On Compromise and Complicity: A Response to the Review of The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement

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We would like to thank the editors of the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning [MJCSL] for reviewing our recent book, The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement. We also appreciate the opportunity to respond to the review they published because we want to be clear about the book’s diverse offerings, basic objectives, and overall purpose. We also thank the review’s author for engaging our work so seriously. Despite the disagreements we have with many of the criticisms raised in the review, we recognize his long-time commitment to the field, and the effort it took to write an extensive review of a 500+ page text.

In response to the review, let us be clear about the handbook’s two major goals. On the one hand, we wanted to collect a wide variety of pieces that help document and describe both the depth and breadth of service-learning in particular, and community engagement in general. The first four sections present: (a) a wide range of historical foundations; (b) best practices and pedagogies; (c) engaged teaching and research across many disciplines; and (d) the institutional and professional landscape for practitioners. The final section includes a range of “critical voices” from faculty and scholars who raise serious questions about, and challenges for, the future of engaged teaching and research. We believe very strongly that these articles demonstrate an accurate, if not necessarily unified, portrait of community-based academic work made all the more rich by the diversity of voices and perspectives represented.

On the other hand, we wanted to offer a diagnosis of the current status of university community engagement in hopes of suggesting potential directions toward more substantive structural and political impact. We believe the future of service-learning and community engagement are to fulfill both the hopes and intentions of its legacy and remain steadfast in challenging reductive and oppressive pedagogies and knowledge production, we believe our work must be critical and big, not opportunistic and small.

Before entering a larger discussion of theory, politics, and practice, we want to address some of the reviewer’s claims about the publication’s basic content. We think many of his comments present an inaccurate portrayal of the book. We honor the reviewer’s disclaimer that “There is no way to do justice to, much less mention, all of the viewpoints, arguments, and details” in such a large book. But we fear that the consequences resultant from his own admission that, given the size of the task, he would only “attempt to convey some key points in order to make a larger point,” misrepresents the handbook in ways that could mislead MJCSL readers as well.

For example, the reviewer writes:

There is no sustained discussion across 500-plus pages of any of the key drivers or disruptive pressures facing higher education. Not a single chapter spent more than a few sentences on issues of, for example, the outsourcing and unbundling of faculty work to contingent labor, on the massive fiscal disinvestment of public institutions, on the ‘new student majority’ where most undergraduate students are ‘non-traditional,’ or on the influx of online learning and digital learning technologies.
In reality such statements ignore or dismiss whole chapters and substantive arguments within other chapters of the handbook. Suzanne Buglione (chapter 18), for example, specifically investigates the experiences of non-traditional, adult learners with engaged learning. Stephen Philion (chapter 38) focuses entirely on the impact of neoliberalism on many aspects of higher education. Lina Dostilio (chapter 30) documents and analyzes the institutional dynamics of power that impact non-tenured faculty and staff in the increasingly corporatized and “part-time, non-tenured” university. And other chapters examine at length and in depth the pressures that corporatization, professionalization, and other dominant forces of power and privilege have on higher education in general and engaged practices in particular.

Most of the critique, however, revolves around three primary arguments the reviewer has, not so much with the content of the handbook itself, but with the framework we editors use to contextualize it. His first concern relates to our contention that community engagement has already moved to the center of higher education, and with that institutionalization has come an emphasis on outcome measurements, program management, and an overall de-politicization of goals and vision. The reviewer also sees the field’s ascendancy, but suggests it is only possible because:

service-learning and community engagement continue to be thought about and discussed in ambiguous language, portrayed as everything from civic engagement to community organizing to the work of Jane Addams (applied feminism and sociology) to the formative experiences of Nadinne Cruz and Liz Hollander with participatory action research.

