply material aid but their very selves.  

Compassionate service to others involves mercy. “Mercy (or compassion) adds to love an element of stronger affective response and an assumption of more acute access to knowledge of the concrete reality of others.”

How does service-learning promote justice congruent with the goals of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education? Briefly, in the Hebrew scriptures, justice is described as right relationships that acknowledge the dignity of each person, as liberation from enslavement, and as reconciliation. The responsibility to care for the “anawim” (or “little ones”) in the Hebrew Scriptures refers to widows, orphans, children and strangers, who were the most vulnerable and marginalized persons at that time. Jesus’ ministry of healing as recorded in New Testament extends this concern for the vulnerable, which Catholic social teaching terms the “preferential option for the poor.” This preference involves bringing the resources of a college or university to bear on behalf of those whose voices are generally not heard in society and to whom society has not conferred the benefits that it has to other, more powerful groups. “The requirement for true mercy is . . . the wisdom to understand well—insofar as we can—concrete realities, contexts, relationships, and the claims they make on us in justice.”

Service-learning provides one way for students to practice how to pay the social debt incurred by their education: a responsibility to work for justice with and on behalf of those with less in society.

II. Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching: Two Resources in the Christian Tradition for Facilitating Social Analysis and Theological Reflection

Scripture

Most Christians view Scripture as a foundational resource of their faith and actions. Students are generally unaware, however, that Scripture’s central directive to love one’s neighbor involves not only direct service but also action to promote justice. This section offers some of the many Scripture passages that indicate God's desire not only for service but also for justice. These passages can be read and discussed in reflection and used as resources for prayer during service-learning.

9 Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, paragraph 30b.

11 Ibid.
The foundational themes of these passages are the following: human beings are created fundamentally good and in community, and thus, are called to do justice; God accompanies humanity in history and desires not only charity but also justice; Hebrew prophets and Jesus seek justice by calling us to right relationships; and Jesus identifies with the poor in a special way.  

**Human beings are called to do justice**

Because human beings are both inherently good and fundamentally social, they are called to structure society to preserve each person's dignity as part of the "common good." Therefore, human beings are called to do justice, i.e., they are called to create and refine social structures that uphold the inherent dignity and facilitate the fundamental sociality of all human beings. As individuals in community, human beings need to strive for personal righteousness — responsibility for themselves — as well as communal justice — responsibility for one another.

“*It is an established opinion that the way to virtue and to piety is shorter by example than by precept.*” Catherine McAuley, “The Spirit of the Institute,” in Mary C. Sullivan, ed. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841*, 463.

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13 This and subsequent sections are not intended to be exhaustive but are instead necessarily limited by the scope of the project in terms of depth of analysis and the number of examples from each resource discussed. All biblical references are taken from *New Jerusalem Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985).

14 For a fuller development of many of these biblical themes, see Fred Kammer, S.J., *Doing Faithjustice: An Introduction to Catholic Social Thought* (New York: Paulist, 1991).
God accompanies humanity in history and desires not only charity but also justice

Throughout the Book of Exodus God is described as accompanying the Hebrew people and desiring justice. God hears the cries of the Israelites who are oppressed in Egypt. God sends Moses to liberate the captives and to lead them out of the land of oppression. God accompanies the Hebrews both in the slavery and in their liberation.

Hebrew prophets and Jesus seek justice by calling us to right relationships

Leviticus 25:10 presents the concept of “jubilee” in which land, property and people ideally are made free each fifty years. This Hebrew sense of justice as regularly restoring “right relationship” is a common theme for the prophets. The Hebrew prophets share this common theme of justice as right relationship when they speak out on behalf of the poor and marginalized. Isaiah 61:1-2 proclaims that “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; . . . to proclaim liberty to captives; . . . to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord . . .” Jesus reads this passage when he begins his public ministry as recorded in Luke’s Gospel (4:18-19). Jesus comes in this tradition of the Hebrew prophets by seeking justice and right relationships.

