The Irony of Service: Charity, Project and Social Change in Service-Learning

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This paper explores a common understanding of service as a term encompassing a continuum from charity to social change and describes the implications this understanding has for service-learning in higher education. Based upon a review of alternative theories, a student survey and interviews with practitioners, the author argues that there exists a series of related but distinct community service paradigms—charity, project and social change—each with its own logic, strengths, limitations and vision of a transformed world. Integrity in service-learning, it is suggested, comes not by moving from charity to social change, but from working with increasing depth in a particular paradigm.

...an ironic situation occurs when the consequences of an act are diametrically opposed to its intentions, and the fundamental cause of the disparity lies in the actor himself and his original purposes.

Reinhold Niebuhr (in Gene Wise, American Historical Explanations)

A significant body of research on the impacts of community service on college student development and academic learning has begun to emerge during the past five years. While it is clearly not conclusive nor complete—longitudinal studies on the relationship between or among service-learning and mastery of content, career choice, voting behavior, charitable giving and activity in civic and voluntary associations are noticeably absent—the evidence suggests that community service linked to academic study is an effective teaching tool. (Boss, 1994; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993)

As valuable and reasonably consistent as the emerging data is, it does not shed much light on the nature and meaning of the community service that is performed. A common language for discussing service is only slowly emerging in service-learning organizations, and it is an abbreviated and blunt language at present. Questions are being raised about how one assesses community impact, beyond the rudiments of volunteer hours and being invited back. In addition, it is increasingly common to come across, at conferences and meetings (e.g. of the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, the National Society for Experiential Education and Campus Compact), language that describes a continuum of activity ranging from service to advocacy.

Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler (1994a) of Vanderbilt University, among others, have launched an ambitious and necessary three-year research project that attempts to isolate the duration and intensity of service as variables in student development and learning. Drawing on a theory of experiential education grounded in the philosophy of John Dewey (194b), they outline a research agenda of nine fundamental questions. The first two of these questions are the subject of this paper: “Is there a continuum of service-learning experiences?” and “Do different service-learning experiences have different impacts because of individual characteristics?” (pp. 92-93).

Answers to these questions are important because they suggest that service experiences may be optimally structured to enhance learning. In the pages that follow, I describe my reflections on these questions, review a cross-section of related theoretical literature, and report on our approach to creating a new public and community service major at Providence College. Among other considerations in creating the major has been the problem of how to structure service opportunities. As a partial response to this problem I have begun to systematically interview students, faculty, administrators and community partners about the nature and meaning of their work. The preliminary evidence, I will suggest, does not sup-