Review Essay
Emerging Voices, Challenging Perspectives

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Problematizing Service-Learning: Critical Reflections for Development and Action

Trae Stewart and Nicole Webster, Editors
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Problematizing Service-Learning offers readers a chance to become familiar with the work of a number of emerging service-learning scholars as well as to renew their acquaintance with some already well established figures. As the editors, Trae Stewart and Nicole Webster, make clear in their preface, their goal in putting together this collection of 15 articles on a range of service-learning topics was to "problematize" service-learning by questioning "knowledge that is often taken for granted" and offering "new perspectives and subsequent actions" (xiv). To a considerable extent their volume succeeds in doing this although many chapters deal with issues that have been explored elsewhere.

The book is divided into five parts: (a) Expanding Frameworks; (b) Complexities in Situating Service-Learning; (c) Youth Development, Voices, and Perspectives; (d) Otherness and Inclusiveness; and (e) Challenges and Concluding Remarks. Some parts, such as the third and the fourth, represent fairly coherent thematic units while others bring together more heterogeneous topics. No attempt has been made to harmonize the positions taken in the book's 15 chapters. While many reflect a strong interest in postmodernist theories and their application, one can still find considerable variety, and even implicit disagreement, on many specific issues.

"Creating Spaces for Service-Learning Research: Implications for Emergent Action and Civic Ingenuity" by M. Jayne Fleener, Laura Jewett, Jolanta Smolen, and Russell L Carson opens the collection with the proposition that the scientific method, operating on a "two-dimensional plane of deductive and inductive reasoning" (p. 4), is inadequate to the epistemic needs of service-learning research. Drawing upon Elspeth Probyn's article "Travels in the Postmodern: Making Sense of the Local" (1990), the authors suggest instead a *three*-dimensional frame that leaves room for what they call "civic ingenuity": "Service-learning research can be conceptualized as residing in the three-dimension-

al space that is created by the dynamic among induction, deduction, and abduction [a kind of reasoning related to 'possibility and creativity']. In so doing, a 'third space' of civic ingenuity emerges" (p. 5). Not being familiar with Probyn's work, I found some of the chapter's theoretical exposition hard to follow. Still, it is clear from the authors' attempts to bring their theoretical concepts to bear on our understanding of the Katrina disaster and its aftermath that those interests are well grounded in a sense of practical necessity: we simply must develop a more creative and dynamic epistemological model if we are to promote effective social problem solving. Because such an epistemological need has also been strongly articulated elsewhere (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009; Schön, 1995; Sullivan, 2000; Van de Ven, 2007), we can perhaps look forward to more sustained and concentrated dialogue on this topic.

Dan Butin's chapter "Service-Learning as an Intellectual Movement: The Need for an 'Academic Home' and Critique for the Community Engagement Movement" returns us to themes he has explored elsewhere, most notably in his book *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice: The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education* (2010). If chapter one focuses on service-learning's need for a more multi-dimensional epistemic framework, this chapter argues, first, that service-learning is an intellectual movement and, second, that as such it needs to be institutionalized in its own academic department. Because the department is the academy's unit of legitimacy, "disciplining" service learning "is a necessary precondition for its ability to work within and through the context-specific mechanisms of higher education" (pp. 23-24). Such a move, Butin also suggests, would facilitate the kind of "meaningful and constructive critique" (p. 26) the movement needs to thrive intellectually as well as institutionally.

While I am sympathetic to many of Butin's goals, I remain skeptical about his chief recommendation and

the logic behind it. Even if one were to grant that service-learning can best be viewed as an "intellectual movement" rather than, say, a pedagogy or a philosophy of education, does it follow that it needs its own departmental home to be adequately explored and developed? Both the Enlightenment and Romanticism can be identified as intellectual movements, and both have been explored and critiqued in great detail without their study having been organized into academic departments. I would certainly agree with Butin that the academic department is perhaps the key to institutional resources [and couldn't help wondering why he makes no reference to Kevin Kecskes's (2006) pioneering book on service-learning and the department]. However, I believe one must never underestimate the power of "siloing" in academic institutions, and although it certainly is not Butin's intention, I fear such a "disciplining" of service-learning would shrink its availability and appeal across the curriculum. Would, for example, Purdue have been able to develop an award-winning service-learning program in engineering (Engineering Projects in Community Service) if it had also had a Department of Service-Learning? Battistoni (2006) has helped us appreciate just how important it is for different disciplinary areas to find and use civic terms and concepts that resonate with their history and culture. Such disciplinary ownership is reflected in organizations like Community Campus Partnerships for Health (the health disciplines) and Imagining America (the arts and humanities).

