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Expressing Discontinuity in Institutionalized Service-Learning

After applying for a service-learning trip, I was pleased to discover that I was accepted into the program and would spend my school break as part of a community building team. In my mind, I already had an idea of how this service trip would unfold: I would exit the academic ivory tower, intentionally engage in the real world, make personal connections, gain new revelations about my identity, and ultimately come back to my educational institution transformed. This perspective seemed to be generally shared with my service group, and we set off on a journey of service and self-actualization.

En route to our destination, our team began a crash course on community building. We visualized how we could achieve our service markers, talked about participation in reflective sessions, and set up personal goals. As we started to engage on our first day of service, I was proud of us. We were good citizens doing good things. In the process of reflection, however, I began questioning the nature of our service. Our understanding of the community was based on information from Google searches, overheard conversations, visual cues, and selected spokespersons. The community never had the chance to define itself.

In a strange way community members became the décor to our self-discovery narratives in ways that we found meaningful. In our work, there was no incentive or opportunity for us to understand the community, or for the community to understand us. I tried to ignore these thoughts and justify my work. I had no doubt that the service my group performed was in some way beneficial to the community we served, but I had trouble identifying the benefit. I felt that I had unequally shared an experience with service recipients. My work had not been co-produced, and my work did not acknowledge the worth, value, and ability of those in the community.

I came back to my university with new friendships, new insights, and lingering questions. The service that our team carried out was celebrated and went unquestioned. "Tell me about your trip," "What was your service like," "How has your service changed you," "Should I participate in the program next year?" I was encouraged to share impressions of my service, and I felt that I had to answer in a positive framework — was there value in sharing my discomfort? What would it be like if I was the only one on the team who shared a different story?

Although I had accomplished my learning goals, I wanted to ask questions. Why had a community allowed a group of young strangers to identify and solve problems that we were unfamiliar with? Was it presumptuous of us to assume that at our age we had skillsets to share? Why had community members become footnotes in our personal stories? Had our wide-eyed innocence and culture shock offended community members? Was it ethical to participate in short-term and possibly unsustainable service? Were we promoting our own development or community development? If I were to ask these same questions about our service after coming back to campus, what would the reaction be?

As noted throughout service-learning literature, the process of reflection encourages students to ask questions and find answers. Engagement in reflection is central to service-learning curricula, a practice that has been referred to as the hyphen between service and learning (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015). Students are urged to make connections between personal experiences, service-learning theory, and community work. While reflection is not "a tidy exercise that closes an experience", students contribute to a canon of ideally successful learning experiences in a field where outcomes and outputs are expected (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015, p. 39).

Can students find comfort in their discomfort and share reflections and experiences which counter the outcomes, outputs, and expectations of service? In the process of meeting learning goals, it is important that service-learning celebrate the discontinuities in the continuity of student service. This paper aims to provide a student perspective on the expectations which script the reflections and voices of service-learners. I will explore these areas through observations on institutionalized service-learning and a discussion of the relationship between expression and reflection.

Institutionalized Service-Learning

Service-learning has embraced a corporate image through the institutionalization of a radical educational practice. Wendy Hesford (2005) suggested that service-learning has been commercialized and is now home to apolitical practices, an environment of agreement, with service placements that resemble internships. If service-learning is to remain more institutional than radical, students should understand the limitations of the corporate structure. Students aware of this structure can find ways "to complicate both the understandings of power and the implicit nature of power of the giver to the receiver" (Pirbhai-Illich, 2013, p. 84). Wendy Hesford reflected on the complicated relationship between universities and service-learning, writing,

> I do not intend to caricaturize service-learning practitioners as docile servants in the house of the devil of capitalism or as corporate vampires feeding off the laboring bodies of the community. It is also not my goal to romanticize student activism or to turn political activism into an academic exercise. Rather my intention is to urge us to consider how service-learning, community outreach, and activism are configured, valued, and marked by material bodies and labor relations within and outside university culture. (Hesford, 2005, p. 195)

