Knowledge, Foundations, and Discourse:
Philosophical Support for Service-Learning*

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For some time now advocates of service-learning in higher education have been arguing for a change in pedagogy without the support of arguments for a change in epistemology. However, if we wish to rethink the way we teach and learn, then we need to rethink the way we know. This article is an effort to support service-learning pedagogy at the level of philosophy. The author describes and critiques the theory of knowledge that undergirds conventional pedagogy in higher education. He then presents pragmatism as an alternative epistemology that illuminates the contextual nature of knowledge and that affirms community, diversity, and engagement as pedagogical virtues. He concludes with brief comments on the significance and limitations of philosophical inquiry for advancing service-learning as a pedagogy and as a movement.

In an earlier article, I used the Kuhnian metaphor of “scientific revolution” to describe service-learning in relation to the pedagogies and concepts of knowledge most typical of American higher education (Liu, 1995; see Kuhn, 1962). I hinted at some of the ways in which service-learning signals a departure from traditional academics, and I suggested that service-learning may constitute a shift in educational paradigm. I learned from many colleagues that this latter notion resonates with what they understand service-learning to be and why they use it.

It is tempting to believe that service-learning is reshaping our understanding of education in important and dramatic ways. Yet practice still varies considerably at the program level, and we continue to struggle for a definition of service-learning that is authentic enough to elicit broad consensus and usage in the field. As a consequence, service-learning has appeared to lack rigor, and it fails to penetrate mainstream educational practice on most campuses.

I believe service-learning will continue to be viewed suspiciously in academia as long as we speak of it as an alternative pedagogy without clarifying the nature of its underlying epistemology. For the most part, we have been making arguments for a change in pedagogy without the support of arguments for a change in epistemology. The premise of this article is that education takes place within an epistemological frame: If we wish to rethink the way we teach and learn, then we need to rethink the way we know.

This article is primarily philosophical. It is an attempt to describe the theory of knowledge that undergirds conventional pedagogy, to criticize that theory, and to propose an alternative epistemology that affirms the pedagogical value of service-learning. Specifically, I discuss foundationalism and dualism as the key pillars of our mainstream intellectual heritage. I challenge these concepts and offer a positive alternative, drawing from Richard Rorty’s Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979). Rorty, who identifies himself as an heir to the work of John Dewey, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, expands the implications of Thomas Kuhn’s history of science into a comprehensive theory of knowledge. The epistemology he proposes is an extension of the philosophical tradition called pragmatism, whose contemporary advocates include Jurgen Habermas, Hilary Putnam, and Cornel West. Pragmatism’s preoccupation with discourse, I argue, illuminates the contextual nature of knowledge and implicates community, diversity, and engagement as pedagogical virtues.

Traditional Epistemology:
The “Received” View

I begin by describing the theory of knowledge that we have inherited from Western post-Enlightenment philosophy. This tradition actually consists of not one but several theories of kno-