Jesus identifies with the poor in a special way

In Matthew 25:31-46, often called the parable of the “Final Judgment,” Jesus identifies with the poor in a special way:

“Whenever you did it to the least of my [people], you did it to me.” And “whenever you did not do it to the least of my [people], you did not do it to me.” In these passages, Jesus does not base salvation on faith or religion so much as how the people care for the poor and marginalized. Service and justice to those in need measure love and salvation.¹⁵

The passages from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures described above exemplify the central theme of service and justice which is concisely embodied in the term “mercy.” If students are to see lifelong action for justice as constitutive of their faith, they need to be familiar with some of the biblical foundations for such a claim. Students need to understand that, according to the Bible, human beings are both inherently good and fundamentally social, that God accompanies human beings and desires justice, and that Jesus identifies with the “least of these.” Furthermore, these passages provide some of the biblical foundations for Catholic Social Teaching.

Catholic Social Teaching

Although often unknown by Catholics and others, the documents of Catholic Social Teaching are an authoritative part of the Catholic Tradition. Introducing students to Catholic Social Teaching can help them to recognize the reality of

¹⁵ For a more detailed reflection on the themes in this passage, see Michael J. Himes, Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships and Service (New York: Paulist, 1995).
social structures and to understand not only service but also justice as central to Christian faith. Furthermore, if students are to engage in theological reflection in which they place their experience in dialogue with the Christian Tradition, familiarizing them with Catholic Social Teaching offers students more of the Tradition with which they can dialogue. Like the previous section on Scripture, this section is not comprehensive but provides points of departure for reflection and analysis.

Since *Rerum Novarum* was published in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, Catholic Social Teaching has analyzed society and criticized injustice while calling “all people of good will” to reject sin personally and collectively, and to transform social structures to be more just. The following excerpts, among others, establish a pattern of Catholic Social Teaching about engaging in social analysis, criticizing unjust social structures, and insisting that Christian faith requires both service and justice.

Catholic Social Teaching has engaged in social analysis since it began in 1891 with *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Leo XIII was concerned that communism and socialism were gaining strength and a newly industrialized Italy caused long, dangerous work for little pay for workers. Pope Leo XIII engaged in social analysis, which led him to seek social and economic reforms in order to prevent a violent revolution. In 1931, forty years after *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI published *Quadragesimo Anno* in which he “broadened the Church's concern for the poor workers to encompass the structures which oppress them.” His social analysis criticized the social (economic) structures of capitalism, socialism and communism.

In 1961, Pope John XXIII promulgated *Mater et Magistra*. In this encyclical, he affirmed a formulation of reflection and action that was usually associated with the lay movement Catholic Action. He encouraged the "three stages" of social analysis and action— “look, judge, act” or “see, judge, act.” Pope John XXIII deemed the application of this method of social analysis “a task which belongs particularly to the laity, for it is their lot to live an active life in the world.”

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19 *Mater et Magistra*, especially paragraphs 236 and 240.
At the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the bishops affirmed the importance of social analysis by declaring that the Church has “the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.” In 1971, Pope Paul VI wrote “A Call to Action” on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. In “A Call to Action,” Pope Paul VI encouraged local communities to engage in a process similar to “see, judge, act” by analyzing local social structures, making judgments with the guidance of Catholic Social Teaching, and acting to make society more just. He wrote that it “is up to the Christian communities to analyse (sic) with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the gospel's unalterable words, and to draw principles of reflection, norms of judgement (sic), and directives of action from the social teaching of the Church.”

The 1971 statement by the Synod of Bishops, “Justice in the World,” explicitly analyzed and condemned “unjust systems and structures” that oppress people. It contains one of the clearest statements on justice ever proclaimed in official Catholic Social Teaching:

> Action on behalf of justice and participation

in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

Here the bishops insisted that Christian faith and justice cannot be separated. If one claims to be Christian, she or he must work for justice.

