

2006

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Repository Citation

Butin, D. W. (2006). Disciplining Service Learning: Institutionalization and the Case for Community Studies. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 18(1), 57-64.

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Disciplining Service Learning: Institutionalization and the Case for Community Studies

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This article argues that the service-learning field has been pursuing the wrong revolution. Namely, service learning has been envisioned as a transformative pedagogical practice and philosophical orientation that would change the fundamental policies and practices of the academy. However, its attempted institutionalization faces substantial barriers and positions service learning in an uncomfortable double-bind that ultimately co-opts and neutralizes its agenda. This article argues that a truly transformative agenda may be to create a parallel movement to develop an “academic home” for service learning within academic “community studies” programs. This “disciplining” of service learning is the truly revolutionary potential of institutionalizing service learning.

The service-learning field has been pursuing the wrong revolution. Namely, service learning has been envisioned as a transformative pedagogical practice and philosophical orientation that would change the fundamental policies and practices of the academy. However, its attempted institutionalization of a political and pedagogical revolution not only faces substantial barriers, but also positions service learning in an uncomfortable double-bind. This double-bind co-opts service learning’s agenda such that, rather than service learning changing higher education, higher education will change service learning.

I thus argue that a truly transformative agenda may be to create a parallel movement to develop an “academic home”—a disciplinary “home base”—for service learning. This “disciplining” of service learning, I will argue, is not the negation of a politics of transformation but the condition of its possibility. Specifically, I put forward the argument that service learning can be sustained as a legitimate and critical undertaking in higher education only by becoming “disciplined” within the framework of an academic “community studies” program. By linking rigorous academic coursework with immersive and consequential community-based learning, community studies programs embody the connections and engagement desired between institutions of higher education and their local and global communities. What community studies truly offer—to students, institutions, and communities—is a legitimate and longstanding academic space from which to foster a meaningful praxis of theory and practice. It is from within this space that service learning can truly flourish.

This article first summarizes the goals of service learning’s present push for institutionalization and its theoretical and empirical limits. It then articulates the potential for community studies programs in higher education and uses the case of women’s studies programs both as an exemplary model of such a transformation and as a means to dispel the worries of

marginalizing service learning as an academic discipline. This article concludes by proposing one possible future direction for ultimately strengthening service learning by promoting academic community studies programs.

The Limits of Institutionalizing Service Learning

Service learning appears ubiquitous in higher education today. It can be found on institutional homepages, in college presidents’ speeches, and as stand-alone administrative offices and centers committed to supporting curricular and co-curricular community-based practices. Almost 1,000 colleges and universities are Campus Compact members committed to the civic purposes of higher education. Tens of thousands of faculty engage millions of college students in some form of service-learning practice each and every year.

The service-learning literature is thus replete with discussions about, and strategies for, institutionalization (Bell et al., 2000; Benson et al., 2005; Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2002; Hartley et al., 2005; Kramer, 2000; Wingspread, 2004). The goal throughout is to embed service learning as deeply and widely across the academy as possible in order to insure its longevity and thus success. However, the institutionalization of service learning is far from secure. Beyond the immense pragmatic difficulties of institutionalizing any educational reform model, I suggest that there are specific theoretical, pedagogical, political, and institutional limits to the institutionalization of a powerful and coherent service-learning model. I have laid out these limits elsewhere in detail (Butin, 2003, 2005, in press a). I thus summarize these arguments in order to suggest that the service-learning movement must look elsewhere to develop alternative and complementary strategies for becoming successfully embedded within higher education.

The *theoretical limits to service learning* in higher education revolve around tensions of knowledge production and dissemination. Specifically, higher education is torn between the notion of functioning as an academic enterprise concerned primarily with the rigorous, objective, and pure examination of the truth versus as a training ground and incubator for the social and civic mission of a public democracy. Service learning is fundamentally viewed as supporting the latter: experiential and engaged learning in the “real world” is privileged over book scholarship; social justice is a presumed and hoped-for outcome; and there is no such thing as an objective and neutral perspective, especially given the all too-often marginalized and silenced voices of the community. However, such perspectives gain little traction in the minutia of developing academic legitimacy and privilege vis-à-vis tenure, promotion, and funding. Ira Harkavy (Harkavy & Benson, 1998) has referred to this as the “dead hand of Plato” winning out over Dewey’s argument that knowledge is a participatory, transactional, and reflective act.

