Fall 2014

Keyword Essay: "Critical Service Learning"

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Service learning has become a feature in higher education in courses ranging from computer science and graphic design to English and the humanities. These courses are designed to provide "internship" experience and enable students to use skills they learned in the classroom in "real world settings." These "real world settings," however, exist in some rather well-defined economic, social, and political system. Tania Mitchell suggests that traditional approaches to service learning either assume that such projects are already inherently related to social justice or are simply concerned with other issues such as the teaching of some rather acontextual "workplace skills." There exists, however, a growing recognition that service learning could enable students to recognize and more deeply understand the social and economic structures they are asked to work within. The aims of this "critical service-learning" approach include the redistribution of power in the service-learning relationship, the development of authentic relationships between the university and community, and an unapologetic movement toward the goal of social change. At my university there is an interest in providing service learning in more traditional workplace settings, but there are also faculty members who are attempting to use these projects to help students understand the contexts in which they live and work. This keywords essay details some recent scholarship in literacy and critical service learning. It is by no means a complete picture of the efforts in this area but, rather, presents some interesting service-learning projects that might be duplicated at other institutions. All the projects provide opportunities for students to gain an understanding of the economic, social, political, and, in one case, environmental contexts in which they live. Writing plays a primary role in facilitating such understanding.

Lisa Rabin's article "The Culmore Bilingual ESL and Popular Education Project: Coming to Consciousness on Labor, Literacy, and Community," details a service-learning project featured in a Spanish class at George Mason University. The project offered an alternative to more "market-based" service learning. In 2009, Rabin had been contacted by labor organizers from the Tenants and Workers United (TWU) in Culmore, Virginia to possibly have some of her bilingual students offer an ESL course for day laborers who were also new immigrants at the union's offices. A former graduate student of Rabin's was asked to spearhead the project and train the undergraduates who would serve as ESL teachers. The project attempted to build a bridge between academic literacy and community literacy using the "popular education" model (Calderon 2006). Rabin deemed the summer-long project a failure. She noted that the

clients of the program needed intensive Basic English instruction, a job that was much too large for full-time undergraduate students. The "separateness" between the two groups remained. The course, however, met a smaller goal, providing the opportunity for undergraduate students in a Spanish course to consider the role of structural forces in creating and sustaining inequity in Latino/a neighborhoods. Indeed, half of the undergraduate students were themselves "heritage" speakers of Spanish who grew up in bilingual households. Although Rabin was disappointed by what she considered the failure of the project to make positive changes in the lives of its clients, the undergraduate tutors seemed to come to a better understanding of the lives of immigrant day laborers. The sort of critical service-learning that students engaged in provided a more visceral understanding of the socioeconomic barriers at work in Hispanic neighborhoods. She suggests that service learning projects are too often hijacked by market entities that impose a neoliberal ideology on the very necessary work students perform. In Rabin's project, students were able to form an attachment with the neighborhood where the clients lived and worked. This sort of service-learning project offers literacy services to clients while providing students a different lens through which to view their experiences.

Similarly, in the journal *Reading Improvement*, Janet C. Richards explores how participation in a service-learning project might impact the professional dispositions of graduate education majors. Specifically, she wanted to know if participation in such a project would impact the majors' attitudes toward and competence in teaching students of color. Twenty-eight predominantly white graduate students collaboratively taught a writing strategies course in a community center in a low-income housing area. The K-5 students they worked with had all scored at or below the 20th percentile on a battery of standardized writing and reading measures. The reflective writing that the graduate students were asked to do followed some interesting patterns. At first, a sense of frustration with both the K-5 students as well as with the collaborative aspect of the project was the primary focus of the writing. As the project continued, however, students began to consider the "relational" aspects of their work. They also started to write in detail about the relationship between their work and bigger issues of social justice. Specifically, a number of the graduate students considered how their teaching would be performed within the existing political structure of a school, a school district, and larger social systems. Students were, thus, able to understand that classroom teaching occurs in some clearly-defined, although not always visible contexts.