As service-learning has acquiesced to the demands of a structured education economy, the practice has become complementary rather than parasitic, losing its "radical relevance" with each advance of the institution (Hesford, 2005, p. 196). Lori Pompa (2002) explains that, "In a society replete with hierarchical structures and patriarchal philosophies, service-learning's potential danger is for it to become the very thing it seeks to eschew" (p. 68). Service-learning has found institutional status within the academy, departing a commitment to fight against power structures. Applying a critical lens to service-learning urges students and scholars to determine whether this loss of identity is beneficial or a shift that should be challenged.

Configuring Service-Learning

In a canonical essay on social service, John McKnight (2000) writes, "Service is a need. Servicers meet needs. People are collections of needs. Society has needs. The economy should be organized to meet needs" (p. 185). From the outset of their service, students are enmeshed in a service economy created by their university. This power structure utilizes a stream of commodified service opportunities to instill values of service within students. By necessity, service-learning partnerships are based on a university's one-sided economic course requirements, as service can only be taught through service. It is important for students to realize that they are not altruistic service providers but exist in a service system created for their benefit.

Service-learning is sold as an experience that will result in change, even if the service may only take place for a semester or during an academic break. Buying into this belief system allows students to imagine themselves as agents of change, implying that students can project their own meanings and missions into a community and operate without a truly reciprocal exchange of information. This framework suggests that students will enter a program as students and exit the program as good citizens and makers of change. If students do not take into account

their place in a social power structure they miss an opportunity to truly understand the communities in which they serve.

A curriculum that teaches students that their end goal is to do good and become a good citizen is inherently limiting to both students and the communities they serve. The idea of doing good suggests that non-good must be corrected in order to reach achievement, thus creating a change maker/changed dichotomy. Service-learning practitioner Linda Flower (1997) warns that "this paradigm maintains a strong sense of otherness and distance, of giver and receiver. It makes no demand for mutuality in analyzing or responding to problems; it maintains the social status quo" (p. 97). Instead of providing liberatory service, unaware service-learners can perpetuate colonialism through their actions. Viewing communities as untransformed locations suggests that students must impart the knowledge from their coursework into communities. As a result, students who believe they must make a change through their service participate in a sort of trickle-down economics that does not facilitate the bottom-up liberation service suggests.

Identity Formation

While participating in service-learning, I have found it difficult to negotiate the differences between my own identity and my identity as a service-learner. There are times when my peers share stories of meaningful and empowering service, and I wonder if I missed out on something. If I am asked to reflect on my service, I find myself searching for words as I speak with the weight of myself, my peers, and my organization. Doing service has placed me into the metaphor of a service-learner, and it can feel that everything I do must support this identity formation. When I face questions, I wonder if I should speak with total honesty or uphold the identity I have embraced and the good work that my service does.

Even though it is understood that there is no right answer to the problems a student will encounter, models of service-learning will ultimately move a student to a place of accomplishment by the end of their service-learning term (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015). Service-learners are perceived as models of citizenship, meeting societal norms of civic engagement and serving those outside the norm. James Banks (2015) describes a successful citizen as a person who is civically engaged and a participant in their community, and service-learners find themselves surrounded by peers, faculty, and staff pursuing the same goals and values. In this environment, a push toward success places pressure on students to share in a unified experience and identity — for the communities they serve, for their university, and for their own sake.

Students create associations with each other and their experiences to form a social identity, creating a metaphor of what a service-learner is or looks like. Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) explored intergroup behavior through social identity theory, explaining that a person's sense of self depends on their group membership. By forming a group, individuals can create and maintain status differences, legitimacy, and stability. Tajfel and Turner (1979) wrote that out-group creation is crucial to define what a group is and is not. Crafting this binary allows group members to establish their identity, and those who voluntarily leave the group stigmatize themselves in the process. To maintain existence as a service-learner, a student must remain within the norm.

