Review Essay

Engaging Difference, Encouraging Dialogue, Embracing Change

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Exploring Cultural Dynamics and Tensions in Service-Learning

Trae Stewart & Nicole Webster, Editors

Trae Stewart and Nicole Webster have assembled a collection of chapters exploring cultural dynamics and tensions within service-learning. The conversation on issues of diversity and difference within the context of service-learning are generally assumed and rarely explicit. And, when they are, we tend to focus on difference in the community (e.g., the homeless, the at-risk youth) without focusing on the privilege of the participants (both faculty and students) in the service-learning classroom. This book does not permit the reader to ignore these points. In Exploring Cultural Dynamics and Tensions in Service-Learning, the issues of cultural difference are front and center and meant to be embraced and engaged to facilitate dialogue, learning, and (hopefully) change.

In his foreword to the text, Paul Gorski introduces the authors as moving from good intentions to thinking “about what service-learning could be if carried out in just and mindful ways” (p. ix). And, while the process of “exploring” cultural dynamics and tensions does not require either just or mindful actions, the point of these chapters demonstrates that our intentionality makes a significant difference in the experiences of students, faculty, community members, and other service-learning stakeholders.

The “polyvocal approach” guiding this book is unique and brings incredible range to the text (Stewart & Webster, p. xvii). Humanists, social scientists, scholars of education, and engineers, as well as their varied approaches to service-learning, are all represented. Undergraduates, graduate students, community partners, faculty, and administrators—this text includes all of their voices. Because of this, there is a lot of variation between the chapters that allows the text to be appropriate and accessible to a diverse audience interested in service-learning practice. Additionally, the diversity in authorship and discipline suggests that cultural issues and concerns are universal in efforts to combine service and learning in educational settings. From psychology and sociology to nursing and engineering (and more), it is valuable and encouraging to see issues of cultural difference grappled with in so many different disciplinary contexts.

The book is divided into four sections. Beginning with theoretical frameworks and ideologies, followed by the second (and longest) section that provides examples of practice that the editors term “novel approaches, noted impacts and noteworthy lessons” (Stewart & Webster, p. xix). The third and fourth sections look at teacher and counselor education and examples from international service. Using the term “cultural dynamics” provides a lot of space and flexibility for the types of diversity explored in the text. Most of the chapters deal with issues of race (and sometimes their intersections with age, class, nation, and refugee status), but there are also chapters where class, religion, and sexuality are the cultural tensions shaping the discussion. This is a significant contribution of the text as it provides the readers an opportunity to explore commonalities and differences in community engagement across different identities.

Despite the representation of various stakeholders as chapter authors, the text primarily concerns faculty and student experiences of working with and within the cultural dynamics of service-learning. Even as authors acknowledge challenges and shortcomings—reinforced stereotypes, false leveling (seeing yourself as “just like” the community member served), cultural shock—there is generally little effort to look at the consequences for these attitudes and experiences on the community members who interact with service-learning students. How does our (and our students’) discomfort and inexperience affect the community members exposed to our sometimes potentially inappropriate or insensitive behavior?

Similarly, even when relevant and appropriate,
some of the authors neglect to discuss the demographics of the service-learning participants in the experiences reviewed. This sadly, but perhaps inadvertently, results in “neutralizing” the participants for the reader. As Gilbride-Brown, author of Chapter 2, reminds us, the discourse of service-learning is largely race neutral. And the neutral subject in service-learning contexts is most often white and female (Butin, 2006). So, what does this mean as we aim to understand the impacts and implications of diversity on service-learning experiences? Unfortunately, it means that underrepresented perspectives remain just that. Recent scholarship (e.g., Evans, Taylor, Dunlap, & Miller, 2009; Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Yep, 2011) has served to affirm marginalized voices in service-learning to explore different learnings, experiences, and outcomes for populations not often named in service-learning research. Exploring Cultural Dynamics and Tensions within Service-Learning could do more to ensure readers understood who (in terms of identity and experience) was wrestling with the tensions presented in the text.

