

2006

Special Issue: Introduction Future Directions for Service Learning in Higher Education

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Repository Citation

Butin, D. W. (2006). Special Issue: Introduction Future Directions for Service Learning in Higher Education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 18(1), 1-4.

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Special Issue: Introduction Future Directions for Service Learning in Higher Education

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“I’m an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same thing as before.” Michel Foucault (2000, p. 240)

Service learning is by now an international reform movement with sustained roots in secondary and postsecondary education in, among other places, Australia, South Africa, North America, and Western Europe. Service learning—traditionally understood as the linkage of academic coursework with community-based service—has been supported by two complementary waves: governments’ interest in and sponsoring of civic engagement and the general public’s desire to see higher education provide more meaningful and relevant experiences and outcomes for its students (Arenas et al., 2006; Harkavy, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002).

Service learning appears to accomplish both. By linking theory with practice and classrooms with communities, service learning provides real-world exposure and engagement with meaningful local and global issues through concrete and ameliorative practices. An ever-expanding body of research validates the positive impact of service learning upon a host of academic, social, and cultural variables. Service learning increases youth’s civic knowledge and political engagement, strengthens openness to diversity and difference, and promotes a better and deeper understanding of course content (Astin & Sax, 1998; Bell et al., in press; Billig et al., 2005; Chang, 2002). Such results appear to be sustained even years after the actual service learning has occurred (Misa et al., 2005).

So why fix what is seemingly not broken? Why critique and disturb a reform movement that in the last decade has swept through and become commonplace within higher education? Why talk about the (plural) *future directions* of service learning in higher education in this special theme issue?

The reason is exactly because, I would argue, service learning has been positioned as *apart from* rather than *a part of* the academy. More precisely, service learning as a pedagogical methodology and a philosophical orientation has been framed as a coherent, cohesive, and liberatory practice able to foster radical change and betterment across higher education. However, service learning is not a monolithic entity, nor (any longer) something external to the academy, nor so easily deemed transformational (Butin, in press).

My goal here is not one of destruction or denigration. It is to point out that we, as service-learning scholars and practitioners, are part of a complex pedagogical experiment that deserves detailed critical attention; for service learning has been embraced by the academy to a much greater extent than it has been scrutinized. To acknowledge this fact, though, risks exposing an underside of service learning that most advocates would rather avoid: namely, that service learning, as any other educational reform model, has its own blind spots, its own unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions, and its own impositional narratives.

The service learning movement has attempted to position itself exactly as a theoretically and pedagogically unproblematic practice to be embedded within higher education. However, the center will not hold. For the academy is by its very nature a space for examination and critique, especially when confronted with issues as complex and contested as what transpires within and across communities. It is thus incumbent on the service learning field to carefully and critically examine its own practices and theories in order to strengthen them rather than have them picked apart by not-so-gentle critics.

If this is so, if we are to begin to think carefully and critically and differently about service learning, if we are “not to think the same thing as before,” then I would argue (with Foucault) that we must experiment. We must experiment with—and this theme issue provides details of—what service learning could be: service learning without servers; service learning explicitly and self-reflexively focused back upon itself rather than out into the community; service learning as community; service learning as an incremental discipline rather than a revolutionary transformation; service learning without service learning; service learning as science.

This theme issue promotes are provocative, critical, and disruptive examinations of service learning. I promote these in order to avoid complacency within a field that has been blessed (and thus perhaps cursed) with a decade-long expansion into an academy of which it is yet not truly a part. The strength of the service-

learning movement lies in the transformational potential of a pedagogical strategy that changes ourselves, our students, and our communities. If we are to take such transformational potential seriously, then I would argue that we must also be willing to allow for the potential to let service learning be changed as well.

The service-learning literature, for example, has unabashedly appropriated the terminology of “border crossing” (Giroux, 1992). However, as Himley (2004; Carrick et al., 2000) has elegantly pointed out, this may be much more about *border inspections* of the stranger rather than the *border crossings* of our students. Likewise, recent work has shown that the boundaries between the server and the served may not be as stable or useful as previously thought (Henry, 2005; Henry & Breyfogle, this issue; Pompa, 2005). I cite one more example: Raji Swaminathan (2005; in press) offers strong ethnographic evidence that there is a pervasive hidden curriculum within community organizations that mediates students’ experiences of their service to an extent completely unexpected by faculty. Each of these examples, I would argue, forces us to experiment with rethinking and constructing a service learning made stronger by such critique.

It is in this spirit that this theme issue was developed. Specifically, I wanted to begin a critical dialogue on possible alternative futures for service learning in higher education. I need to be clear that these are not positioned (at least not by me) as what the future of service learning in higher education *should* look like. Rather, these essays—some constructive and some destructive—force service-learning practitioners and scholars to carefully revisit how and why we do what we do and think what we think.

