

Communication as critical inquiry in service-learning.

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Abstract:

Service-learning courses offer the opportunity for students to make sense of the social world by recognizing its political and ethical dimensions through practical engagement in community problems. This paper presents pedagogical resources to inspire students in service-learning courses to experience: 1) dialogue inside and outside the class, 2) critical inquiry into a social issue, and, 3) surprises that invite students to activate civic responsibility. The interplay of dialogue, critical inquiry, and surprises presents the opportunity for students to experience how they can shape and redefine their roles in society, and as importantly, how society can change as a result of their involvement.

Article:

PEDAGOGY FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

Service-learning courses offer the opportunity for students to make sense of the social world in ways that do not rely on the linear logic of textbooks. While texts present valuable information, it is too often done by hiding the political nature of the content rather than highlighting it. Without service-learning, students may acquire a complex knowledge in their academic pursuits, but of the kind unsituated and devoid of meaningful ethical obligation. Books certainly have a central role in the service-learning process, yet students need to extend that learning through engagement with and reflection on the messy character of communal life. It is there, in the vastness of uncertainty and difference, set against the backdrop of our collective concerns, that students experience not the resolution of doubt, but the value of commitment (Loeb, 1999). This kind of learning moves students beyond the acquisition of knowledge as a gateway to power, into the territory of ethics and questions of how we ought to live. To do so recognizes the social inequities that exist in our world and the attending citizen responsibilities to respond. Ultimately, students must ask to what degree are they complicit in the perpetuation of social ills, or in what ways are they poised to confront and act to alleviate pressing, systemic inequities.

Artz (2001) argues that service-learning courses need to do more than charity work. Recognizing charity can attend to urgent community needs, Artz nevertheless argues convincingly that this kind of benevolence can obscure the underlying practices, attitudes, and institutional structures that render charity necessary in the first place. It is through critical engagement that service-learning can affect its higher goal--of yielding meaningful change for the student and the community. In service-learning courses, students recognize and participate in the political underpinnings of our society, as revealed in and expressed through communication.

COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY

Communication and community intersect to be sure, each anchored in the other to define its reality and each simultaneously subject to fluctuation, shifting allegiances, and evolving concerns. Community emerges from communication; that is, it is realized in and through talk (Adelman & Frey, 1997). Likewise, communication

emerges from community and is shaped by the constraints, systems, cultures, and histories that define the social world of which we are a part (Artz, 2001).

Communication is unsettled. Communication is representative, symbolic of shared meaning. And communication is constitutive, creating meaning. For some, communication is best assessed through a demonstration of excellence and efficiency, aiming for goals to achieve and relationships to enhance. For others, communication is better understood as an approach, an encounter that speaks not of effectiveness, but of obligation and care. Communication may be viewed and enacted as planned and strategic. Or, it may be grasped as spontaneous and responsive. More likely, communication is at the nexus of all these concerns. Community is likewise unsettled. Rather than a stable feature of social life, today's communities reflect the difference and difficulties of people with varied backgrounds, preferences, and dreams (Rothenbuhler, 2000). We know this and still many of us yearn for a kind of community we cannot seem to grasp. We want a place where comfort is guaranteed, where our sense of belonging exists without question, where loyalty flows in both directions, and where resources are at our disposal; we want our "dreamed of" community (Bauman, 2001). The paradox of communication and community is that on the one hand, they offer the location and means by which we can interact. On the other, communication and community create the very idea of subjectivity such that interaction can even occur (Angus, 2000).

The view of communities as homogeneous collectives, and the uncomplicated perspective of communication as transmission of ideas elude us, no matter how much we desire that kind of simplicity. Homogeneity and information exchange mark anachronistic underpinnings that have failed to keep pace with a world rapidly changing by social and technological forces. Increasingly, citizens are distancing themselves from traditions that once served to unify diverse interests and people; they are retreating to the enclaves of similarity or assuming positions of radical individualism that run counter to the desire for community (Putnam, 2000; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1996). Goodall poignantly reminds us, "Community is not a term that necessarily evidences much stability, nor much reality, in academic culture" (1999, p. 491). Surely, his rejoinder applies as well to our workplaces, neighborhoods, cities, states, and world as shifting and competing discourses ensure change in the presence of enduring interdependent structures. Goodall tells us that community communicated as an abstract ideal deters engagement. He offers instead a hope for building community by observing the " ... everyday exchanges of words and actions" (Goodall, 1999, p. 487).