The *pedagogical limits to service learning* in higher education refer to the types of students and faculty involved in service learning. First, student demographics do not align with the type of students supposedly doing service learning. Much of the service-learning literature presumes an “ideal type” student: one who volunteers her time, has high cultural capital, is single, has no children, is un-indebted, is between the ages of 18 and 24, matriculates in four consecutive years, and gains from contact with the cultural “other.” However, this is not the demographics of higher education today, much less in twenty years. Thirty-four percent of undergraduates are over 25 years of age, and 40 percent of undergraduates are part-time; NCES (Snyder et al. 2004) data shows that such “non-traditional” students (over the age of twenty-five, with children, and part-time) are in fact the largest growth segment in postsecondary education. Second, a normative model of teaching (83 percent of faculty use lecturing as the primary instructional method [NCES, 2002, tables 15 and 16]) is reinforced by the marginal and transitory status of faculty. Non-tenure track faculty constitute almost half of all teaching faculty in higher education (Snyder et al., 2004).

The *political limits to service learning* reside in the fact that service learning has a progressive and liberal agenda under the guise of a universalistic practice. The field’s consistent valorization of the goals of civic engagement and social justice presumes a steadily upward movement from charity-based forms of volunteerism towards justice-oriented modes of sustained and collective practice. As Westheimer & Kahne (2004) note, these are fundamentally distinctive models of what it means to be a citizen, yet in our

hyper-sensitive red-state/blue state political culture, such distinctions all too easily are transposed into, and associated with, left- and right-wing agendas and ideologies. The very mention of “social justice” thus sets in play (conservative) political maneuvering employing the language game of left-wing “indoctrination” and the subversion of “intellectual diversity” (Horowitz, 2003; see Butin, in press b, for a further analysis). Service learning thus finds itself in an extremely uncomfortable double-bind. If it attempts to be a truly radical and transformative (liberal) practice, it faces potential censure and sanction. If it attempts to be politically balanced to avoid such an attack, it risks losing any power to make a difference.

Finally, the *institutional limits to service learning* reside in the realization that higher education works by very specific disciplinary rules about knowledge production, about who has the academic legitimacy to produce such knowledge and how. The service-learning field has adapted to such an academic game primarily through the embrace of what I term the “quantitative move” (Butin, 2005, in press a). Appropriating the “statistically significant” nomenclature, service-learning scholars have attempted to show that service learning is a legitimate academic practice with measurable positive outcomes. Yet in so doing, service-learning scholars buy into a paradigm of instrumental accountability whereby success is both definable and measurable. Relying on such a quantitative move may help service-learning scholars gain a certain legitimacy in the academy. What it will not do, though, is expand the boundaries of how to think about the academic because it buys into, rather than subverts, the very norms by which the academy engages in knowledge construction and dissemination. What it will not do is provide a decidedly different discourse vis-à-vis how service learning should be institutionalized to revolutionize higher education.

The Exemplary Case of Women’s Studies

I want to suggest that women’s studies offers an exemplary model of institutionalization that has in fact transformed how the academy operates. Specifically, women’s studies offers an example of disciplinary institutionalization that is not the negation of politics but the condition of its possibility. In fact, I suggest that the arc of institutionalization for women’s studies has much to offer scholars and practitioners intent on deeply embedding service learning within the academy.

Women’s studies began as a set of courses in the early 1970s, first at San Diego State University and soon across dozens and then hundreds of campuses. The impetus was the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation Movements of the 1960s and the example of the mobilization of Black Studies programs in higher

education. By the early 1980s women's studies had formed a national organization—the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA)—and there were several hundred Women's Studies programs scattered across the country. A fundamental issue was whether the field should be conceptualized as an autonomous academic entity (i.e. an academic program or discipline) or a transformative agenda of feminist activism across higher education (Bowles & Klein, 1983; Howe, 2000). Women's studies took the first path: it became an academic program. Today, women's studies is a thriving discipline, with over a thousand programs and the usual academic accoutrements that accompany such success: dozens of journals and conferences, multiple stand-alone Ph.D. programs, etc. (Stanton & Stewart, 1995).

The question today, though, is whether women's studies is still possible (Brown, 1997, 2003). Specifically, have the transformative goals of feminists and women's studies programs been appropriated by the norms of academia? Indeed, there appears a simple linear trajectory for women's studies: a radical social movement intent on changing higher education has instead become co-opted and domesticated to the detriment of both the movement and the peoples meant to be liberated by it. Women's studies has become "routinized" (Messer-Davidow, 2002).

