Political, Not Partisan: Service-Learning as Social Justice Education

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By engaging in purposefully designed community work, we can involve students in conversations about social justice and their roles as community members. Service-learning is an engaged pedagogy that encourages students to explore social justice in depth. Social justice work, as well as service-learning, can often encourage students to become involved politically in issues they encounter. Given the Millennial Generation's distaste for polarized political debates and the potential for overly political discussion to silence students, how can service-learning programs continue to support students' social justice education and political engagement while avoiding partisanship? This article introduces the concept of justice-based service-learning (JBSL) and explores service-learning as social justice education, including the philosophical foundations of socially just service-learning and the intersections of politics, social justice, and service. The author proposes six principles for creating political—not partisan—socially just service-learning.

Social justice educators are familiar with the criticisms that we are too politically liberal, too concerned with political correctness, and even that we are "indoctrinating" students into becoming politically liberal activists. One criticism is that "critical educators typically enter the classroom with preformed political objectives. Their goal is not to bring out students' independent thoughts… but to alter students' ways of thinking to conform with a preconceived notion of what constitutes critical thought" (Freedman, 2007, p. 444).

The same criticisms are often leveled at service-learning educators. This article is a response to those criticisms, intended to spark dialogue among social justice and service-learning professionals about how we can be effective educators. Our goal is to give students the capability to be engaged, thoughtful, and purposeful community members who think critically about issues in the community rather

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than parroting politically correct responses. In short, both social justice and service-learning professionals are seeking to promote settings where "individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities), and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others)" (Bell, 1997, p. 3).

In this article I will explore how service-learning as a method of social justice education can be a liberal process, in the tradition of liberal education, without having politically liberal conclusions. We will briefly explore the foundations of service-learning, the idea of charity in service-learning, a new paradigm of justice-based service-learning, and the intersections of service and politics. Taking into consideration recent findings of the Millennial Generation's perspective on political engagement, we will close with six principles for political but not partisan service programs. To begin, let us explore some key terms.

Terminology

There are many terms to describe work promoting the civic mission of higher education, ranging from service-learning to public scholarship. Within the field, there are ongoing discussions about which terms are best for these engaged pedagogies. Jacoby (1996) offered the following definition of service-learning: "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (p. 5). For the purposes of this article, service-learning is inclusive of both academic credit-bearing and co-curricular service opportunities that aim to promote student learning and development while meeting community needs (as defined by members of that community).

As a pedagogy, service-learning developed from the work of John Dewey and this foundation provides a useful framework as we begin our examination of politics, social justice and service-learning. As part of the progressive education movement, the work of John Dewey highlighted the connections between practical experience and education. Dewey's works *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) provided the foundations for modern service-learning and other experiential education pedagogies. Dewey's concept of democracy in education entails challenging students to balance their own needs with the needs of others in the community. As Rhoads (1998) elaborated, "democracy seen in this light demands that individuals understand the lives and experiences of a society" (p. 281).

As Jacoby and Brown (2009) explained, service-learning (particularly in a global context) can "enable students to develop the very qualities to which liberal education aspires: understanding of our complex and interconnected world, reflection

and critical thinking, problem solving, communication, tolerance for ambiguity, appreciation of diversity, and respect for the views of others" (p. 225). Further, service-learning as a particular mode of civic engagement can promote ethical development. Hollister, Wilson, and Levine (2008) explained: "engaged students are more likely to think about other people's needs and interests, about the communities in which they are studying, and about the obligations that come with their privileges" (p. 18). The idea of privilege—although we have not always used this term—has played a prominent role in service and service-learning programs in the past, as we will explore.

From Charity to Justice

Some campus service-learning efforts have evolved from a charity, or philanthropic model. As Battistoni (1997) explained, the philanthropic ethic of service emphasizes character building as well as a "kind of compensatory justice where the well-off feel obligated to help the less advantaged, though they do not conceive of those served as being part of their own communities" (p. 151). An example of a service project informed by this charity ethic is a canned food drive. Often, such projects are single or annual events and include little contact between volunteers or donors and the recipients of service. Battistoni referred to this kind of service as reflective of a "noblesse oblige of people lucky enough to be where they are" (p. 151); other authors related this to a missionary mentality or "white horse syndrome," the idea that the privileged volunteer can sweep in and fix whatever social problem they are confronting in a short period of time.

