“But You Aren’t White:” Racial Perceptions and Service-Learning

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This article argues that teaching the implications of white privilege is crucial in service-learning courses, particularly when most of the students are white and most of those being served are of color. It also considers the ethical implications of race in service-learning.

Much of the writing on service-learning has documented how service-learning affects students’ perceptions of “the other.” Service-learning, it is argued, makes students more “ethically committed” and interested in democracy (Cooper & Julier, 1997), provides students with an opportunity to explore multiculturalism (Rhoads, 1998), and engages students in the work of the “public intellectual” (Cushman, 1999). These are all important and thoughtful goals for service-learning, but much of the writing focuses on the abstract and the ideal, what happens in our service-learning classes on our best teaching days with the students who “get it.” In arguing for service-learning, we often gloss over the difficulties that students have performing service in places where they are uncomfortable, where poverty is not pretty or idealized. The service-learning student can feel disconnected, angry, frustrated, and recognize, for the first time, that service-learning is not an experience that immediately makes one “feel good.” The faculty member teaching service-learning can also feel angry and frustrated, and if she is committed to multicultural education, recognize, for the first time, that teaching about race, particularly whiteness within the course, made it easier for students to talk with one another about race and class and to problematize their own agendas for social justice.

In the fall of 2000, through a small grant, our Writing Center began reaching out to the community through intensive work with a local, Catholic middle school, Our Mother of Sorrows (OMS). This work continued the long history with OMS that our Faith/Justice Institute began. In my class, rather than tutoring in the university Writing Center, each tutor worked on a weekly basis with a fifth or a sixth grader at OMS on his or her writing. The tutoring class had 14 students: 4 students of color (3 African American women and 1 Filipino American man) and 10 white women. Each week, the tutors took field notes on their experiences at OMS, and during the second half of the semester, I went out with the students to tutor and observe the tutoring.

OMS is located in an inner city, urban community, a five-minute drive from our university. The OMS brochure provided for prospective parents states that it “provide[s] hope and quality education for hundreds of disadvantaged youth in our . . . community.” 75% of the students who attend OMS are at or below the poverty level. What the OMS brochure does not say is that virtually all of the students who attend are African American. The local Jesuit University where I teach has a long commitment to social justice work and the Jesuit ideals of “men and women for others.” The University students, in contrast with the students who attend
OMS, are 92% white and 2.4% are African American. The average income of families who send their children to my university is $73,000 per year. The contrast between the tutors and the OMS children is one of both race and class. In addition to teaching tutors how to work with student writing — the goal of any tutor training class — it was extremely important to me to find ways to get the tutors to think intensively about race and class. Because race and class are taboo subjects in most contexts, we frequently discussed and wrote about why these topics were difficult to address.

Two things make this service-learning work extremely important and unique: our long-term goals of deepening, strengthening, and sustaining our relationship with OMS, and the responsibility that our university has to the local community. Our Faith/Justice Institute is committed to long-term, collaborative work with OMS (and other service-learning sites). This effort to collaborate means that our relationship with OMS, and the responsibility we have to the OMS students. It also means considering how race and class affect the students of color who tutor have a different subject position and bring different strengths to tutoring than our majority, white population.

As I thought about the course, I considered that because tutors would be working directly with African American children, race, on the one hand, would automatically be foregrounded. On the other hand, because it is so difficult to talk about race and because often students will avoid talking about it, we needed to become part of the course in a more fundamental way. So on the syllabus race, class, gender, and writing were listed as areas we would discuss, and throughout the semester, we explicitly worked on these issues. In the past I encouraged writing tutors to explore their own writing processes as individuals. In the service-learning course, we read more theoretically and broadly in educational theory about writing, and I encouraged students to explore their own writing processes through race, class, gender, and their relationships to the larger community.