Where the text excels is in bringing a critical dialogue to discussions of difference in service-learning. Questions of power, authenticity, and social change that guide a critical service-learning framework (Mitchell, 2008) are asked, explored, debated, and struggled with as the authors seek to showcase the challenges and possibilities of a service-learning practice that intersects with race, class, and cultural issues. From Kistler’s (Chapter 1) discussion of the asymmetry in service-learning that privileges university knowledge above community knowledge to Simons et al.’s (Chapter 10) conceptual model of multicultural service-learning, multiple authors use critical pedagogies and theories to frame their research and practice. Burbules and Berk (1999) write that critical pedagogy

raise[s] questions about inequalities of power, about the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students, and about the way belief systems become internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life. (p. 50)

Freire (1970/1995) further establishes that the purpose of a critical pedagogy is to engage learners “to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 17). So, the framing of service-learning as a critical pedagogy—as a way of teaching that facilitates dialogue, exploration, and action in order to reveal individual and systemic practices that perpetuate injustice while preparing students to question and respond to that inequality in hopes of affecting change—makes sense for the teaching, learning, and research goals of the contributors.

As is often the case with edited volumes, I found more value in some chapters than in others. But, there are certainly chapters I will return to in seeking to advance and improve my practice. Chapters by Jen Gilbride-Brown, Catherine Mobley, Nicole Webster and Centrice Mulfinger, Trae Stewart and Ximena Mejia, and Caroline Bailie, Eric Feinblatt, and Jens Kabo are particularly strong and significant contributions to the field.

In “Moving Beyond the Dominant: Service-Learning as a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” Jen Gilbride-Brown foregrounds critical race theory as a methodological framework to develop a more nuanced understanding of the potential of service-learning. She argues “we must be more inclusive of our understandings of who and what is transformed and where are the places perpetuating alienation and marginalization as a result of this pedagogy” (p. 40). The chapter begins with a review of the connections between critical pedagogy and service-learning. She suggests theories of critical pedagogy “mirror[s] many of the core principles of service-learning” but that we must be attentive and accountable to the “claims, complexities, and shortcomings” of our research and practice (p. 28). Gilbride-Brown provides a powerful critique of service-learning research that suggests our understanding of service-learning pedagogy is limited because of the exclusion of diverse voices from the research and literature. Presenting three examples of critical race theory—a framework that engages storytelling and counternarratives to challenge “the dominant discourse on race and racism” (Solórzano, 1997, p. 6)—in service-learning research, Gilbride-Brown pushes for the application of more culturally-relevant ways of knowing to service-learning research. “Unless this dominant, individual-centered discourse is disrupted, we will simply never know what the total impact of this pedagogy is or could be” (p. 39). Her argument is both convincing and compelling and will inspire researchers and practitioners to think about ways to de-center our work to be more attentive to and explicit about the contributions and experiences of people of color in service-learning.

Catherine Mobley authors “Diversity and Service-Learning: Finding Common Ground through Social Justice and Mindfulness” and contends that the “tensions and ambiguities found at the intersection of diversity and service-learning form the core of the ‘learning’ in service-learning” (p. 84). She uses a change-oriented model of service-learning emphasizing research and advocacy over direct service in a sociology class focused on policy implementation. Students’ service is with homeless people but goes beyond the meal service and companion activities students usually undertake with this issue. Mobley
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believes that change-oriented service-learning “strengthens relationships and community in a way that honors diversity and embraces the cultural tensions associated with service-learning” (p. 86). Through this approach, students ended the experience with more positive perceptions of the unhoused and a deeper acknowledgment of structural causes of homelessness. Yet, Mobley saw little change in students’ views on race and ethnicity and their interactions with diverse individuals. I appreciate that Mobley does not try to explain this away and instead interrogates her practice to understand what could be done differently to create more just outcomes for students and community members. Mobley acknowledges potential challenges and pitfalls in the change-oriented approach and encourages the addition of mindfulness to improve the experience. Mindfulness, for Mobley, becomes a tool to focus on building relationships, move away from dualism, redefine common ground, take risks, listen deeply, and remain present emotionally. I ended the chapter wanting to know and understand how this integration of mindfulness affected Mobley’s teaching as well as the students and community members experiencing this pedagogy. It is clear from her description that this approach to service-learning is neither instant nor simple, but intentional, requiring “continuous application” over multiple semesters to become “a way of living in community with our students and community partners that is the foundation for democracy, engaged citizenship, and hopefully long-lasting social change” (p. 99).

