Of What Use Is It? Multiple Conceptualizations of Service Learning Within Education

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principles and goals in the service-learning literature. This article attempts to clarify
service-learning practice and theory by offering four distinct conceptualizations of
service learning: technical, cultural, political, and poststructuralist. In so doing, it
hopes to accomplish two goals: first, to clarify the assumptions of and implications for
service learning within each perspective; second, to suggest that the dissonance and
synthesis across multiple perspectives offers a means of reframing some of the most
vexing problems within service-learning theory and practice. Specifically, this article
focuses on the limited community impact of service learning, the limited empirical
evidence for defining and articulating best practices that lead to meaningful and
sustained student outcomes, and the difficulty of rigorous and authentic assessment of
service-learning outcomes. The article offers a means, through multiple perspectives,
of reframing and dealing with such issues.*

Service-learning has become a prominent feature of the K–16 educational
landscape: More than half of all high schools use service learning in the
curriculum, Campus Compact boasts a membership of more than 900 insti-
tutions of higher learning, and the National Center for Service Learning in
Teacher Education reports that more than 200 teacher education programs
employ service learning in their courses (Campus Compact, 2003; NCES,
2000). Moreover, service learning has increasingly garnered national
attention: Legislators and policymakers view it as a means of reengaging
today's youth with both academics and civic values; philanthropic organi-
zations have made it a cornerstone of their giving across program areas

within undergraduate education (NCSL, 2002; W.K. Kellogg Foundation 1998).

At first glance, such prominence seems well deserved. Service-learning pedagogy rejects the banking model of education, where the downward transference of information from knowledgeable teachers to passive students is conducted in 45-min increments. It subverts the notion of classroom as graveyard—rows and rows of silent bodies—for an active pedagogy committed to connecting theory and practice, schools and community, the cognitive and the ethical.

Service-learning advocates cite such linkages as contributing to the accrual of numerous positive outcomes. Service learning is seen to enhance student outcomes (cognitive, affective, and ethical), foster a more active citizenry, promote a scholarship of engagement among teachers and institutions, support a more equitable society, and reconnect K–16 schools with their local communities. Moreover, by emphasizing real-world learning and reciprocity between schools and communities, service learning serves as a powerful counterpoint to contemporary positivistic educational trends that deprofessionalize teaching through prescriptive curricula, behaviorist outcome measures, and instrumental conceptions of teaching and learning.

Yet despite (or perhaps because of) the recent proliferation and expansion of service-learning theory and practice, there is a troubling ambiguity concerning even basic principles and goals in the service-learning literature. Is service learning a pedagogical strategy for better comprehension of course content? A philosophical stance committed to the betterment of the local or global community? An institutionalized mechanism fostering students' growth and self-awareness concerning issues of diversity, volunteerism, and civic responsibility? Or, as some critics note, a voyeuristic exploitation of the cultural other that masquerades as academically sanctioned servant leadership? Moreover, notwithstanding a plethora of anecdotal results, there is a dearth of substantive research documenting and supporting some of the impassioned claims of service-learning advocates. Questions must therefore be raised concerning the implications—academic, social, and political—of such differing perspectives.

This article attempts to clarify service-learning practice and theory by offering four distinct conceptualizations of how service learning is articulated in the literature and enacted in the field: technical, cultural, political, and poststructuralist. In so doing, I hope to accomplish two goals: first, to clarify the assumptions of and implications for service learning within each perspective; second, to suggest that the dissonance and synthesis across multiple perspectives offer a means of reframing some of the most vexing problems within service-learning theory and practice. Specifically, after explicating each perspective, I turn to the question of how to use such differing perspectives to refocus questions concerning the limited community

impact of service learning, the limited empirical evidence for defining and articulating best practices that lead to meaningful and sustained student outcomes, and the difficulty of rigorous and authentic assessment of service-learning outcomes.

I focus primarily on service learning within education, though I find that these conceptualizations are found across multiple disciplines. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are beginning to more seriously engage with the newfound success of service learning. One consequence of such success, though, is that several thorny theoretical and pragmatic issues have begun to be raised concerning the goals, means, and value-added dimension of service learning. This article is thus an attempt to clarify and move forward the discussion on service learning for both those inside and outside of the field by helping to understand the multiplicity of goals, means and (un)intended consequences of how service learning may be conceptualized.