The first essay, a collaborative work between Lynne Boyle-Baise and seven of her graduate students, does exactly that: namely, in a graduate-level course on the theory and practice of service learning, Boyle-Baise reverses our standard academic emphasis in order to “scrutinize service as a democratic force.” This analysis of, and reflection upon, “learning service” stops short our implicit presumption that service is something simply to be done by those involved in service-learning experiences. As one of her graduate students notes, “As we explored theoretical concepts of service and otherness, I began to reflect on what it means to really help someone...none of my previous experiences with service taught me how you went about working with people as opposed to doing charity work.” Ultimately, Boyle-Baise and her students challenge the reader to “dare to teach service” as a means to explicate hidden assumptions of ethics, standards, and reflection within the service-learning experience. Such an emphasis on *teaching* our students about a process that we all too often simply make them *do* reveals an important lacuna in the field: that the respect and reciprocity we offer to

the community may not be as openly offered to our very own students, who we may simply expect to do the service learning we as instructors have set up.

Sue Ellen Henry and M. Lynn Breyfogle take up a related issue in the second essay. Henry and Breyfogle argue that the service-learning field has unwittingly bought into a rigid and static model of reciprocity that bifurcates and reifies the “server” and the “served.” Henry and Breyfogle elegantly use John Dewey’s (1896) critique of the stimulus-response model of action to demonstrate how both “providers” and “recipients” are actually “changed in the process of their service-learning venture.” To maintain the “unnatural dualism” of one entity acting upon another—analogueous to psychology’s reflex arc notion that a stimulus “simply” triggers a response that in turn triggers another stimulus, ad infinitum—is to miss Dewey’s profound insight that entities (be they people or stimuli) are inextricably changed by the process in which they are engaged. Henry and Breyfogle link this organic process of action to Enos and Morton’s (2003) argument for an “enriched form of reciprocity” to suggest alternative models for university-community partnerships that are able to take into account the collective efforts of fostering educational change both for undergraduate students and the local community.

Amy Lee DeBlasis takes up this critique as well when she suggests that community-based research (CBR) offers an even more fruitful means by which to foster a shared vision between an institution and its community partners. Building on recent CBR literature (e.g., Strand et al., 2003) and her own college’s development, DeBlasis argues that CBR moves all stakeholders into a collaborative relationship rather than a service one, thereby fostering “an equal sharing of the power, knowledge, information, and execution of the project.” This allows universities and communities, DeBlasis argues, to sidestep the problematic baggage of “service” in order to truly meet the needs of students, faculty, and the community. This is, I should note, fully in line with the recent surge of attention being given to the potential value of undergraduate research.

In a different vein, though with similar goals, Keith Aronson offers a highly provocative argument for the necessity of increasing the scientific rigor of service-learning research. Using the field of prevention science as his point of comparison, Aronson systematically lays out the shortcomings of present-day service-learning research and how that might be alleviated by embracing a multistage research cycle used within the prevention sciences. In so doing, Aronson suggests, the service-learning field could make very important strides vis-à-vis issues of valid assessment of impact, legitimization in the academy, and positioning within the contemporary era of accountability. Aronson is clear that such accrual of benefits comes with costs (e.g.,

diminishing an egalitarian ethos, positioning of the researcher as expert rather than collaborator). However, such is the price, he suggests, for providing a scientific foundation for the service-learning field.

My own essay explores this exact dilemma—how to deeply and legitimately institutionalize service learning within the academy—through a different argument. Namely, I suggest that the service-learning movement must have a parallel movement to develop an “academic home” within higher education. This, for me, is embodied by an already existing academic field: community studies. Community studies integrates coursework with sustained, consequential, and immersive community-based learning within the legitimate space of an academic program. “Disciplining” service learning, I argue, allows the service-learning field to gain the professional and social legitimacy to control its own knowledge production, develop its own disciplinary boundaries and norms, and critique and further its own practices. I use women’s studies as an exemplary model of such a transformation and provide both an empirical and theoretical detailing of community studies programs in higher education to suggest how such a strategy could fruitfully complement the service-learning movement.

In the next essay, Katharine Kravetz details how one such academic course in community studies actually works. Kravetz provides a detailed description of American University’s Washington Semester program *Transforming Communities*, which she helped to develop and now teaches. Kravetz shows how community-based learning is at the heart of this program and, as such, is what allows for a genuine engagement with and understanding of “how communities function and the means of strengthening them.” Kravetz’s vision is of long-term commitment to and support of communities, and her program explicitly engages the complexities, frustrations, and opportunities for such a long-term vision.

Finally, David Berle concludes this issue with a wonderful example of service learning embedded across an entire departmental program. Berle outlines a sequence of courses in the University of Georgia’s Department of Horticulture to show how service learning is progressively and systematically expanded. Such a model of incremental integration, Berle argues, alleviates faculty impediments to “buying into” an unknown pedagogical strategy and fosters a spiraling curriculum to scaffold students’ understanding and successful use of service learning.

I hope that these essays support sustained reflection and engagement with community-based forms of teaching and learning. My goal is to foster discussions and debates that expand the transformational potential of service learning, both upon higher education and

upon itself. I leave it to the reader to determine if I have succeeded.

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