He accepts the function of “broad terms that encompass complementary conceptual frameworks and theories of action,” but expresses concern about the “lack of clarity” and “inability to critique, build upon, and improve specific theories and practices.” Thus, he asks, “When we talk about service-learning, are we talking about a pedagogy that allows us to enhance its ‘high impact’ practices? A method for developing and enhancing students’ cultural (i.e., behavioral and/or attitudinal) competencies? A mode of activism committed to social justice?” The reviewer concludes that we – the handbook’s editors – perpetuate, “Our inability to define our terms, our methods, or our goals undermine the sustained and thoughtful institutionalization and legitimation of the field.”

We do not contest the broad nature of our discussion. In fact, we believe it is necessary to have such wide-ranging conversations about the parameters of practices and the multitude of politics and values that inspire and shape practitioners’ work. We consider this diversity a strength for both community engagement in general, and our handbook in particular. We do not, however, suggest that all perspectives are equal and, as the reviewer points out, we do have a strong commitment to embracing more radical practices that pursue fundamental and transformational structural changes on campuses and in communities. Some may disagree with our perspective, but we hope most see the importance of the debate as a constructively critical tool for developing democratically engaged work.

To complain that the book does not focus on the “thoughtful institutionalization and legitimation of the field” misses a key question raised throughout the handbook. While we suggest that engaged teaching and scholarship has gained ascendancy, we are critical of the impact that institutionalization and formalization have had on the field in the first place. The legitimation process all too often possesses a conservizing force that “disciplines” engagement away from its more transformative, radical practices and strategies. Instead of being more radical, it becomes more conservative. Instead of being more transformative, it reifies bureaucratic, neoliberal tendencies toward commoditization and rationalization. Instead of political education and liberation, its pedagogical conversations too often focus on limited outcomes and techniques. Still, we embrace, and present through the handbook, a diversity of approaches and theories to understand community engagement’s past, present, and possibilities for the future. Our goal remained a rich and diverse conversation about the very real conditions we face and the challenges ahead. Ironically, we editors ourselves are not uniform in our critique of institutionalization and its impact on campus-based engaged teaching and learning. But we believe strongly that the dialogue itself keeps the field vibrant and potentially alive with the possibility of transformative educational practices – a transformation crucial at this particular historical juncture.

But the “disciplining” of service-learning – which risks the possibility of limiting the political vision of community engagement – is exactly what the reviewer himself has promoted for over a decade. Thus, in the review’s next section, “Disciplining Service-Learning, Redux,” he returns to his self-proessed “soapbox,” that “deep institutionalization” and programmatic rigor must be the future of service-learning for it to survive as a professional discipline. A central aim of his scholarship has been the “legitimation and institutionalization” of service-learning by following the successful ex-
ample of women’s studies to best accomplish its professional and institutional fulfillment. Without debating the merits of creating service-learning as a discipline or department in particular, we believe it is instructive to examine his celebration of women’s studies as a model.

Many observers of contemporary women’s studies departments are quite critical of the fields’ depoliticization. Some even argue that the processes of bureaucratization and institutionalization betrayed the political movements that inspired feminist scholarship and teaching to begin with (Epstein, 2001; Kennedy & Beins, 2005; Scott, 2008; Staggenberg & Taylor, 2005). Thus, to suggest that women’s studies has effectively become a field despite significant ambiguity over terms and concepts and practices seems to gloss over the ongoing tensions and disagreements shaping the discipline. Whether one looks at debates over different waves or approaches to feminism(s), current theories of intersectionality, varieties of feminist ethnography, or even the very basic debate over biological versus socially-constructed sexuality and identity (Mohanty, 2003, Roth, 2003; Woodward & Woodward, 2009), many argue that the legitimation process for institutional success all too often supplants the original goals and political movements that inspired these critically-engaged programs in the first place. At least in women’s studies there remains significant, political dialogue over the very core issues and values that comprise feminism and engaged political and academic work. Something, it seems, the reviewer would have us leave behind.