CONCEPTUALIZING SERVICE LEARNING FROM MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Scholars have put forward useful definitions, criteria, and conceptualizations of service learning. A commonly cited definition (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995) argues that "service-learning [is] a course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (p. 112). Such an articulation is a model in the field precisely because it attempts to balance service and learning and link them in a meaningful way.

It is possible, other scholars suggest (Furco, 1996; Sigmon, 1994), that a spectrum of service programs fall under the rubric of service learning. Programs that emphasize the service component and the served (e.g., volunteer activities and community service) would fall on one end of the spectrum, and programs that focus on the learning and the provider of the services (e.g., internships and field-based education) would fall on the other end. The scope of what potentially counts as service learning has thus resulted in the development of multiple monikers—academic service learning, community-based service learning, field-based community service—in an attempt to differentiate between programs and emphasize what is of primacy.

Irrespective of the definitional emphasis, service-learning advocates put forward a consistent articulation of the criteria for service learning to be legitimate, ethical, and useful. These may be glossed as the four *R*s—respect,

reciprocity, relevance, and reflection (Campus Compact, 2002; MJCSL, 2001; Sigmon, 1979). First, those doing the serving should always be respectful of the circumstances, outlooks, and ways of life of those being served. The point to be made is that the server is not a white knight riding in to save anyone but just another human being who must respect the situation he or she is coming into. Second, the service is not to benefit only the server (i.e., the White, middle-class, preservice teacher who, through his or her tutoring, becomes exposed to and begins to understand how the underprivileged live and behave). Not only should the server provide a meaningful and relevant service to those he or she is serving, but often members of the community being served should be the ones responsible for articulating what the service should be in the first place.

Third, the service must be relevant to the academic content of the course. This is not simply to say that course credit is based on learning rather than service; more forcefully, the service should be a central component of a course and help students engage with, reinforce, extend, or question its content. Finally, service learning does not provide transparent experiences; reflection is required to provide context and meaning. Given the real-time aspect of service learning, students need multiple opportunities to engage with the ambiguity and complexity of the experience. The issues that arise, for example, from tutoring ESL youth or working with elderly AIDS patients are not simple topics that can be addressed in a 45- or even a 90-min class; they require time for reflection, discussion, and research.

The breadth of how and why service learning is enacted—it is used from elementary schools to graduate schools and in disciplines from accounting to women's studies—provides for a wide range of conceptualizations of the field. Kendall (1990), for example, differentiates between service learning as a pedagogy—a specific methodology for the delivery of content knowledge—and service learning as a philosophy—a world view that permeates the curriculum, instruction, and assessment of a course. Alternatively, Lisman (1998) suggests that all modes of service learning are embedded in philosophical orientations, which he differentiates as volunteerism, consumerism, social transformation, and participatory democracy. Each perspective, Lisman argues, privileges different modes of service-learning engagement with vastly different consequences for individual and societal outcomes. Other scholars (e.g., Liu, 1995; Morton, 1995) attempt to avoid such dichotomization by suggesting that all modes of service learning, if enacted thickly enough, offer useful modes of providing valuable service and increasing academic learning.

At one level, I find these definitions, criteria, and conceptualizations helpful. Such perspectives provide a useful heuristic for understanding and contrasting distinct and often divergent forms of service learning as they are perceived and enacted across multiple disciplines. They provide both

insiders (e.g., practitioners, researchers, tenure committees, administrators) and outsiders (e.g., general public, philanthropic organizations, lawmakers) a language for situating the multiple forms of service learning.

Yet there are several distinctive problems with such traditional articulations of how to understand service learning. Foremost are the problems of a latent teleology and an unsupportable ethical foundation. Most definitions, criteria, and conceptualizations privilege particular modes of service learning and view deviations from such implicit norms as derivative. Specifically, service-learning scholarship and practice privileges volunteer activities done by individual students with high cultural capital for the sake of individuals with low cultural capital within the context of an academic class with ameliorative consequences. To reverse any of these preconditions is to expose the strong normative framework within which service learning operates.

To suggest, for example, that students engaged in service learning be paid, or that they provide service to the rich, or that the outcomes may be other than positive is to go against the grain of the implicit normative framework of what is understood by service learning. My point is not to promote any such specific alternative; rather, it is to make clear that undergirding almost all conceptualizations of service learning are modernist, liberal, and radical individualistic notions of self, progress, knowledge, and power. This is the latent teleology that individuals are autonomous change agents—that such agents can affect positive and sustained transformations, that such transformations are promoted by the more powerful for the less powerful, that this downward benevolence is consciously enacted, and that all individuals involved in such a transaction benefit from it.