Pope John Paul II echoed and elaborated upon earlier popes’ critiques of the economic structures of capitalism and communism in his 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*. In 1986 the bishops of the United States of America wrote *Economic Justice for All* in which they analyzed and criticized the United States economy for allowing increasing poverty in the midst of plenty. They acknowledged that, rather than being accidental or inevitable, social and economic structures are human constructions and therefore can be made more just. They reinforced this theme in subsequent teaching, such as “Ten Years after *Economic Justice for All*,” “A Place at the Table,” and “Faithful Citizenship.”

Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) emphasized the primacy of love in the Christian life, as it is expressed through acts of service and justice. While critical of Marxist understandings of economic theory that would lead to social revolution, and

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20 See “Gaudium et Spes,” especially paragraph 162.
21 See *A Call to Action*, especially paragraph 4.
22 See *Justice in the World*, see especially paragraphs 270 and 276.
23 Ibid.
mindful of the role of the state in securing justice for its citizens, he affirmed that “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society . . . is proper to the lay faithful. . . . The mission of the lay faithful is therefore to configure social life correctly . . . .”

Much more could be written about these rich documents. When introducing students to Catholic Social Teaching as a resource for theological reflection and social analysis, the following websites may also be helpful in providing teaching about specific social issues students face in service-learning, such as immigration, poverty, racism, and others:

• United States Conference of Bishops (This includes the full text of U.S. Bishops’ documents.)

• Sisters of Mercy of the Americas (This contains much information about social justice priorities, including the Direction Statement.)

• Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas

• Catechism of the Catholic Church

• Center of Concern

• Chronology of Catholic Social Teaching’s Major Documents

• “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching” by the US Catholic Bishops (1997)

III. Engaging in Social Analysis

The Pastoral Circle

Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J.’s Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice elucidates a process of thinking about and engaging in social analysis. Holland and Henriot locate social analysis within what they term the “pastoral circle.” The pastoral circle demonstrates the connection among four “mediations of experience:

1. insertion,
2. social analysis,
3. theological reflection, and
4. pastoral planning.”

“Insertion” implies that those reflecting choose an experience and examine the context of those involved in the experience. “Social analysis” is the

24 Deus Caritas Est, para. 29.

25 Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, S.J., 7. See also the model proposed by Laurie Green, Let’s Do Theology: A Pastoral Cycle Resource Book (England: Mowbray, 1990).
process of analyzing the “bigger picture” by looking at causes, consequences, stakeholders, powerbrokers, structures and assumptions that influence the situation. “Theological reflection” is “an effort to understand more broadly and deeply the analyzed experience in the light of living faith, scripture, church social teaching, and the resources of tradition.”26 And “pastoral planning” leads to decisions and actions by individuals and communities in light of the insertion, social analysis and theological reflection. Holland and Henriot point out that the “circle” can be better described as a spiral because the process is lifelong, i.e., it continues with a new cycle, which should be informed by previous cycles.

### Social Analysis

The part of the pastoral circle most helpful for our purposes here is Holland and Henriot’s method of doing social analysis, which can be used as part of Killen and de Beer’s method of theological reflection detailed in the next section.27 Holland and Henriot define social analysis as “the effort to obtain a more complete picture of a social situation by exploring its historical and structural relationships.”28 They explore the following four elements of society when doing social analysis: history, structures, divisions and levels. Looking at the history of an issue or policy offers insight about how society developed to its present situation and where it is headed in the future. Analyzing economic, political, ecclesial, social and cultural structures is necessary if the subsequent action is to be most effective. Examples of social divisions include race, sex, age, class, ethnicity, religion, and geography. A simple analysis can ask three basic questions: “1. Who makes the decisions? 2. Who benefits from the decisions? 3. Who bears the costs of the decisions?”29 Finally, issues and policies being analyzed can happen at local, regional, national and international levels. For social analysis to be most comprehensive and effective, all of these elements need to be included in the analysis.

> “We ought therefore to make account, that our perfection and permit consists in acquitting ourselves well of these duties, so that though the spirit of prayer and retreat should be most dear to us, yet such a spirit as would never withdraw us from these works of mercy, otherwise it should be regarded as a temptation rather than the effect of sincere piety.” Catherine McAuley, “The Spirit of the Institute,” in Mary C. Sullivan, ed. The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley 1818-1841, 461-462.