In this way, the course I taught was similar to the one described by Gail Okawa and Thomas Fox (1991) in that I “specifically advocated critical reflection” and emphasized “conscious explorations of language within a society stratified by race and cultural background and the implications of this social context for education” (p. 12). In order to do this work, students’ response papers were often related to their service. One goal was to find ways to teach students about structural racism. Rather than teaching students about racism as an individual psychological problem and emphasizing that racists can be “cured” through education, I attempted to show students how racism is a structure embedded in institutions that people of color encounter on a daily basis. This structural analysis of racism assumes that how white people view race rests on their vested interest in justifying their power and privileges” (Sleeter, 1993, p. 158). In order to do this, we spend a great deal of time talking about why a school like OMS has limited resources when schools less than five miles away in the suburbs have seemingly unlimited resources.

so that “we who are white can see the respect embodied therein, and learn to practice it ourselves” (Welch, 2000, p. 34). Working toward an ethic of risk has changed how I structure the peer tutoring class and affected how we continue to work with OMS. While, as Welch acknowledges, conflict is inevitable, we work to sustain relationships of productive growth for all of the participants that do not duplicate ones of exploitation and domination. In order to do this work, I find it important to teach white students about white privilege, and to acknowledge within the classroom that the students of color who tutor have a different subject position and bring different strengths to tutoring than our majority, white population.
These discussions help writing fellows recognize that the playing field is not level and, hopefully, think beyond their own service-learning experience to the larger structural changes (e.g., equal funding for inner city schools, federally funded after school programs, easier access to affordable fresh fruits and vegetables, and readily available medical care) they can advocate for as citizens in a democracy.

In addition to changing the structure of the course, I also felt it necessary to address the affective elements of the course. Because we talk about race and racism, and because most of the white students have not had the experience of being a “minority,” we work to develop a sense of trust. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1994) writes that “a safer space required high levels of trust and personal commitment to individuals in the class, gained in part through social interactions outside of class . . . opportunities to know the motivations, histories, and stakes of individuals in the class” (p. 316). She suggests that these opportunities should be available early in the semester. In an attempt to create this sense of safety, our entire class visited Project Home, a local agency that provides services for homeless people. Project Home displayed the work of a local, formerly homeless, artist, and the students wandered among the art talking with one another as they tried to interpret the images. While the art exhibit and the community agency were not in any way directly related to our course work, the time that the class spent together — carpooling to and from the exhibit, making tea and eating pizza afterward — gave the tutors time to connect. Knowing one another, knowing a bit of our histories, interests, likes and dislikes, and understanding one another’s goals facilitated class discussions of difficult topics. From that point, more students participated more often in class discussion, and before and after class students spent time talking with one another. In some cases, friendships were formed that influenced the tutoring and the class discussions that followed.

By looking at the different subject positions that tutors brought to their service-learning experiences, we explored how and why service-learning is different according to the race and class that each person brings to the service-learning site. These stories help highlight the complexity of race and class in service-learning situations. Beverly Daniel Tatum (1992), most famous for her book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, has written extensively about the phases of racial development that white students experience as they move from individual explanations for racism to a more systemic understanding. As white students become cognizant of racism as a system, Tatum argues, they move through six stages: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independent, Immersion/Emerison, and Autonomy. Tatum argues that not every white person goes through all of the six stages of racial development (some, in fact, never move out of the Contact stage), and that the stages, rather than working in a linear progression, act more like a spiral. “As a person ascends a spiral staircase,” Tatum writes, “she may stop and look down at a spot below. When she reaches the next level, she may look down and see the same spot, but the vantage point has changed” (p. 12).

Robert T. Carter (1997) further explains, “whites, while socialized in a racially constructed world, are taught not to be aware of themselves in racial terms” (p. 199). When moving through the stages of white racial identity development, a white person gradually acquires knowledge of how individual and structural racism works, but the white person can also move back and forth between stages depending on the level of comfort and discomfort that he or she encounters. An example of this is an experience I had with one of the students in my class. At the end of the Writing Fellows course, she had made great progress in understanding and deepening her understanding of race and racism, but in her recent writing about her experiences at OMS from last year, she seems to have slipped back to a “contact” stage of white racial identity development. While a year ago she could describe in detail how her race and class changed how she was received at OMS, when writing about the experience now, she has crafted a piece which does not mention race or class. While she will describe students’ “big brown eyes,” she goes to great length, rhetorically, not to mention that she is white and the students are African Americans. This regression points to the need for multiple courses in a given curriculum to highlight race. In other words, the process of white racial identity development is on-going.

