More Reasons to Adopt the Pedagogy of Service Learning

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Abstract
This essay identifies key pedagogical outgrowths of the service-learning experience and
demonstrates how these outgrowths impact positively on the character and the quality of
instruction in the classroom. It argues that service learning, by bringing community partnership
experiences into the classroom, readjusts the power dynamic in the Professor-Student
relationship that empowers students to become co-initiators of the learning process. Further, it
shows how service learning opens up a Community of Inquiry that creates a safe space for
student agency in the learning process.

Introduction
This essay attempts to elucidate the classroom outcomes of service learning. It proceeds against
the backdrop of a conviction that, initiating a critical conversation about the essential features of
the pedagogy of service learning itself, is necessary for drawing out the full implications of
service learning as an effective pedagogical tool. It argues that service learning, more than
adding an experiential element to course design, redefines the instructional process in a
transformative manner that impacts not only on the students and the instructor but also on the
pragmatics of the in-class instructions. To that end, this essay unfolds in three sections: 1)
Background, which contextualizes the essay, 2) Professor-Student Relationship, which
articulates how the pedagogy of service learning unsettles the asymmetrical relationship between
the instructor and students characteristic of the typical classroom, and 3) Community of Inquiry,
which illustrates how service learning that allows students to explore their opinions without the
fear of judgment and reprisal.

Background
Since the 1990s, interest in and commitment to the pedagogy of service learning has been
nothing short of being phenomenal. This pedagogy is dynamic and participatory in nature in that
it enables students to directly connect community service to academic outcomes. It is
enthusiastically adopted in education from K to Higher Education as a way of connecting civic
life with course requirements. Today it is international in scope and is identified by the *American
Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU)* as a "high-impact" teaching practice. In fact,

it is hardly possible to pick up one issue of the *AACU* publication *Liberal Education* without finding in it a call for engaging in the pedagogy of service learning. The research on service learning has been prolific and it continues to grow.

Most of the research on service learning follows one of two tracks. The first track adopts a variable-analytic approach to investigate the connections between service learning experiences and the personal development of student outcomes. This line of research finds positive relationships between participation in service learning and singular variables like self esteem, civic behavior, the development of social responsibility, student retention, (Astin, & Sax,1998; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000), character and social development of students (Ocal & Altinok, 2016), student self-confidence (Boru, 2017), student appreciation of dis/ability (Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015), communication skills, career skills, and personal development (Laursen, Iry, & Liston, 2012). Such findings are borne out in the international setting as well. For example, Kohlbry (2016) found that international service learning positively impacted the development of cultural knowledge, cultural self-efficacy, and cultural skills.

The other track of research focuses on the development and design of service learning courses. This scholarship aims to identify "best practices" in instruction across various disciplines. Here attention is directed toward explaining the formal requisites of service learning. Typical of this work are arguments for relevant and meaningful service to the community, reflection exercises, articulation of civic learning objectives, and appropriate assessment measures (Howard, 2001). Following from this, research elaborates examples of incorporating service learning into disciplinary courses (Grange & Miller, 2018; Straus & Eckenrode 2014; Jenkins & Sheehey, 2011), the role of and need for reflection and journaling exercises (Mills, 2001; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004).

The research on service learning to date is extensive, but it falls short of elucidating the relevant characteristics of the pedagogy of service learning that produce positive learning outcomes, thereby failing to bring us closer to a true understanding of the meaning and effect of service learning. What exactly is it in the architecture of service learning that produces changes in academic and personal outcomes? Why should a Humanities professor incorporate a service learning component into her course? How are in-class behavioral practices altered by the experiential component of the course? What are the specific characteristics of service learning that are responsible for producing the effects it has and how are these effects realized in the process of both teaching and learning? Finally and more specifically, how do these characteristics reshape the dynamic of teaching beyond the context of service learning? While a meta-analysis of research on service learning amply demonstrates positive outcomes for service learning service learning on understanding of social issues, personal insight, and cognitive development (Yorio & Ye, 2012), it does not bring the field any closer to understanding the path from service learning to such outcomes. Even an anthology such as *Deconstructing Service Learning* (Billig & Eyler, 2003) brings us no closer to elucidating an answer to the above questions. There is clear need, as remarked earlier, to take stock of the welcome effects service learning has had and continues to have on the pragmatics of teachers-student interaction in the classroom.