Chapter 3, "Opening Up Service-Learning Reflection by Turning Inward," by Trae Stewart, one of the volume's editors, not only has a very different focus from its predecessors but also takes a very different stand vis-à-vis academic legitimization. In his chapter's final paragraph Stewart maintains that "Assimilating to the rituals and routines that have thus far served to control potential through a fear of non-legitimization is not going to secure our [i.e., service-learning's] existence within K-12 schools or higher education" (p. 60). Thus, he urges the field not to shrink "from the implications of returning to a marginal position" if that is the price it must pay to pursue the "counter-normative" practices that alone will allow it to "realize its full transformative possibilities" (p. 60).

The specific counter-normative practice that Stewart champions here is a spiritual or contemplative form of reflection that focuses the individual on "present thoughts, emotions, senses, and behaviors" (p. 37). For Stewart, the reflection that has come to dominate service-learning "has arguably taken on a hyperpragmatic, product-oriented place as a project management and assessment tool" (p. 37). Unfortunately, he doesn't prove this assertion or even illustrate it with specific examples from practice.

Instead, he reviews what some of the literature has had to say about the characteristics of effective reflection, lists the methods most frequently mentioned in recommended resources, and concludes that much of what passes for reflection really amounts to a "flirtation with mindlessness" (p. 41). After making this charge, the chapter turns to a general exposition of the concept of "mindfulness," its relationship to contemplation, Western neglect of contemplation, and calls for more spirituality in education. Stewart concludes with an explication of what he calls a "soul-centered 'bicycle wheel model' for service-learning" to "address the potential mindlessness of service-learning and weaknesses of [David] Kolb's model [of experiential learning]" (p. 54).

While it is interesting to consider how contemplation and its many proven benefits could indeed complement other reflective practices, I found it hard to move from Stewart's philosophical and historical generalizations to his wholesale critique of traditional reflection strategies and objectives. No doubt there is much shallow reflection in service-learning practice. However, that shallowness may well result more from a failure to follow principles of good practice than from some epistemic flaw in the very concept of reflection outside of contemplative traditions. I couldn't help wondering whether Stewart would charge those contributors to this volume who do recommend traditional forms of reflection with the "flirtation with mindlessness" (p. 41) he warns against.

Clearly part one of *Problematizing Service-Learning* foregrounds theoretical and/or philosophical issues. Many of the chapters that comprise parts two and three situate themselves more centrally in practical concerns. Chapter 5, "Service-Learning: An Exportable Pedagogy," by Margaret Brabant warns that, however carefully one must prepare local service-learning projects to ensure they result in genuinely educative experiences, the challenges are even greater when one attempts to link service-learning to study abroad. This is due to no small extent to the fact that the service-learning movement is "particularly imbued with western [sic] concepts of citizenship, democracy, service, and social justice" (p. 109). Thus, an international service-learning experience may well involve additional kinds and layers of cognitive dissonance. To demonstrate her point, she briefly considers some of the complications that service-learning in Turkey has to contend with, including a concept of citizenship in which male military service is seen as "the penultimate civic duty" (p. 119).

"Collegiate Service-Learning: Perspectives on Legal Liability," by Marin Dupuis, Melody A. Bowdoin, and Sarah Schwemin, not only provides perspectives on the legal concept of liability as it pertains to colleges and universities but also makes spe-

cific suggestions for minimizing risk. One recommendation in particular would be very hard for many service-learning programs to follow, namely that "[t]he university should generally not provide transportation or arrange travel for the student" (p. 146). Since questions of liability are almost always raised when service-learning programs are started or significantly expanded, this chapter can provide a readily available jumping-off point for more institution- and situation-specific policy discussions.