Many of the white students who participated in the peer tutoring course advanced through some of the stages of white racial identity development that Tatum articulates. Many of the students of color went through a different process because, from the beginning of the tutoring project, they identified with the learners at the site. As the course progressed, the conversations about race deepened and changed. One of the most important points the course emphasized was how understanding and undoing racism are ongoing projects that are never complete. Rather than isolating race as one topic for discussion in the course, we talked about race throughout the course, and race appeared in both the students’ mini-research projects and in their
final ethnographies. Race was built into the course (rather than added on) and changed the fundamental structure of the course, connecting discussions on language, subject position, tutoring strategies, and even the writing process.

Two particular assignments asked students to reflect on their subject positions and race while tutoring at OMS. When we read Anne Dipardo’s *Whispering of Comings and Goings: Lessons from Fannie* (1995), an essay on cross-racial tutoring, students were asked to review their field notes and answer the following questions: Has cultural difference affected your interactions at OMS and if so, how? What have you noticed? What do you wonder about? What questions about literacy and writing are you developing? Later students read June Jordan’s (1985) essay on Black English, *Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan* and Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) foundational essay, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. After reading these essays, students wrote a response to the following questions: How does your race affect your tutoring? Are there particular uses of language you attribute to your race? If so, how does language work in a tutorial? The class discussion that followed the reading of the McIntosh essay was very interesting. Many white students said they had never thought about race before. When I opened the discussion by asking for a volunteer to read his or her paper, one white woman said, “I tried to do this paper, but it was just too hard. I didn’t want to think about this stuff, so I took it as a skip.” (Students were allowed to skip three papers during the semester.) One African American student, Callie, asked the white students who did not think race was important why this was so. White women reflected on how men do not see gender bias and speculated about how they might be blind to racial bias. Some of the white women who acknowledged male privilege could not acknowledge racial privilege, but began to acknowledge their own blind spots in this area. Later, Callie said it was refreshing to have a talk about race that did not focus on African Americans and race as their problem.

In a response paper, Susan, a student from a previous first year service-learning course who wrote extensively about race, analyzed how race impacted her tutoring at OMS:

> When I was working with Jennifer... she and Daryll were joking with one another and in the middle of their teasing, she said to him, “Go back to your table, you’re messin my reputation.” They were laughing and talking, meanwhile, I asked her what she meant... So Jennifer proceeded to explain herself to me, but it took me a while to really comprehend what she meant. ... Later in the conversation between Jennifer and Daryll, Jennifer turned to me and said, “I am only playin, he’s my son. I am his mom, so he knows I am only kidding.” ... According to Jennifer, the “reputation” and the reference to “mom-son” relationship she was speaking of just meant that they [Jennifer and Darryl] care about each other... Jennifer takes care of me [Susan]. She can read me well; she knows when I don’t understand something she says, senses my confusion, and takes the initiative to explain herself to me... (Susan, 10/26/00)

Susan’s writing places her in the autonomous stage of white racial identity development. She accepts racial differences and tries to listen to what the students are saying. Susan was exceptional in that she came to the class with a highly developed sense of her “whiteness” and a commitment to act as a white racial ally to work against racism. As the semester progressed, Susan became a close friend with Callie, one of the African American women in the class, and Callie and Susan had discussions outside of class about how their races affected their friendship.