The latter point also reveals the unsupportable ethical foundationalism of service learning. Namely, service learning practice and scholarship is predicated on the belief that both the process and outcomes of service learning are universally beneficent. This view seems clear when one hears stories of elementary school students revitalizing run-down neighborhoods or college students working hand-in-hand with community organizations to develop environmental impact statements concerning a proposed incinerator plant. It becomes more problematic, however, when certain kinds of questions are made visible: what sustained community impact is achieved? Who benefits from the enactment (and publicity) of such processes? What actual learning is documented as a result of such a process? As I argue in the second half of this article, service learning has promoted much good will among those doing the actual service learning, but there is considerably less evidence that service learning has provided much benefit for the recipients.

It is sufficient at this point to note that both through the frame of critical theory and with the rise of postmodernism, all the above-stated suppositions have become problematic. From the notion of autonomous individuals

consciously willing positive change to the win-win mantra of service-learning advocates, conceptualizations of service learning have glossed over the presumption of neutrality, the privileging of Whiteness, and the imbalance of power relations.

It is thus useful to put forward four distinct perspectives on service learning to clarify what is highlighted in each, as well as what remains hidden. The methodology for the construction of such perspectives is drawn from a review of the primary literature in the service-learning field. I should note that I do not presume that service-learning practice and scholarship neatly separates into four ideal types; rather, I put forward such distinctive perspectives as a means of clarifying what is possible within the service-learning field. Additionally, I acknowledge that such typologies overlap, blend, and are reconstituted in a multiplicity of unanticipated modes. Nevertheless, it is critical that some basic premises and overarching paradigms are delineated in order to bring greater clarity to service-learning scholarship and practice.

A TECHNICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SERVICE LEARNING

A technical perspective on an educational reform focuses on "the innovation itself, on its characteristics and component parts and its production and introduction as a technology" (Hargreaves et al., 2002, p. 73). Questions concerning an innovation's legitimacy and implications are muted or even absent. Rather, technical considerations of implementation are highlighted. Thus questions of efficacy, quality, efficiency, and sustainability of both the process and the outcome of the innovation come to the forefront.

This perspective constitutes a major strand within service-learning scholarship. A host of linkages between service learning and student outcomes—personal, social, and cognitive—have been analyzed and best practice principles have been put forward. Service learning has been shown to enhance, among other things, students' personal efficacy and moral development, social responsibility and civic engagement, and academic learning, transfer of knowledge, and critical thinking skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Rhoads, 1997; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). Crucial program characteristics of service-learning experiences, irrespective of the academic discipline, include the quality of the placement, the frequency and length of contact hours, the scope and frequency of in-class and out-of-class reflection, the perceived impact of the service, and students' exposure to and interaction with individuals and community groups of diverse backgrounds (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Mabry, 1998).

Service-learning scholars have particularly emphasized the need to link service learning to enhanced cognitive outcomes. Zlotkowski (1995), for

example, argues that the very future of service learning within higher education may rest on "a single elusive but nonetheless basic decision—whether the [service-learning] movement as a whole prioritizes ideological or academic issues" (p. 126). Thus the phrase "academic service learning" (see, e.g., Rhoads & Howard, 1998) has become a symbol of the need to demonstrate how service is a means to learning rather than the goal in and of itself. In one review of the research, Eyler (2000) concludes that "we know that service-learning has a small but consistent impact on a number of important outcomes for students. Now we need to push ahead to empirically answer questions about improving the academic effectiveness of service-learning" (p. 16). Such a tinkering approach to educational reform—where the goal is to make a known product better through incremental and systematic change—positions service learning as a legitimate educational practice in need only of more rigorous and sustained research.

A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE ON SERVICE LEARNING

Rather than focusing on the innovation itself, a cultural perspective emphasizes individuals' meaning making within and through the context of the innovation. Such meaning making may be broadly understood within what Geertz (1973) famously termed our "webs of meaning" in that we make sense of who we are with respect to both local and global communities. A cultural perspective—at both the micro/individual and macro/societal level—is thus concerned with normative questions of acculturation, understanding, and appropriation of the innovation.