However, such a narrative arc of marginalization—which, it should be noted, has much resonance for service-learning scholars intent on not giving up their activist orientation—misjudges the very structures and purposes of the academy. What it ignores is that a critique such as Brown's—of whether women's studies is still possible in the academy—is only allowable within the disciplinary boundaries of an academic program. Put otherwise, the very routinization feared is exactly what allows women's studies (or any other discipline, for that matter) to flourish through public and rigorous critique which is able to be built upon.

Feminist and women's studies scholars realized by the early 1980s that as long as women's studies was conflated with social activism, it risked being dismissed as yet another form of identitarian politics beholden to the unquestioned uplifting of an essentialized category (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender) (Wiegman, 2005). The move of institutionalization as an academic discipline provided a means for women's studies to use the gendered subject as its mode of inquiry. Women's studies is thus no longer about feminist politics and activism; rather, it is about engaging in academic discourses through a feminist lens. It allows women's studies scholars the ability to internally debate and determine what issues are worthy of study, by what modes of inquiry, and to what ends (Weigmann, 1999, 2002). Moreover, it allows feminist and women's studies scholars the

opportunity—through traditional academic paths of scholarship, discourse, and the micro-politics of everyday practices—to promote feminist models and practices across the academy (DuBois, 1985; Stanton & Stewart, 1995).

Thus, Brown's (2003) critique ultimately does not engage the (lack of a) future of women's studies; rather, it engages the inadequacy of viewing women's studies as the revolutionary vehicle for a feminist liberation. Revolutions, Brown argues, presume a coherency and liberatory status that women's studies never had (see Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981 for just such a critique of "first wave" feminism). For Brown (2003), such a throwing off of the yoke of liberation is itself liberatory: "If we are without revolutionary possibility today, we are also free of revolution as the paradigm of transformation" (p. 15). Women's studies as an academic discipline thus has the freedom—in fact the obligation—to develop, question, and revise its own tools, its own practices, its own analytic foci, and its own disciplinary modes of knowledge production and dissemination.

This case of women's studies suggests that only by becoming disciplined—by becoming an academic program or departmental unit—can service learning truly be sustained and nourished in the academy. In fact, if service learning does not to some extent become transformed into an academic discipline, it may ultimately become just one more educational reform model scattered haphazardly and ineffectually across the higher education landscape. If service learning cannot discipline itself, and if it cannot 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, it will be unsustainable as a transformative agent within higher education.

The Case for Community Studies

Women's studies took an activist vision of feminism and embedded it as an academic practice within the academy. I suggest a similar process is possible for service learning: taking an activist vision of community engagement and embedding it as an academic discipline of "community studies."

Such an alternative, in fact, already exists. There is a sizable set of programs in higher education that go by the moniker of "community studies." As table 1 shows, such programs are highly variable in their foci, institutional affiliation, and level of autonomy. (This list was derived through a comprehensive web-based search of the exact phrase "community studies" on only ".edu" domain webpages; see <http://www.gettysburg.edu/~dbutin/communitystudies.htm>.)

TABLE 1
Community Studies Academic Programs in Higher Education

Concentrations

- California State University - Northridge's Asian American Studies Department offers a Community Studies concentration
- Clemson's Sociology Department offers a Community Studies concentration
- George Mason University's New Century College offers a Community Studies concentration
- Guilford College offers a Community Studies concentration within their Justice and Policy Studies major
- Portland State University offers a Community Studies cluster within their University Studies program
- University of Missouri-Columbia's Department of Rural Sociology has a Community Studies emphasis

Minor

- Ferris State University offers a Community Studies minor
- Santa Clara University offers a Community Studies minor
- University of Michigan's College of Literature, Science, and the Arts offers an Urban and Community Studies minor
- Washington State University's Community & Rural Sociology Department offers a Community Studies minor

Major

- University of Baltimore offers a Community Studies and Civic Engagement major
- University of Massachusetts - Boston's College of Public & Community Service offers a Community Studies major
- University of Utah's Department of Family & Consumer Studies offers a Consumer & Community Studies major

Graduate offering

- Northeastern University's Department of Sociology & Anthropology offers an Urban Affairs & Community Studies concentration for its graduate program
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Department of Human and Community Development offers a Community Studies and Outreach PhD program
- University of Vermont offers a graduate program in Education and Community Studies

Department

- St. Cloud State University has a Community Studies Department
- University of California -Santa Cruz has a Community Studies Department
- University of Connecticut has an Urban and Community Studies Department
- University of Maine-Machias offers a Behavioral Sciences & Community Studies major
- University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee has a Department of Educational Policy & Community Studies

Yet despite such variability, an analysis of these twenty-one programs' self-description (based on their websites) revealed just three distinctive "community studies" models: 1) community studies as methodology, 2) community studies as academic specialization, and 3) community studies as community development and social change.

