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# Saving the University on His Own Time: Stanley Fish, Service-Learning, and Knowledge Legitimation in the Academy

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## Review Essay

### Saving the University on His Own Time: Stanley Fish, Service-Learning, and Knowledge Legitimation in the Academy

Dan W. Butin

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*Save the World on Your Own Time*

Stanley Fish

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008

“Not long ago,” Stanley Fish begins in his new book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, reflecting on his transition from dean of the college of arts and sciences at the University of Illinois, Chicago,

there was a time when I was responsible for a college with close to 30 departments and units, a budget of between 50 and 55 million dollars, 400 tenure-track faculty members, 700 staff, 10,000 undergraduate students, 2,000 graduate students, and 17 buildings...The pressure never relaxed. When I left the job after slightly more than five years, I felt that I had all the time (well, not quite all) in the world at my disposal, and for a while, spent it by trying to improve everyone I met, whether or not those I ministered to welcomed my efforts. (pp. 3-4)

He fills it by harassing a neighboring landlord for negligence, lecturing salespeople on proper etiquette, and berating checkout clerks for their lackadaisical job skills.

“But those were just my weekend activities,” he tells the reader: “Although I was no longer the dean, I couldn’t shake the habit of being at the office every day, all day. Because I had nothing particular to do, I roamed the halls looking for things that were wrong, and I found them” (p. 4). He throws out cartons of books sitting in hallways, tears down entire bulletin boards, orders staff to immediately attend to the minutest problems, and mercilessly harangues his students:

I told them that I hadn’t the slightest interest in whatever opinions they might have and didn’t want to hear any. I told them that while they may have been taught that the purpose of writing is to express oneself, the selves they had were not worth expressing, and that it would be good if they actually learned something. I told them that on the basis of their performance so far they should sue their previous teachers for malpractice.” (p. 5)

Why would Fish, now the Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Humanities and Law at Florida International University, do such things? And why, you ask, should we care about and be attentive to a man so seemingly petty, obsessive-compulsive, and hyperbolic? Because, to answer both questions at once, Stanley Fish is trying to save the university. The attempt is of course Sisyphusian; but the arguments that Fish musters and the means by which he does so are critical for the service-learning community to understand. More pointedly, I want to suggest that if we simply dismiss his perspectives as errant nonsense from the contemporary king of post-modern sophistry, we risk undermining the long-term sustainability and potential of service-learning specifically and community engagement more broadly in the academy. Stanley Fish’s harangues—at his students, the university, the world—are the manifestations of a deep-seated commitment to the power and role of the university, and, if one buys into his premises, his sharply accurate diagnosis of how it is being undermined.

Fish’s book can be read as the public culmination of an academic endeavor begun more than 30 years ago in his groundbreaking analysis of Milton specifically and literary theory more generally (Fish, 1972). Literature such as Milton’s, Fish argued, functions as “self-consuming texts” that “do not allow a reader the security of his normal patterns of thought and belief” (p. 409). The point of such texts is exactly to avoid having the reader come to a final point: “Coming to the [final] point fulfills a need that most literature deliberately frustrates (if we open ourselves to it), the need to simplify and close” (p. 410; see Butin, 2005a, for a deeper explication of this argument).

This antifoundationalism of resisting and rejecting all “objective” and thus static readings of a text is also what is at the heart of how Fish has come to view the role and function of the academy: as being con-

stantly engaged with and in pursuit of a never-closed-off truth. For Fish, truth is always temporary and always being reformulated within the context of our particular “interpretative communities” (Fish, 1982), which, in higher education, means our particular disciplinary academic communities. As such, the only way we can do our jobs is to have the authority, the academic legitimacy, to control the means and goals of our own knowledge production and dissemination.