Service learning is highly amenable to a cultural perspective. From a macro perspective, it can be viewed as a means of repairing what social theorists describe as the frayed social networks of our increasingly individualistic and narcissistic society (Bellah et al., 1986; Putnam, 2000). Advocates suggest that service learning is an ideal means by which to support and extend civil engagement, to foster a democratic renewal and to enhance individuals' sense of community and belongingness to something greater than themselves (Barber, 1992; Lisman, 1998). From a micro perspective, service learning can be seen as a means of fostering in the individual a respect for and increased tolerance of diversity, to gain a greater awareness of societal concerns, to develop a stronger moral and ethical sense, and to encourage volunteerism and civic engagement (Coles, 1993).

These two levels are linked to the extent that we come to know about ourselves by engaging with those who are different from us. Such greater knowledge, in turn, affects how we think about and engage with the

world we live in. It is therefore critical to acknowledge that, from a cultural perspective of service learning, diversity in the placement site acts as a crucial mediator between individual self-knowledge and societal responsibility. By engaging with those different from themselves—with "difference" primarily understood across racial, ethnic, class, and sexual orientation lines—students will come to better understand, respect, and engage with the cultural plurality of our diverse society.

This perspective constitutes a second major strand within the service-learning movement and is often linked to the technical perspective. Thus Eyler and Giles (1999) do not hesitate to include citizenship alongside critical thinking as a legitimate student outcome of service learning. Likewise, the *Service-Learning Course Design Workbook*, by the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (2001), argues that academic service learning is, by definition, the linkage of meaningful service to academic and civic learning. Such interweaving of the technical and cultural perspectives is in fact ubiquitous in the service-learning literature.

Service learning is thus understood from both perspectives as a particular methodology for accomplishing specific goals. It should be noted that a cultural perspective mitigates somewhat such an instrumentalist conceptualization; a cultural perspective acknowledges that service-learning outcomes are often embedded within the process itself. As such, a cultural perspective privileges the affective, ethical, and formative aspects of service learning and is concerned with linking these experiential components to local, national, and international issues.

A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SERVICE LEARNING

A political perspective is most concerned with issues of competing constituencies and how these issues are manifest through power (im)balances, questions of legitimacy, allowed or silenced perspectives, and negotiations over neutrality/objectivity. It is within a political perspective that an innovation is examined and challenged on normative, ethical, epistemological, and ontological grounds. Whose voices are heard and whose are silenced? Who makes the decisions and by what criteria? Who benefits from such decisions and who loses? To what extent is the innovation a repetition, a reinforcement, or a revocation of the status quo? A political perspective presumes that conflict rather than consensus is an underlying aspect and consequence of the process and product of an innovation.

From a political perspective, service learning is both potentially transformative and repressive. It is transformative to the extent that education becomes a disruption of the hierarchy and authority of the student-teacher relationship (Freire, 1994; hooks, 1994). Rather than a didactic banking model of knowledge dissemination and regurgitation, education becomes a

collaborative venture between students and teachers such that information is constructed rather than simply found (Giroux, 1983). Moreover, by leveraging the cultural, social, and human capital of higher education, service-learning practitioners are able to make a visible difference in the communities they are a part of (O'Grady 2000; Sleeter, 2001). This social action creates an opportunity for border crossing (Hayes & Cuban, 1997) that encourages students, teachers, and community members to question the predominant and hegemonic norms of who controls, defines, and limits access to knowledge and power.

At the same time, a political perspective encourages a reflexive stance toward the foundations and implications of service learning. It is here that service learning becomes a potentially repressive activity, rather than the ameliorative one described from the previous two perspectives. For example, there is little empirical evidence that service learning provides substantive, meaningful, and long-term solutions for the communities it is supposedly helping. In fact, it may do just the opposite to the extent that it perpetuates and reinforces dominant deficit perspectives of others and substantiates the unquestioned norms of whiteness for students engaged in service-learning (Boyle-Baise, 1999; Rosenberg, 1997; Sleeter, 2001; Varlotta, 1997a).

From such a perspective, service learning becomes yet another means for those in the culture of power to maintain inequitable power relations under the guise of benevolent volunteerism. It reinforces conservative assumptions that relatively isolated actions of caring individuals can overcome societal problems and that it is the servers who bring the solutions and that such solutions are assimilationist by nature. Tutoring students or working in a soup kitchen maintains the position of privilege for those doing the serving, and presumes that the enactment of such service in and of itself substantiates the worthiness and legitimacy of the servers' perspective.