Students who feel they must remain loyal to a group identity ultimately reshape their personal identity. Jacqueline Akunda (2016) explains students write — or even serve as — a customer review for their program after finishing their service. Akunda (2016) writes, "Our University's interest is in the University and us," observing that students have to buy into service

in order for engagement to continue (para. 6). Civic engagement works around the same concept of in-group and out-group formation: good citizens are civically engaged and those who are not civically engaged are not good citizens (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). By the same principle, upholding civic engagement proves good citizenship, and questioning civic engagement raises doubts around allegiance to shared goals. It is for this reason, Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) write, that civically engaged groups often become apolitical and view conflict as a threat. Similarity is valued more than individuality meaning that students who enter into civic engagement as students will exit as service-learners.

Impacts of Commodification

An inescapable language of success permeates service-learning — words such as *goals*, *outcomes*, *demonstration*, *growth*, *celebration*, or *achievement* populate service-learning literature. Strategies are designed with success in mind, as they should be, and words associated with problems are intended to be solved. When problems enter into conversation, it is implied that students will work out these issues on their own, ultimately coming to a place of growth, resolution, or success. This discussion assumes that students falter and do not know how to proceed and will eventually find resolution within the institution of service-learning. What if students do know how to succeed and do succeed, but express issues and questions on a more existential level?

In the vein of success, student efficacy in service-learning is measured through quantitative outputs — grades, rubrics, hours, contracts, or requirements — much like a typical academic course. Students approach academics knowing they could pass or fail a class based on syllabus guidelines, but the dynamics of a service-learning course place different responsibilities on students. A service-learner is encouraged to arrive at a place of success at the end of a

service-learning engagement, both academically and in their service placement. Even within these expectations, there is an understanding that service-learning is not straightforward. Students may find a discrepancy between their experience and the information which factors into a letter grade.

During one of my first service-learning placements, I found myself questioning my service while simultaneously succeeding. I felt my service had channeled me into a series of problematic choices and that I had participated in what Robert Woodson (2015) calls "intellectual imperialism" (p. 185). When the course ended, I was celebrated for my accomplishments, but I continued to have questions. There were a series of meetings and email exchanges between myself and the program director and an expectation that I would eventually come to see my service in a different light. While it would have been easy to brush my concerns aside, I decided to allow myself an unresolved success. Instead of conforming to the image of service-learning as successful change making, I wanted to view this experience as an experimentation in citizenship.

Over the course of a semester, the only transformation that might occur through service is a personal transformation within a student perspective. Social change cannot be achieved in a semester, so the likelihood of students witnessing real transformation is slim (Mitchell, 2008). Where does this leave students? Students who question their inability to make change lack credibility in a service economy. Voicing skepticism calls into question student efficacy and allegiance to the values taught through service-learning. Mindsets which place a community in "the domain of problems and institutions as the domain of solutions" may alienate students who want to voice problems of their own (Verjee, 2012, para. 5).

Reflection

As I walk through service-learning with friends and fellow students, I have come to realize that we speak of our experiences in indirect and coded ways. Programs might be described as *interesting*, *really authentic*, *unexpected*, *challenging*, *involving transition*, or possibly *hard to adjust to*. These words present service in positive or hopeful terms, but tiptoe around what might feel true for a service-learner. I wish more explicit conversations about service were springing up between students, not stories framed entirely in the language of success. The continuous sharing of positive stories and problems with pleasant endings seems to reduce the meaning and gravity of our service. If positivity is the ethos of service-learners, students lose the opportunity to express the entirety of their experience.

