Differences in Faculty and Community Partners’ Theories of Learning

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Two focus groups, one comprised of faculty members and the other of staff members at community-based organizations, discussed their experiences with service-learning courses. Transcripts of these discussions were analyzed to infer the theories of learning that informed participants’ talk and to compare the theories across groups. Faculty members and community partners differed in 1) their commitment to the idea of expertise and their willingness to identify themselves as learners; 2) their attention to words or actions as evidence of learning; and 3) their tendency to represent learning as an individual or collective activity. These conceptual differences mirror the differing values and work practices of the academic and nonprofit worlds, highlighting the importance of continual communication and sensitivity in service-learning partnerships.

When we speak of service-learning as building a bridge between the campus and the community, we invoke the image of two lands separated by a stream or river. The campus is here, the community there, and the bridge permits traffic between them.

Of course the campus and the community are seldom really so separate. Especially at metropolitan universities like the one where I teach, many students have grown up, live, work, and raise their own children in the very neighborhoods we hope to serve. One of my students remembers going to daycare at the community center where we’ve formed our service-learning partnership; another works for the center’s principal corporate donor; the agency director is a graduate of our University whose last faculty partner was once her teacher.

And yet the bridge metaphor makes sense to us. We all feel that, whatever prior connections we may have had, the service-learning relationship does in fact represent a link between two worlds. For faculty, one of the most satisfying rewards of the service-learning partnership is the opportunity to glimpse a world of activities and ideas that lie outside our familiar professional realm. Both academia and the nonprofit sector are extremely complex and diverse but nevertheless identifiable subcultures characterized by distinctive values, goals, and worldviews. In the interest of maintaining respectful and productive service-learning partnerships, we continually seek to more deeply understand the two cultures, our common ground, and our differences.

This study addresses how selected members of the two cultures—a group of faculty and a group of staff members from community agencies—conceptualize the key constructs of “knowledge” and “learning.” Participants in the study took part in focus group discussions during which they talked about their experiences with service-learning. The discussion transcripts were then analyzed to infer the theories of learning that informed their talk and to compare the theories across groups.

Theoretical Framework

I distinguish between two kinds of theories: one kind that operates as theory conventionally does, supplying a lens through which the data can be viewed, and the other kind the object of study.

“Capital-T Theories of Learning” are coherent, well-developed concepts that philosophers, educational theorists, and psychologists work out over their careers; in service-learning, we rely on Theories of Learning derived from John Dewey, Paulo Freire, William Perry, and David Kolb. These theories arise in the context of an ongoing discussion about what learning is and how it occurs. In recent years, the discussion has been enriched by exchanges between cognitive psychologists, who represent learning as, “the acquisition of structures that are stored in memory” (Greeno, 1997, p. 12), and situated-learning theorists, who define learning as improved participation in communities of practice. (For the situative perspective, see, e.g., Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990. For the cognitivist critique of this perspective, see Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; 1997. A comparative overview appears in Greeno). Contrasts foregrounded in this discussion—especially between learning by means of symbolic representation and learning by means of activity, and between individual and collective learning—inform this analysis.

“Small-t working theories” are the clusters of ideas and beliefs that guide everyday behavior. It is
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commonplace to observe that every teacher is guided by theory, whether he or she knows it or not. When a community partner takes part in the educational enterprise, he or she too makes decisions and later can reflect on those decisions in light of a working theory of learning. The goal of the analysis was to uncover the participants’ working theories of learning.

The analysis depends upon two assumptions about talk. One is that participants’ talk offers a reliable basis for inferences about their ideas and beliefs. As H.P. Grice (1975) has observed in formulating the Cooperative Principle, unless there are special circumstances suggesting otherwise, we conduct conversation on the assumption that people are not trying to trick us or lie to us. Conversation is possible because people do, for the most part, speak to the point and say what they believe to be true. What someone says is not a perfect representation of what he or she thinks, but normally it is the best representation available. While the analyst should not be naïve—it is worth attending to participants’ efforts to accomplish such social goals as pleasing or impressing each other—focus-group methodology assumes that participants speak in good faith.

The second assumption is that language use varies among social groups. In my field (composition studies), the most important theoretical work of the past 20 years has been elaborating on the “discourse community” concept (Berkentrotter & Huckin, 1995; Bizzell, 1982; Porter, 1992; Swales, 1990, 1998). Briefly, a discourse community is a group of people who engage in characteristic discourse practices through which they accomplish the group’s shared objectives and perpetuate the group. As people gain membership in a discourse community, they acquire the specific group’s vocabulary and become familiar with its favored genres. Although the concepts of “discourse community” and “subculture” are not identical, they are closely related, sharing the fundamental insight that social groups engage in practices that both reflect and perpetuate their worldview.