Fish’s book, thus, is a very public and brazen defense of higher education as a space for academic deliberation and debate. This, I suggest, can help us—practitioners and scholars within the community engagement movement—to realize that certain forms of service-learning are not simply powerful pedagogical practices; they are, in fact, exemplary models of how higher education can and should support students’ academic growth. Moreover, I maintain that this is a critical moment and opportunity to push back on what Fish (and the academy) consider to be the role and scope of service-learning as a mode of bridging theory and practice and college classrooms with their communities. For service-learning—as an inherently culturally saturated, socially consequential, politically contested, and existentially defining experience (Butin, 2005b)—can help clarify and sharpen how this very mission and vision of higher education can be practiced. Thus, if the service-learning movement can clarify what it does and how it does it, it becomes possible to institutionalize and sustain a more focused and ultimately more impactful model of community engagement. But only, I suggest, if we understand and engage Fish’s arguments.

### Why We Should Save the World on Our Own Time

Fish is a master at phrasing complex ideas simply and concisely. “Do your job,” says Fish, “don’t do somebody else’s job and don’t let someone else do your job” (p. 8). According to Fish, colleges and universities have vastly and inappropriately overreached in what they claim to do and be for the students who attend them and the communities within which they reside. Higher education, claims Fish, should not be in the business of enhancing or expanding students’ moral, civic, or social characters; nor to inveigh on current social, cultural, and political issues such as war, poverty, or racism; nor to revitalize, transform, or collaborate with local and regional communities. Rather, Fish suggests,

College and university teachers can (legitimately) do two things: (1) introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience; and (2) equip those same stu-

dents with the analytical skills-of argument, statistical modeling, laboratory procedure—that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research after a course is over. (p.13)

This is a highly focused (and some might suggest myopic) vision for higher education, and Fish is very well aware of this. “The topics considered and arguments waged in these chapters vary,” Fish writes, “but everything follows from the wish to define academic work precisely and narrowly” (p. 17). Higher education, and the faculty teaching and researching within it, has a very specific function: knowledge production and dissemination. There are, of course, intended and unintended byproducts to these actions; and there are, of course, co-curricular and extra-curricular functions to which higher education increasingly attends to; and the university is, of course, a part of a larger web of social, cultural, economic, and political interconnections. But ultimately, for Fish, “the pursuit of truth is the cardinal value of the academy” (p. 119). And this pursuit of truth—wherever it may lead, without end, without undue external encumbrance, done diligently and carefully within the bounds of academic practice—is what drives Fish’s arguments.

In one respect, Fish draws out this argument to its fairly technocratic and pragmatic conclusion: doing one’s job as a faculty member is hard enough already. Don’t, as such, pile up other tangential responsibilities, no matter how high-sounding or politically-expedient. Faculty are “responsible for the selection of texts, the preparation of a syllabus, the sequence of assignments and exams, the framing and grading of a term paper, and so on” (p. 57). Their goal is to help students master specific bodies of knowledge and particular scientific procedures, to understand certain worldviews and their limits, to come to think and view specific issues in the world from particular disciplinary lenses (be it physics, history, or engineering) in which they were prepared. To go beyond that—to, in his words, not stick to one’s job—undermines one’s contractual agreement to be a good pedagogue. Fish doesn’t mince words here: “Responsibility of a pedagogical kind seems to exist in an inverse relationship to noble aspirations in the education world” (2005, p. 43).

This is over-the-top and standard-fare Fish. For Fish is deeply concerned about the power of pedagogy. Fish wants, implores, demands, that faculty teach, and teach well. By this Fish means that our job as academics is to “academicize” (i.e., read: not proselytize): “To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed” (p. 27). For Fish it is irrelevant whether I am a

Democrat or a Republican, gay or straight, a Red Sox or Yankees fan. When I walk into a classroom all that matters is the pursuit of truth, as defined by academic standards, protocols, histories, and lines of inquiry.

It is here that Fish is an instructor's best friend. For with such an argument, Fish has cleanly and concisely dismantled external threats of imposition or intrusion into classroom practice. My job as the instructor is to teach the truth as I best surmise it within the context of my specific discipline. I do not have to "teach the controversy" or balance my reading list to fit the desires of intelligent design advocates, conservative commentators, or anyone else attempting to influence what or how I teach. That's why I got a PhD. That's why I keep up on my literature and research. That's why I was hired. That's my job. (And not someone else's.) So back off. The classroom thus becomes one of the few spaces where we put aside the distracting and tangential issues of political affiliations, gender identity, or baseball fandom to create a "classroom full of passion and commitment" (p. 39).

