

## Review Essay

# Challenges and Possibilities: Linking Social Justice and Service-Learning

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### *Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change*

Susan Benigni Cipolle  
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The connections between service-learning and social justice are sometimes assumed to be natural and obvious (Jacoby, 1996; Rosenberger, 2000; Warren, 1998). The idea behind this assumption is that participation in community service, regardless of the activity, illuminates community problems and engages students in activities designed to address (if not ameliorate) these problems. However, research has debunked this assumption. Demonstrating instead that students sometimes leave service-learning experiences with stereotypes reinforced and with little understanding of the systemic nature of social problems (Boyle-Baise, 1998; Green, 2001; Vaccaro, 2009), service-learning is not always the transformative pedagogy we imagine it to be.

Susan Cipolle, in her new book, *Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change*, is asking educators to embrace the social justice orientation that drives many to service-learning pedagogy in the first place. She advocates for and presents a social justice model of service-learning based on her experiences weaving “multicultural education, Catholic social teachings, service-learning, and critical pedagogy” (p. vii).

Prompted by her background as a teacher in a Catholic school and her belief that education is “an act of social justice” (p. 8), Cipolle offers “a road map to social change through service-learning” (p. 9). Through this text, she guides readers through theory and practice to build a service-learning program that “fosters students’ critical consciousness and their commitment to engage in social change” (p. xi).

This book is timely. In a recent *New York Times* article, Joseph Kahne explained that most service and service-learning programs “pay least attention” to the kinds of experiences that would best develop a student’s orientation toward justice (Tugend, 2010). Cipolle’s book aims to support educators developing service-learning courses that might develop what Kahne calls “justice-oriented citizens,” those people

“who examine causes and possible solutions for society’s ills” (Tugend, 2010).

The three-stage process Cipolle outlines includes: becoming committed to service, becoming committed to social justice, and developing a critical consciousness. She contends that accurate information, constructive service experiences, and critical reflection are the key strategies supporting students through this process. As students develop a more complex view of the world, Cipolle argues, they move from a framework where they understand the need for service in terms of individual deficits to “an institutional, systemic view of the causes of injustice and inequity” (p. 11).

As is common with developmental models, Cipolle’s social justice service-learning model is presented as linear and directional, though she acknowledges that this is an unlikely path. In truth, she concedes, developing a critical consciousness through social justice service-learning is slow, and students may move back and forth through the stages as they continue to confront the dissonance created by their once held views and the reality they are coming to understand. “We begin to alter our view of others, the world, and ourselves as we come to see how society is based on dominant and subordinate groups and how power and privilege are used to maintain the status quo” (p. 49). As students move through this dissonance, they choose to involve themselves in problem-solving, advocacy-oriented service experiences that might, through their actions, create social change.

While Cipolle uses data from interviews with alumni of the Benilde St. Margaret’s School service-learning program to inform her theory of social justice service-learning, the alumni are not really the focus of the book. Cipolle, instead, focuses on educators, and treats those of us reading as the primary actors. She is, in essence, challenging us to take up the cause of social justice education and encouraging us by outlining clear strategies to do this work. Cipolle wants us to

move from a model of service-learning that sees service as an individual act of charity that often perpetuates the status quo to an understanding of service-learning as collective action with the community served where students “reflect on targets and agents of multiple systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, and others) and examine what they can do to combat oppression” (p. 14). She reminds us that this requires not only a change in how we teach, but a commitment as well to developing in ourselves the critical consciousness (which for Cipolle is founded in a commitment to anti-racist action) we desire in our students. While Cipolle offers a “road map” to implementing her social justice service-learning model with effective visuals and useful examples explaining the practice she envisions, the text would be stronger if she offered more tools and personal examples for helping educators develop the self-awareness and consciousness of self and others she sees as essential to this practice.