It is reasonable, then, to hypothesize that members of two groups will differ, at least occasionally, in how they use language, and that differences in language use may reveal underlying differences in the groups’ values, goals, or beliefs. Since participants in this study were drawn from two discourse communities—university faculty and the community of local nonprofit organizations—one can hypothesize differences in the way they talk about “knowledge” and “learning” may point to differences in the theories of learning characteristic of the two groups.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the study were collected in the summer of 2000. Two focus groups were organized: one comprised of faculty who had taught service-learning courses during the 99-00 academic year and the other comprised of staff members from community agencies that had participated during the same period. The focus group participants are described in Figure 1.

A set of questions, designed to elicit information about service-learning’s impact on each group of stakeholders, guided the focus group discussions. The discussions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed using established techniques for thematic analyses of qualitative data (developing coding categories, independently coding and sorting the data, identifying repeated themes and significant

Figure 1
Faculty Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>DIVISION</th>
<th>EXPERIENCE WITH SL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheila</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>More than 20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>2 semesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Letters and Science</td>
<td>1 semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayle</td>
<td>Letters and Science</td>
<td>1 semester</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Community Partners Focus Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PSEUDONYM</th>
<th>COMMUNITY AGENCY</th>
<th>EXPERIENCE WITH SL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nellie</td>
<td>Alcohol and drug treatment center</td>
<td>Several semesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Mediation center</td>
<td>1 semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Program to assist immigrant families</td>
<td>1 semester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Program to assist immigrant families</td>
<td>1 semester</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
patterns, triangulating through comparison with other data sources). In the course of this analysis, it was noted that the two groups appeared to be operating with different conceptions of “knowledge” and “learning.”

With that observation in mind, I returned to the data and reanalyzed them to investigate two questions:

- Assuming that participants operate with reasonably coherent working theories of learning, what are the beliefs and understandings that characterize these theories?
- Do the theories of faculty as a group differ from those of community partners? How?

The analysis undertaken for this study involved three steps. First, utterances relevant to the new research questions were isolated. This reduced the data by more than half, rendering it manageable for fine-grained analysis: 5,542 words drawn from the faculty transcript and 4,162 words from the community partners transcript were examined. Second, specific themes associated with “learning” were identified and used as categories for coding the data. Third, as patterns became visible—that is, as it became possible to see common threads characteristic of each participant’s talk about learning—several dimensions of difference (for example, “learning is sudden vs. learning is continual”) were identified, locating the participants’ positions along a continuum. Group differences became visible when, along a salient dimension of difference, the faculty and the community partners tended to sit at opposite ends of the continuum.

Three observed differences warrant the attention of service-learning practitioners and researchers. Faculty participants and community partners differed in 1) their willingness to identify themselves as learners; 2) their attention to words or actions as evidence of successful learning; and 3) their tendency to represent learning as an individual or collective activity.

Theories of Learning: Shared Themes

We have, in our culture, a default theory of learning which goes something like this: X is something knowable. First you do not know X. Then learning occurs: you read X, somebody tells you X, or some experience makes you aware of X. So now you know X. When we say “learning,” what we mean at bottom is movement from not-knowing to knowing. This conception can be captured with a spatial metaphor: one’s knowledge base expands, the territory of the known growing larger as the boundary of the unknown recedes. At one point or another, all participants in the study demonstrated commitment to this commonsense view of learning.

But in both focus groups, as participants shared their thoughts throughout the afternoon, they introduced other views which varied in their congruence with the default theory and with each other. Some ideas that emerged to complicate the default theory were:

1. People learn when they gain deeper understanding of a concept. When we think of learning this way, the spatial metaphor is revised; instead of a widening circle, we visualize a movement downward—toward the heart of a concept, toward the heart of a learner. Participants in both groups asserted that, when students supplement reading with service-learning experiences, they understand course concepts more deeply.

2. Disciplinary expertise involves general knowledge that has relevance in multiple contexts. Participants in both groups valued disciplinary expertise.

3. Knowledge of local circumstances is also necessary to effective action. Participants appeared to value local knowledge but did not afford it the status of “expertise.”