Holland and Henriot acknowledge that social analysis illuminates the context of a given question or problem, but it is not intended to offer an immediate answer or solution. Anyone can engage in social analysis, not just academics or intellectuals. We all make everyday

26 Holland and Henriot, 9.
27 Killen and de Beer’s method of theological reflection incorporates social analysis as one way to define and explore experience. However, because students can easily overlook this dimension of Killen and de Beer’s process, we incorporate other scholars’ discussion of social analysis.

28 Holland and Henriot, 14.
29 Ibid., 28. See also 21, 24-27.
decisions based on implicit social analysis. Holland and Henriot's framework helps to make that process more explicit and precise for students. Furthermore, social analysis is not a neutral process. To do social analysis best, it is important to be as honest as possible about one’s social location, including one's own biases and assumptions. Finally, Holland and Henriot admit that social analysis “is a difficult task [because] it is complex, never ending, and always controversial.”

Despite the challenges implicit in social analysis, engaging in rigorous social analysis is essential to gain insight into social structures while engaging in service-learning.

Social analysis is useful for facilitators who wish to broaden their students’ learning through service beyond a particular discipline by posing questions about the social contexts of service. The method of questioning is designed to help students appreciate the multiple social influences on the particular social problems they encounter, as well as the multidisciplinary research required in order to understand and solve the social problems. Because most social issues have multiple dimensions, students should be cautioned that they cannot easily construct a complete analysis of a social situation. Rather, social analysis helps them to appreciate the complexity of the issues.

Because service-learning projects are usually done in collaboration with community organizations serving community members who are economically poor or otherwise vulnerable, students are likely to first notice the deficits and needs in a community. As a facilitator, it is important to help students to notice the community’s assets. Community assets include churches, neighborhood organizations, and other community associations and institutions such as businesses, schools, and libraries. These assets constitute the community’s capacities, resources and strengths. The model of noticing assets presumes that there are already committed people within the neighborhood working for its improvement. Students and colleges/universities can partner with local residents rather than see themselves as the outsiders with solutions to impose upon the community.

For students who are novices at social analysis, the goal could be to pose questions that, if researched well and answered, could yield a rich understanding of the systems affecting a particular experience they encounter while engaging in service-learning, e.g., homelessness. The goal for the novice would not be to provide definitive answers but to practice asking good questions to more deeply understand the relevant issues. One way to think about the social analysis would be to ask, “In what directions would we need to focus

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30Ibid., 19. See also 15 and 16. 31The classic text describing the Asset-Based Community Development Model is found in John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann, Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Institute for Policy Research, 1993).
our research in order to understand better the relevant issues?”

**Specific Recommendations for Facilitating Social Analysis**

For example, we have facilitated social analysis with college students by framing it as such: Any social issue can be “dissected” or analyzed according to the various systems that affect it. Some of the systems we can analyze are the political, economic, religious, educational, and health care dimensions of society. There are other systems we could also consider such as systems regarding ecology, security, culture and race, but we will begin with just a few systems initially. In order to understand the systemic dimensions of the social issue you encountered in your service (e.g., homelessness, hunger, immigration, or another issue), we need to analyze the dimensions separately and then put them together.

The analogy we have used is that of medical students who need to understand the human body in its totality and the interactions among the various systems (such as respiratory and circulatory systems) by dissecting each system independently. We understand the entire body as an organism better if we break it into its component systems, just as we understand a social issue better if we analyze the systems that influence it.

Then we break the students into groups of 2 or 3, assigning each group one particular system to analyze in relation to a social issue they encounter through service-learning, e.g., homelessness or hunger. Some examples of systems and questions to pose about them follow:

**Questions to Pose for Social Analysis**
(This set of questions is adapted from the Eighth Day Center for Justice, “Towards a Spirituality of Justice,” available at the website http://www.8thdaycenter.org/resources/publications/printbook.pdf.)