Break Away, a national organization that supports alternative break programs, has promoted a model of service named "Triangle of Quality Community Service." It includes three essential components for service-learning programs: strong direct service, education, and reflection (Break Away: the Alternative Break Connection, Inc., 2009). This composition is consistent with the Freireian model of service-learning preferred by many service programs. Freire (2007) encouraged educators to avoid false charity that can reinforce oppression, such as the missionary mentality as described above. "True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals [such as the clients of service programs] or entire peoples—need to be less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world" (p. 45). This sentiment characterizes one of the realizations that some service-learning practitioners seek to encourage in student volunteers: the purpose of service should be to eliminate the need for it. This idea at heart is a political one, because students often examine social structures and economic systems from a more complex perspective. This reexamination often arises from exposure to the stories of people who have been marginalized, and the new perspective may lead some to adopt new beliefs. However, the solutions to the social problems

addressed by service-learning are not necessarily prescribed, and these will be examined later in this article.

Justice-Based Service-Learning

I would like to introduce a new term here to fully encompass the social justice aspects of service-learning: justice-based service-learning (JBSL). I created this term to distinguish JBSL from service and service-learning efforts that do not include an intentional social justice component. JBSL provides students with the opportunity to examine their privilege and to put it to work to create social change. JBSL incorporates reflection at all stages of an experience, especially through activities and assignments that promote critical thinking about social issues and one's own place in the world, and in the creation and maintenance of those social problems (privilege). JBSL also incorporates comprehensive, multi-disciplinary, issue-based education that places the service experience in a social, economic, historical, and geopolitical context. Whenever possible, this education includes members of the community as co-educators to fully incorporate their lived experiences. Of course, JBSL also includes a strong direct service experience that fills a community-defined need and involves direct, meaningful interactions with community members. The written and/or verbal critical reflection incorporated in the experience allows students to construct new understandings of the world, to truly connect theory and practice.

One challenge of social justice education that JBSL can address is that many students have not had opportunities to interact with diversity. When effectively facilitated, JBSL provides structured, purposeful, and thoughtfully designed opportunities in which participants can meet and truly begin to interact with and get to know people who have had different life experiences. For example, I advised a service trip to an urban area in the Northeast. Most of the students were White, first-generation, had limited travel experiences, and were from rural areas of Northern New England. One of our service sites, and the one that some students described as most meaningful, was a men's "wet" homeless shelter, which will allow people to come in if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The residents were primarily people of color, and our service "job" was simply to be with the residents: to play cards, share a cigarette if you chose to, and to hear stories.

This was the first time many students had a substantive conversation with a person experiencing homelessness. From our reflective conversations later I gathered that this was a powerful encounter for the students for many reasons. From an educational standpoint it gave them a richer, deeper and perhaps more accurate view of the social problems of poverty and all its interrelations with oppression, including racism. If we asked every student to give a definition of

homelessness, I'm sure each would give a different response: their understandings were shaped by their experiences, our discussions, and their own individual backgrounds. If we had prescribed a definition and a solution, and students had not had the opportunity to interact in this way, students' responses to our question would all be the same—and they would not understand it in the same way. Powerful encounters such as this one give students an added perspective when evaluating proposed policy solutions and political candidates, and in some cases can lead them to question or solidify already-established political identities.

Politics and Service

Civic engagement efforts are sometimes seen as overly political, particularly those initiatives that are informed by a Freireian rather than philanthropic ethic. Battistoni (2002) explained faculty reactions to civic engagement efforts: "faculty on the left complain that citizenship education tends to convey images of patriotic flag-waving. More conservative faculty see civic engagement as masking a leftist, activist agenda" (p. 10). At times, the politicization of an academic setting—whether in the classroom or not—can have a silencing effect on students. In their book *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus*, Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (2008) described a political discussion forum that devolved into partisan extremist arguments, frustrating organizers' hopes for dialogue: "it wasn't long before argument replaced discussion, and insult replaced argument" (p. 179). What Nash et al. longed for was a free exchange of ideas, the kind of conversation that leads to innovative solutions to complex social problems in an academic setting. When discussions become overly political or polarized, even the most well-intentioned efforts are stymied.