The difference between Susan’s response and some of the other tutors’ responses was the level of awareness of white privilege. At the end of Susan’s essay she wrote, “The more I learn about these issues of race/gender/class etc., the more I come to disapprove of a lot of what (as a white person) my culture has done and continues to do to those of different backgrounds” (Susan, 10/26/00). Susan’s response placed Jennifer’s use of language in the broader social/cultural context of white privilege. She did not remain oblivious to white privilege or deny Jennifer’s differences or ask Jennifer to suppress her differences. Other white tutors had very different responses than Susan’s. One of the most striking of these was Ellen’s.

For the same response paper that asked students to address race, Ellen wrote:

> How does race affect my tutoring? I haven’t noticed/remembered any instances where it has affected what I’ve been trying to do. It’s not something that I sit there with the children and think about... Race isn’t something that I like to think about, or write about. I guess for me growing up it’s always had a connotation around it like, “oh, don’t talk about that” as if it were some forbidden subject. I don’t know why, but I think it has. (Ellen, 10/26/00)

Ellen expressed the fears about race as a taboo topic that many white students express; she hesitates to talk about race or to bring race up. Tatum (1992) traces this fear to childhood experiences of race and
argues that white students’ fears of discussing or acknowledging race stems from the belief that the United States is a meritocracy. By acknowledging racial differences, students confront the structural inequalities that still exist in the United States and become angry and frustrated.

Ellen’s denial of race as important came after her previous response paper about cultural differences where she wrote:

How do you spell “ghetto?” This was what one of the sixth grade OMS students asked me on my first visit there. The assignment was for them to write about themselves, i.e. describe where they live. Apparently this student felt he lived in the ghetto and blatantly said so. I don’t think I knew what the ghetto was until I came to [our university] two years ago, let alone when I was 11 or 12. (Ellen, 10/2/00)

That Ellen did not connect the word “ghetto” with the racial differences between the OMS students and herself, did not recognize that class differences had enabled her to “not know” the word “ghetto,” is typical of white students in an early stage of white racial identity development. Ellen’s description of her own mental state that “race isn’t something that I like to think about, or write about,” is typical of a white person in the contact stage of white racial identity development. Ellen asserts a kind of “color blind” read of her tutoring at OMS by denying the validity of race as a category of analysis. To her credit, Ellen was not defensive as she began to recognize the ways that race and class affected her tutoring. At the end of the semester, she was able to, as she put it, unpack her privileges in the final ethnography that students wrote about OMS. Ellen moved from an idea of racism as an individual act to the idea of racism as a structural system embedded in institutions. She was thinking hard to understand her white privilege and to “take off her blinders.”

In other ways, white tutors were continuously reminded of their race and their racial differences. During a conversation with one of the OMS students, a white tutor asked, “Why do you like Angela?” The student replied, “Oh, Angela’s cool. Angela’s black.” The student continued, looking at the white tutor, “But that’s OK, I like you, too. You’re not white.” The tutor, Margaret, brought this conversation up during class discussion, and she was both happy and confused to be told that she was “not white.” The whole event was difficult for Margaret to process, and when we discussed it with the fifth grade teacher, she said that the students often tell her that she is “not white.” When they do this, she and the students have a conversation about how whiteness does not always have to be bad or negative, and that there are good white people. Margaret struggled with the idea that whiteness was not viewed positively by the students at OMS. Initially, Margaret had felt very happy that she was seen by the OMS students as “not white,” but then she realized that despite the student’s words, that she was white, and thus different from the African American tutors who went out to OMS with her. Around this time of the semester, Margaret stopped writing field notes on her experiences at OMS. She felt frustrated with her tutoring and her work in the class. Margaret’s frustrations stemmed from her growing recognition of her whiteness and her developing white racial identity. Although Margaret and I spoke about the frustrations she experienced, she remained distant. Tatum (1992) attributes this to white students’ growing “self-awareness” that their “newly recognized racism will be revealed to others” (p. 8). In her final self-evaluation, Margaret wrote “The work of this course seems to have followed me everywhere I go this semester. I don’t know how to say this . . ., but it really honestly changed me, in ways that I probably can’t fully articulate now.” The change that Margaret experienced is part of what the service-learning experience, ideally, should bring with it; however, the pain that Margaret went through is what we often neglect to discuss in the service-learning classroom.