It is thus inaccurate to portray, as is often done, a tight linkage between a cultural and a political perspective. Service learning that enhances students' civic responsibility, for example, does not necessarily also develop a stronger democracy. That is surely one option if the engagement mobilizes silenced communities, fosters neighborhood self-reliance, or dramatically increases individuals' aptitudes to understand and participate in our legal, social, and cultural institutions. Yet another option is that service learning may simply reinforce students' deficit notions that blame the individual or the so-called culture of poverty for the ills that allowed those students to engage in such service in the first place. A political perspective thus rejects service learning as an instrumental and amelioristic methodology to instead focus on how service learning affects power relations among and across diverse individuals, groups, and institutions.

A POSTSTRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE ON SERVICE LEARNING

A poststructuralist perspective is concerned with how an innovation constructs, reinforces, or disrupts particular unarticulated societal norms of being and thinking. A poststructuralist perspective, for the purpose of this article, has two key premises. The first is what Lyotard (1984) terms an incredulity of metanarratives: There is no single and objective truth to be found, for all perspectives are beholden to particular presuppositions, contexts, and modes of thought. As such, knowledge and meaning become fragmented, partial, and often indecipherable. The second premise is what Foucault (1983) terms the subjectification of the self. Our identities do not consist of unitary, essential, and internal attributes. Rather, we are constructed and construct ourselves within the multiple confines and relations of our society.

A poststructuralist perspective questions to what extent service learning supports and undermines our notions of, for example, teaching, learning, self, and otherness. Does service learning perpetuate or disrupt our notions of who the teacher is and who the learner is? Who the served is and who is doing the serving? Moreover, how does service learning help to construct students' notions of themselves and others as gendered, racial, and status-bound individuals? Few scholars have used such a lens to analyze service learning (see Boyle-Baise, 1999; Harvey, 2000; Varlotta, 1997a, 1997b).

Given the dearth of scholarship linking poststructuralism and service learning, I put forward several examples of its potential. One major positive attribute of service learning is in the potential for students to become engaged in activities with individuals whom they otherwise might not have come in contact with. Such border crossing—be it physical, social, cultural, or intellectual—provides students the opportunity to glimpse or even become immersed in a reality unknown to them beforehand. In so doing, service learning from a poststructuralist perspective provides a fruitful occasion to make visible and begin to question the *sui generis* of such borders and definitions. Teacher education students may begin to see that a youth labeled at-risk in school may be very different in a tutoring environment, at home, or on an outing. A new perspective on multicultural education may be gained by viewing youths' racial and ethnic groupings, subgroupings, and cross-groupings. The definitional certainty of what constitutes success and failure may be disrupted in the face of the community strength and vibrancy of marginalized groups.

Even more forcefully, a poststructuralist perspective on service learning uses border crossings to reveal that we too are deeply implicated in the sustenance of such borders. Or as I often remind the undergraduates whom I teach, "if you weren't here, they wouldn't be there." The same system that provides high-achieving students admittance to institutions of higher

learning is at work in articulating the level of "need" of the students they tutor. This measuring, ranking, and sorting informs how we view ourselves, our service, and the recipients of our service. It legitimates certain modes of being while hiding others. Specifically, a poststructuralist perspective suggests that in positioning ourselves as tutors who give back to the community, we are necessarily involved in asymmetrical and static power relations, a dichotomy between teaching and learning and the essentialization of who we and they are.

A poststructuralist perspective therefore does not presume that service learning is a fundamentally positive or negative activity. This is not to say that it reflects a radical relativism that negates any form of constructive action; the question is rather what is or is not possible to think and do given the constraints that we find ourselves working with (Butin, 2001). To quote Foucault (1997), the "point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous ... so my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism" (p. 256). A poststructuralist perspective thus suggests that service learning is a site of identity construction, destruction, and reconstruction with profound consequences of how we view the definitions and boundaries of the teaching process.

USING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES TO REFREAME THE DISCUSSION

Viewing service learning from multiple perspectives is crucial to the service-learning field because it can lead to alternative conceptualizations of foundational goals and pragmatic enactments. I suggest that many issues continue to plague service-learning practice and scholarship precisely because of a lack of multivocality in the definitions, criteria, and conceptualizations of what service learning is and could be. Excessive reliance on the technical/cultural lens has constrained how we view service learning and its potential uses. The rest of this article analyzes three specific problems in contemporary service-learning research and practice. Appropriate use of multiple conceptual frames may allow researchers and practitioners to deal with these problems in a creative way.