Christine Greenhow describes another approach to service-learning pedagogy in her article, "Online Social Networks and Learning." Greenhow, a Professor of Education and Information Studies at the University of Maryland, discusses the use of social media outlets as sites for literacy learning. While most school districts see Facebook as a distractor for students, Greenhow suggests that online social networking can stimulate social and civic benefits, online and offline, which has positive implications for education. She argues that "social capital," which she defines as the resources or benefits available to people through their interactions that creates feelings of trust, reciprocity and social cohesion, and places the creation of networks as the primary

focus of venues for learning. She suggests that, although many school districts place limits or impose outright bans on social media during the school day, these sites are a large part of students' learning "ecology." Indeed, their ubiquity would indicate that ignoring the power of these sites makes little sense for educators. Instead, Greenhow asks that we consider how "offers of practical, just-in-time assistance, information, emotional or psychological aid, modeling, coaching," all features of social media, can be used (9). Limits on the use of social media outlets seem ill-informed, as these are the sites of communication that students find most meaningful. Indeed, bans or limits seem only to lead to student resistance. She proposes using Facebook and other social media sites as the venues for service learning in literacy tutoring.

A credit-bearing required information literacy course became the site of a service-learning course at Wright State University (2011). Maureen Barry, a librarian there, developed a service-learning project that served the Children's Hunger Alliance (CHA) in Ohio. Roughly 500,000 children in that state are food insecure, or don't know where or when they will find their next meal. The CHA partners with schools, child-care providers, faith-based organizations, and other youth-serving nonprofits to increase USDA child nutrition program participation and relieve food insecurity. Students in the course fulfilled the components of the service-learning project in two ways: first, they served at after-school programs that promote nutrition and physical activity, and second, they supplied research portfolios to CHA staff members. As they picked out useful topics to help CHA improve child nutrition, students discover parts of the World Wide Web considered invisible (i.e., the dark web) to the general public. They are guided in their search by the expressed needs to the CHA and by what they experience themselves in their work at the after-school programs. Course outcomes indicate that the dual experiences of work in the after-school programs and information literacy activities create a sense of empowerment for students (i.e., that research and literacy can change peoples' situations for the better). The course activities also serve to create a better bond between university students and the larger community. The program continues and the research has enabled CHA to expand its program offerings.

An article by Jason F. Lovvorn, Linda Holt, and Charmion Gustke, "Service-Learning Liberations: Transformation through Personal Writing, Community Partnership, and Student Advocacy" published in the *Belmont Humanities Symposium Journal* explores not only the services provided in three projects by undergraduate students but also the type of writing they do to record and make sense of their experiences. Students in one project, members of a junior-level class in literacy, spent the semester working with clients at the Nashville Adult Literacy Council. The reflective writing these students composed for the course was comprised of first-person narratives. These narrative writing assignments provided a venue through which students could connect their experiences with the course content. In another project, students worked in a community garden project for a parolee halfway house. The personal writing that these students did was transformative in that it enabled them to consider issues of race and class. The writing in these two cases was an integral part of the projects, allowing students a space in which to develop an understanding of various types of literacy and how these literacies

support or subvert systems of economic, social, and racial privilege.

Scientific literacy was the focus of a service-learning project by Julie Reynolds and Jennifer Ahern-Dodson. They wanted to design a course that would increase science literacy, help students understand scientific inquiry, improve writing skills, and learn about local environmental concerns. The Eno River in North Carolina was the site of the project and students wrote collaboratively about the connections they gleaned between what they learned in their introductory science class and what they observed near and in the river. The project has led to external grant funding for future efforts but, according to the authors, the real reward from the project involved student learning and students coming to understand their roles as environmental stewards. A number of the students have been inspired to continue this work after the course was completed.

Service learning provides great value to a student's educational experience. As a variety of active learning, it can teach skills in ways that classroom practice alone cannot. But, without clearly defined pedagogical goals, service learning serves to reinforce hierarchies of class and gender. Too often it seems to impart the message to students that "this is the way things are." Yet, if students are encouraged to explore things such as class structure, organizational hierarchies and power, environmental degradation, access and ability, race, and gender, these concepts take on new meaning and can be understood in some very profound new ways. The service-learning course can become transformational rather than simply a conduit for the transmission of information and skill. The articles discussed here all represent examples of critical service learning. In these projects, students are encouraged to learn about the immigrant experience, barriers to literacy for students of color, appropriate educational goals for social media, food insecurity, incarceration, and environmental problems. Writing becomes the means through which students make the connections between what they learn in the classroom and what they experience. Many projects are replicable in different university classrooms and communities and all encourage a deeper understanding of structural inequalities.

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