

Talking About Service-Learning: Product or Process? Reciprocity or Solidarity?

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Abstract

Through an exploration of values of the neoliberal university and critical service-learning, this article explores how associating service-learning with products and relationships based on reciprocity negatively impacts its connection to social justice. By emphasizing the constructs of process and solidarity, instead of products and reciprocity, the understanding of service-learning is more explicitly aligned with social justice outcomes.

Keywords: service-learning, reciprocity, solidarity, neoliberalism

Introduction

Over the last decade in which I have taught service-learning (SL) courses I have seen a shift in perceptions about service that has pushed me to question how I talk about SL with my students. Many students now arrive at the university ready to critique SL for perpetuating a charity model that does not create structural change in society and is distanced from social justice. The formation of ideas and values associated with service-learning is not happening in a vacuum. Students are forming their understanding of service from information received from many sources in society and within academia. In this essay I examine the narratives circulating within the neoliberal university to show the negative impact of associating SL with products. In addition, I address the lack of development of social justice objectives in traditional SL (in comparison with the critical service-learning model) by questioning the practice of reciprocity. This article is an exploration of the need to disrupt the association of service-learning with products and reciprocity, and it proposes a shift to talking about service-learning through the concepts of process and solidarity.

The Neoliberal Context: Emphasis on Product

There are many ways to define neoliberalism, but this discussion is based on Slaughter & Rhoades's (2000) definition of the neoliberal university as one that practices academic capitalism in which students are viewed as raw materials that are transformed into products for the corporate world, an environment in which we see the ascendancy of market values within higher education

and civic engagement. Market-based economy has expanded to market-based societies in which exist the “privatization of the public sphere, the imposition of market principles in all aspects of social life, and a general suspicion of social and political welfare-regulatory programs originating from the state” (Kliwer, 2013, p. 72). Raddon and Harrison (2015) state that

[t]o be a neoliberal citizen is to valorize individualism; to self-identify as a consumer; to naturalize and accept the discipline of competitive markets and their sorting of “winners” and “losers”; to shift away from an earlier generation’s conception of the citizen as a rights bearer; and to take up responsibilities for socially determined eventualities such as unemployment or ill health, which are now attributed to the bad choices of individuals. Furthermore, neo-liberal subjects are driven to emulate business entities by becoming more personally innovative, entrepreneurial, and efficient even in areas of life where markets do not operate. (p. 138)

The neoliberal context has a devastating effect on students since it “legitimizes and reinforces the pursuit of economic self-interest . . . career skills and credentials” (Benson, Harkavy, & Hartley, 2005, p. 198). We see that the university monetizes student volunteer hours and uses them as a measure of impact, rather than measuring actual impact in the community (Mitchell, 2014; Stoecker & Beckman, 2009). As a result, many SL scholars are concerned that “service-learning experiences reinforce the values and perspectives of neoliberal culture by emphasizing personal over collective agency and treating public life and democracy as extensions of the marketplace” (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015, p. 19). Benson, Harkavy, and Hartley (2005) underscore the dangers of the neoliberal university for SL by declaring that a “clear and present danger to the democratic mission of higher education and to American democracy in general also comes from the forces of commodification (education for profit, students as customers, syllabi as content, academics as superstars)” (p. 196). These trends to prioritize skills, credentials, products, and personal agency call into question the motivations, expectations, and practices by students in SL that are tied to social justice.

Kliwer (2013) questions how students educated within the neoliberal university embrace justice aims. He proposes that:

First, if neoliberalism is not recognized and accounted for, it will continue to maintain and reproduce the existing ideological structures that preclude achieving the democratic and justice goals of the civic engagement movement—unjust levels of inequality, disengagement, and disempowerment. Second, if the civic engagement community cannot adequately respond to neoliberal ideology, we risk producing a type of citizen completely defined in relation to a market society, thereby precluding a robust form of democratic engagement in which citizens organize, cooperate, and act outside the bounds of market and economic activity. (p. 73)

One effect of neoliberalism in the university is that academia tries to remain politically neutral and distanced from social justice. In the neoliberal paradigm, civic engagement “should be minimally political or even apolitical—for if politics is redefined in market terms as social positioning for private advantage, then service to others and politics do not mix” (Meens, 2014, p. 47). Meens (2014) declares that “[r]ecognition of the neoliberal redefinition of citizenship and civic engagement is necessary if the problem is to be confronted and addressed and if the interrelated nature of democracy and justice goals is to be recovered” (p. 48). By remaining apolitical, the student does not embrace one of the fundamental goals of service-learning—to enact social change (Mitchell, 2008). Robinson (2000) states, “Practitioners are exceedingly nervous about service-learning curriculums that entail political challenge to the established order, or involve students in taking political sides and creating transformational movement” (p. 144). He warns that SL

must neglect calls to moderate and thereby accommodate the movement to a broader range of funders and university supporters. Rather, our charge is to grasp what power we can, claim the mantle of the university as the spark and engine of social progress, powerfully advance our political and moral principles, and use this opportunity to educate students on both the possibilities and the strategies of participatory politics. (p. 155)