Part of the civic mission of higher education is to produce graduates who are prepared to tackle the complex social and environmental problems facing our world in an increasingly globalized society. As Jacoby and Brown (2009) explained, "higher education is confronted with the challenge of educating global citizens who can engage with one another to address [global challenges]" (p. 213). Creative and critical thinking, in addition to the capacity for dialogue, is crucial to this preparation of engaged citizens. Michael Bérubé, a professor of literature at Pennsylvania State University, in his 2006 book *What's Liberal About the Liberal Arts?* expressed this goal in a wish:

> [T]hat our graduates emerged from our institutions even more cosmopolitan, less parochial, more willing to consider themselves citizens of (and responsible to) the world, more prepared for the moral and intellectual consequences of globalization; I wish our graduates were more fluent writers and more nimble thinkers; I wish more of them majored in the liberal arts, and that more of my fellow citizens appreciated the strength of liberalism, the

power of the arts, and the appeal of liberal arts. (p. 281)

In this call for more cosmopolitan graduates, Bérubé was not simply decrying the lack of political liberalism in graduates, but rather the kinds of critical thinking and reasoning promoted by the study of liberal arts. As he explained, higher education is dominated by the kind of liberals who are "liberal intellectuals … committed to both substantive and procedural liberalism, to a form of pluralism and reasoned debate that does not always culminate in liberal *conclusions* [original emphasis]" (p. 24). While it can be argued that justice-based service-learning is a liberal procedure, the solutions it promotes do not need to be politically liberal. By adding an experiential component to explorations of social problems, JBSL provides additional complexity and depth to the search for solutions.

JBSL does not need to be prescriptive— such as a facilitator saying, "as we saw in our service experience, *x* is the problem and *y* is the solution"—and indeed it should not be. In order to best honor diverse perspectives and the wide variety of lived experiences present in the students and community members, we need to let new solutions and understandings come from the group. As we join and learn from new groups, our understandings of social justice issues and our places in them will evolve. As Paulo Freire (1990) said, "one of the best ways for us to work as human beings is not only to know that we are uncompleted beings but to *assume* the uncompleteness" (as cited in Horton & Freire, p. 11). This assumption of "uncompleteness" is especially important in discussion and reflection activities.

Politics and the Millennial Generation

In 2006 and 2007 the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) conducted a study of Millennials' viewpoints on political engagement, including 47 focus groups at 12 colleges and universities across the United States. For the purposes of the CIRCLE study, the Millennial Generation included people born after 1985. The resulting report, "Millennials Talk Politics," offers practitioners several insights. First, Millennials are more involved than Generation X, but express ambivalence with politics. In particular, Millennials dislike the polarization of public issues in the media and desire opportunities for authentic conversations instead. Students in the study also expressed a greater involvement in local issues and service than with politics: "the Millennials appear to be much more comfortable and experienced with direct service than with politics, yet their feelings toward government, politicians and the media are complex. They do not want to write off politics, despite their many criticisms; instead, they seek ways to engage politically" (Kiesa, Orlowski, Levine, Both, Kirby, Lopez, & Marcelo, 2007, p. 4). Additionally, students do not see the political system as accessible to them (Lopez & Kiesa, 2009). If students do not

believe traditional modes of civic engagement, such as voting or lobbying, are accessible to them, they may seek other forms of involvement in community problem-solving or may "drop out" of community involvement altogether.

Millennial Generation students are more politically and civically aware than previous generations, with almost 34% of first-year students in 2006 reporting discussing politics frequently during their senior year of high school and over 83% of incoming students in 2005 having volunteered at least occasionally during their senior year (Hunter & Moody, 2009). This increase in awareness and interest in civic engagement requires practitioners to be prepared to support deeper engagement and civic learning. As high schools begin to offer service-learning opportunities (especially as part of a graduation requirement), higher education's civic engagement opportunities should build upon students' civic knowledge and experiences.

When combined with Millennials' experiences with politics this may provide unique challenges; as Jacoby and Hollander (2009) explained, Millennials "are angry with adults' apparent inaction on mounting social problems and with what they perceive as adults' labeling them as self-absorbed and apathetic. They are usually not drawn to 1960s-style protests, yet they are uncertain about how to respond to the problems they see around them" (p. 232). Practitioners should be ready to offer opportunities for deeper involvement with political discussion and reflection surrounding community experiences.

Suggestions for Political, not Partisan, Service-Learning Programs

Balancing the political nature of JBSL programs while avoiding disengagement from Millennial Generation students uninterested in the extremes of political rhetoric can be challenging. While JBSL should promote exploration of the public issues that necessitate service as well as possible public policy solutions (and could even encourage students to become involved in advocacy efforts), these policy solutions should not be predetermined. Rather, students should have the opportunity to produce these suggestions with the community through the intersections of practical service experience, observation, educational exploration of root causes, and reflection that encourages critical thinking and the synthesis of knowledge from multiple sources. The following are principles for encouraging thoughtful, substantive exploration of public issues through political (not partisan) justice-based service-learning.