4. Learning involves making connections—connections among ideas, among people, and between theory and practice.

5. Reality is complex, and the reality of everyday life in a community organization is often chaotic. Participants in both groups asserted that service-learning gains its value in part from students’ exposure to “messiness” and “ambiguity.” Both groups acknowledged a difference between learning in school, where we make an effort to organize knowledge into digestible pieces, and learning in the community, where students dive into reality.

6. Real-world problems do not respect disciplinary boundaries. Effective action in the real world requires that multiple knowledge bases converge.

Hopefully it is clear that these people were operating with highly complex sets of ideas about learning. Their theories were largely overlapping, which is to be expected given their shared cultural background, their common experience as college graduates, and their shared experience of working with students in service-learning courses. Differences among individuals or between the groups do not appear to be rooted in starkly incompatible ideologies or epistemologies.

However, differences do appear, reflecting variation in participants’ understanding of and/or
commitment to the concepts they discussed.

Knowers and Learners

The faculty group and the community partners group differed in their representation of the movement from not-knowing to knowing, with faculty demonstrating more commitment to the idea of expertise and to their own identity as experts.

After the faculty participants introduced themselves, the first question they addressed was this: “What did you learn, if anything, new about the community and maybe community needs as a result of teaching the course?” This discussion ensued:

Wanda: Having a social work background I felt I came in with some skills of knowing community resources, but I really found that I learned a lot more particularly from the first year of working with a more grass-roots based community organization that is not involved at all with social workers. . . . So I thought it was just a really good experience to see what was going on in one neighborhood with an organization that’s really devoted to helping youth in that area.

Sheila: I too have great familiarity with the people who serve . . . children with disabilities. The one thing that I think I learned was about the early childhood programs. My specialty is secondary and adult disabled folks and so I haven’t spent a whole lot of time in my life worrying about children, little bitty ones, you know babies and stuff. . . . that’s not where the focus of my teaching has been. So what I learned about . . . [was] this group of early childhood service providers . . .

Peter: I don’t really think that I learned anything as a consequence of the interactions with the community through my students; what I suspected was basically just confirmed. My students were working with immigrant families, many of the parents who didn’t speak English, and trying to help them out with the kinds of problems that they had with their children in the educational system. I wanted my students to gain a respect for these different communities and understand the nature of their cultural conflicts. And that is precisely what my students got. I just can’t say I was surprised that the parents and families were in general fairly open, maybe I was surprised in a couple of instances by the degree of openness to the parents. They have problems, very serious problems, and my students learned that. That is what I expected.

Gayle: I am not sure how much I learned, either. We focused on . . . an organization as I said and I learned about that organization and my students did too, but I didn’t-, I don’t feel like I really learned a lot about the community outside of them. I had a surprise about that organization . . . so I guess I learned something.

Facilitator: Great, thanks.

Peter: I would say that I learned a little about the organization, things about the organization that surprised me, but it was after the course and it was the connection with the organization that I did not understand, the connection that the organization had with the [mayor’s office], it was more political than I-, than you would have expected.

The first two speakers begin by asserting their expertise. Because Wanda and Sheila teach in pre-professional programs (social work and special education), their disciplinary expertise gives them a leg up in developing community contacts and understanding community organizations. Before identifying the local knowledge they developed through their service-learning partnerships, both women offer information which explains why the knowledge was new to them—Wanda noting that the organization was disconnected from the professional community of social workers, Sheila noting the disjunction between her expertise in secondary education and her students’ interest in working with young children. These faculty members do present themselves as learners, but only after establishing that they are also experts.

In the course of the afternoon, the faculty participants made reference to their own knowledge in three areas: knowledge about the community, understanding of teaching as a process, and expertise in an academic discipline. With Peter excepted, they readily acknowledged gaps in their knowledge about the community, and they presented themselves as continually learning about teaching, especially in light of their experiences with service-learning courses. By contrast, they were slow to acknowledge gaps in their disciplinary expertise.

Peter’s response to the opening question illustrates a pattern that continues throughout the data as he makes a forcefully worded claim in one turn at talk and then, in a later turn, contradicts it. Peter didn’t learn anything from his experience, he says, because he saw just what he expected to see. He represents the service-learning experience as one engineered by the teacher, who already has all the relevant knowledge, for the sake of the students who, as a result of the experience, gain the knowledge: “I wanted my students to gain a respect for these communities . . . and that is precisely what they got.”