**Political System:** This system refers to people’s power to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.
Questions to ask in order to analyze this dimension include:
  ◆ How are decisions made?
  ◆ Who has the power to influence decision-making?
  ◆ Who does not have power to influence decision-making?

**Religious System:** Most broadly, this system refers to “humanity’s ultimate concern.” (Paul Tillich) Questions to ask in order to analyze this dimension include:
  ◆ Which religious beliefs and practices contribute to maintaining this situation?
  ◆ Which religious beliefs and practices contribute to alleviating this situation?

**Economic System:** This system refers to production, distribution and consumption of goods and services.
Questions to ask in order to analyze this dimension include:
  ◆ Who owns the resources?
  ◆ Who benefits financially from this situation?
  ◆ Who suffers financially from this situation?
Social System: This system refers to how people categorize or “group” themselves, and the relationships among the various groups. Questions to ask in order to analyze this dimension include:
- Which groups are included?
- Which groups are excluded?

Educational System: This system refers to structures providing formal education, including those funded by the public and by private entities. Questions to ask in order to analyze this dimension include:
- How is this resource distributed?
- How does access affect life chances?
- How does particular groups’ likelihood to access these resources affect their life chances?

Health Care System: This system refers to structures providing physical and mental health care, including those funded by the public and by private entities. Questions to ask in order to analyze this dimension include:
- How is this resource distributed?
- How does access affect life chances?
- How does particular groups’ likelihood to access these resources affect their life chances?

At its most basic, the praxis spiral is about having an experience and reflecting on that experience. The reflection leads one to action—another experience—which leads to more reflection. And so on around the spiral, deepening with each rotation. Experience/action and reflection are part of the same process, one informing the other. The spiral looks like this:
IV. Reflecting Theologically

Making Meaning

A basic premise of theological reflection is that human beings desire to make meaning in their lives. Theological reflection is the process of placing into dialogue life experiences with a religious tradition to produce new insights, leading to deeper meaning and action. Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, who have elucidated a method of theological reflection in their book, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, define it in this way:

[T]heological reflection is the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may confirm challenge, clarify, and expand how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition.

The outcome is new truth and meaning for living.32

Because the student body at colleges and universities founded or sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy is religiously pluralistic, students may engage in theological reflection by placing their experience in dialogue with any faith tradition or paradigmatic set of values that guide their own interpretation of meaning. The following are a few of the essential elements of Killen and de Beer’s method of engaging in theological reflection. They describe what they call the “movement toward insight.” By this movement they mean the basic meaning-making process that we use as we encounter events, people and things in our lives. They also describe the corresponding framework for doing theological reflection. There are four basic moves in the framework that undergirds all theological reflection:

1. Focusing on some aspect of experience.
2. Describing that experience to identify the heart of the matter.
3. Exploring the heart of the matter in conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage [or, for our purposes, with the wisdom of a faith tradition].
4. Identifying from this conversation new truths and meanings for living.33

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33 Ibid., 74. Words in “bold” are such in the original.
Challenges

It can be difficult for students to identify “the heart of the matter,” an image, symbol, event, or other experience that expresses the students’ overall feelings or views about the service-learning experience. For those groups that encounter great difficulty identifying “the heart of the matter,” we encourage the facilitator to simply have the students focus on step one, focusing on any aspect of the service-learning experience that was especially important to them.

According to Killen and de Beer, one must always consider people, purpose, and context. This means one must consider the individual people who are doing the reflection (students), the possible purposes, and the changing contexts. Finally, “experience” has both an outer and inner dimension. When paying attention to an experience, one must consider both what happened from the outside as well as what the person was feeling or perceiving internally.

A significant difficulty for facilitators of theological reflection is that many students are unfamiliar with the “wisdom of the Christian heritage” which is central to the process Killen and de Beer describe. The depth of students’ theological reflection will be highly influenced by the extent of their knowledge of the Tradition. Hence, it will be essential for facilitators to teach students the theological foundations in Scripture and Catholic Social Teaching provided above, and to be receptive to students’ placing the “heart of the matter” into dialogue with other paradigms in which they find meaning.