African American women tutors experienced their work at OMS differently. Some of the differences that the African American tutors encountered were because of their race and some were because of their class. Early in the semester, Callie, an African American senior majoring in finance, talked to me before class started.

“I’m afraid to go out to OMS,” Callie said. I was surprised. I thought many of my white tutors were afraid to go out to OMS because it was in a “bad” (read “black”) neighborhood. However, because, as Tatum documents, race is a taboo topic, none of the white students had expressed their fears. Callie was a minister’s daughter raised in an affluent New Jersey neighborhood. She had worked on other service-learning projects at a halfway house for women on parole from drug charges. I was surprised at Callie’s concern, partly because she had felt very connected to the learners at the halfway house because of her race.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Working with kids.” Other students were filtering in and waiting for class to start.

“Why are you afraid of working with kids?”

“Well . . . are they bad? I mean, I’m just afraid
that they’re bad, and I won’t know what to do.”

I reassured Callie that these were 10- and 11-year-old kids and that they were enrolled in a Catholic school. “Badness,” I assured her, was not really allowed, and if a student was bad, the tutors had teachers and Sr. Jean (the principal) to back them up. This conversation segued to a class discussion about the tutors’ fears concerning their work with fifth and sixth graders. To my surprise, the white tutors expressed anxiety, not so much about going to OMS as about telling students “the wrong” thing about their writing. Many of the white tutors recounted bad experiences that they associated with writing in middle school. Some of these experiences ended their interest in writing for some time. Different than Callie’s fear of “bad kids,” many of the white tutors worried that they would not help (and even hurt) a student’s writing.

Callie’s experience continued to be different than the white tutors because of her race and class background. The African American tutors were more willing to push the students at OMS. As Callie wrote, “When I tutor, I expect the best out of every 20 minutes that I may have with the individual student. Saying, ‘I can’t think of anything else, isn’t an option’ (Callie, 10/25/00).” While white students expressed more fears about keeping the students on task and writing (and hesitated to speak firmly to students to get them “on task”), African American students had an easier time establishing their authority with the kids. Often when white and African American tutors tutored together, the white tutors expected the African American tutors to be disciplinarians. White tutors wanted the students to like them and hesitated to tell a student to sit down and get to work. They wrote about these fears and some were eventually able to assume greater authority.

The issues were complex, however. Angela’s description of her first visit to OMS highlights how her race and class background connected her deeply to the students.

Traveling to OMS, I didn’t worry about what the school looked like or how the students there would look or be like. I’m from [the urban area where OMS is located], I have driven past this location on several occasions and I already knew what black kids would look like, after all at one point I was one. Yet, I must say Mother of Sorrows, I always thought was just some old castle building located near the Cemetery. Elsa and I were very prompt, you know the usual, first impressions. When we approached the front door of the school, I was in front of Elsa, a black woman who appeared to be about 40 opened the door. She was wearing the usual on-my-way-to-rush-the-kids-to-school outfit, sweatpants. I was not concerned with her appearance; I just had enough time to notice her for she stood in the doorway, blocking my entrance. I knew she was wondering who I was. If her mind could tell this story, she was probably thinking “who is this young black girl, I have never seen her up in here before.” That’s all it takes, that split second for one member of the black race to doubt the other. I knew this is what she was thinking by her facial expression and how it changed when Elsa’s white face came into view of the doorway, and all of a sudden this 40-year-old woman seemed welcoming. This does not upset me, for the point is I got through the door, and just in case you were wondering I did not need Elsa’s white face to get through the door but I might have been there for a couple of more seconds without it. (Angela, 10/26/00)

Angela’s description highlights the conflicts she encounters in daily life, and the conflicts she continues to experience at the service-learning site. When white students read Angela’s field notes, they were forced to reflect on why they did not often have to recognize or acknowledge their whiteness, while Angela often encountered situations where she reflected on her identity as an African American woman. While Elsa’s “white face” helped Angela get in the door, Elsa noticed several things about Angela’s race that changed the tutoring situation for her.