Peter introduces the notion of “surprise,” which indicates a view of learning as a sudden shift from not-knowing to knowing (a notion perhaps suggested
by the facilitator’s asking whether participants had learned anything “new”). Peter, already knowledgeable, was not surprised. But wait, perhaps he was a bit surprised by the immigrant families’ openness to the students, and yes, he was certainly surprised by some things he learned about the politics of the organization. Peter is caught in a contradiction between the fact that he has learned and his unwillingness to acknowledge prior ignorance.

The community partners also placed high value on expertise, and they, like the faculty, tended to view expert knowledge as residing in the university. Asked how their organization might benefit from future service-learning projects, the community partners imagined students bringing expert knowledge to bear on problems they face in their daily work. Carlos described several scenarios:

Carlos: We might be helping a family applying for a home, so I am out there with the bank, loan officers, so I am explaining to them the interests rates of this and this and . . . I don’t have that experience. I can translate the information to them, but I am pretty sure it is just going above what they’re understanding. And then you have them taking them to the doctor’s appointment, asking them certain questions, and not having medical expertise so I am translating with the nurse. Counseling, we have . . . just so much that we can do for families. Families who want to open up a business, . . . what steps do they need to take? So we are always out there informing ourselves on what [another] agency or somebody in the community can do. The ideal thing would be to call down here and say look, do you have a service-learning project in terms of business . . . .

Carlos presents himself as learning on the fly, but rather than seeing this as a sign of his proficiency as a community activist, he laments his lack of expertise. While he is accustomed to seeking help from knowledgeable people in the community, he would like to be able to turn to the university to find a pool of service-learning students with backgrounds in finance, medicine, or counseling.

In the community partners’ conversation, disciplinary expertise was a recurring theme. It is curious that, while these participants spoke about faculty and graduate students in terms of their expertise, they did not claim expertise for themselves (though all four had college degrees). Instead, they tended to represent their own knowledge as something arising naturally from their experience.

An important common thread in their working theory of learning was the notion of lifelong learning grounded in experience. As learners continually gaining understanding through experience, the community partners situated themselves in the same boat as the students they supervised. Consider these remarks:

Nelly: Anybody who has done community-based residential work knows that it can be extremely chaotic . . . . That was an element for me that was sometimes difficult, for them to get the big picture; their view was extremely narrow. And I can certainly appreciate that when I was that age-, but no, no, you got to think bigger, bigger. It didn’t always happen. I think that is just part of being new in the field and learning about the field . . . .

William: I would like to train the student in the minimal skills of mediation earlier and then get them practicing sooner and for more time . . . . It would be nice if it could be done over longer than a semester. Because then we could start getting the students- sort of like the way I got through graduate school, learn about a new area, take an incomplete and then write the paper the next semester.

Both Nelly and William explicitly identify with students by remembering an earlier stage in their own lives. Nelly highlights the centrality of experience to understanding the nature of community-based work: people who are young, people who are “new to the field” cannot be expected to see “the big picture,” while “anybody who has done community-based residential work knows” that it can get chaotic. William similarly implies a theory of learning at odds with the default view of a sudden movement from not-knowing to knowing. Learning a skill requires repeated practice over time, he suggests, and it takes time to process an experience, to transform it from raw sensation to understanding.

One difference revealed by the faculty members’ and the community partners’ talk about learning, then, might be captured in shorthand by noting that the faculty had a greater investment in the idea of expertise—an endpoint in the learning process, achieved through study—while the community partners tended to speak about learning as being continually achieved through experience. The faculty participants (with Peter sometimes excepted) did see themselves as learners: they were growing as teachers, and they were discovering new things about the community. But at the same time, they asserted their identity as experts in their academic disciplines. Since it was specifically disciplinary knowledge that they were responsible for imparting to students, they and their students stood on different sides of the knowing/not-knowing fence. The community partners presented themselves as being, like the students, engaged in a lifelong journey toward understanding and competence.
Words and Actions

The university is a world of words. The primary pursuits of academic life—scholarship and teaching—are accomplished by means of reading, writing, lecturing, and participating in discussions. In service-learning courses, we invite our students to move back and forth between experience and reflection, between practice and theory, between action and words, generally assuming that the community setting is the site for experience while the classroom is the site for spoken and written reflection. Not surprisingly, the theories of learning indicated by faculty members tended to be word-oriented; to find evidence of successful learning, they examined students’ words. Community partners saw evidence of learning in the ability to take effective action.

An interesting glimpse of the role of language in Gayle’s theory of knowledge appears in her observation that her community partner did not know what the organization needed.

