

The Bridge Between Intent and Impact: Reflection

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Prelude

How often do my actions have the impact that I intend? Before taking a full year of Service Learning (SL), I rarely asked this question or took a moment to analyze the outcomes of my doings. However, by taking SL—a course built on the principle of analysis and reevaluation—and the paired practicum, I learned foundational SL concepts that highlighted the importance of intent vs. impact and the bridge that connects these two concepts: reflection. Most importantly, I discovered that in order to engage in meaningful service and create the impact that I intend, I must actively participate in critical and honest self-reflection.

At California Northstate University College of Health Sciences², the SL requirement is designed to ensure that prospective healthcare professionals, myself included, acquire a profound comprehension of the humanitarian aspects of medicine. The school understood that courses preaching the importance of intentional and holistic thinking were necessary in our schedules, which would otherwise be filled with rigid STEM courses that offer less reflective moments. However, this deeper understanding of the importance of SL was not yet something I understood; to me, a newly joined-freshman, the course was just another addition to my schedule—a mere prerequisite to my degree. I perceived this obligation more as a burden than a voluntary commitment associated with SL.

The Start of a Journey

So, joining the class, I had no intentions of how I wanted to interact with the material; frankly, I had little idea of what to expect in a course titled *Foundations of Service Learning*. Were we going to learn how to serve? Is serving something you can, or *need*, to learn? Anyone can volunteer, and volunteering is serving, right? Wrong. Looking back, now that I am nearing the end of the year, I can quite easily and proudly say that I was wrong. Serving is not something one learns and then masters; learning to serve is a constant journey of reflecting and reevaluating, a journey without an end, but rather endless junctions constantly molding one's experiences. This was a hard lesson to learn; most subjects I have taken related to my major require a formulaic process of memorizing and applying; completing a year of SL required breaking down a form of learning that was almost second-hand in nature.

I also realized that service is not a concept one can learn from reading a textbook or hearing stories; it is only fully developed as an individual actively engages with their community. For this reason, at the beginning of the semester, we were asked to choose a community matter and community partner to work with in order to gain the experience-based lessons of this course. After reading about the importance of selecting a community topic you are personally invested in, I decided early on to work within the realm of drug awareness, specifically concerning high school students. As a recent high school graduate, I noticed how rarely my school provided drug awareness education, despite the countless overdoses our school witnessed. And in the rare instance that curriculum was provided, it was extremely ineffectual and was often

² California Northstate University is a culmination of six campuses that each specialize in a field of healthcare. College of Health Sciences is the undergraduate campus, and it offers a degree in health sciences. The undergraduate campus offers pathway programs for students to complete their undergrad in three or four years and then attend one of the post-graduate schools apart of the University; these schools include the College of Medicine, College of Pharmacy, College of Psychology, and the College of Dental Medicine.

counterproductive; students would flip the catchy slogans and acronyms to justify drug use— Drug Abuse Resistance Education, or D.A.R.E.³, became “I DARE you to do drugs”. So, after choosing my community issue and reflecting deeply on my experiences in high school observing drug use/abuse, I set my intention: to determine how to decrease the number of lives lost due to drug use amongst high school students.

After researching the drug epidemic and the education being used to combat it, the ineffectiveness I noticed in high school was validated as I quickly learned that there was a major gap between the students and the curriculum; D.A.R.E., up until recently, was the only government-funded federal drug awareness program being promoted to schools, despite countless studies finding it extremely ineffective and having the opposite effect (Wolchover, 2012). Naïve and just starting to dip my toes in the pool of SL, I came up with a preliminary goal: *fix* the drug awareness curriculum present in high school students by researching which methods of communication resonate best with them. Looking back, my goal has stayed relatively similar; I still believe that the most effective curriculum would be one created, in theory, by high school students for high school students and that direct research done to assess the opinions of students is pertinent to creating a curriculum. However, one key detail changed: I no longer believe in *fixing* the issue but instead *servicing* the cause and those it affects.