LIMITED COMMUNITY IMPACT

Cruz and Giles (2000) state that the "service-learning research literature to date is almost devoid of research that looks at the community either as a dependent or independent variable" (p. 28). They suggest that this lack is due to the theoretical, methodological, and pragmatic difficulties of rigorously defining and analyzing such constructs as "community" and "community impact." Although certain research (e.g., Gelmon et al., 1998)

does suggest that positive community impact accrues from service learning, the lack of empirical research seems to serve as a proxy for the traditional lack of institutional emphasis, practitioner awareness, and community organizations' lack of voice with regard to the role of the community.

Moreover, of the studies that have looked at community impact, the emphasis has been on issues of community satisfaction: with student participation, with relations to the higher education institution, and with the immediate outcomes of the service (Driscoll et al., 1996; Gray et al., 1998)—which is to say that the breadth and depth of the positive impact of service learning upon a community is absent from the research focus. While a lack of such research does not immediately impugn service-learning practice or its potential outcomes, it is certainly an awkward and problematic acknowledgment for the field.

Sigmon (1979), in what is considered a classic text, put forward three key principles of service learning, two of which focused on improving the conditions of those being served. A technical/cultural perspective of service learning attempts to address such a lack of community impact by enhancing certain aspects of the service-learning protocol (e.g., increasing time requirements in the placement site, implementing authentic assessment of community impact, creating stronger partnerships between educational institutions and the community). Yet it is difficult to address the lack of community impact from a unidimensional perspective. Rather, a technical/cultural perspective must be linked to a political perspective in order to reframe the issue.

A political perspective raises questions such as the following: "Who benefits from service-learning practice as traditionally enacted?" and "What are the structures that maintain and allow such benefits to accrue?" Such questions are key because they reveal that service learning is almost universally located within the context of a specific academic course. As such, course-based service learning is beholden to specific structural constraints: There is a short-term one-semester time frame to complete activities; there are a limited number of engaged students; there is a complete turnover of the service population; the goals of the course are student-centered to the extent that academic learning is a key requirement within the course; service-learning is positioned as an add-on that can easily be put in or taken out of a course; there is a limit to the time that students and teachers can be involved; and the service learning on the academic side is ultimately associated with a particular individual (namely the professor supporting the service-learning).

These structural conditions make clear that service learning, as a classroom-based practice, privileges the students (and teachers) in a particular course: They gain knowledge and insight, they participate in a quasi-experimental study on the so-called community for academic gain, they feel good about

themselves, they gain peer and institutional approval and recognition, and they gain real-world experience that can be easily put into a resumé. Once the privileging of a course-based structure is made clear, it becomes possible to rethink the issue of how community impact can be increased outside of these constraints.

Working through a political perspective, it becomes possible to return to a technical perspective to analyze the efficacy of different spaces for service learning, which can be viewed as functioning at the classroom level, at the departmental level, and at the institutional level. If the primary goal for service learning is community impact, then the classroom level, with the structural constraints enumerated above, appears to be the least likely to create an impact.

If instead service learning is situated at the departmental level, multiple benefits immediately accrue: linkage and consistency across courses becomes possible, departmental resources (e.g., administrative support, academic legitimacy) become available, and long-term projects become possible. It is from this perspective that my colleagues and I are integrating service learning throughout the education department at our institution. The goal is to construct a self-contained and self-supporting structure by which incoming cohorts of education students are mentored by the outgoing cohort of students engaged in their capstone service-learning experience prior to their student-teaching semester. Ongoing and periodic milestone checkpoints—both within and outside of specific education courses—allow students the opportunity to reflect on service learning, link it to academic content, and engage with it outside of course-based constraints. Most important, it provides community organizations with access to and support from students and faculty on a long-term basis. This approach should lead to more ambitious longitudinal projects, reduce training costs and time, and provide a more holistic and multifaceted understanding of the ongoing service relationships.

If service learning is situated at the institutional level, additional benefits seem to further become possible. Institutional ownership—with its access to human, social, and fiscal capital, and its ability to impose and create cultural norms—makes possible an overarching institutional culture of service. Thus, for example, both CSU-Monterey Bay and Portland State University emphasize community involvement in their mission, structures, and reward systems (Gelmon et al., 1998; Rice & Pollack, 2000). The ability to raise service learning to an institutional level might thus provide a unique opportunity for institutions of higher education to engage with the larger communities (Mattson, 2002). Both the departmental- and institutional-level positioning of service learning becomes possible once a political conceptualization is linked to a technical conceptualization.