Gayle: The organization did not know necessarily what it needed, which is typical, and I did not necessarily know what the students needed to learn, so I was watching my students really struggle with the organization’s ambiguity. And the way I dealt with that, I think it was the correct way, was to say that is how it is, that is how it is: people don’t know what they need and you are the professional—that was always a fun line. You are the professional and you have got to help them figure it out.

Generally, service-learning educators assume that it is members of the community, and specifically staff members at community-based organizations, who ought to define the needs addressed by service-learning projects. Gayle offers a different view. Staff members at the organization, she says, typically do not know what they need, and it is the job of “the professional”—in this case, seniors completing a course of study in Communication—to “help them figure it out.” What Gayle’s students brought to the organization was a vocabulary for describing communication problems. Only when they had helped the staff articulate their needs in that vocabulary was Gayle satisfied that the problems were known.

The notion of making knowledge real by containing it in words is pervasive in the faculty group’s conversation. At one point, the facilitator asked, “If you think that this was a successful learning experience, for your students or some of them or most of them, how did you know?” All of the participants described students’ articulation of ideas:

Peter: I really knew from their responses, their written responses. I had a lot of text from my students, so it was just very easy to tell . . . You could tell when . . . it became impelled discourse, something that they needed to write about . . . . When you start writing and it comes right out of you. As opposed to you could tell about the very quick entries, those were dutiful discourse, but several of my students were very involved with their families and . . . we would always be talking about well, how does this relate to what we’re reading . . . what kinds of connections can we make, and that’s how I know, if they knew how to make the connections that worked.

Gayle: . . . I could tell they were learning through the discussion, that they were putting pieces together and that they were making realizations about-, they were making systems, they were thinking in terms of system at some point . . . .

Wanda: . . . I think I could tell when the whole class discussion would occur that they were seeing the dovetailing in with the content of the course . . . they were beginning to get it . . . .

Sheila: The night that we sat there in a great big circle and they shared about the stories of the parents and what they learned from the parents, I mean it gives me goose bumps even now, it was so powerful, because they told and then they were able to hear, okay this is what a parent of a learning-disabled child goes through . . . . And here is a child, a kid with a facial deformity who doesn’t have an ear, you know a funny-looking little kid and here is one who is an adult who has been hurt in a car accident, and it was just unbelievable. I mean there was a lot of magic in that room and they felt it. It was like they just got on fire, it’s like oh, this is what I can learn from this, so that was a very powerful experience.

This is a particularly rich exchange, not only illustrating that the faculty valued opportunities for students to talk and write but also showing why. Spoken and written texts are more than evidence of learning. They can be a means by which learning occurs. It is when they are writing, Peter suggests, that students make the connection between their service experience and the course content. The other faculty participants pointed to discussions as opportunities for students to make connections and to learn from each other.

While Peter and Gayle consistently privileged the articulation of ideas as both a means and an end of learning, Sheila and Wanda spoke of learning as preparation for action in the world. Sheila was emphatic on this point:

Sheila: I think that’s the advantage of being in a professional college . . . we almost feel compelled to do experiential kinds of things . . . .
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I remember when I first started college teaching, it was working with teachers, who were practicing teachers, and they kind of nail your little butt to the wall if you don’t get real. If you don’t take the theory and make it real, they will just- they will crucify you. So I learned very quickly that in my profession I had to take what the theoretical piece was and find a way to make that real.

Sheila is committed to experiential pedagogy because she is convinced it will make her students better teachers. “And that’s the bottom line for me, to make as good of special ed teachers as possible.”

Wanda, a social work educator, also spoke of improved practice as her primary motive for building service-learning into her classes. Remembering the class without its service-learning component, she adopts a sing-song voice: “... and here is the textbook examples and here is what you do in this situation, and here’s what is POSDCRE for administration ... .” The theory-based course was inadequate precisely because it failed to prepare students for professional practice: “... in terms of actually being able to actually implement those things, I don’t think they had it.” Service-learning courses are preferable, she suggests, because they give students a taste of reality, thereby preparing them for their careers.

A dimension of difference in participants’ theories of learning, then, is the relationship between experience and conceptual understanding. The two participants from the Division of Letters and Science spoke of real-world experience as helpful for enriching students’ understanding of course content. The participants from the professional colleges were aligned with their community partners in viewing the relationship from the other side as well, speaking about enriched academic learning as helpful for guiding action.