Killen and de Beer provide students with a method of theological reflection through which they can socially analyze their experience, place that analyzed experience in dialogue with their faith tradition, and integrate resulting insights with the rest of their lives. In short, this method can facilitate students’ process of finding the theological meaning of their experiences of service-learning.

The following diagram illustrates our view, influenced by the authors cited above, of how social analysis and theological reflection can be integrated:

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34 Ibid., 116-121.
35 Ibid., 59.
The Process of Social Analysis and Theological Reflection

**Action/Vision**
- Act (or make a plan to act) upon the insights gained and pose new questions for future analysis and reflection.

**Theological Reflection**
- Dialogue the “heart of the matter” with where we make meaning in our faith traditions.

**Bonding the Group**
- Establish a welcoming environment right away and maintain it throughout the experience.

**Staying with The Experience**
- Write in a journal and reflect without judgment on internal and external events.

**Social Analysis**
- Examine structures, systems affecting the issue.

**Heart of the Matter**
- Where is the energy? What is one image or statement that conveys the affective dimension of the experience?

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V. Sample Plan for Facilitating Theological Reflection and Social Analysis on a Service-Learning Seminar

What follows are suggestions for how to facilitate theological reflection and social analysis on an intensive service-learning seminar such as an Alternative Spring Break Trip. The suggestions are not intended to be exhaustive but simply to illuminate the theoretical foundations presented above. The plan can be modified for use in semester-long service-learning courses. The modification for curricular service-learning would be two-fold: 1) the reflections can be spread out throughout the semester and 2) the analysis would need to include particular disciplinary learning goals as well as the more general social analysis described here. Finally, those whose disciplinary expertise precludes theological reflection may simply take the pieces of social
analysis described below that are helpful in meeting their course’s learning goals.

**Before the Seminar**

- Meet with the group several times before the service begins. You will need to explain certain topics: the basic itinerary, signing any necessary paperwork, etc. One important goal of the meetings is to begin to bond the group through “ice-breakers,” discussions, food and social time. How well the group functions during the seminar will greatly aid or detract from the experience of the individuals. Build trust. Facilitate a conversation among the students about their hopes, fears and expectations for themselves, each other and the facilitator(s).

- Do not wait until the service begins to introduce students to social analysis and theological reflection.

  - For social analysis: Research and study the basic demographics and social issues of the people and region to which you are going. Articles, quotations, pictures, videos and music can begin the process. Have students generate a list of questions, using the model provided in the section on Social Analysis.

  - For Theological Reflection: Weave Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, quotations from Catherine McAuley, other parts of the Christian tradition, and aspects of participants’ other faith traditions into discussions and prayers. Discuss documents and quotations from Catholic Social Teaching that are pertinent to the social issues students will encounter. Explain to the students that the group will engage in a basic process of reflection that will “make meaning” of experiences. As human beings we naturally seek to better understand ourselves and our world, to ask “why” about our world. We seek meaning by thinking about the experiences we have and placing those experiences in dialogue with other places that we find meaning, such as our faith lives. Explain to students that what anyone says during the reflection is confidential, that it is to remain in the group.

Explanation: The pre-service meetings focus on preparation, establishing expectations, and pre-teaching. Members’ high level of trust will encourage students to talk more openly during group discussions. They will be more willing to “try on” new ideas and new perspectives. Trust among group members will encourage deeper reflection and openness to ideas such as social justice and faith development.

“The perfection of the religious soul depends not so much on doing extraordinary actions, as on doing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions and exercises of every day.” “Rule and Constitutions,” Chapter 5, articles 1 and 3, found in Morning and Evening Prayer of the Sisters of Mercy, 917.
Evening One of the Seminar

- Remember to continue to facilitate group cohesion and to maintain a welcoming, open atmosphere. Remind participants that everyone is encouraged to voice their views during reflections but that no one will ever be forced to share. Students always have the option to “pass.” Also remind them about confidentiality. You may want to begin each evening by “checking in,” asking each participant to state how she is feeling right then.