Cipolle separates the book into two halves, the first explaining the theory she’s designed for social justice service-learning and the second showing practical steps for implementing these experiences. The practical steps Cipolle offers, however, are not necessarily based in her theory, but instead reviews the literature of best practices in service-learning and K-12 teaching. She uses the “K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice” adopted by the National Youth Leadership Council (2008) to help readers think about improving their practice. This review, while useful, does little to advance the social justice service-learning model Cipolle promotes. The section on higher education is more explicit in connecting to the model, as Cipolle uses a course she taught, “Infusing Multiculturalism and Critical Pedagogy in Catholic Schools,” informed by the social justice service-learning model, as an example to explore its implementation. The practices Cipolle introduces to promote the development of critical consciousness, especially co-creation of the curriculum and situated learning, are especially useful as Cipolle demonstrates exactly how this was done in the class she taught. The example also has its challenges, however, since the graduate level course met once a month for six hours over a six-month period and all the students were classroom teachers. The timeline of the class, combined with the students’ life experience and role as educators, plays significantly in the developmental aspects of critical consciousness and, therefore, makes this experience hard to generalize to or replicate with other student populations and course designs.

Discussing the service-learning aspects of this course, Cipolle writes:

In this course, students researched poverty and homelessness and then prepared and served meals at an adult drop-in center, after which there was group discussion and individual reflection. Due to the time spent learning and reflecting, the service-learning experience had a powerful impact on the students, which advanced them in their critical-consciousness development. (p. 98)

However, in a surprising turn for a model that emphasizes relationship and care with the community served as key aspects of critical consciousness development, the students only spent one day in their community placement. The amount of time needed in community to achieve particular outcomes in service-learning courses is unclear. Many, including Cipolle, advocate for a “sustained relationship” (Donahue, Boyer, & Rosenberg 2003; Jones & Hill, 2001; Levinson, 1990; Mitchell, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), though some research studies have shown significant results for students with as few as 12-15 hours in the community (Mabry, 1998; Nokes, Nickitas, Keida, & Neville, 2005; Worrell-Carlisle, 2005). Cipolle acknowledges that a “one-time service opportunity can often be problematic and result in unintended consequences, such as reinforcing stereotypes or using the population served for one’s own personal growth” (p. 103), but she believes that the foundation already laid through critical multiculturalism and bolstered by effective preparation for and interactive debriefing of the service experience created an experience where students were able to progress “to more complex understandings and a greater commitment to educational praxis for social justice” (p. 106). But, if this is the case, how are we defining social justice in service-learning? Is student learning about power, privilege, and injustice sufficient for the label social justice service-learning or must community impact and reciprocity be factors, too?

The most important revelation from this course example is perhaps how difficult it is to implement the social justice service-learning model. Is it possible to lay a foundation of critical consciousness development that allows students to increase their understanding and awareness of self and others while also participating in a community service experience that provides an opportunity to build authentic relationships with community members? Can the service experience simultaneously be a site for student learning and an opportunity for meaningful change in the community? Cipolle may not provide an example that fully actualizes the model she presents, but she continually reminds us that it is important to work toward a service-learning practice that has an intentional social justice aim.

Cipolle devotes an entire chapter advocating for

institutional support of service-learning. Beginning with a deliberate program design, moving to staff (“service-learning coordinator”) and financial support, and concluding with the institution’s mission, Cipolle argues that the key to a strong service-learning program, and especially one focused on social justice, is institutional support. I believe the emphasis on institutionalization, evidenced by increasing membership in Campus Compact and the creation of the Community Engagement classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is one that seems to have been embraced by much of the field, though it is useful to have the focus on institutional support and program sustainability outlined so clearly in the text.

The appreciation and credit Cipolle offers Benilde-St. Margaret’s service-learning coordinator (Lisa Lenhart-Murphy) is such an important moment in this book. Service-learning coordinators are frequently invisible in much of the literature about service-learning practice. Cipolle takes the time to highlight the very important role of the service-learning coordinator in making sure that effective community engagement work happens. From the development of community partnerships to successful fundraising and grantwriting, from faculty development to assessment and evaluation, Cipolle makes it clear that a service-learning coordinator is essential to building and sustaining a successful program.