My race most certainly affects my experiences at OMS and I would say that it also affects my tutoring. When I work with the children, I am the only white person in the room. Angela and the kids have a bond that I don’t have because of their mutual understanding and culture. I have noticed that working with the fifth grade as the day begins, if Angela and I are sitting in the science room waiting for the first kid to come through the door, that first kid, whether boy or girl, looks at both of us and goes to Angela first . . . . It’s not intimidating but it makes me aware that I am different from everyone else in the room. I have freckles and blue eyes and I have a white personality. I can’t speak Black English authentically and if I tried I would look stupid. I am aware of myself for the first time in my life. I am sometimes uncomfortable but most of the time I just kinda feel what is going on around me. (Elsa, 10/26/00)

Elsa’s recognition of her race took place in part because her service-learning partner was African American. She is beginning to be “aware of herself for the first time” because she is beginning to recognize difference.
Like Elsa, I am also continuously developing a greater understanding of “whiteness” and how my whiteness is visible. I spent some time at OMS tutoring as well, and I worked, in particular, with a student named Sasha. During one of our tutoring sessions, Sasha, another student, and I had the following exchange:

Sean: Was I born crazy? Since I come to this school, am I crazy?

Sasha: Yeah, especially when you jump out of the garbage can during “The Wizard of Oz.”

We work for an interlude.

Sean: Sasha, Sasha, is it weird to see people with uzis in [our neighborhood]? Or people with Shotty Pippens?

Ann: What’s a Shotty Pippin?”

Sean: Yeah, in West Philly they got everything. You wouldn’t see that in the suburbs. Shotty Pippin’s a shot gun.”

Sasha: Yeah, you wouldn’t see that in the suburbs. In the suburbs black people don’t mix. Black people and the suburbs don’t mix.”

One thing that I want to point out is the disingenuousness of my question, which the students initially ignored. I know perfectly well that a “Shotty Pippin” is: a shot gun, a combination of “shot gun” and “Scotty Pippin” the basketball player. So why would I ask this question? Partly because of my whiteness. In a way, I felt as if this exchange was scripted for me. Rather than responding to uzis in the neighborhood, I responded in a typically raced and gendered way. I asked about “shotty pippins” because on some level a white woman is not supposed to know what that is. While I have grown up with guns and know the difference between a 30.06, a double barrel shot gun, a 9 mm, and a pellet gun, and could tell you why a gun would be used in one situation and not another, this was not information I could or would share with these kids. While I know enough about the NBA to recognize Scotty Pippin, my question gave me distance from the culture of African Americans in an urban setting and reinscribed me as “white.” At the end of our time together, Sasha and I spent some time talking about the differences between the “ghetto” and the “suburbs.” She explained to me that she liked where she lived and did not think she would ever leave.

The next time I worked with Sasha, she asked me what I wrote down (we wrote together and I recorded field notes at this time). I told her that I had written down “Black people and the suburbs don’t mix.” She was interested and excited that I thought her idea was important enough to write down. She said she wanted to talk more about what we talked about last time, but she would not say what she wanted to talk about, she would not say “ghetto.” And I would not, for a while, say “ghetto” either, partly, I think, because I was aware that when a white person (me) names a neighborhood a ghetto, it is very different than when an African American person who lives there names their neighborhood a ghetto. Although I knew what the word “ghetto” meant, like Ellen, I did not want to name Sasha’s home a “ghetto” because of the connotations that white people have of ghettos. And even though I recognize that “ghetto” can have different meanings in different contexts, even though I am intellectually aware of the rhetorical effect of “ghetto” for different audiences, my white sensibility intrudes. I use this example to point to how I, too, am implicated in the discourses of race, and that I also am learning about race and unlearning racism. In the words of Lisa Delpit (1997), our entire class struggled to “be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 47). As we continue this service-learning work, we will continue this struggle.