Mitchell (2008) identifies “social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships” (p. 62) as common elements to distinguish critical service-learning

from traditional service-learning. Mitchell (2008) declares that critical service-learning is the “next direction of service-learning programs” (p. 62). In contrast to critical service-learning that promotes community-oriented social justice practices, the traditional SL model can reinforce neoliberal values of “personal over collective agency and treating public life and democracy as extensions of the marketplace” (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015, p. 19). Aligning service-learning with social justice takes conscious planning but can lead to students examining their political agency and their justice-oriented commitments (Mitchell & Coll, 2017).

This disassociation with social justice outcomes is seen in the current dominant model of SL, the technical model (Butin, 2007). Within the four models of SL defined by Butin (2005)—technical, cultural, political, and antifoundational—the technical one does not develop analysis of social problems, but emphasizes deepening of content knowledge for the course. Consequently, “the technical conceptualization is highly palatable to university administrators because it promotes a type of hyper-pragmatism that avoids power issues and can attract a range of sponsors” (Cuban & Anderson, 2008, p. 45). The concentration in the technical design “shift[s] the focus from addressing the systemic problems of society to developing specific skill sets or volunteer proclivities in a service context” (Dostilio et al., 2012, p. 28). We will look more closely at how Mitchell (2008) more broadly articulates the distancing of traditional SL from justice issues; for now, it is important to underscore that she agrees that traditional SL is skewed toward professional skill development. Mitchell states that

[t]raditional interpretations of service-learning tend to emphasize students, focusing on “preprofessional” experiences (viewing service much like an internship or practicum), and the personal or social development of students (mostly attitudes toward leadership, altruism, and sometimes thoughts or feelings about the people served in the community). (p. 52)

Within the neoliberal university, the technical, skill-centered service-learning model positions the experience as a resume builder and a vehicle through which we train students for the professional world. Service-learning is perceived as a “product” that is a building block for career advancement and does not focus on social justice.

Another way that SL functions as a product in the neoliberal university is as a corporate brand, the “kinder face” of the univer-

sity that creates a positive public image by showing “the relevance of the university to community needs” (*Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 142*). The application of SL as a public relations tool means that there is a “strategic use of service-learning for elevating institutional reputations and revenues, and for fundraising” (*Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 142*). Moore (2014) proposes reframing engagement “not as a desired product, but as the necessary process through which the community and university interact to strengthen communities at the local and regional level” (p. 4), reflecting a commitment to two-way knowledge flow (p. 10). He states that “[u]niversity leaders must come to understand that the current approach to engagement as outcome has made firm boundaries between universities and communities unworkable, thereby threatening the university’s ability to achieve its desired goals” (p. 10). The call to prioritize the process rather than the product is fundamental to the future of SL. We need to engage with the community not for public relations, but for outcomes related to changemaking and relationship building. According to Moore (2014), the university typically positions “community as a place to advance university objectives” rather than sharing how community developers see “the process of interacting equally as important as the outcome of the interactions” (p. 11). How we engage with the community is a defining aspect of SL, and students need to see models of authentic relationships that support systemic change rather than prioritizing counting hours and producing deliverables as measures of their level of engagement.

The final way that we will discuss how community engagement is manifesting itself in higher education in this era of neoliberalism is the growing popularity of social entrepreneurship (SE). Within the neoliberal paradigm “[t]he responsibilities of the state for public services are transferred onto individuals, while the ‘entrepreneurship of the self’ broadens to encompass social entrepreneurship, the expectation that individuals and businesses will innovate to solve social problems” (*Raddon & Harrison, 2015, p. 139*). The rise in popularity of SE within community engagement offerings on campuses emphasizes the need to reassess how SL is defined and perceived so that SL remains a robust arm of civic engagement in academia. Students talk about SL and SE in different ways. Scobey (2015) proposes that students associate different values with SL and SE. SL is associated with partnerships that identify needs, relationships, cocreation with community, ethics of collaboration, apprenticeship in institutional partnership, and humility, whereas SE is associated with a world with problems to be solved, projects, clients, hero for community, innovation, and hutzpah. The changing

values of each generation impact the interpretation of practices, but it is important to consider why SE is emerging as a more innovative framework for changemaking and work to align SL more explicitly with problem-solving and social transformation. Raddon and Harrison (2015) remind us that

[a]ny given service-learning program could perform contradictory roles within an institution: a program could be co-opted as a form of community–university outreach, while at the same time introducing students to perspectives that challenge the market creed and simultaneously equipping them to be socially enterprising, self-commodifying neo-liberal citizens. (p. 145)

It is up to the practitioner to consider the representation of SL in the course design, the type of measurement used to identify engagement, and the narrative about SL to determine whether they are perpetuating or disrupting the neoliberal paradigm.