An Evolving Pathway

The importance of *servicing* rather than *fixing* occurred as I made a critical discovery during the first semester of SL: the connection between *fixing*, *helping*, and *servicing* and intention vs. impact. Even though *fixing*, *helping*, and *servicing* sound as though they are similar, *helping* and *fixing* create a power imbalance as they denote one party being in a higher, more capable position; *servicing* denotes an equal relationship where both partners learn from one another (Reitenauer, 2013). Additionally, as Rachel Naomi Remen, an author and doctor, puts it, *helping* and *fixing* can be done with distance and may not require a personal connection, but *servicing* can only be done with meaningful intent and sincere connection (Remen, 1999). Prior to taking SL, I never took the time to view these words so microscopically; however, now, as I am reflecting, I have realized that *servicing* translates to a genuine form of care, one where the individual is respecting and learning from their partner, whereas *helping* and *fixing* indicate a short-term and shallow relationship between an individual and community partner. Therefore, in order to have the positive and sustainable impact I intend, I must *serve* the cause and community partner instead of simply volunteering or trying to “fix” a surface-level problem of a deeper societal issue.

Prior to learning the distinction between *helping*, *fixing*, and *servicing*, I joined the fall semester of SL with a *helping* mindset; I saw my role in the community as a helper who would aid a cause in whichever way was required. I was not personally invested in a cause and was

³ D.A.R.E. was a federally funded drug awareness program incorporated in 75% of school districts in America, until it lost funding in 1998. The program was first developed in Los Angeles County and was done through a partnership between the city’s public school system and the Los Angeles Police Department. The popularity of the police-led classroom lessons caused its expansion throughout the country. However, many retrospective studies, notably a 10 year investigation by the American Psychological Association, have found the program to not only be unsuccessful, but also counterproductive (Cima, 2022).

willing to accept any “job” as I falsely believed that volunteering did not require a personal connection to be impactful. And though volunteering is beneficial to a community and can help mitigate the consequences of societal issues, without the desire to delve deeper into the roots of the problem itself, a meaningful and long-lasting impact cannot be achieved. A genuine interest and care for an issue is essential to ensure that solutions seep beyond the surface level and address the multifaceted intricacy of societal issues. The *helping* mindset established my intention to make a change, yet it was not personal enough to create an impact.

However, after deciding my community issue, drug awareness, I found a personal connection to the course as I now had a cause I was deeply impacted by and connected to. This connection shifted my mindset from *helping* to *fixing*. With a *fixing* mindset, I analyzed the issue on a very superficial level without delving deeper into its history and all the factors that have contributed to the ineffective drug awareness curriculum. I began to look for solutions and adopted a savior-mindset towards the issue, believing that there was a single solution I could employ to solve the issue, without recognizing the depth of what I was researching. I also started looking towards someone or some institution to blame for the lack of drug awareness, mistakenly blaming “high schools” in general and “the education system,” believing that they had complete control over the curriculum and were choosing not to care about the drug epidemic that is affecting students. Simultaneously, I started working with my first community partner, Safer Alternative Thru Networking (SANE) Center⁴, a local center in the Sacramento region that provides services to mitigate the dangers of drug usage, a concept known as harm reduction. Visiting the center and talking to the staff about their first-hand observations and experiences dealing with the drug epidemic, I was taught about the importance of a *servicing* mindset.

Discoveries Along the Way

Upon meeting the SANE center coordinator, he made it very explicit that the center’s role is not to “*fix*” or “*help*” individuals but to *serve* them and ensure they are safe. The center provided resources for individuals to get Narcan, a miracle drug that overrides overdoses, sanitary products, clean needles, etc.—in summary, materials that will reduce the danger of drug use (Safer Alternatives Thru Networking and Education, n.d.). The concept of harm reduction was deeply unfamiliar to me as I had never heard of community centers that, what I believed at first, aided drug use. But the more I talked to the coordinator and employees of the center, most of whom were recovered drug users, I understood the goal of the center: to save lives. The center recognized that even though it is important to educate individuals about drugs and prevent people from engaging in them, it is equally important to care for and support individuals who have already started using drugs in order to decrease the number of lives lost due to the drug epidemic. Leaving this meeting and reflecting on the conversations that occurred, I had two big takeaways: I learned what it meant to serve a cause, and I realized that to create the impact I intended—decrease the amount of high school lives lost due to drug use—I need to prioritize prevention *and* protection equally. With these two takeaways, I started the second semester of SL, SL Practicum,

⁴ The SANE center is a clinic located in Sacramento, California. The center was founded on the principles of harm reduction, respect for human rights, and dignity. The center’s focus is to utilize a humanistic approach to combat the consequences of the drug epidemic by providing services that minimize the lives lost, such as Narcan distribution and overdose prevention, recognition, and response programs.

with a *servicing* mindset and a project focused on researching and understanding what makes curriculum effective and providing students with resources to support them in drug-related emergencies, cleverly titled: Project Prevent *and* Protect.