There is much I admire and take from Cipolle’s charge for a social justice service-learning program. Her connection to critical pedagogy, multicultural education, and a service-learning pedagogy that is intentional and explicit in its social justice orientation resonates deeply. However, I found myself questioning the assumptions Cipolle uses to guide her model’s development.

The author’s framework for this theory is informed primarily by her experiences as a teacher at Benilde-St. Margaret’s School and as a student and faculty member in a graduate program at a small Catholic university. It is clear from the discussion of her experiences that her classrooms were not very racially diverse and that she is inspired to create effective learning experiences for the students she most frequently encounters — White students. She is explicit about this emphasis (which is in many ways refreshing), naming “White critical consciousness development” one of the processes important to the social justice service-learning model. But what this means is that Cipolle significantly narrows the audience to whom this model is applicable. While figures vary by district, state, and other factors, few of us are teaching to predominantly White student bodies.

Dan Butin (2006) warned, “the overarching assumption is that the students doing the service-

learning are White, sheltered, middle-class, single, without children, un-indebted, and between ages 18 and 24” and that we have targeted service-learning pedagogy to the needs of this “ideal type” (p. 481). But the demographics of our classrooms are changing rapidly, and to continue with this assumption is not useful to advancing our practice toward the social justice aims for which Cipolle advocates.

So what are we to do with a model of service-learning that relies on “encounters with otherness?” Cipolle’s model is focused on a student body whose “exposure” to diversity is limited and for whom service with diverse individuals will inspire a more racially conscious existence. But what if it doesn’t work? Examples certainly exist (Boyle-Baise 1998; Green 2001; Vacarro, 2009) where White students engaged in service with racially different groups only to end the experience with reinforced stereotypes and deficit notions, and where practitioners feared their students did more harm than good in the community. Other examples show that in diverse service-learning classrooms, where White students are trying to understand their newly discovered privilege and the possibility that the issues impacting the community served are not simply self-made but systemic, the students of color in those classrooms suffer (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009). Can Cipolle’s social justice service-learning model, with its primacy on White critical consciousness development, be adapted for a diverse classroom? What does social justice service-learning look like for students of color? I am not suggesting that the work to develop social justice allies (especially amongst White privileged students) is not important, but instead that we need to find ways to do this work where White students and students of color (not to mention students in other privileged and marginalized categories) can be challenged and supported in developing their consciousness and commitments across multiple dimensions of identity and experience.

Cipolle writes from an assumption that the readers of this book already subscribe to her worldview: Those who feel our society is unjust and in need of repair, and that today’s students can be equipped with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to challenge and change the systems and structures that perpetuate injustice. And while this is a view to which I (and I am sure many others) can easily agree, Cipolle also privileges a particular audience through this work. While her transparency about this audience is appreciated and the reasons behind this focus are admirable, the reality of our increasingly diverse campus populations requires a pedagogy that speaks to more than the consciousness of White students.

Despite these shortcomings, Cipolle’s work provides encouragement (“start small and keep moving forward”) and a framework to actualize an idea often

voiced in service-learning practice. Her analysis speaks to the larger questions with which we have not yet sufficiently wrestled: What are our assumptions about social justice? How do we honor the experience and insight many of our students bring and many of our students do not bring, as a result of inequity, marginalization, and privilege? How do we acknowledge the impact of privilege on ourselves and others and build a commitment to engage differently in the world? I believe in a service-learning pedagogy focused on social justice aims that challenges and changes the systems and structures that create inequality and perpetuate injustice, and that asks students to examine their biases and assumptions, to acknowledge privilege, and to open their minds and hearts to a new possibility for themselves and the world. Revising our pedagogy to operationalize these ideas can lead service-learning to be Cipolle's vision of a "counter hegemonic educational practice that results in transformative social action" (p. vii).

### Notes

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