This pedagogical exhilaration informs and undergirds Fish's argument that how we do our jobs is deeply political. Not "political" as in a partisan sense, but in the sense that we academics have to do our jobs, and do them well, because we don't want to get caught doing something we are not trained to do and open ourselves up for being told by someone else how supposedly to do our job. Fish's point that we should save the world on our own time is but another way of reminding us that the academy is a highly specialized institution with highly specialized functions. It cannot be and do everything for everyone. "Distinctiveness," says Fish, "is a prerequisite both of our survival and of our flourishing. Without it we haven't got a prayer" (p. 100). For if we don't attend to what we do best—which is developing, testing, critiquing, transforming, and transmitting knowledge—we open ourselves up to the critique of dealing with issues for which we are not equipped or trained.

A clear example is how the conservative movement (think here of David Horowitz, the National Association of Scholars [NAS], American Council of Trustees and Alumni [ACTA], etc.) has appropriated the mantra of curricular balance, the students' bill of rights, and academic diversity. The conservative argument is that liberal bias pervades entire programs (such as Women's studies and peace studies) and can be found in a multitude of courses that force students to read, discuss, and oftentimes engage in just one side (the liberal side) of the argument. As such, the conservative argument goes, the key to a good education is to balance such liberal doctrine with alternative and contrasting perspectives and readings. This is, as Fish points out, a fallacious argument for it ignores that faculty who do their jobs and acad-

micize what they do are, rightly enough, just doing their jobs. The conservative argument only sticks when faculty move away from this academic space. Fish is very clear that such an academic space is not somehow sterile, pure, or neutral: "Again, this is not to say that academic work touches on none of the issues central to politics, ethics, civics, and economics; it is just that when those issues arise in an academic context, they should be discussed in academic terms; that is, they should be objects of analysis, comparison, historical placement, etc." (p. 25).

What Fish has done here (brilliantly, in my perspective) is attempt to safeguard the mission and practice of higher education by placing the criteria of success internal to the workings of the mission and practice of higher education. My status, success, and legitimacy as an academic is not just convergent with what and how I teach and research; what and how I teach and research are who I am as an academic. I am thus not bound by political pressure, students' desire for "balance," or even Stanley Fish's prognostications about how I should teach my course. I am simply and solely bound to the pursuit of truth as I best see fit within my own academic and interpretive community. This is why, by the way, Fish views poetry as the "liberal arts activity par excellence." Neither poetry or the liberal arts can or should make any claim whatsoever to "the truth," enhancing democracy, or saving the world. "Indeed," claims Fish,

when liberal arts education is doing its job properly, it is just like poetry because, like poetry, it makes no claim to efficacy beyond the confines of its performance...A good liberal arts course is good because it introduces questions you did not know how to ask and provides you with the skills necessary to answer them, at least provisionally. (p. 52)

Fish's book, of course, has many other interesting tangents and tidbits. His arguments on academic freedom and free speech are insightful and clear, if, again, contrarian to most people's desire for expansive notions of these values in higher education. His points on the role and missteps of prominent administrators—such as Harvard's Larry Summers on women and science and Columbia's Lee Bollinger's prefatory remarks to Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's speech—ring accurate. And his articulation of what postmodernism and deconstruction is (and isn't) is some of the best general-audience articulations I have read.

Ultimately, though, this book will not be bought and read by individuals concerned about the finer points of deconstructionist thought. Fish's title and arguments are meant to provoke (and thus at some level sustain) the binary political debate about the so-called politicized classroom. That is a shame, for on this count

there are many problems with his book.