Community studies as methodology views engagement with a community as consisting of a set of methodological practices akin to ethnography and community-based research. Every single academic program articulated a set of methodological procedures by which students would begin to examine an issue, be it public health or poverty. Thus, irrespective of the focus or where in the academy it was positioned, every single community studies program expected students to engage in some form of fieldwork to understand the academic content under investigation. *Community studies as academic specialization* views engagement with a community as the analytic lens through which to examine and analyze a specific issue. Thus, while women's studies scholars make use of the gendered

subject as the lens by which to examine a host of issues, multiple community studies programs examined specific issues (e.g. race and ethnicity, urban policy, education) through the lens of distinctive communities. Finally, *community studies as community development and social change* views engagement with a community as an activist practice. The focus is on how community engagement supports and strengthens the (re)building and sustenance of specific communities of practice.

Irrespective of the specific focus (i.e., methodology, academic, or social change), each and every community studies program is clearly within an academic discipline. Transforming service learning into an academic discipline thus offers a highly intriguing opportunity, for developing an academic community studies program and embedding it within the very core of the academy would relieve many of the worries within the service-learning field. For example, the Campus Compact annual membership survey (2004) cites faculty time pressure, lack of funding, lack of common understanding, lack of funding for work, and faculty resistance as the top obstacles to service

learning on campuses. This is because service learning is seen as an add-on to all of the other worries, pressures, and constraints on faculty. However, if there were a community studies program, a scholarship of engagement within the community would be the primary task. There would still be time pressures and funding obstacles, but those would simply be part of the job of being a faculty member in community studies rather than an additional burden. I would no longer have to worry about whether service learning was taking time away from my research and potentially preventing my case for tenure. My scholarship of engagement with the community *would be* my research and my case for tenure.

Such disciplinary specialization in fact strengthens rather than undercuts deep and sustained community engagement, for all disciplines create and monitor their own disciplinary assumptions of learning, teaching, and research. Teacher educators ask questions such as “should we lecture in a classroom?”; qualitative researchers debate the ethical dilemmas of fieldwork; economists worry about which statistical models skew the data more than others. Every discipline is a community of scholars worried about particular major or minor crises in their respective fields and subfields.

Likewise, the means and goals of community studies become the fundamental questions in the field. For example, the question, “How much voice should community members have in the partnership?” immediately becomes expanded and problematized: “Whose voices should be heard and whose shouldn’t?”; “How should such hearing occur?”; “What does it even mean to hear?” What becomes clear is that there will be (and should be) a spectrum of perspectives about the notions of reciprocity, respect, power, and knowledge production embedded in this extremely complex and multifaceted question. To be a member of the community studies field means that at some point in one’s academic career one has grappled, and hopefully continues to grapple, with the question of community voice.

Critics may contend that community studies would marginalize service learning into a theory-laden and activist-poor academic backwater concerned more with publishing and tenure than with real changes in the real world. Yet such an argument presumes (wrongly) that service-learning-as-activism is the only way to transform higher education. For all of the human, fiscal, and institutional resources devoted to service learning across higher education, there are in fact very minimal on-the-ground changes in the academy, in local communities, or in society more generally. I do not dispute that in isolated situations with unique circumstances profound changes have occurred. I also do not want to demean the immense effort and energy committed by two generations of activists both within

and outside higher education. What I am simply pointing out is that service learning should not have to bear the burden (nor the brunt) of being the social justice standard-bearer. To do so would be to set up an impossible causal linkage between service learning and social betterment. Much scholarship, for example, can be marshaled to show that the divisions in our society based on categories of race, class, ethnicity, and language have in many cases become worse, not better; that democracy for all intents and purposes has become a spectator sport as most of us (and particularly youth) have disengaged from the public sphere; and that the United States is the worst offender in the developed world of human principles and ethical norms for the treatment of its incarcerated population. Is this service learning’s fault? If service learning succeeds as hoped in higher education and these conditions continue to decline, does this mean that service learning is to blame? The issues cited have much more to do with a host of interconnected economic, social, political, and legal policies than they do with the percentage of faculty implementing service learning on any particular campus.