In the community partners’ discussion, acquiring knowledge was consistently discussed as a means toward the end of solving problems. Throughout their discussion, the community partners characterized schooling as training, as preparation for taking action. In this view, classroom-based reading and talk give students useful background knowledge and intellectual skills but a narrow vision of how the world works. The service-learning experience illuminates that vision’s limitations.

When community partners described students as having inadequate knowledge, the evidence cited was a failure to act appropriately. William, who collaborated with his faculty partner on classroom-based training in mediation before setting the students to work, seems baffled by students who heard his words yet failed to act successfully:

William: A certain percentage of the group . . . didn’t get it, they never quite got it. They have been told three times and they still didn’t quite understand what they were getting into. So when they were in the middle of the work they felt overwhelmed and they hadn’t realized that they had even this much work to do.

Nelly seconds William’s observation:

Nelly: You know I can piggyback on that. What we noticed . . . was [the] level of education of the group. Because we had two different levels, one was undergrad and one was grad, and the undergrads . . . got more overwhelmed and the grads didn’t. Then it was kind of okay, okay, let’s put it back in and let’s frame it a little differently for you. And that’s where I saw the biggest variables was the level of education.

William: I agree. The graduate students tended to say oh yeah, this is pretty much what I expected, and the undergraduates said oh, this is so hard.

Both William and Nelly diagnose students’ being overwhelmed as a failure of understanding—as something that could be corrected by “framing it a little differently” or by spending more years in school.

However, the community partners’ discussion also suggested the possibility that no schooling could really prepare students to work in the real world because the vision of reality presented in school is too reductive. When they spoke of what students learned as a result of the service experience, the specific learning these participants mentioned was increased awareness of the complexity of reality. Faculty and community partners alike were struck by students’ struggle to come to terms with a reality more complicated and less open to analysis than textbook examples. When Nelly speaks of some students’ “narrow view,” their failure to “get the big picture,” she is apparently referring to students’ preference for simple, stable problems to solve. Nelly notes that students need to learn “that variables change very quick and you have got to be spontaneous and you have to go with it.”

Carlos makes a similar observation, again representing ill-prepared students as overwhelmed:

Carlos: We have a student who doesn’t have that experience [of direct service] and they never had that and we match them with a needy family that . . . has so many needs within that family unit . . . [If] we put that student there, it’s not going to work. And I think the family to some point will kind of burn out that student . . . it will be too much for the student, so they will just back away . . .
Students without service experience might, Carlos implies, be prepared to deal with a single problem. But it is only through experience that they can become prepared to deal with the complex and multiple needs of the families he serves.

In short, learning is conceptualized in the community partners’ discussion as including the acquisition of school-based knowledge, which is necessary but not sufficient for coping with real-world problems, supplemented by an awareness of complexity that comes from experience. The purpose of learning is to know how to solve problems. This instrumental view is consistent with the theories expressed by Sheila and Wanda, who prepare special-education teachers and social workers, but it differs from the word- and concept-oriented view expressed by the other faculty participants.

Thus, participants’ remarks revealed differences not only in their working theories of learning but in how they understand service-learning’s central aim. The humanities faculty saw the service as a means to reach better understanding of theories covered in class. The faculty from professional colleges and the community partners saw classroom theory as a means to achieve more effective practice.

**Individual and Collective Learning**

A third difference between the two groups is that the faculty tended to speak about learning as an individual accomplishment, while community partners viewed learning as a collective activity and about knowledge as collectively constructed.

This is a difference in degree, not in kind. As noted above, several common themes were sounded in both groups, and the role of social interaction in learning was one of these. Among the faculty participants, Sheila supplied the most evidence of building opportunities for interaction into her class: she described the class working as a group to develop assignments and documents, and she spoke eloquently of how, by sharing their stories, students could “spark” each other’s learning. Peter had his students share their written reflections in an online bulletin board; Wanda organized her class into task-based groups and noted that group development was part of her course content; Gayle reported that once students’ service projects were underway, her class sessions felt like business meetings during which students shared updates and ideas. All faculty participants, then, saw interaction as playing an important role in learning. The logocentric bias noted above is consistent with a commitment to collaborative learning: when knowledge is contained in words, not only is it clarified for the person who articulates it, but it can be apprehended by his or her interlocutors.

Faculty members also saw the potential of bringing multiple knowledge bases together in cross-disciplinary discussions. Peter said he would have liked to team up with someone from the sociology department; Gayle saw that art students could have contributed to the documents her communications students wrote; Wanda stressed the value of an interdisciplinary “teaching circle” to her own development as a service-learning educator. The faculty participants sketched a vision of experts from various fields coming together to learn from each other and to share knowledge applicable to community problems.