### Why Fish Should Have Spent More of His Own Time to Save this Book

There is, unfortunately, much to criticize about this book. First and foremost is that the book is almost completely a compilation of past writings somewhat haphazardly stitched together. As Fish himself admits in the acknowledgments, the book was basically put together by an editor at Oxford University Press from past essays “some too long, some too short, all too repetitive,” which Fish then revised and reworked. But the patchwork nature of the text—the visible seams, the lack of flow—shows through clearly. While it is always useful to have the writings of a major cultural figure handily available in a single place, there is something less than satisfying when the texts no longer have their original shape and context. Fish’s past compilations (e.g., 1994, 1999) were excellent in part because each chapter constituted the full text of a previous stand-alone article; and these chapters were book-ended by an excellent framing and synthetic essay that drew out the themes and arguments to be found across these disparate texts.

Such is not the case here, for this text attempts to pass itself off as a book; as a coherent and cohesive argument from the first to the last page. The only other tipoff the reader receives is on the copyright page, where it is stated that “Previous versions of certain portions of this book appeared in different form in *Change*, *Harper’s Magazine*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and the *New York Times*.” This is maddeningly obfuscating: “previous versions” of “certain portions” in “different form.” Huh? Why not just cite the specific sources? Or why not just rewrite the whole thing from start to finish. I found one of Fish’s past articles, for example, cut up and repositioned across four different chapters. That’s hard work, from an editorial and authorial point of view. Why bother?

Moreover, Fish’s overarching and singular argument (what he calls his “one note song” [p. 153]) is the wrong battle at the wrong time in the quickly transforming world of higher education. There are larger issues to worry about, from quickly changing demographic trends to the marketization of the academy and the rise of for-profit institutions to the vastly changing nature of faculty work. We should be a lot more worried about the atrocious graduation rates of historically underrepresented groups in postsecondary education, the marginalization of the role and value of community colleges which enroll nearly half of all postsecondary students, and the disappearance of the tenured professoriate (e.g., Kirp, 2003; Musselin, 2007; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). The debate over

the politicization of the classroom has a certain self-satisfied, vainglorious, and dated feel to it.

For while researchers, institutions, and higher education organizations continue to delve into and pronounce on classroom politicization and academic freedom (e.g., AAUP, 2007; ACTA, 2006; ACE, 2005; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005; Wilson, 2008), Fish’s point of view was first expressed, and remains, in the early years of the decade. David Horowitz and his “student bill of rights” became prominent in 2004; the Ward Churchill controversy exploded in the first months of 2005; and this so-called new “culture wars” seemingly reached its apogee (and nadir) when Horowitz and Churchill met to debate at George Washington University in April of 2006 and found, really, that they had little to talk about besides their talking points. As one commentary (Capriccioso, 2006) noted,

Why? That question lingered above all others for some academics upon learning that David Horowitz, a conservative writer and social activist, would debate Ward Churchill, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, on Thursday night in Washington about whether politics belong in the classroom. And many observers were still asking the same question after the relatively substance-free debate ended. (§ 1-2)

Fish’s compilation of slightly-dated texts thus seems more suited to stoking old fires rather than putting them out. The original essay which now gives the book its name was first published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in January 2003. While it may be the case that current debates have not moved far, it appears cynical to claim that one has the answer to current questions when in fact the issues have morphed.

And, in fact, Fish does not help himself here on the “trust me” index. To put it simply, either Fish is horrific with numbers or he is ginning up his own relevance. He haphazardly and nonchalantly guesses in his book that “perhaps one out of twenty five” professors “use the classroom as a stage for their political views” (p. 152). And in a recent interview in *Inside Higher Education*, Fish (2008) hazards that “The reality is that the percentage [of professors]... who do something like that [“always imposing their loyalties on the students in an attempt ... to recruit students into a political agenda”] is perhaps small, I would say, at the most, 10 percent, probably more like 5 or 6 percent” (§ 10).

This is sheer nonsense. There are 1.3 million faculty members in higher education and the vast majority of such faculty either teach in fields (such as the hard sciences) or levels (such as community colleges) not typically conducive to politicization; or are

either in part-time or non-tenure track positions and thus more worried about their next paycheck than indoctrinating students (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2008, tables 234, 235, and 254). If we simply apply Fish's percentages, this would mean that between 50,000 and 130,000 faculty members each and every year use the college classroom primarily as a site for the attempted indoctrination of young and impressionable minds. But this would suggest (based on the disaggregated data of faculty status) that nearly every other tenured or tenure-track faculty teaching undergraduates in the humanities or social sciences was involved in such politicization.