Should We Talk About Reciprocity or Solidarity?

Reciprocity is a frequently articulated key component to SL, but has it become code for an exchange of goods and services that reinforces unequal practices? In conversation about a service-learning student's work, a local volunteer coordinator expressed concern about how the student organized her interactions with a refugee family based on the student's need to interview them for her course's final project. The nonprofit organization had invited the student to build a supportive relationship with the family as they transitioned into U.S. life, yet the student fixated on the desired product to be developed through her service, not the relationship. Have the student and the family engaged in a reciprocal relationship? Knowing that the neoliberal construct promotes commodification and the push to think about service as product, it is important to consider ways of talking about SL relationships other than reciprocity.

Stoecker and Beckman (2009) suggest shifting from a service model of individual serving individual to a more collective effort grounded in a community development approach that is “fundamentally about relationships” (p. 4). They stress that “[q]uestions are always better than answers at relationship-building” (p. 5) and that academics need to build their listening skills in order to form long-term, community-driven partnerships. Finding a balance of being open to dialogue, participating in active listening,

and planning for a semester course is difficult. If faculty want to get more buy-in from students in SL, then they need to prioritize establishing, maintaining, and growing relationships in the community. Reciprocity based on a product-centered relationship creates a negative cycle of service. Instead of an environment in which deliverables and checklists of outcomes define success, how can reciprocity be connected to the process of building a relationship with the community?

In order to clearly define relationship building as the backbone of SL, is it possible to put more emphasis on solidarity instead of reciprocity? Solidarity has been defined as “unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives, and standards” (*Solidarity, n.d.*). Although it is not a new concept to SL, solidarity is not regularly present within definitions or practices. Mitchell (2008) expounds on the importance of solidarity in critical service-learning:

Expressions of solidarity represent a dimension of authenticity because they demonstrate that we will continue to work for social change and social justice once the service-learning experience has concluded. It is the recognition that the social problems and structural inequities that create and maintain those problems belong to all of us and require all of us for change to occur. (pp. 61–62)

Heldman (2011) discusses differences in service work oriented to charity versus solidarity that highlight issues of power and privilege, stating that “with charity work, volunteers conceive of themselves as being above the person or group they are assisting” (p. 36). Students “see their assistance as one-sided instead of recognizing the benefits they receive in the exchange (e.g. feeling good about themselves, learning from the people they are assisting, living a more meaningful life)” (p. 36). Heldman suggests a reorientation to solidarity work, in which

volunteers (a) see themselves as equal to the people they are assisting, (b) are able to see how privilege shapes their place in the social/economic hierarchy, (c) see a part of themselves in the person they are working with, (d) recognize they are working for the betterment of both parties, and (e) understand they are working for their own liberation from systems of supremacy that

they unconsciously uphold through their everyday actions. (p. 36)

Another critic of SL, Renner (2011), echoes the practice of orienting SL with solidarity. He calls for us

to create a new world premised upon justice, democracy, and liberation. Service-learning can be an educational tool to further these ends provided we are prepared to transcend the disciplinary boundaries, move from a language and philosophy of projects to partnerships, and are ready to leverage our relative privilege in order to live lives of solidarity—that is, humbling our individual selves for a more communal experience and recognizing that intimacy of giving our lives, our work, to others. (pp. 110–111)

This type of deconstruction of hierarchies is mirrored in Tapia's (2012) exploration of the community as "co-protagonist" within *servicio solidario* (service in solidarity), the form of SL that Tapia identifies in Latin America. Tapia (2012) states that solidarity is defined by "actions [that] are developed *in conjunction with* the community and not *for* it" (p. 193; *italics in original*) and that solidarity is "social engagement linked in with transforming a situation and the quest for a fair and equitable society" (p. 197). This integration into the community with the democratization of partnerships demands that we change our orientation from thinking of service as product to perceiving service through processes or relationships.