- To help the individuals and group “stay with the experience,” (the “See” of “See, Judge, Act”) say something to this effect: “Now I’m going to lead you through a simple guided meditation so that we can get back in touch with what we experienced today. As much as possible, try not to judge the experience yet. Don’t think about what you “should” or “should not” be feeling, thinking or experiencing. Just notice what you did experience, both externally and internally. I’ll slowly mention some of the things we did today. I invite you to let the images, memories, and experiences just flow through your mind.”

- Read through the following (or say something to this effect on your own) in a calm, relaxed voice: “I invite you to close your eyes and relax . . . Notice your breathing . . . Check in with your body. Tighten and relax the muscles in your feet . . . In your legs . . . In your lower back and stomach . . . In your chest and back . . . In your shoulders…neck… and head . . . Now let’s remember some of the experiences of our day . . . (Slowly mention some of what you did that day, e.g.: “You woke up early . . . How were you feeling? . . . You gathered at the van at 7 a.m. . . . you rode in the van for 12 hours . . . What did you notice? What did you see? hear? smell? What were you feeling? . . . We arrived at ________ . . . What did you notice? . . . The host community came out . . . They showed us where we would be staying . . . They gave us a tour . . . etc.)” When you are ready to end, say: "I invite you now to come back to the group. . . Open your eyes when you are ready . . ."

- When everyone has opened their eyes, invite the group to “write in a journal for about five minutes, first ONLY about what you experienced externally (from the outside), what you saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched today. Remember that writing in a journal need not be in complete sentences or neat! Just jot it all down. Remember that you are not yet judging the experiences. There will come a time for that over the next few days.” Let them know when there is one minute or less so they can wrap up.
• “Pair up and share what you want to with one other person for a couple minutes. Be attentive to any new insights, new learning, new questions, or thoughts that make you say, “A-ha!” . . .”

• “Now we'll share any insights about what you're experiencing with the large group. Still, try to refrain from judging the experience. . .”

• “Go back to writing in your journals again, but this time reflect what you experienced internally (on the inside). What did you feel during the day? When did you feel it? Again, no need to judge.”

• “Pair up again for a few minutes and then we'll share insights with the whole group.”

• Close with a prayer and/or scripture reading.

Explanation: “Staying with the Experience,” not moving too quickly to judgment or trying to fix things, will deepen the experience. The process described here utilizes guided meditation to reflect upon experience. It also balances the needs of introverts (to write and think before speaking and to speak with one person before the entire group) and extroverts (to speak with the entire group).

• The second night you can do something similar. Invite them to be mindful of their breathing and to be present, here and now. Then slowly go through some of the activities and highlights of that day: the service work, the meals, tours of the city, meeting the people, seeing the houses from the van, etc.

• Combine the journal exercise the second night so that they write in their journals about what they experience externally and internally at the same time, then share with one other person, then with the large group.

Explanation: The process still seeks to balance the needs of introverts and extroverts while staying with the experience, but the process is compressed.

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**Evening Two of the Seminar**

• By the third night you can encourage students to reflect in their journals about the day but with less instruction. Then they can probably share directly with the large group without first sharing with one other person. The group has probably built more trust at this point.

• Now you want to begin to analyze students’ experience and entertain more questions. Perhaps someone has voiced frustration
over why things are the way they are. This is a great lead into social analysis. You can offer a quotation or two on social justice at this point, perhaps something from Catholic Social Teaching.

- End with a reading from Scripture and/or prayer.

Explanation: The reflections are now analyzing experiences. At this point students tend to be more open to recognizing social structures as well as understanding both service and justice as central to Christian faith.

Middle Evenings of the Seminar

- The middle evenings can be a bit more open. Here you can use more of your creative reflections and ask others to help lead them. Participants should have been staying with their experiences. If they are not already doing so, help them to begin to ask deeper questions about why things are the way they are. You are moving into the “Judge” part of the “See, Judge, Act” process. You want to be more attentive to social analysis and theological reflection. At the same time, you do not need to force it. Just stay with the process and be ready with some handouts that will help with the social analysis and theological reflection.