At best, Fish appears to be making a mountain out of a molehill. At worst, he is disingenuously setting up a false starting point from where his arguments and battles seem not only meaningful, but critical to the saving of higher education. But this is exactly why Fish should have spent more time on the book. For he, hastily and sloppily, is attempting to convince everyone that he is right. This becomes clear by making visible one of Fish's idiosyncratic tics. Throughout the book, Fish has an extremely annoying habit of highlighting, discussing, and critiquing seemingly off-the-cuff and random examples. He, for example, approvingly discusses a 1997 professor's opening speech to University of Chicago undergraduates (pp. 101-102); in three separate chapters (pp. 21-22, 67-68, 103) he attacks two academics at a conference who are critical of his perspective; at one point (p. 69) he even takes issue with what someone wrote about him on a blog about "punks and science."

This randomness is annoying (at least to me) because when you're a top-notch scholar (and Fish is a really top-notch scholar), you carefully choose who you use as examples. That's because, at that level, there are so many bad examples that (1) you can't read everyone who has decided to attack you or your position, and, (2) most of the people who write about you and your positions don't really understand either your positions or their own. So any commentary on these individuals' arguments is a waste of time, a setting up of straw men that doesn't do much to help the reader understand your argument, except perhaps rhetorically. Yet Fish does this constantly in the book. My point is not that Fish should make abstract and general claims and arguments; rather, there are plenty of prominent examples of sophisticated and nuanced examinations of similar issues (e.g., Berube, 2006; Nelson, 2005) that go unread and un-commented on and thus are unable to help the reader see the boundaries and distinctions of Fish's arguments. Fish, it appears, simply wants to take on all comers, convince every critic, lecture every checkout clerk. It's hard to save the university on your own time and alone, but I guess Fish was trying.

## Why Fish Still Matters

We are thus left, in my perspective, with a deeply flawed and yet deeply provocative set of arguments which matter to and influence service-learning. For Fish's arguments cut directly to the heart and soul of how many in the service-learning movement see themselves:

The view I am offering of higher education is properly called deflationary; it takes the air out of some inflated balloons. It denies to teaching the moral or philosophical pretensions that lead practitioners to envision themselves as agents of change or as designers of a "transformative experience," a phrase I intensely dislike...Teaching is a job, and what it requires is not a superior sensibility or a purity of heart and intention...but mastery of a craft. (p. 53)

This "mastery of a craft" is, for Fish, what will save higher education because it will allow us as faculty to focus on our legitimate jobs of academicizing any and all issues; such academicizing leaves behind cultural transformation and partisan politics in favor of the search—in the classroom and in one's scholarship—for the always complex and contingent truth. Fish sees his perspective as antithetical to what is commonly thought of as the service-learning movement; I, though, see it as a perfect roadmap for the legitimation of certain parts of the service-learning movement in higher education.

The linkage begins here: "What set me off in all of this," Fish comments in a 2005 interview about his essays about the politicized classroom (i.e., Fish, 2003a, 2003b), "was the book called *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*" (p. 44). Readers of the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* should be well aware of this book (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003), as it, and a subsequent book (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007) from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, provide some of the grounding theoretical and empirical ballast for the value of service-learning in higher education. The Carnegie Foundation, in fact, serves as one of the two or three most prominent advocates of service-learning, particularly as it has recently unveiled a new (though voluntary) classification of "community engagement" that both highlights and at the same time legitimates institutions' commitment to such engaged forms of pedagogy (Carnegie, 2006).

Fish's attack on this book was that such noble goals, while laudatory in a participatory democracy, are not only inapplicable in higher education, they are in fact harmful to and corrosive of the mission and practices of higher education. "Aim low," he suggests to the reader.