To discipline service learning, though, is to focus it and provide a means by which to foster sustained and consequential change. This is the dual meaning of the term “disciplined.” There is no doubt that women’s studies was disciplined in its institutionalization. It distanced itself from the “street” and from the fervent activism therein; it had to devote attention to bureaucratic maneuverings for funds and faculty rather than for institutional change and transformation; it had to settle for yearly conferences instead of round-the-clock activism. Yet the appropriation of a Foucauldian terminology of “disciplining” more often than not glosses over Foucault’s productive meaning of the term (Butin, 2001, 2002). As Foucault (1997) argued, “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals.’ In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (p. 194). By becoming “disciplined,” women’s studies was able to produce the domains of objects and rituals of truth to be studied and recast. The same can be said for the potential of service learning. As such, I would argue, disciplinary institutionalization is not the negation of politics but the condition of its possibility.

I am aware that “community studies” is a contested term (Vasta 2000) that defies simple categorization, is all too easily essentialized, and that has been used for highly contradictory and political purposes. But so has the term “woman.” It is exactly because of this contestation that an academic community studies program is a viable and necessary solution to the service-learning field, for it allows, in the safety of

disciplinary parameters, scholars to debate and define themselves and their field. This has everything to do with routinization. This is an acknowledgment that knowledge is disciplined by the particularities and specificities of mundane and totalizing structures, policies, and practices. Disciplines and disciplinary knowledges are forged and crafted by (to name but the most obvious) conference papers, journal articles, book series, philanthropic funding, research institutes, job openings, tenure-track faculty lines, *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles, and external reviewers.

There is nothing immediately revolutionary and transformational about such mundane practices; which is, I would argue, exactly what is so revolutionary about such an opportunity.

So Now What?

Elaine Reuben, the national coordinator of the NWSA in the early 1980s—at the height of discussions concerning institutionalization—noted, “We may get lost in our transformation” (quoted in Bowles and Klein, 1983, p.1). Likewise, I acknowledge that service learning may get lost as well. I am not suggesting that community studies programs are the silver bullet to institutionalizing service learning across higher education. They trade in one set of worries for another. What I am suggesting, though, is that this new set of worries may be much less worrisome than the present ones.

As an academic program or department, community studies would have to worry about tenure-track faculty lines and resource allocations vis-à-vis other institutional funding priorities. It would have to worry about developing graduate programs to train a new cadre of academics not beholden to other departments’ norms and preconceptions. It would have to worry about the rigor and quality of its courses. It would have to worry about its value to the communities it works with and for. It would have to worry about how to articulate a cohesive and coherent vision of what it is and should be within higher education and to society at large. It would have to worry about whether it was even possible or worthwhile to articulate such a vision.

These worries, it may be argued, are pedestrian and insignificant compared to what is now being discussed, but I beg to differ. Yes, service learning may be lost in the transformation, but if we are truly free of revolution as the paradigm of transformation, an entire new field of possibilities opens itself up. Service learning may no longer claim that it will change the face of higher education, but women’s studies does not do that either anymore.

Instead, women’s studies scholars carefully and systematically elaborate how feminist perspectives are slowly infiltrating and modifying the ways specific disciplines and sub-disciplines work, think, and act (Stanton and Stewart, 1995). This is not radical and transformational change. This is disciplined change. It is the slow accretion, one arduous and deliberate step at a time, of contesting one world view with another. Some of it is blatantly political. Some of it is deeply technical. Much of it is debatable, questionable, and modifiable, just like any good academic enterprise. It is this which is truly transformational. What I am proposing will take immense time, funding, and talent. The ultimate directions and outcomes are far from clear, but the immediate path is obvious: we should think and act like good community studies scholars.

Namely, we should debate and discuss this proposal in multiple forums and venues and with multiple stakeholders; we should garner funding from our institutions, from federal grants, and from private foundations to develop pilot projects; we should set up an internal working group within Campus Compact to explore the feasibility and action steps necessary to develop this agenda; we should launch a community studies journal; we should start an annual community studies conference; we should question why we are doing this and, once we are doing it, assess what we have accomplished and failed to accomplish; we should look to our colleagues in other disciplines to help us understand what we are doing, what we should be doing, and why what we are doing differs from what they are doing; we should begin to map out what community studies encompasses, what it doesn’t, and why; we should begin to articulate how community studies should function, how it shouldn’t, and why.

Much of this is already being done in different parts of the service-learning movement. What I am thus suggesting, to put it simply, is that we should become disciplined.

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