LIMITED EVIDENCE FOR DEFINING BEST PRACTICES

A second issue is the limited empirical evidence for defining and articulating best practices that foster meaningful and substantive student outcomes. Research consistently shows a small but significant increase in academic, social, and personal outcomes due to service learning (Eyler, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler et al., 1999). Nevertheless, although researchers have begun to articulate what positive outcomes may accrue from service learning, there is almost no solid research on how such outcomes occur.

Reflection, for example, is seen as a key component in service learning, yet any definition of its duration, scope, placement, mode, and structure remain frustratingly absent. Every teacher of a service-learning course must either implicitly or explicitly decide, among other things, what students should reflect on; how long and how often they should reflect; whether reflection should be in class, out of class, or some combination thereof; what mode of reflection is valid (e.g., monologue, dialogue, performance, written); the level of descriptive, analytic, and reflective detail; and the means by which such reflection will be assessed (e.g., self-, criterion, or norm-referenced). There is simply no rigorous research of service-learning practice that begins to address this level of detail (I exclude here the proliferation of anecdotal and retrospective self-reporting data).

This issue is, from a technical/cultural perspective, troubling. Without adequate definitions, practitioners cannot develop optimal learning environments for enacting service learning, researchers cannot rigorously measure the value added by service learning, and policymakers cannot focus legislative support on best practices supported by scientifically based research. As Furco and Billig (2002) argue, more substantive research is critical to "bring us one step closer to understanding the essence of service-learning" (p. viii).

I suggest that a poststructuralist perspective offers a means for reconceptualization. A poststructuralist perspective argues that there is no such thing as an essence of service learning. There are, instead, truth claims about service learning that struggle for normative sovereignty and as such produce our identities as service-learning providers or recipients. The pursuit of best practices, from a poststructuralist perspective, is more clearly understood as a contested construction of social and cultural categories by which we define who we are and what we do.

The point for service learning is that the quest for definitional certainty has the potential to constrain rather than foster emergent practices. A poststructuralist perspective suggests that researchers' attempts to pinpoint the *how* of service learning privileges quantification and thus normalization. For example, to construct a best practice for reflection, no matter the good

intentions, is to move the discussion away from the usefulness of reflection in multiple modes and arenas to the legitimacy of diverse methodologies by which reflection is enacted. The singularly normative implications are to develop specific standards to which practitioners are to be held accountable. It is sufficient to note that legislating and quantifying highly complex variables and actions (such as the outcomes of sustained reflection) is not the strong suit of educational research or legislative mandates. A poststructuralist perspective thus suggests that instead of articulating best practice strategies, service-learning advocates should explore less constrictive practices (Butin, 2002).

Once a move is made away from definitional certainty, it becomes possible to use a cultural perspective to explore alternative means by which to explicate useful modes and structures of service-learning practice. To take the case again of reflection, it becomes possible to ask different questions that avoid an overly technical focus: How is reflection used in conceptualizing oneself as a teacher? Which moments are used in the reflection process? Which are not? In what ways can diverse and previously unarticulated positions become available to reflect on? Can reflection be dialogical? For example, can youth in the classroom be a part of the reflective cycle? The point to be made is that research on the role of reflection in service learning is less concerned with issues such as how long reflection should be and more with issues of how reflection better supports self-awareness and self-reflective practice.

The quest for definitional certainty concerning best practices in service learning is thus, when viewed from diverse frames, an invitation for fundamentally constricting the means and modes by which service learning became an alternative pedagogical strategy in the first place. Namely, service learning was a response to traditional educational methods that seemed irrelevant to the context of truly educating youth. A poststructuralist perspective linked to a cultural one suggests that to overemphasize the legitimacy of particular modes of enacting service-learning is to normalize and stigmatize alternative modes and potentially produce yet another doctrinal methodology.