You can reasonably set out to put your students in possession of a set of materials and equip them with a set of skills (interpretive, computational, laboratory, archival), and even perhaps (although this one is really iffy) instill in them the same love of the subject that inspires your pedagogical efforts... You have little chance however (and that entirely a matter of serendipity) of determining what they will make of what you have offered them once the room is unlocked for the last time and they escape first into the space of someone else's obsession and then into the space of the wide wide world. And you have no chance at all (short of a discipleship that is itself suspect and dangerous), of determining what their behavior and values will be in those aspects of their lives that are not, in the strict sense of the word, academic. You might just make them into good researchers. You can't make them into good people, and you shouldn't try. (pp. 58-59)

At one level Fish is just pointing out what developmental researchers (e.g., Allport, 1954; Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Tatum, 1992; see also Butin, 2005c) have consistently noted: that changing one's point of view (especially on a contested or controversial topic) takes many years and much investment of time and energy on the part of an institution, the faculty, and the students themselves. On another level, though, Fish wants to cleanly and clearly demarcate where the job of higher education begins and where it ends.

Specifically, Fish is demanding that knowledge production and dissemination begins and ends in higher education, be it in the research lab or in the college classroom. This is what we have control over—nothing less and nothing more. Put otherwise, the legitimacy of what we do as academics can only be determined by the internal conditions we ourselves have set for it. We control our own knowledge legitimation. This is, by the way, how Fish also defines academic freedom—as the freedom of academics to do their job:

It is best thought of as a matter of guild protectionism... Academic freedom, correctly and (modestly) understood, is not a challenge to the imperative always to academicize; it is the name of that imperative; it is the freedom to be an academic, which is, by definition, not the freedom to be anything and everything else. (p. 80)

Fish's attack on Colby et al. (2003) is, thus, a demand that we as researchers and professors stick to what we know and do best; and if we do, we'll have a much better chance of being good teachers who positively impact our students, good researchers who can inform and extend our disciplinary knowledge, and most important of all, good and politically-savvy academicians who can actually stay in control of how we define and go about our jobs as good teachers and

good researchers. What Fish saw in *Educating Citizens* was his greatest fear realized: prominent academics (supported by a prominent organization) seemingly claiming that higher education could do and be all things to everyone.

This brings me back to my claim of the value of Fish's arguments for service-learning. I have argued elsewhere that service-learning can be viewed through four distinct lenses: technical, cultural, political, and antifoundational (Butin 2003, 2009). Through a technical lens, service-learning is all about better instruction for better academic outcomes; through a cultural lens it is about imbued meanings (e.g., tolerance, citizenship); through a political lens it is about the empowerment of the dispossessed; and through an antifoundational lens it is about the defamiliarization of the seemingly natural.

This is to say that Fish's critique and attempt to save the university (be it on his time or ours) is in fact deeply compatible with the technical and antifoundational aspects of service-learning, and not with the cultural or political. Specifically, when service-learning (or any form of pedagogy, for that matter) attempts to directly enhance diversity or promote social justice or strengthen civic virtues, the very first questions become: whose notion of diversity?, whose notion of justice?, whose notion of virtues? These are morally- and culturally-fraught issues that demand allegiances and commitments and, by definition, invoke partisan and oftentimes binary distinctions. But for Fish, the university must be amoral: "the university gives no counsel, and that is the professional, and in some sense moral, obligation of faculty members to check their moral commitments at the door" (p. 101). Our job is to academicize the critical issues of diversity, justice, and civic virtues, not preach about them.

It is, thus, in some sense deeply ironic that the service-learning movement has so firmly embraced John Dewey, the father of contemporary antifoundationalism (see Rorty, 1989); for Dewey (1910) argued that all thoughtful deliberation began with a "forked road" situation whereby the individual had to "endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching... to sustain and protract [a] state of doubt" (p. 14, 16) to become a thoughtful and educated citizen. Put otherwise, Dewey would have loathed considering a pedagogy already predicated on someone else's (i.e., the instructor's) notion of truth or justice or democracy. All of these terms—for Dewey as much as for Fish—were to be understood as objects of inquiry rather than endpoints of pedagogy.