Providing African American role models to the OMS students was crucial for both the students, the tutors, and for me. The OMS students had the experience of seeing people “like them” who were successful at college; the African American tutors felt a connection with their students and they felt like they could “give something back”; and the white tutors found ways to recognize racial differences that would have been easily ignored if all of the tutors were white, all of the students were black, and none of us were brave. And for me the presence of students from different racial backgrounds in the classroom helped me to think and learn about race as well. Because of the racial makeup of the classroom, I was more easily able to embrace an ethic of risk and to practice listening. As a white teacher, it is important for me to recognize my race and to actively reflect on the role that race plays in my classroom and at the service-learning site. To do this is difficult and challenging, but necessary for those of us in positions of race and class privilege to actively work against those privileges to undo systems of domination.

The presence of students of color in the classroom made discussions of race harder for majority students to dismiss, and the ability of white and African American students to talk with one another across racial lines was, in my experience, excep-
tional. Of course, this tutoring situation was ideal and unique in several other ways. Without extensive recruiting of African American tutors and a higher percentage of students of color in the class than the overall institution’s population (around 25% of the tutors were students of color, the institutional percentage is 2.3), the kind of work we did together at OMS would not have been possible. The importance of having African American tutors was highlighted through the letters that OMS students began writing, mostly to the African American tutors. In a letter to Angela, a fifth grade student at OMS wrote:

Nov. 7, 2000

Dear Angela,

Do you like going to school at [our university]? Because I might want to go there. I want to be a Food marketing and accounting major. I love Larry’s because the cheese stakes [sic] are good. I want to be a hair dresser. My birthday is March the 1. Who is you best friend in school? My best friend is Taesha. What are you favorite classes? Mine are math and reading.

Love, Jennifer J.

One way to make service-learning work is to trouble systemic racism by interrupting the processes that generally place white service-learning students at sites of predominantly people of color. Jennifer’s letter points up the kinds of connections that service-learning students who are also students of color can make with learners of the same racial background. While white students can and do connect with learners at their sites, it is important for service-learning students to recognize that race does matter, and to think about the ways that race facilitates and limits the work that can be accomplished at the service-learning site.

For those of us at predominantly white institutions, service-learning raises particular issues about race that we need to further theorize.¹ We need to recruit students of all races and class backgrounds for our service-learning classes and to develop pedagogies that ensure these students are not asked to “represent their race” (or social class) during class discussions. Because learning to talk about race takes practice and time, race should be an explicit topic threaded throughout the semester and not simply an “extra.” When race is talked about, whiteness and white privilege should be analyzed and theorized, so that whiteness does not remain invisible as a category. In addition, when we set up service-learning sites, we should consider what those sites represent to our students.

Finding sites that serve diverse populations or assigning classes to a variety of sites that serve different racial populations would highlight how race and poverty are linked and create multiple perspectives for service-learning students.

At the institutional level, service-learning coordinators and faculty can work closely with the office of multicultural life or the campus diversity officer to support students of color in predominantly white institutions, in service-learning classes and in all classes. Several students of color with whom I have worked have reported being more comfortable at their service site than on campus. As service-learning teachers, we must acknowledge that the university community is in and of itself a community where “service” needs to be performed. Until our universities welcome difference in all of its complexity, those of us who teach service-learning courses that take students “out there” should also consider what we can do within our institutions to make conditions of equality and social justice possible.

Notes

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¹ Service-learning is truly a collaborative effort. At our institution, the service-learning program is housed in the Faith/Justice Institute.

² Both the students’ and the tutors’ names are pseudonyms. Quotes from students’ response papers are used with permission, and have been silently edited for minor grammar, punctuation, and spelling consistencies.

³ Further questions for research include: Is service-learning in and of itself a “white” construct? How is service perceived differently at Historically Black Colleges and Universities? How does a working-class or non-majority student learn about service through their church or community and do the reasons for doing service differ in non-majority or working-class communities? If poor people help other poor people, is this called “service,” or does the term automatically invoke relationships of power defined by white, middle class norms?
References


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