DIFFICULTY OF AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

A third major issue in the service-learning field is the difficulty of rigorous and authentic assessment of service learning. Recent attempts have focused on explicating outcomes and systematizing research methods specific to service learning (Gelmon et al., 2001). Yet solutions in the service-learning field are subject to highly problematic theoretical and pragmatic positions. Namely, assessment is understood as focusing on isolated and static entities such as students, faculty, and communities. This focus may be seen, in part,

as a political strategy of employing seemingly objective quantitative methodology to isolate and find as statistically significant certain variables to prove the worth of service learning. In part, it is also in keeping with the history of educational assessment and its overreliance on psychological theorization. From the early IQ tests to today's high-stakes testing, assessment is traditionally understood as making visible the internal attributes and aptitudes of individuals; as such, it posits the isolated individual, knowledge as internal and unique to the individual, and the goal of clarity (or the "truth") as the goal for assessment (Shepard, 2002).

I suggest that a poststructuralist perspective can again serve to both deconstruct and reconstruct the potential of assessment for service learning. A poststructuralist perspective disrupts the notion of assessment as making visible internal characteristics. Instead, assessment is rather understood as categorizing the individual through the very definitions of the process. Such categorization privileges a hierarchical dichotomizing of terms; gender, race, class, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation are just the most cited and obvious examples of this proliferation (Sondergaard, 2002; Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

The poststructuralist deconstruction of any assessment activity is not simply a negative move. For it also suggests that assessment may be used to help construct who we want to be. Such construction is not to be done by focusing on the individual but rather focusing on how the individual is enmeshed in relations and structures in society. Such an approach is reminiscent of Dewey's point that the transaction, and not the isolated entities within it, is of significance for study. For Dewey, there was never an individual outside of an environment, nor an environment without individuals. Likewise, the poststructuralist perspective would argue that what is of interest is the relationships between selves and society and to what extent those relationships help or hinder the act of the resignification of the self.

Once the poststructuralist frame moves the act of assessment away from the individual, a cultural perspective becomes useful. On its own, a cultural perspective is bound to focus on how the individual makes sense of the assessment act. Yet freed from this focus, a cultural perspective suggests that the assessment of relationships allows a more complete perspective on how meaning is made within communities. If, for example, we value engaged, creative, and articulate students, what modes of authentic assessment may be useful for such a task? If we are interested in how service learning affects students' critical thinking skills, why would we think that self-reporting (with its emphasis on the isolated individual) has any relevance? Rather, assessment becomes possible through viewing the student-in-action within the context of activity (Wiggins, 1994).

Cruz and Giles (2000) recently put forward a similar proposal. They argue that evaluation must become an analysis of community–university

partnerships rather than assessment of individual outcomes. The partnership, they suggest, is not only one of the variables in student service and learning but is also one of the outcomes of such service and learning. To suggest the partnership as the unit of analysis is to reject an acontextual focus on the individual and the value-added of service learning to learning outcomes; it is to instead focus on more meaningful questions concerning the role of service-learning in the larger community-university partnership. A cultural frame thus allows a more holistic understanding of, to return to Geertz, the webs of meaning that we are all enmeshed within. Webs, for that matter, cannot be understood by where they start and end, but in the entanglement of its many parts.

CONCLUSION

Service-learning has become a potent force within the rhetoric and reality of reconstituting alternative modes of teaching and learning across the K–16 educational landscape. With this newfound success, though, service learning has stumbled on several knotty theoretical and practical issues such as community impact, student outcomes, and authentic assessment. This article suggests that such issues are a byproduct of a monochromatic perspective on what constitutes service learning. Specifically, the normative framework of service learning is constituted through what I have termed a technical/cultural lens. If instead the service-learning field is understood through multiple conceptual frames—technical, cultural, political, and poststructural—it becomes possible to uncover the specific assumptions and implications of each. In so doing, I suggest, service-learning practitioners and researchers can move forward in developing, extending, and reconstituting diverse means and goals for service-learning. More forcefully, I suggest that melding and merging contrasting lens offers the opportunity to come up with new ways of approaching service-learning theory and practice.

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Educational Learning Theories. Multiple Conceptualizations of Service Learning Within Education. Teachers College Record, 2003. Dan Sarofian-Butin. Download PDF. Download Full PDF Package. This paper. A short summary of this paper. 37 Full PDF related to this paper. Planning, implementing, and assessing a service-learning project can be a complex task because service-learning projects often involve multiple constituencies and aim to meet both the needs of service providers and community partners. In this article, Stufflebeam's Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) evalu ation model is recommended as a framework to systematically guide the conception, design, implementation, and assessment of service-learning projects, and provide feedback and judgment of the project's effectiveness for continuous improvement. Of What Use Is It? Multiple Conceptualizations of Service Learning within Education. Dan W. Butin. Psychology.