In a chapter entitled "Service-Learning and the Culture of Ableism," Pamela J. Gent presses the service-learning community to take ableism or discrimination against people with disabilities as seriously as it takes sexism and racism. For Gent this means far more than simply recognizing that people with disabilities can "serve" just as well as those without. It also means recognizing the full range of disabilities that exist in our society, disabusing ourselves of the assumption that people with disabilities necessarily see themselves as less capable or even less fortunate, and, perhaps most challenging of all, rejecting the impulse to create a "hierarchy" of impairments"—a construct so pervasive it appears to exist "even amongst people with impairments" (p. 225). For Gent, a hierarchy among impairments is as unacceptable as a hierarchy between people with and without impairments. Were the field as a whole to adopt this position and regard all impairments as equal, the practical implications for service-learning practice—i.e., how activities are actually structured—would be truly daunting.

Two chapters, one in part two and one in part three, focus on specific higher education programs, though only one actually identifies the host institution by name. In "Service-Learning: A Student's Perspective and Review," Angela Perkey discusses her experiences as a first-year Sharpe Scholar at the College of William and Mary. Perkey is not afraid to identify specific practices that did not work from a student's point of view, and I would like to think her honesty and insights will alert other organizers of edited volumes to the importance of making room for student contributors. As I and my co-editors, Nicholas Longo and James Williams, tried to demonstrate in our own edited volume, *Students as Colleagues: Expanding the Circle of Service-learning Leadership* (2006), student initiative and student voice have an essential role to play in the field's attempts to take service-learning to the next level. The fact that Perkey identifies insufficient room for student initiative and ownership of project outcomes (pp. 213-14) as areas needing attention would seem to corroborate this diagnosis.

In Sharon M. Livingston's "Virtual Adoption of Service-Learning Through Controlled Discourse,"

chapter four, what is at issue is not how to improve a college-level service-learning program but why an unnamed institution that seemed poised to make service-learning central to its operations failed to do so. Her analysis points to many factors: the "absence of a change initiative strategic plan" (p. 96), inadequate communication among stakeholders, inadequate faculty leadership, and "differing goals and motivations" (p. 98) among those involved. Ultimately, all these factors can be linked to the issue of who "control[s] the discourse" (p. 101) of the change process. As Livington summarizes her findings: "[I]n the end, [the university's] attempt to centralize service-learning failed because the power of the dominant narrative was not taken into consideration from the outset..." (p. 102).

The chapters reviewed above comprise all of parts one and two, as well as one chapter in part three and another in part four. The two remaining chapters in part three deal with explorations of youth development and student voice in K-12 settings, and I found them among the most appealing—and effective—in the volume. In chapter 7, "Youth Development in Traditional and Transformational Service-Learning Programs," Matthew A. Diemer, Adam M. Voight, and Cyndi Mark explore the relationship between service-learning and youth development theory. They consider two models, one "traditional" and the other "transformative," with the key difference between them being that "the former describes development adaptive to and operating within the status quo, whereas the latter is interested in developmental processes that contribute to changing the status quo" (p. 156). As the authors note, both kinds of programs have liabilities as well as benefits: "Traditional programs are less able to prepare youth to recognize and change inequitable social conditions; however, transformational programs are less able to help youth directly and tangibly meet the pressing needs of their communities" (p. 157). I found such flexibility and balance especially noteworthy because in many other chapters in the volume the "traditional"—whether in the form of more privileged groups or inherited practice—is implicitly or explicitly rejected. As I read this chapter, it also occurred to me that the inclusion of a non-academic on the authorial team might have contributed to its stylistic transparency and strategic flexibility. This is one of the few chapters I would not hesitate to recommend to a community-based colleague.

Shira Eve Epstein's "Who's in Charge? Examining the Complex Nature of Student Voice in Service-Learning Projects," chapter 8, shows similar strengths. Epstein's analysis of student voice allows neither ideology nor theory-driven method to obscure the genuine difficulty of determining what makes sense in any given situation. While she recog-

nizes student voice "as one of the eight indicators for quality service-learning practice" (p. 178), she also recognizes the complexity of any effort to move in this direction.