- You have been interspersing prayers and sacred readings throughout the reflections. One middle evening it is important to explicitly ask: “So what does this experience have to say to your faith tradition? And what does your faith tradition have to offer the experience?” Give students time to write in their journals about this question, and then ask for verbal insights.

- After giving the faith/spirituality question a chance, you might try: “Are there stories from Scripture, stories or quotes about saints, or social teachings that pertain to what you are experiencing? Are there other resources such as books, movies, or family traditions that speak to your experience?”

- You need not be an expert on these matters. It is important to give participants a chance to combine their new experiences with where they make meaning—especially from their faith traditions—in a dialogue, so they can integrate the experience into the rest of their lives. Remind them that this is a process and that they will continue to make meaning about this experience for a long time.

Explanation: At this point you are explicitly engaging participants in social analysis and theological reflection.
Final Evening of the Seminar

- The final evening you want to concentrate on “Action,” the third step of the “See, Judge, Act” process. Students can write in their journals about what they might do differently as individuals and as a group as a result of their experience and reflection. Then have a discussion about those possibilities. At the end, have everyone write in their journals one thing they will do—and give them the opportunity to share that with the group if they want. Is there some kind of group action or commitment everyone would like to make? For example, if their service-learning has taken place away from their home community, could they continue serving regularly at a community organization located near campus? Is there an advocacy organization through which the group can lobby for systemic changes?

- Another important part of the final reflection is for students to identify questions that they have not yet answered. These could become questions for future research and action projects, the results of which will deepen students’ understanding of their experiences.

Explanation: Shifting attention from reflection on the present to what students will do as a result of their experience and reflection helps them to integrate the experience into the rest of their lives rather than compartmentalizing the service-learning experience as a singular event. The reflection on the final evening helps students to see that their faith can be expressed by acting on behalf of justice in their everyday lives. It helps them to struggle with how best to live out a life-long commitment to a faith that does justice.

Follow-up after the Seminar

This will usually take place one or two weeks after returning from the service experience. (If you are teaching a semester-long course, continue to integrate analysis of the service throughout the semester.) For the follow-up to an intensive seminar, provide time for the members of the group to reconnect to each other by sharing pictures, stories and food. Then consider leading them through a guided meditation that will help them get back in touch with the seminar and what has happened to them since then.

- Based on your knowledge of the group after being with them for a week during the seminar, facilitate reflection on the experience and their current situations. Have they made any changes in their thinking or acting since the seminar? Have they had interesting conversations with people when trying to describe the experience? Have they integrated any insights from the seminar into their daily
lives? What has the seminar and the time since the seminar had to say to their faith tradition and vice-versa? You may consider asking them to construct an image from the seminar that still carries energy for them. Stretch that image by talking about its meaning, and place it in dialogue with their faith traditions. What other thoughts, reactions and reflections do they have?

• End by brainstorming about resources and ways to help one another to continue the process of integrating service, faith and justice or any other issues with which they want support. Planning a group presentation (usually with a slideshow of pictures) for other college or university constituents can be a helpful opportunity for students again to analyze their experience and make meaning of it.

Explanation: This one meeting can be a shortened version of the reflective exercises during the seminar. By reconnecting with one another and the experience, memories of the seminar will be fresh. This process, including the brainstorming about ways to help one another to continue to integrate service, faith and justice, challenges students to a life-long commitment to a faith that does justice.
VI. Works Cited and Recommended


Campus Compact Website: http://www.compact.org/

Center of Concern Website contains much information about Catholic social thought: http://www.coc.org/


National Service Learning Clearinghouse Website: [www.servicelearning.org/](http://www.servicelearning.org/)


Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, *Constitutions.*

Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Website: [http://www.sistersofmercy.org/justice/index.html](http://www.sistersofmercy.org/justice/index.html)