Looking at how reciprocity and solidarity have been discussed in SL previously provides us with insights about new directions for future conversations. Jacoby and Associates (1996) identified SL within a "philosophy of reciprocity, which implies a concerted effort to move from charity to justice, from service to the elimination of need" (p. 9). Here we see generativity-oriented reciprocity supporting the goals for transformation of society. Dostilio et al. (2012) established a framework for categorizing the different ways *reciprocity* is referenced in civic engagement literature. They identified three different orientations toward reciprocity: exchange, influence, and generativity. Exchange-oriented reciprocity "does not invite knowledge of the others with whom one interacts and thus may allow anonymity when such is not desired" due to the emphasis on outcomes for stakeholders (p. 27). The influence orientation requires that "one must take the personal and interpersonal

risks associated with trying to understand difference and allowing it to meaningfully influence the process, interactions, outcomes, and meaning-making of the collaboration” (p. 27). This process can take considerable time and weaken the possible outcomes. Finally, the generativity-oriented conception of reciprocity prizes cocreation of knowledge and the ideal of mutual transformation. Davis, Kliwer, and Nicolaides (2017) state that “[m]utual sharing of power that produces generative reciprocity enables all stakeholders to join together synergistically to build capacities and produce outcomes that none could otherwise produce separately” (p. 50). Similar to how generative reciprocity highlights the cocreation process of SL, transformative reciprocity (Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2010; Stanlick & Sell, 2016) is defined by cocreation. Only when reciprocity is defined beyond the exchange of product and identified as a transformative process can it affect the best practices of SL and produce an impact like that of solidarity.

Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk

In general, students who have become habituated to the traditional or transactional SL model will resist changing from checklists of expectations and practicing reciprocity based on products. Within the neoliberal model students “make a difference” through concrete deliverables and predetermined quantities of service hours. Destabilizing the traditional SL model by making more room for relationship building will be challenging, but it will move us closer to the ideals set forth in critical SL to foment our connections to social justice—and to reaffirm our collaboration *with*, not *for*, the community.

Ensuring that this topic is included in the student orientations for service in the community, as well as in reflection activities, is essential to students’ understanding of service-learning. In addition to creating opportunities for students to examine their practices and beliefs, it is imperative that faculty reassess how students and community partners are involved in the process of building relationships. Faculty should consider how the design of the SL experience may impact student perceptions. For example, if faculty preplan the logistics of a SL experience with the community partner, the students will have more difficulty seeing themselves as central to the service-learning relationship. If the students do not participate in any decision-making with the community partner and do not feel ownership of their work in the community, they may perceive the experience as simply completing service hours, rather than building a relationship. With more collaboration

between students and community partners in the development of the relationship, the students can identify more with the concept of solidarity since they will be more integrated into the process, rather than anticipating prenegotiated benchmarks of their work. It would be helpful for students and community partners to also participate in the design of assessments for the service-related components of the curriculum since the measurement of engagement should be as transparent, representative, and reflective as possible.

A blockade to transforming transactional SL models is the semester model. Because of the limit of time for interactions with the community, it may be difficult to sustain the relationship building that is intrinsic to solidarity. Creating long-term placements by sequencing courses or having students commit to service past the one enrolled semester could offer enhanced opportunities for students to understand their work in solidarity with the community. Engagement in the process of relationship building could also be enhanced if students who have been involved with a community explain their relationship to newly involved students. The student–community relationship might also be extended by enabling students who have completed the course to work in future course iterations as assistants or TAs. The bottom line is to encourage students to embrace solidarity as a way to reorient negative practices of reciprocity.

To be more deliberate with connections to social justice, and to better support transformative learning, faculty need to reconsider the role of politics in the classroom. The conflation of non-partisan with nonpolitical is reinforcing the traditional SL model and contributing to the depoliticization of citizenship. How we embrace the fact that education is a political undertaking is key to the future of SL. Giroux (2012) provides a clear explanation of the differences between politicizing pedagogy and political pedagogy. The first “insists wrongly that students think as we do,” whereas the second “teaches students by example and through dialogue about the importance of power, social responsibility and the importance of taking a stand (without standing still) while rigorously engaging the full range of ideas about an issue” (Giroux, 2012, para. 19). Teaching SL as a political pedagogy will support social change and structural transformation.

SL practitioners need to talk about reciprocity, solidarity, product, and process in order to close the distance between traditional SL and critical SL. This conversation must articulate the values that align with ethical and authentic relationships that build capacity for changemaking and open dialogue about social justice.

A new direction in the discussion about SL must be advanced since “the dilution and radicalization within both service-learning and social justice education, as contradictory pressures, have created an empty center that cannot be filled except by a reframing of how we talk about both” (Butin, 2008, p. 78). Faculty have the chance to discuss these issues with students and thus to challenge students to be open to the process of building relationships in solidarity with the community and to work toward social justice. Talking about process rather than product, and solidarity instead of reciprocity, will change the narrative about service-learning and build better relationships that lead to personal and community transformation.

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