Professor-Student Relationship

It is common to turn to learning theory for advice on how best to approach teaching and learning. In this regard, we see a strong influence on instructional practices from learning theorists like Ausubel (1963), and Gagne (1985). Because of this influence, the literature on learning tends to place an emphasis on development of cognitive capacity and learning skills, structure of the learning environment, instructional planning, setting of learning objectives, use of advance organizers, expository organizers, comparative organizers, development of assignments, and measurement or evaluation of student progress, and the like. This emphasis on the individual's general cognitive capacities reflects a commonly held belief that teaching is primarily an instructor-centered affair and learning is thought to begin and end with the instructor who initiates the process of learning in a loop we call "instruction." Under this view, instructors design the class; they come to the class with expertise, relevant experiences, and a desire to impart all of these to their students. In this way, students are rendered passive; they become receivers of prepackaged knowledge, rather than active agents in the learning process. As a result, instruction becomes an essentially asymmetrical affair, a process of interaction weighted on the instructor's directive, reflecting what Paulo Freire (1970) referres to as the "banking" model of instruction.

In the context of service learning, the conventional one-way flow of expertise, the uneven distribution of responsibility, the more or less rigid dynamic of exchange between teacher and students, and the like, begin to unravel. This creates a space for student-agency and active participation in the learning process, producing an outcome rarely achieved or achievable through the conventional mode of instruction. Service learning proves to be effective because it facilitates learning by changing the power dynamic in the classroom whereby students are no longer passive receivers of prepackaged information but empowered partners in the learning process. In fact, as a direct consequence of the experiential component of the course, students become co-initiators of the learning process, placing themselves at both the beginning and end of a journey that is as open as it is progressive and enriching. It is this empowering placement that critically accounts for the success of service learning as a pedagogical tool across a wide range of topics or subject matters.

Reflective of the constructivist learning principles (Jonassen,1999), service learning courses enable students to enter into a relationship with the instructor, whereby both parties learn together as equal partners. This relationship breaks open the person-centered process that, as I just noted, empowers the learner as an agent of self-determination and growth. More than that, the partnership characteristic of service learning opens possibilities for development that extends beyond those based on personal interests. By bringing community partnerships into the classroom, and vice versa, students are inspired to become partners with the instructor in the learning process, thus bringing about an opportunity of learning where students and instructor contribute equally toward matters of interest, meaning, and significance to all.

Community of Inquiry

In the service learning class, it is customary to set aside specific periods of time for "reflection" on the service experience. When students are engaged in reflection, they are bearing witness to their own experiences and become co-experts with the instructor in a pedagogical setting. This allows service learning to return to its foundation and encourages its continued possibility. For it

creates a space for learning that, dialogic in nature, allows for the open exchange of opinion in a non-judgmental manner, thus leading to a better understanding of the connection between the course content and the students' experience of the real world. As Lipman & Sharp (1985, 1) argue, true learning

> is seldom a solitary matter. It is generally pursued by groups of individuals with similar objectives, individuals who share information with one another, respect each other's views and opinions, offer reasons for their views, willingly consider alternatives and attempts to construct together a reasonable understanding of the ways in which human beings could be said to live well. If/then such a group reflects in a self-corrective manner upon ethical issues, it can be called a community of inquiry.

Such a "community of inquiry" unsettles the rigid self/other dichotomy and facilitates a social and moral awakening. It promotes the development of values usually foreclosed by traditional modes of instruction. This explains in good measure why students report that service learning is a transformative experience: one that they seek to repeat throughout the course of their college careers, even when it is not required of them to do so.

Conclusion

Freire (1998) argues cogently that teaching must be grounded in recognition of the powerful connection between theory and practice and the belief that "to teach is not to *transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge." We can find the confirmation of his ideas in Piaget when he states:

> The principal goal of education is to create men [sic] who are capable of doing new things, not simply of repeating what other generations have done-men [sic] who are creative, inventive, and discoverers. The second goal of education is to form minds which can be critical, can verify, and not accept everything they are offered...So we need pupils who are active, who learn early to find out by themselves, partly their own spontaneous activity and partly through material we se up for them; who learn early to tell what is verifiable and what is simply the first idea to come to them. (1973, p. 36)

To be sure, high impact practices like service learning have made great strides in that direction, but they can be made even more meaningful and relevant if and when we look beyond their already known characteristics and proceed to experimenting with more flexible, student-centered approaches. Participating in discussion and exchanging ideas about service learning is essential to understanding the unique contributions that the pedagogy of service learning makes in the classroom. It is with this in mind that I offer my reflections.

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