However, in the faculty discussion, the notion of collaborative learning and knowledge-making coexisted with a more pervasive image of learning as an individual activity. Asked what they learned, or what their students learned, faculty focused on the accretion of information or increased depth of understanding. You might visualize this theory of learning by imagining a circle representing the boundaries of what the learner knows; after a service-learning experience, the circle expands to include insights about the community.

In the community partners group, the theory of learning underlying the discussion included attention to individual learning as well. But the individual learner was clearly subordinate to the collective development of the group. If you visualize this theory of learning as a widening circle, the circle is the community, a set of learners engaged in continual interaction; after a service-learning experience, the circle expands to include the students.

As compared to the faculty group, the community partners talked less about specific instances of interaction such as discussion and talked more about relationships developing over time. Asked “what went well” in the service-learning experience, three of the participants responded with observations about relationships: Tina by noting the “good connection” between students and the immigrant families, William by describing a “good working relationship” with his faculty partner, Nelly by stressing the coordination among all parties. “So it was like everybody was on the same page,” Nelly concluded, “everybody kind of stood up to the plate, everybody was very involved and I thought that was very exciting, very exciting.” It took some prodding from the facilitator to shift the topic from relationships to other outcomes of the service-learning projects. Similarly, when community partners were asked to describe obstacles they faced, they began by thinking about problems in relationships: Nelly mentioned a group of students who did not function well as a team, and Carlos pointed to miscommunication among the faculty, students, and agency staff.
In the community partners’ discussion, developing relationships and developing knowledge were linked: it is through sustained relationships that people achieve the trust and shared understanding necessary to work together and to build new knowledge. While both focus groups touched upon the importance of communication, the faculty group tended to treat communication as an information exchange, as a matter of packaging knowledge in words and transmitting it from speaker to hearer. The community partners appeared to conceive communication as a long-term exchange of perspectives. Thus, Nelly observed that when she undertook another service-learning partnership, it would be important to be personally involved in the process from beginning to end. Both William and Carlos seconded her observation.

Carlos’s remarks are particularly interesting because of the difficulties he and Peter encountered. Both men described the problem as arising from miscommunication and misunderstanding about their respective roles in supervising students. Peter describes the communication problem in terms of conversations that should have happened but did not.

Peter: And in some instances there were so many telephone calls back and forth, and they would be meeting the next week but it didn’t happen, and then the students got frustrated and then there were also miscommunications...some students would tell me that they had been trying to communicate with the director and that they were not receiving responses back...and I would talk with the director and he would tell me that he was not getting these communications...They did not have technology, leaving telephone messages just doesn’t work. E-mail would have made all the difference in the world.

Carlos also would have liked to have seen more frequent interactions between himself and the students, and between himself and the faculty member. But he traces the problem to inadequate groundwork in the relationship:

Carlos: What I would have liked to see more of . . . is really take an interest in that community you are providing services to. If they are not familiar with what we do and not familiar with the actual community, it just makes it a little bit difficult to work with. I would have liked to see the faculty just take an interest in having meetings there with us in our building instead of us coming here . . . show me around, give me a tour, asking questions. It creates a better understanding of . . . what can you do and what can we do.

The two men differ in their views of what constitutes adequate communication to achieve mutual understanding, with Peter thinking in terms of information exchange and Carlos imagining a longer and more intensive relationship.

The most animated exchange in the community partners’ discussion came when the facilitator asked how participants would describe service-learning to a novice. “This service-learning thing,” he asked, “what is it?” Nelly was first to speak, and her response set the tone of the ensuing discussion:

Nelly: I would probably just say it is a coordination of different knowledge bases, coming together to resolve, or find a solution to a problem...It takes a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of willingness on everybody’s part, to look at a broader base. You need different people on a team with different experiences, from the visionary to those real task-based, and hopefully by the end everybody is-, and then a miracle happens...and everybody gets it.

Nelly does not speak of service-learning in terms of an individual student’s experience, or even the individual community partner’s experience. Instead, she focuses on the convergence of several people, several perspectives, “different knowledge bases,” and different talents. The outcome of this collaboration is not only activity intended to solve a problem, but also knowledge that has been jointly constructed and that comes to be collectively owned: “Everybody gets it.”

Nelly’s remarks were echoed by the other participants, with William sharing “a little fantasy” of social work and law students practicing mediation together, and Carlos sketching out his dream of university students bringing expertise in finance, medicine, counseling, and business into the service of his agency. The common thread in the discussion is that bringing people together generates new and useful knowledge.