> Teachers do not necessarily choose to either liberate students or encourage their passivity. Dialogues about schooling that describe teachers as either fostering or curtailing student empowerment can misrepresent the nuanced work of teaching and classroom life. There are many reasons why authority and voice should be viewed as complicated ideals. (p. 179)

She then examines two cases illustrating that complexity and concludes her chapter with a statement that all educational researchers might take to heart:

> I intend for this research to encourage teachers to consider the multiple, and possibly contradictory, ways their authority shapes educational environments and service-learning projects specifically. Without attention to the limitations of any one ideal—in this case, "voice"—the ideal can become mythic and untenable…. (p. 198)

Epstein's chapter is another I would not hesitate to recommend to multiple service-learning constituencies. She writes in a style that promotes rather than impedes comprehension.

The three remaining chapters in part four (which opens with Gent's essay on ableism) also have a lot in *common*, perhaps most obviously, a strong and explicit concern with social justice. Central to chapter 11, "A Critical Connection Between Service-learning and Urban Communities: Using Critical Pedagogy to Frame the Context," by Nicole Webster, one of the volume's editors, and Heather Coffey, is the critical pedagogy of Paolo Freire (1970). According to Webster and Coffey, a "critical pedagogy of service-learning involves an entirely new orientation"—at least when utilized in the context of urban youth: it "must be centered on dialogic interactions"; it must foster an "integrated approach to theory and practice"; and it must not only "validate students' experiences and values [but], more importantly, situate the experience at the center of the classroom content and process in ways that problematize it…" (p. 251). However, the authors also concede that one can arrive at such practices without "necessarily advocate[ing] or practice[ing] critical pedagogy" (p. 251), and I would suggest that an analogous parallel exists between the best service-learning practice and what we know about highly effective teaching in general (Zlotkowski & Duffy, 2010). In the specific instance of critical pedagogy the authors examine here, mostly White, female pre-service teachers volunteered to participate in a service-learn-

ing project at a Children's Defense Fund Freedom School. Their gains in social and pedagogical awareness seem to have been impressive. Unfortunately, as Webster and Coffey note, "whether [a] Freirean approach…is completely possible in a classroom context remains to be seen" because the current emphasis on standardized testing makes it difficult "to justify such a student-centered and dialogic approach" (p. 253).

The next chapter, "Discourse of Advocacy: Student Learners' Critical Reflections of Working with Spanish-Speaking Immigrant Students," by Chiu-Hui (Vivian) Wu and Robert L. Dahlgren, also draws heavily on Critical Theory and the work of Paolo Freire (1970). Indeed, much of the chapter's introductory material covers the same ground as that covered in chapter 11. But Wu and Dahlgren are ultimately interested in Discourse Analysis, so the frame they provide is even more extensive—14 out of 28 pages of text. The rest of their chapter they devote to a case study of the discourse of four students who participated in a service-learning project as part of an ESOL methods course. The students volunteered to work on language acquisition skills with children in two Hispanic families, and the researchers then analyzed the students' discourse in reporting on their experience. While there may well be a level of subtlety in Wu and Dahlgren's analysis that I missed, much of what their theory-based method yields would also seem to be achievable through the kind of close reading skills once expected of all accomplished English majors.

Furthermore, the very strength of their theoretical interests seems to marginalize other considerations. For example, the two study participants who exhibited "critical reflection" deemed suitably resistant to the "dominant ideology" (p. 283) were single women around 30 working with a single Hispanic mother while the two whose reflection was found to be insufficiently aware of "how forms of oppression shape an immigrant's social realities" (p. 291) were a 21-year-old male and an Asian-American immigrant in her forties working with a two-parent Hispanic family. Is it not important to consider the interpersonal differences between these two situations in deciding how and why the discourse of each of the four participants either reflected or failed to reflect sufficient agency to promote change? I suspect most of us in the field of service-learning would agree that among our first priorities must be a determination to deal with the full complexity of our students' experiences.