Service-learning is intended to be progressive and disruptive. Civic engagement does not have to be to civil engagement (Hesford, 2005). Post-service reflection can promote in-group mentalities if service-learning is viewed as a disagreement free zone. I have personally seen the public reflections of politically conservative service-learners cast aside and viewed as simply wrong or close-minded. In a reflection between peers, there is pressure to fit in and not stand out, even at the cost of effacing an honest opinion or experience. Reflection encourages students to speak, but when reflection is graded and evaluated, students may feel limited in what they can say. Certain responses or answers may be hinted at and elicited with close ended reflection prompts, leading many students to the same conclusions. If students have to express themselves by indirectly answering a reflection prompt, or their narratives disagree with their peers, their experiences can seem illegitimate.

Student reflections are also hedged in by the fact that students have very little agency. Students enter into service roles for credit requirements or competency based programs (*i.e.*, resume needs, skill enhancement, scholarship programs, financial requirements, gaining tools for

advancement). To be successful in these categories, students buy into an understanding that success depends on learned experience. What happens if a student does not learn any new skills, competencies, or perspectives through their service? In common frameworks of reflection, students have limited ways to express these feelings without seeming jaded, unengaged, or disillusioned. There is a perceived social cost in suggesting that not all experiences within service-learning are good. Critical reflection is important to reimagine these discourses, as norm-breaking views assist in the dismantling of power structures. If students are not encouraged to engage in reflection that provokes and illuminates their practice, students will not be able to liberate themselves and others. Students who engage in truly honest critical reflection, without penalty, are moved toward action and awareness.

Limitations on Expression

When reflection is focused on the "beneficent givers bestowing gifts on those under-privileged souls" certain types of stories are privileged (Kramer & Davis, 2016, para. 6). In an academic setting, instructors necessarily facilitate reflections, the process often factoring into a participation grade. This facilitation encourages students to speak, but it also comes with some limitations in what is said. If reflection questions are shaped to guide specific answers, students are not afforded the opportunity to critically approach their service. During a high school service-learning course, I received prompts similar to these to express my service:

- Write about a time when you actively participated in a community. How were you motivated to participate, and how were you changed by this experience?

- Write about a time when you served with someone different from yourself. How were you similar? How were you different? How did this experience change your perspective?

While students could write any response they wanted to, these prompts suggested specific answers. Unless a student was willing to veer from the topic, the language of these prompts limited original discourse. If not in a mode of observation, students can be coached into supplying limited answers. These prompts would suggest that the following statements are true of those engaged in service-learning:

- I was motivated to participate.

- I was changed by my participation experience.

- I worked with someone different than myself.

- I found similarities with someone different than myself.

- Working with someone different than myself changed my perspective.

These statements come across as very positive and likable descriptions of identity formation in service-learning. But are all of these statements true? Do students write answers based on what they believe their instructor wants to hear? If reflection is limited by prompts, how do students truly learn? Is service-learning actually learning if there are predetermined answers? This style of reflective questioning privileges specific responses to illustrate a predetermined narrative. The following fictional case study illustrates a type of discourse that is well received in a service-learning classroom:

> The class becomes quiet and Alexis, choking back emotion, says, "This class is so powerful for me. I have been struggling with feeling helpless as a White person to make any kind of difference. I feel like this problem is so huge it's not going to change soon, but at least I'm making a difference right now with one student that I'm tutoring in math. I feel like this is all any of us can do." (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012, p. 618)

The authors observe that this response affirms the pedagogy of whiteness and service privilege, noting that Alexis's emotional response is privileged over an intellectual reflection on service-learning. There is an instructor bias which encourages eye-opening and personally revelatory narratives rather than possibly problematic yet thoughtful insights. Alexis's hard hitting narrative is more palatable and universally relatable than a reflection which leaves students wrestling with difficult questions. Privileging this type of reflection contributes to an agenda of normalizing and de-radicalizing service-learning. Teachers and students should question the hidden curriculum in academics, by asking a series of questions: "Who benefits? Whose curriculum? Whose knowledge counts? Whose culture? Whose standard?" (Pirbhai-Illich, 2013, p. 84). Both students and communities are left at a loss when a full range of expression is limited. Within a language of success students find themselves writing out the messiness of their service, becoming performers in a service-learning theatre with their stories retroscripted to demonstrate achievement.