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

The growing interest for service-learning in higher education reflects a desire to invest in an effort that promises great returns in a democratic society. Service-learning courses are defined here as ones that attend to three primary criteria: 1) The service rendered by students is in response to a need issued by a community partner; 2) Classroom instruction is provided through readings and discussion of experiences (that is, the service becomes a form of research in which class concepts, theories, and philosophies are examined); and, 3) There is sustained discourse in the class on the overarching theme of civic engagement. This "model of undergraduate education promotes the development of responsible and intelligent citizens" (Stanton, 1990, p. 176). Teachers, students, and community partners benefit from three principal activities to ensure learning within the civic arena is maximized. Dialogue inside and outside the classroom provides the opportunity for students to construct knowledge and meaning of their experiences and readings. Critical inquiry into a social issue presses students to move beyond interpersonal considerations to systemic, institutional practices that contribute to social injustices. Finally, along the way we need to create the possibility for surprises that enable responsibility to emerge for the students, teacher, and community members.

ACTION IN COMMUNICATION

The mission of higher education is to educate students to help solve their community's problems. To do that, students need to learn from the work of others and to engage in social activism themselves. A service-learning course is ideally constructed to integrate these tasks in and through communication. Giroux stipulates student

engagement in the community is a performative practice that ensures democracy (2001). A service-learning activity in the first week or two of the semester moves students into public spaces without delay to set a tone and focus for the course that speaks to the importance of civic engagement. Students then need to reflect and write by applying concepts from service-learning and discipline-specific readings to make explicit their own fears, concerns, and dreams for the coming semester. This includes a frank discussion of their interests, biases, and obstacles to doing service intended to combat the cynicism that typically keeps students' voices silent.

The first service experience affords teachers, students, and community partners a springboard for communication about politics, resources, power, ethics, and collaborative enterprise. By talking about the intersections of knowledge, values, and authority, the conversation necessarily drifts toward the deeper structural conditions of society. What was taken for granted previously is under circumspection for critical learning. We must grant that some of the best learning takes place outside the classroom. Students need opportunities for informal socializing. Speech is constrained, no matter how much we wish it were otherwise in structures where power, hierarchy, and roles exist. One suggestion is to have students meet in small groups outside of class, with food or drink. There, conversation is the linchpin of engagement, facilitated, perhaps even made possible, with the addition of food and drink. The unstructured opportunity for speaking in an atmosphere of sustenance allows the students to get to know each other as community members rather than as "just" students. Oldenburg calls these forums of talk that take place at bars, neighborhood stores, coffee counters, park squares, and university centers, "Great Good Places" (1999). There, he says, people gather informally and conversation naturally follows. In a neutral atmosphere where conversation is the main activity, individual views open themselves up to collective response, debate and challenge.

Students have consistently pointed to these informal socializing experiences as among the most important ways to build community in the class, and by extrapolation, within the larger community where they reside. Casual talk and involvement with others leads to the development of trust that encourages learning in ways perhaps more poignant than what can be achieved in the classroom alone. Without a teacher looming over, students encounter egalitarian conditions where their contributions as active dialogic players are both encouraged and required to keep the conversation moving.

CRITICAL INQUIRY PROBING SOCIAL JUSTICE

With a communicative base, the service-learning course can move to building awareness of the social problems in our community. Students need to engage in their own research on community agencies that have been pre-screened for semester-long projects. Of the many available approaches to introducing students to community partners, one that does double duty as an introduction to the community's vital social concerns is to host a community partner reception. Representatives from community agencies visit the campus to talk to students about their organizations and the attending social issues, both to educate students on community affairs and to entice them into a commitment of continued service at their sites. In these face-to-face meetings, students come to know how the various agencies work on low-income housing, refugee education, teen-parent mentoring, animal rights, downtown revitalization, and homelessness to name but a few of the topical areas. The interactive format of these discussions accomplishes two things. First, the social concern is made real; alarming statistics about the social injustices of our society are translated from abstract data into personal appeals. Questions from the students become processes of engagement with the social issue. Second, the community partners come prepared to tell their stories. They "know the power of stories to move people's hearts, so they weave the richness of personal example into their arguments" (Loeb, 1999, p. 125). The students do research in advance, but the opportunity for critical inquiry really begins during these small group talks.

