Structured Reflection at Kalamazoo College
(Based on an excerpt from the 2012 Kalamazoo College Self-Study Report)

Use of structured reflection is becoming part of the fabric of Kalamazoo College and will likely lead to students developing self-authorship that will prepare them for transformative learning in college and beyond. Rooted largely in courses and co-curricular programming instituted through service-learning in the late 1990s, structured reflection developed a strong theoretical and empirical base at the College through research done in a series of projects funded by grants from The Teagle Foundation in 2004 and 2008. Kiran Cunningham (Anthropology/Sociology) and Bob Grossman (Psychology) led the way by investigating factors that catalyze transformative learning, entailing a shift in frame of reference, in our students. Through their work, and through collaborations with faculty colleagues, they clarified a very effective approach to, and conceptual framework for, carrying out structured reflection. Our definition of structured reflection, developed and refined by faculty and staff at Kalamazoo College¹ and illustrated in the Structured Reflection Triangle below, is the following: Structured Reflection is a process that can catalyze transformative learning by employing intentionally designed discussions, activities, or assignments that help students (and others) interrogate assumptions, theories and concepts, and experiences, make connections and comparisons between them, and thereby develop deeper understanding of themselves and of complex issues. When engaged in structured reflection, an individual, or a group of interacting individuals, steps aside from being a subject in a life and begins viewing ideas held and experiences encountered as objects to be examined and manipulated and as building blocks of meaning making. Through working along the legs of the Structured Reflection Triangle, and using the triangle when grappling with unscripted problems, individuals can move from being externally defined to developing self-authorship,² a pre-requisite for transformative learning. This kind of reflection fosters development of self-authorship both because experiences and assumptions are part of the substance of what is being examined and because in making connections between them and with theories and concepts learned the students must do the meaning-making work. To be prepared for productive engagement with the high intensity dissonance encountered in many learning experiences in college, students must understand themselves as meaning-makers and, more importantly, understand that the system of meanings they operate out of is itself made. Through self-authorship students construct their own educational paths at Kalamazoo College and learning throughout their lives.


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