Creating Space for Expression

In the interest of development, students should have the confidence to speak openly about their experiences. Service-learners have an outlet for expression within the typically required activity of reflection. While student reflections are not meant to be a series of reality television confessionals, service-learning pedagogy should justify public expressions of honesty outside of office hours. Reflection is intended to be the assessed and graded connection between service and learning, not an "emotional exercise about [a student's] feelings" (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015, p. 26). In a value-based and hopefully life-changing experience, service-learners should have opportunities to voice their feelings in a constructive manner – reflection is a crucial activity for students to express themselves within the institution

of service-learning. Feelings of discontinuity should be heard and not viewed as "feeling guilty about not doing more" (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015, p. 39). While some of the experiences which occur while engaged in service do not always relate to coursework, these experiences are still real, valid, and should not be silenced.

Students who feel they must act as "the answer" to a community bear unreasonable expectations for themselves (McKnight, 2000, p. 190). In a reflection on the efficacy of community-based learning initiatives, Tereza Joy Kramer and Jaquelyn Davis (2016) explain that in a misguided server/served dichotomy "the service provider begins to seem eerily like a colonialist on the edge of a frontier, tasked with enlightening the less fortunate" (para. 4). Students were never intended to be the answer to community problems. Instead the community is a space for education. If a student is released from the idea that they must maintain an identity and be the answer, they can express their uncertainties and "develop their self-efficacy" (Kramer, 2014, p. 66). The work of service-learners is important, but maintaining a singular identity prompts questions about what stories service-learning culture values the most. If students approach their service to engage in discomfort and discontinuity, they have the opportunity to fully develop their own identity.

Within a language of success, there is no way to control or quantify the questions and unresolved problems that students face. Departures from service-learning expectations cannot be prevented or anticipated. Similar to the practice of ethical photography within service-learning, the entire student experience should be photographed in reflection, not misconstrued or parts left unseen (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015). If experiences within service-learning are presented as radical and dissimilar, it will be understood that students do not have to confine their expressions. If a student feels silenced by the language of success, they lose

the opportunity to fully connect with the goals of service-learning. Discontinuity does not define a student and does not require correction – it should be presented as a transformative experience, pursued as an indicator of learning, and celebrated as an accomplishment.

Conclusion

There are two sides to service-learning: a university needs a community to act as an educational developing ground and a community needs resources from a university. At the heart of service-learning is a hyphen, representing the chance for students to open up and sort through their experiences (Center for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, 2015).

- To institutions – The commitment to service-learning is powerful. Conceptions of service-learning can be challenged, and institutions can encourage and pursue thoughtful partnerships with communities. I hope that the institution will resist packaging service-learning for the educational corporation, and instead liberate students and educators to pursue radically authentic programs.

- To service-learning instructors and administrators – your guidance and the work students cannot see is an incredible gift. Service-learning can be strengthened by revoking metaphors of identity in the classroom and guiding students through an exploration of institutionalized power. I hope you will continue to step past the curricula of reflection and share the full range of your experiences, inviting students to do the same.

- To fellow service-learners – our voices are powerful and should be liberated. May we inhabit a self-aware spirit of searching, remove the burden of change-making, challenge the labels we uphold, and lean into our service as we understand the

lives of those we serve. I hope that we can decolonize our identities, find our

voices, and be unapologetically human.

Service-learning cannot guarantee a life-changing experience or a state of completion, but it can guarantee that students walk away with something learned. If students discover that they need to disrupt their learning outcomes, they should not have to alienate themselves in order to find solidarity with their work. When students are encouraged to share challenging reflections, they can find comfort in the discomfort of their service. It is only fair for students to process toward a place of conclusion, but not all conclusions must end with a solution.

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