Likewise, the experiences of the first semester ingrained the importance of reflecting: it is the passage that connects student's experiences in class and their interactions in the community, allowing moments of deep thought, curiosity, and realization (Collier, Williams, 2013). I would not have been able to have the critical epiphanies that altered my views on service if I did not take the time to reflect and analyze the conversations I had at the SANE center by myself and with my professor, advisor, and peers. I also found that reflecting is best done when paired with concepts learned in class because they can be used as a guideline to evaluate my outlook and interpretations of experiences.

For example, when I reflected on how shocked I found myself when someone who did not fit the "stereotype" of a drug user walked into the clinic, I was extremely disappointed in myself. I told myself not to make any assumptions and forced a neutral mindset toward individuals. However, after learning about the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), a model that shows increasing levels of sophistication an individual may have when navigating through different cultures, a week after visiting the center, I found myself reflecting on my experiences deeper, drawing parallels between my mindset and the model (Bennett, Cress, Reitenauer, 2013).

I attempted to be non-judgmental and open-minded towards the individuals that came to the center as I believed this was most appropriate. However, after reading through the DMIS, I realized that I was stuck in a stage called *acceptance*, where individuals are aware of cultural differences and adopt a neutral position of knowledge. At first glance, this stance does not sound harmful. However, after deeper thought, it becomes apparent that *acceptance* is not enough to engage in service meaningfully. Service connotes mutual respect and empathy, which can only be done by acknowledging the cultural differences between one and a community partner and the roles they play in shared interactions. In short, one must shift into *adaption*, the stage of "consciously shifting perspective and intentionally altering behavior" (Bennett, 2017). At this stage, when differences are understood, authentic empathy and respect can blossom within both cultural groups.

These critical realizations could not have been arrived at without deep reflection paired with learning. Reflecting, which is often overlooked in service due to the "I am finished, what's next" mindset individuals adopt, is necessary to ensure that one stays true to the original intention. And learning fundamental models and perspectives of thinking allows one to truly reflect on themselves through the lens of service. The pairing of reflection and learning proved important during SL, but it was most necessary when I started SL Practicum as four teammates from class joined me in the pursuit of Project Prevent and Protect.

A Fork in the Path

Working in a group of five, I quickly realized how easy it is to get influenced by various voices. Our semester goal was to create a research poster for our college's annual research symposium that showcased the message and goal of Project Prevent and Protect. As everyone

had different areas of expertise and interests regarding drug awareness curriculum and the direction of the project, multiple ways of approaching the project were being proposed. There were so many great ideas that I became overwhelmed and began losing sight of my original intention: to decrease the number of high school students lost to drug use. As we started collaborating and delving into the general history of the drug epidemic, we started to focus our attention on the current usage of fentanyl, which has recently become more prevalent among young individuals aged 10-19 (Hermans et al., 2022). Eventually, our project poster shifted from highlighting the importance of researching curriculum and resources—in essence, preventing and protecting—to detailing the current fentanyl epidemic. As a group, we lost sight of our goal, and on a more personal note, I lost sight of my initial intention, drug awareness curriculum, a cause I formed a genuine interest and curiosity about. And in the process, I found myself extremely confused and frustrated with how our project was unfolding, and I lost a lot of the drive and motivation I was oozing at the beginning of the semester.

Different perspectives and opinions are extremely important in helping remove pre-set blinders and should be utilized to *evolve* one's project. Yet, as I disregarded the importance of frequent reflection during the second semester, various voices and opinions *changed* the project entirely and the impact it was having. Looking back, if I had made a conscious effort to reflect on my project, the direction it was going in, and if the impact I was working towards was aligning with my intention throughout the semester, I could have avoided a semester of disarray.

Redirection

But thankfully, a much-needed moment of reflection occurred when I was practicing presenting our group's poster for the upcoming research symposium. To prepare, our class held mock presentations so that we students could receive feedback on our research poster/presentation encompassing our experiences in SL. After presenting my poster, which was, in short, an infographic about the fentanyl epidemic, a guest professor observing our presentation asked me a critical question: How does this information you presented relate to your service topic and your service goal? At this moment, I realized that I had fully lost my intention and my service project as a whole.