The focus group itself was an instance of bringing people together to share perspectives. Like any focus group, it was organized in the hope that the participants would learn from and build upon one another’s contributions. The community partners were remarkably explicit about their collaboration in knowledge-making. Of 51 turns at talk, 8 began with explicit bridges to the previous speech: “I agree,” “You know I can piggyback on that,” “I think I can relate to what you just mentioned as well,” “I would concur with what you said.” When describing the value of making “network connections,” William observed, “and this is even an example of what I needed and I didn’t even know I needed this.”

Again, it should be stressed that both faculty and community partners operated with an understanding of learning as a social activity and of knowledge as
socially constructed: these ideas constitute common ground. But the conception of knowledge as collectively created appeared more central to community partners’ theories of learning. While faculty were prone to speak about learning as an individual accomplishment which might inform group activities, community partners spoke about learning as a collective accomplishment, an outcome of interaction.

Implications

The faculty and community partners observed exhibited several differences in their working theories of learning. Specifically, the two groups differed in 1) their conception of expertise and their tendency to identify themselves as “knowers” or “learners;” 2) their understanding of the relative importance of using experience to understand ideas and using ideas to inform action; and 3) their conception of knowledge as individual or collective.

In a qualitative study, findings cannot be tested for significance: this study cannot measure the probability that group differences visible in this data set are attributable to the participants’ positions as faculty members or community partners, rather than to the quirks of eight people talking on two summer afternoons. It would take more *hubris* than I can muster to recommend changes in service-learning practice based on a focus-group study. But the results of qualitative research can nevertheless be meaningful beyond the local context.

First, these findings shed light on the current discussion of cognitivist and situativist Theories of Learning. In general, with their focus on symbolic representations of knowledge and the growth of individual understanding, the faculty members’ working theories of learning are aligned with a cognitivist perspective; with their focus on collective activity, the community partners’ working theories sit well with a situativist perspective.

The integrative context of service-learning suggests new ways of thinking about disputes in the theoretical literature. Situated learning theory is often presented as a challenge or rebuttal to cognitivist claims about learning and knowledge: *Either* learning is about breaking knowledge into decontextualized particles and storing it in the mind *or* it is about engaging in activities in the company of others *en route* to productive membership in a community of practice. By contrast, the participants in this study were in the process of developing a comprehensive view. If the faculty were more attuned to words and to individual learning while the community partners were more attuned to actions and collective learning, that appears to be attributable to where these people spend their time and what sort of learning they habitually witness and experience—not a matter of one group’s being right while the other is wrong.

Second, the findings suggest promising questions and hypotheses for further research. Can the differences between these two groups be observed among faculty and community partners in other settings? Do faculty in Letters and Science differ from faculty in professional colleges in terms of their theories of knowledge or their orientation toward service-learning projects? Do faculty members’ theories of learning shift as they become more experienced in community-based projects? Do community partners’ theories of learning shift as they spend more time working with students and faculty?

As Carlos suggests, faculty must “take an interest” in the experiences and worldviews of community partners. In our role as service-learning practitioners, we are increasingly sensitive to the importance of building solid, enduring relationships as the foundation for service-learning initiatives. In our role as researchers, we can help by advancing the profession’s understanding of academic culture, the culture of community-based organizations, the differences between them, and the common ground where they meet.

Notes

I am indebted to Paul Sather of UNO’s School of Social Work and to Katie Evermann Druffel of Washington State University for their work on data collection and their insightful contributions to the analysis. Many thanks to Frank Bramlett for his response to an earlier draft.

1 In speaking of these groups as discourse communities, I am accepting a broad definition of the term. Staff members at local community-based organizations would not meet the six criteria identified in Swales’s (1990) definition.

2 Our questions were closely modeled on the interview protocol developed by Driscoll, Gelmon, Holland, Kerrigan, Spring, Grosvold, and Longley (1998).

3 By referring to participants’ “shared cultural background,” I do not mean that they have the same ethnicity. I mean simply that they are all exposed to the views of learning and knowledge that infuse contemporary American culture.

4 I’ve cleaned up the data, removing the “ums” and “ahs” that characterize speech and adopting the punctuation conventions of written language. Ellipses indicate deletions, not pauses. A hyphen at the end of a word indicates self-interruption, a speaker’s sudden shift to a new topic or syntactic structure.
References


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