Nicole Webster and Centrice Mulfinger present preliminary data from a service-learning initiative focused on Latino charter schools to make an effective argument highlighting the positive impact of this pedagogy on an emergent constituency in K-12 schools. “Service-Learning Pedagogy: A Method for Improving the Education of Latino Students in Charter Schools” makes a convincing case for service-learning as an instructional tool to improve leadership, critical thinking, and decision-making skills while also providing Latino youth a sense of pride in their communities. It is a rare example of service-learning research that centers the experience of an underrepresented group, and where the resulting learning from service is not reliant on an encounter with difference, but instead is focused on assisting “their own community” (p. 228). If Gilbride-Brown is challenging readers to invest in making service-learning more culturally relevant to fully embrace its transformative potential, Webster and Mulfinger paint a vibrant picture of what that pedagogy looks like when realized. It is a practice that goes deeper than connecting school and community, but integrates parents into their children’s education and encourages students to see themselves as agents of change. Through service-learning, in this context, “teachers can increase knowledge while also allowing students to learn and explore their own culture and more importantly, validating their environment, culture and identity” (p. 230).

Pointing to a lack of understanding in working with gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) clients, Trae Stewart and Ximena Mejia advocate for the inclusion of service-learning with GLB-serving organizations in order to build competence in counselor education students. They argue that the lack of practica opportunities with GLB populations “minimizes the ability for students to examine reflectively their own discomfort working with diverse populations, honestly questions their ability to work with clients different from themselves, and silently renders GLB peoples unworthy of assistance” (p. 305). Stewart and Mejia point to various research studies that demonstrate the positive impacts of service-learning in counselor education, suggesting that this type of experience with GLB persons will offer the “authentic experiences” to bring theory to practice and develop “more well-rounded, sensitive, and able practitioners” (p. 314).

A common thread that runs throughout the book is a belief that service-learning provides an opportunity to work with diverse, underrepresented, or underserved communities in a way that will build skills, improve future work, and enhance understanding. This belief can be true, but, as many of the chapters in this text attest, is not automatic. Service-learning can ensure interactions with diverse others, but may not necessarily result in the knowledge, skills, and attitude that faculty may hope for in their students. Exploring Cultural Dynamics and Tensions within Service-Learning does a great service to the field by including chapters that demonstrate effective practices that lead to greater competency in responding to diversity alongside examples where the outcomes were not successfully met. While neither of these aspects, individually, are groundbreaking (see previous research by Boyle-Baise, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Green, 2001; Jones & Hill, 2001; Vaccaro, 2009), this collection of scholarship addressing achievements and shortcomings regarding diversity and service-learning in a single volume provides a valuable resource to service-learning practitioners.

In the final section of the book, Caroline Bailie, Eric Feinblatt, and Jens Kabo explore the work of development in an international context and the cultural tensions that may emerge. In “Whose project is it anyway? The Case of Waste for Life, Argentina,” the authors discuss the challenges in working with engineering students in an international service-learning experience with a nongovernmental organization (Waste for Life is an organization that “devel-
ops poverty-reducing solutions to environmental and social problems” (p. 344). The authors suggest that the engineering curriculum dominating the discipline does not provide students access to the types of courses and experiences that might prepare them for effective service abroad. The authors lament, “Students are not encouraged to critique and, when they do, they come up with socially based questions, which they are not in a position to respond to or problematize” (p. 343). This lack of preparation may lead to ineffective and potentially harmful relations with the communities they intend to serve. The authors present an emerging framework for service-learning in engineering grounded in community needs and relationships. In addition to exploring opportunities for culturally-relevant service-learning in engineering, I appreciate Waste for Life’s value-based mission which leads the organization to only work with groups whose values align with theirs. Many times in service-learning experiences we partner with organizations and agencies whose approach to client services reinforces stereotyping or whose work is not in alignment with our values (Vaccaro, 2011). “It is not our position to change the values of communities we work with,” Baille and colleagues say (p. 350). Instead, they aim for social and ecological justice and work with community groups also committed to those aims. These shared values allow Waste for Life to focus on a directed response to community needs that sensitively explores the important questions and concerns facing the community and responsibly prepares engineering students to respectfully engage with those communities.

Throughout the text, there is a constant reminder: When we ignore the cultural concerns and issues that undergird service-learning practice, “we are, regardless of our intentions, hastening inequity and injustice by behaving as if they do not exist” (Gorski, p. ix). Stewart & Webster’s text brings intentional focus to cultural tensions that emerge but are often unacknowledged in service-learning practice. The chapters in this book name the tensions, struggle with them, and (sometimes) suggest new possibilities for working with and across difference. In the end, Stewart & Webster’s effort “to begin deliberate conversations” about how these challenges are “acknowledged and addressed” is certainly welcome and achieved (p. xvi).

References


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