As students work with their selected community partners, they must continue to research the history, culture, and current condition of the broader social issue within which their service work is situated. Interviewing public officials is one way for students to develop a thorough understanding of how we as a society have constructed and are responding to the social problems we face. Another useful exercise is to have students attend and analyze a city or county meeting where competing public comments demonstrate the pluralistic and conflicted

nature of community. Students realize justice, as the adjudication of competing claims, is not as simple as they may have previously thought. They see social problems involve personal explanations, yes, and systemic conditions, too, that are not so easily reconciled (Daigre, 2000). Readings on critical discourse compel students to move beyond "putting in time" and "commending everyone" at their community site, to asking probing questions. Students benefit by investigating their own roles, considering the questions they did not dare ask and the conversations they did not have, and pressing to identify the resources not discussed at their community sites. Students should be encouraged to confront the breadth and depth of their interactions with the populations their community partners serve. The goal is for students to cite individual and civic lessons learned in the on-going process of building community.

INVITING SURPRISES

To be effective, the service-learning class must be an experience that intensely and sincerely involves the students' thoughtful and deliberate views. After all, the course is designed to ultimately cultivate those public voices. Integral to the learning process is that students exercise their verbal muscle in the classroom to invite, though in no way guarantee, surprises. By way of illustration, consider one of my students who introduced a project to heighten awareness of ovarian cancer prevention. Even though students are encouraged to collaborate with previously screened community agencies, there need to be avenues available to those students to introduce their own projects into the class. This surprises students, that they can initiate movements of social change. The student with the cancer support project rallied the interest of eight students to work with him. During that semester, the group conducted educational programs and raised \$1,500 for cancer research while learning about social capital, dialogue, intercultural communication, ethnography, and representation. A year later, that same group was meeting socially and planning their second annual fundraising event.

Another forum for surprise is in the course design itself. Deadlines for assignments, though important, ought to be subject to revision at the request of the class or individual members. The best-designed plans do not always match the realities of fieldwork. Recognizing this, students need flexibility in assignment due dates and formats to more suitably fit their learning process. Finally, what seems to surprise students (and their teachers) most is to hear of their classmates' enduring commitments. I have found that well over half of each class spends considerably more time at their community site than is required. A community partner recently thanked me for the efforts of 6 students who had spent nearly 60 hours each during the semester, rather than the required 12, working with teen mothers ages 12 to 18 on reading and life skills. Another community representative expressed gratitude for a student's dedication to a refugee family. Through this student's encouragement, weekly contact, and willingness to step beyond her role as a tutor, the mother of the family finally consented to attending English speech classes she had been avoiding for months. What students learn about their own agency and ability to affect change surprises them; frankly, for many, they did not know they could do something important in the community that begins but does not end with the important gesture of communicating concern.

CONCLUSIONS

Service-learning offers a structured means to introduce students to the political dimensions of society and the ethical obligations of its citizens. Service-learning has the potential to inspire meaningful communication, enable critical inquiry to be a natural outcome of course work, and invite surprises that can extend the required course work into desired life commitments. Higher education is serious business to be sure; service-learning significantly adds to the stakes of teaching and learning by making it contingent upon civic engagement. With service-learning, students learn much more than the rhetoric of social involvement; they experience it. They learn, too, that working in the community is not just about doing something you feel good about at the end of the day, but that every step of activism contributes to a broader social endeavor targeted toward alleviating pain and transforming society. Many of us may rush to pat ourselves or our students on the back for the time spent in the community. For students in a service-learning class, however, the pat comes not from time doing service alone, but more importantly, from the realization that community is constructed through communication and storied through our collective experiences. The experience of their own agency, to introduce projects, to affect

change in the community, to negotiate assignments with a teacher, and to redefine their own roles in society, is a surprise that produces more surprises yet beyond the confines of the classroom and into the space of public life.

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