In the final chapter of part four, "Service *Loitering*: White Pre-Service Teachers Preparing for Diversity in an Underserved Community," Valerie Hill-Jackson and Chance W. Lewis make the not implausible claim that "At primarily White institutions…there is a

model of service that is focused on a missionary or savior perspective of outreach" (p. 303). Under such circumstances, "service is about delivering a product and less about the process of introspection and personal growth" (p. 302). Deep-seated prejudices may not be expressed, but they remain firmly in place. The authors explore this incongruity between product and process via a case study in which a largely White group of pre-service teachers undertook a project with a local African-American museum. Ostensibly the project was a success but data gathered from the White students' journals revealed considerable resistance and resentment throughout the experience. Indeed, "[s]tudents' dispositions had not changed since the beginning of the course, even though they had gained new experience about the Black experience in America and the region" (p. 309). The authors conclude that "Whiteness positionality is an overlooked issue in…service-learning and teacher education" (p. 310) and simply must be addressed: "Preparing White pre-service teachers for diversity must be our grandest project in the field because they are teaching the growing population of diverse learners in America's classrooms" (p. 314). This chapter provides an important wake-up call to all of us who would like to believe that our majority White students' "successful" work with minorities signals significant inner growth. It may just as well signal nothing more than a technically successful project.

Part five of *Problematizing Service-Learning* rounds off the collection with two very different essays. In the first, "Reflections on Scholarship and Engaged Scholarship: A Call to the Field," Robin J. Crews seeks to clarify our understanding of the scholarship of engagement and identify "how it might contribute to transformation both within and beyond our institutions of higher education" (p. 333). Revisiting Ernest Boyer's two seminal texts, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990) and "The Scholarship of Engagement" (1996), Crews argues that "the scholarship of engagement" is neither another term for the "scholarship of application" nor a fifth and discrete kind of scholarship to be added to the four Boyer proposes in Scholarship Reconsidered. Instead, it is one or more of those four types—discovery, integration, application, and teaching and learning—"that involves collaboration between faculty and community…partnership and reciprocity, and a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources" (p. 330).

This definition raises an interesting question. Given that the editors chose to include Crews's essay in their volume's final section, did they thus mean to imply the preceding 13 chapters should be taken as examples of the scholarship of engagement? Despite the editors' claim that the volume's "[a]uthors include community organization representatives" (p. xv), in point of fact very few of the chapters can claim any kind of community authorship. Nor are most of the chapters written in a way that makes them accessible to community members without an academic background. What exactly is the relationship between the scholarship of engagement and service-learning scholarship in which an academic, acting on his/her own initiative and without community involvement, has taken an abstract theory, applied it to a community situation, and published it in a book unlikely to be read widely in community circles?

Part five's second chapter, the last in the book, clearly does speak to the identity of the volume's essays—though not with regard to the scholarship of engagement. In "Service-Learning Research: Returning to the Moral Questions," Peter Levine both recognizes and welcomes the degree to which many of those essays are driven by issues other than service-learning's pedagogical effectiveness.

> The younger scholars who have contributed to this volume have mostly not addressed the question of whether and when service-learning "works." When they "problematize service-learning," it is not—for the most part—by asking whether it is effective. Instead, they are interested in a second reason to study service-learning: as an opportunity to investigate issues such as ideology, faith, class, gender, disability status, human development, education deliberation, and politics. (p. 344)

And yet, as positive as is his overall assessment of such a moral focus, Levine also makes it clear, in examining specific passages from two chapters, that "moral intuitions" (p. 345) can be and should be carefully deliberated and assessed. Obviously, assessing an essay's moral positions involves a very different set of considerations than those that would help us decide whether it can be said to exemplify the scholarship of engagement. Such an assessment is, however, no less interesting, and no less central to our work as scholars.

In concluding this review I would like to congratulate the editors for overcoming their apprehensions "as to how the book would be received" (p. xx) and for guiding it to publication. Not only have they succeeded in bringing together a collection of thoughtful and challenging essays that enrich the field, but they have also provided a much needed platform for younger scholars to begin to assume leadership positions in a movement that is, I believe, as important as or even more important than any other in contemporary higher education. In the spirit of their own recommendation that readers must "challenge the field; hold authors accountable for their conclusions; present alternative perspectives, theories, and models;

and disrupt complacency by creating disequilibrium" (pp. xx-xxi), I have not hesitated to disagree with positions taken in individual chapters or to indicate where an argument or its presentation needs to be modified in some way to be more effective. However, even in the case of chapters with which I felt less resonance, I never for a moment doubted the scholarly commitment and moral engagement of the authors. With little difficulty this entire review could have dealt with only one—any one—of the book's five parts without exhausting the questions it raises. To have produced a volume that stimulating is no small achievement.

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