This is why service-learning from technical and antifoundational perspectives can be truly powerful, sustainable, and defensible as a deeply academic practice. Service-learning as a technical practice is about helping us do our job—as academics who acad-

emicize—better. Whether I am teaching about income inequality, math education, or non-profit management, community-based pedagogical practices can help students understand the contextual realities, real-world subtleties, and multiplicity of perspectives of the specific issue under analysis. Fish, in fact, acknowledges and praises such active engagement (even as he doesn't understand service-learning and thus conflates it with community service): “a student who returns from an internship experience and writes an academic paper...analyzing and generalizing on her experience, should get credit for it” (p. 21). This is, for Fish, higher education at its best: introducing students to bodies of knowledge and ways of thinking that help students academicize deeply volatile and complex issues through careful reflective and analytic work.

Similarly, service-learning as an antifoundational practice forces students to question their certainties and as such expand their sense of the possible. For service-learning is (if we open ourselves up to it) a truly destabilizing pedagogy that implodes our grand narratives and fixed truths exactly because of its contingent character. And if service-learning can do that—if it can disrupt our sense of the normal to the extent that we internalize a “state of doubt”—then it exhibits Fish's other deeply desirous trait of higher education: the always restless and never closed-off search for truth.

These goals may at first seem modest, especially when compared to the often heard claims that service-learning will transform higher education, the teaching and learning process, and local and global communities. But this is exactly Fish's point. The goals must be modest because the job is so complex. Education is an opening into the unknown; and careful, deliberate, and powerful education is extremely difficult to do well. Service-learning—a real-world and real-time pedagogy of engagement that confounds any simple or simplistic textbook notion of a fixed and stable truth—thus becomes a paradigmatic example of what Fish envisions as the ideal of higher education that he is trying to save.

But service-learning, I suggest, also can push back on what Fish and the academy consider legitimate modes and models of academic inquiry. This is because, for Fish, the academy must ultimately serve as a space for constant rethinking and defamiliarization; so long as this is done within the context of the academic (rather than political), any and all models for such inquiry are fair game. This is why Fish (1994) approvingly cites feminism as a powerful intellectual force in and for higher education:

[T]he questions raised by feminism, because they were questions raised not in the academy but in the larger world and that then made their way into the academy, have energized more thought and social action than any other 'ism'

in the past twenty or thirty years...[and] marks the true power of a form of inquiry or thought: when the assumptions encoded in the vocabulary of a form of thought become inescapable in the larger society. (p. 294)

Fish here is approving of a form of feminist inquiry that strengthens higher education in its practice of teaching and in its ability to help students rethink their so-called commonsensical assumptions; or what I have termed as technical and antifoundational perspectives, respectively. To be clear, though, he is not approving of a feminism that attempts to foster gender awareness or equity. Feminism, for Fish, should not be about cultural or political goals. But if it strengthens the role and functioning of the university (as he sees it), then more power to it. At the risk of repeating myself, Fish's fundamental points of the role of the academy as doing but two things—“introduce students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry that had not previously been part of their experience;” and “equip those same students with the analytical skills...to engage in independent research after a course is over” (p. 13)—take on a new meaning. Namely, Fish is always in search of the next text that does “not allow a reader the security of his normal patterns of thought and belief” and a job well done in teaching it.

So if feminism can move from the “larger world” and deeply impact the process and product of higher education, so can diverse pedagogies of engagement. Community engagement—whether manifested as service-learning, public scholarship, community-based research, etc.—is a wonderfully complex and situated practice that truly disturbs and forces students (and faculty) to rethink their normal patterns of thought and belief. It brings to the fore the voices and practices of the community; it forces us to reconsider the very nature of scholarship, its practices, and its outcomes; it allows us to reimagine collaborative practices and interdisciplinary inquiry. And if this is so, then what we as practitioners and scholars must begin to do is work through how to make it inescapable. I have elsewhere (Butin, 2009) argued that this may be best done in the context of an “academic home” for service-learning. But the specifics of how to actually become such good teachers and researchers is not as relevant for the moment as the realization, following Fish, that it really isn't our job to save the world. Rather, if we instead come to embrace the seemingly modest vision of doing our job, we might just save the university instead.

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