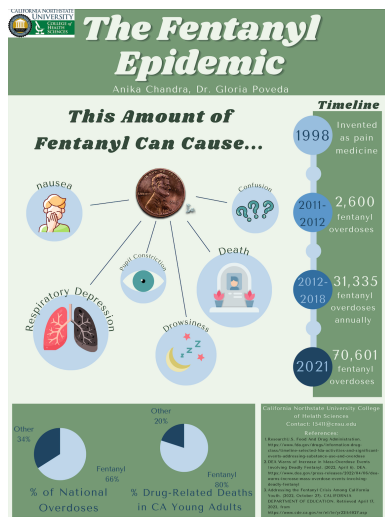
After class ended, I immediately went to my SL professor's office, on the verge of tears, feeling the project I was deeply invested in and saw great potential pursuing slipping away from under me. We unpacked my original goals from semester one and worked towards re-developing Project Prevent and Protect. We also redesigned the research poster, shifting the focus from the Fentanyl epidemic to the lack of an effective and protective drug awareness curriculum in high schools. We drew attention to the ineffectiveness of the current curriculum by featuring a timeline that demonstrated how despite both society and the face of the drug epidemic evolving and changing, the drug awareness curriculum being utilized has stayed the same. Likewise, we addressed the importance of curriculum containing a *balance* of prevention and protection, as

they both are necessary to decrease the high school lives lost due to drug overdose—my original intention for the project.⁵

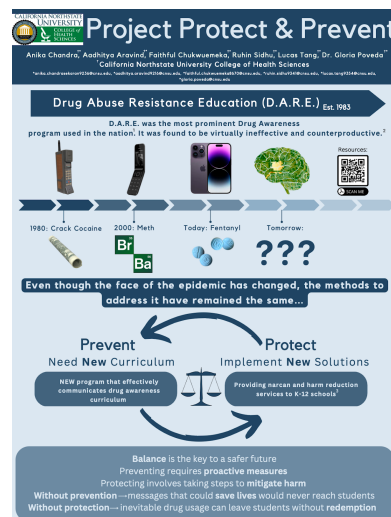
After this entire experience, I have fully *understood* the importance of self-reflection and the frequent evaluation of whether my impact is aligning with my intent. In the first semester, I actively reflected, mostly because reflection pieces were a required component of the semester’s curriculum, but I did not see their actual value. When the second semester started, and I stopped taking the time to reflect on my progress and experiences, as reflection assignments were no longer required, I lost touch with my project, goals, and overall intention, creating an undesired impact. Only after I almost lost my project entirely I began to meaningfully reflect and work towards creating the impact I desired.

Destination Reached

Throughout SL, I learned about many key aspects of serving, such as the difference between *helping*, *fixing*, and *servng*, intercultural sensitivity, and, most importantly, meaningful reflections to ensure that my impact is in conjunction with my intent. As a future healthcare professional, I plan to carry these lessons, memories, and experiences with me to ensure I *serve* my patients through the lens of *Narrative Based Medicine*, a form of practicing medicine where the attention shifts away from addressing a patient’s symptoms to understanding a patient’s narrative in order to identify and treat the root issue. The lessons learned in SL will guide me towards providing the best possible care for my patients. As Zaharias, the author of the paper “Learning narrative-based medicine skills,” claims, skills such as learning, exploring, deciphering, and *reflecting* are necessary in order for healthcare professionals to provide the most quality of care. Without exhibiting these skills, not only will the patient feel unheard and become less likely to seek medical attention, but the healthcare professional will also become desensitized to their career, losing sight of any positive *intentions* they may have started with (Zaharias, 2018). Therefore, as I am progressing in my education and working towards a career in healthcare, I must engage in frequent reflection in order to verify if the impact I am making on patients is truly aligning with my future intentions, whatever they may be.



Initial Poster



Final Poster

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The Takeaway

Overall, my SL experiences taught me that reflection is the bridge between intention and impact. Learning integral concepts of SL such as the differences between *helping*, *fixing*, and *servicing* and the stages of intercultural sensitivity through the DMIS built a foundation of knowledge that challenged the methods of thinking I previously held. However, pursuing Project Prevent and Protect in the practicum course taught me that without taking the time to critically reflect on the SL experiences I was having and the concepts I was learning, it can become very easy to lose sight of the goal I had set. Even though this lesson took nearly two semesters to learn, it is one I can apply to all aspects of life, especially my future career in the healthcare field. I may have started SL with no real intentions, but it impacted how I now view service and the steps I will take as a future healthcare professional.

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