Principle One: Introduce Students to Local Context and Highlight Public Policy Issues

Give students a thorough introduction to the local context and public policy issues that contribute to the situation they observe. The scope and duration of

the service project may determine how thoroughly you are able to do this; for a single-day project, having the organization's staff give a tour and brief history provides context for student volunteers. A longer-term project, such as a semester-long service-learning course or multi-year service internship program, allows practitioners to provide more depth. Staff can provide students with information about the history and evolution of the community and statistics about the health of the community. Inviting local organization staff, advocacy organizations, and local legislators (e.g., city council members) to speak to students about the public policy issues that contribute to community needs is particularly effective.

Principle Two: Encourage Critical Reflection

Reflection is a crucial aspect of quality service-learning. Reflecting on issues of identity and privilege as they relate to the social issues at hand is especially important. Providing students with an opportunity to reflect on their service experiences both individually and in groups can support students making connections between "out-of-the-classroom knowledge" (such as observations made during a service project) and academic learning. Using a variety of reflection activities—written, verbal, artistic, group or individual—addresses differences in student learning styles and supports the development of all students.

Principle Three: Support Long-term Engagement

Promoting long-term involvement in service projects, or at the very least long-term engagement with social issues, is essential to providing students with the opportunity to practice citizenship skills. Long-term service is often most useful to community organizations, as students become more skilled and familiar with the organization. Furthermore, long-term civic engagement provides students with the opportunity to practice political engagement skills that will serve them well after graduation as citizens. As philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill (1963) observed:

> We do not learn to read or write, to ride or swim, by being merely told how to do it, but by doing it, so it is only by practising [sic] popular government on a limited scale, that people will ever learn how to exercise it on a larger. (p. 229)

Principle Four: Ensure Equal Access

One additional benefit to JBSL is that it provides students with the opportunity to engage with people who are different from them. For many students participation in service is not feasible—particularly those with fewer resources who may need to work or take care of family members while pursuing their education.

Given the benefits of participating in civic engagement programs, as well as the advantages of having a diversity of experiences represented in discussions of potential solutions, institutions of higher education should promote equal access to service programs. This can be done through several methods, including the use of scholarships, community-service federal work-study programs, and creating credit-bearing opportunities for civic engagement.

Principle Five: Build Academic Connections Across Disciplines

In co-curricular service-learning programs, encouraging students to make connections to academic experiences can enrich group discussions. This can be accomplished through encouraging students to link their service experiences to independent academic projects (such as a research assignment), to take courses that relate to the social issues explored through the service project, and to encourage faculty to develop courses that relate to the ongoing service work. Faculty can develop courses using academic service-learning and other engaged pedagogies. Interdisciplinary work is especially helpful in finding innovative solutions to social problems.

Principle Six: Promote Safe Space and Robust Dialogue

Finally, service-learning experiences should provide a safe environment for dialogue. Using ground rules, such as those suggested by Nash et al. (2008) for moral conversation can encourage the free exchange of ideas and provide students with the flexibility to fully explore social problems and their own potential to work to solve these problems. We should be gentle with each other and ourselves when engaging in dialogue about the occasionally challenging topics that arise in JBSL settings, to keep in mind the "uncompleteness" that Freire described (as cited in Horton & Freire, 1990, p.11). Whenever possible, practitioners should seek to facilitate dialogue that holds all members of the group at an equal level: "a necessary condition for dialogue … is that no one has a greater ability to contribute to the discussion than anyone else has" (Freedman, 2007, p. 450).

Implications

A traditional goal of higher education in the United States has been to prepare graduates for citizenship. Service-learning is a powerful tool to engage students in critical examinations of social problems and systems of oppression that create them, as well as connect students to a local context. This work is not the responsibility of student affairs practitioners or faculty alone. As we work together to create educational environments that promote the development of citizens, we can consider taking the following steps. Faculty can incorporate justice-based service-learning into their courses; administrators and student affairs profession-

als can support these curricular efforts by providing logistical support as well as financial support through release time or curriculum development grants as appropriate. Faculty can incorporate transdisciplinary examination of social problems through team-taught courses, recommending courses in other disciplines to advisees as appropriate, and considering civic engagement efforts in reassessing core curricula. Student affairs professionals can highlight long-term engagement opportunities such as internships, fellowships, club involvement, and other methods. Both faculty and student affairs professionals in service-learning can incorporate reflection activities throughout the service experience, and incorporate group ground rules to promote a healthy setting for dialogue. Justice-based service-learning can help us achieve many of our goals for graduates; taking these next steps cannot only support our students' success but the success of our communities in solving problems as well.

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