In fact, the reviewer’s reduction of women’s studies itself is clearest in his misappropriation of Dolgon’s interview with Catherine Orr. Orr, who was lead author of a notable Teagle Foundation report entitled, Women’s Studies as Civic Engagement: Research and Recommendations, spoke at length about the political and institutional complexities of maintaining a feminist critique of power while simultaneously navigating the patriarchal, racist, and corporate halls of higher education. The reviewer quotes her on the value of critically analyzing engaged pedagogy for (quoting Orr) “how do you continue to do the work of teaching and writing about the structures of inequality that perpetuate racism, sexism, class inequality, etc. at the same time that you are an integral part of those very structures?” (p. 286). The reviewer continues quoting Orr: “Institutions of higher education,” she argues, “are now leaning in heavily on civic engagement and service learning as a redemptive narrative in austere times” (p. 287), and such rhetoric demands a response, “a call to colleges and universities to walk their talk . . . holding the institution accountable by trying to position ourselves as core to its stated mission (pp. 288-289).” Here Orr is continuing her theme about the complexities of challenging powerful forces while working within institutions shaped and controlled by those same forces.

But for the reviewer, Orr is suggesting that “careful and thoughtful analyses” lead us away from addressing structures of power and radical visions of democracy toward a smaller emphasis on the day-to-day life of programs and departments, classes and meetings. He writes:

There are no Faustian bargains, no satanic pacts, no bureaucratic entrapments, no corporate hegemony here. Or if there are, then it is up to her and us to figure them out and call them out in order to better walk the path we are all on. She is just asking us to do our job as academics ensconced within the neoliberal university.

This interpretation of Orr’s work minimizes her argument. Orr is not being so reductive and no feminism we know of would suggest we simply “do our jobs” trapped within unassailable institutions of power and inequality. In this same interview, Orr states clearly that “the academy is one institution where I feel like I can actually do activist work that is both grounded in a particular community and simultaneously open for intellectual critique” (p. 287). But she never argues that such engagement ought to be limited in its vision nor that it is the only way to carry out transformational work.

In the last section of his critique, “Mind the Rhetoric-Reality Gap!,” the reviewer is most direct in challenging our so-called “save the world” boosterism. While we do call for more focus on critical structural analysis and practices that have greater potential for radical transformation, the reviewer interprets this as promoting a political litmus test, suggesting we ignore our own positionality in an effort to appear “pure.” To his own accusations he then responds, “None of us are pure.” And continues:

We have all, in our own ways, confronted complex situations, made difficult decisions, regretted our actions. Do the editors really want to claim that they are somehow immune from defilement and not one of those “men and women . . . desperate for greatness”? This phrasing and framing, to be blunt, actually makes no sense. What exactly would it look like to make a “satanic pact” within the bureaucratic entrapment of the corporatized university? Give us specifics and not some abstract and rhetorical universal . . . We are all – the editors, me, you – walking with the devil, side by side, doing
the best we can to push forward our respective visions for a better world.

We do not know where exactly in the book the reviewer thinks we suggested our positionality as “immune from defilement.” We are only suggesting as educational workers we do not get stuck in the muck and mud and call it paradise or success. The postmodern dilemma of professional life is neither beyond us nor something we do not struggle with on a day-to-day basis despite the reviewer’s implication that we forgot these realities in our dreamy idealism or hypocritical stone throwing. For us, it may be that neoliberal institutions such as colleges and universities cannot be changed dramatically from within and that those of us who hope to inspire and engage with radical social transformation must do so outside of higher education. Our historical and sociological training suggests that only mass social and political movements create the space for radical change and, while community engagement cannot create such movements, we refuse to believe it cannot support them. Indeed, we aim to highlight, embrace, and imperfect them through our collaborative community-engaged work. And we acknowledge that this work is hard, and messy, and imperfect. We do not ignore any of these limitations; we simply refuse to wallow in, settle for, or even worse, celebrate them.

But the reviewer seems content with these limitations. He states with some pride that engagement programs will not save the world; but the beauty and power of this empirical reality is that they never claimed to do so. Rather, these are academic programs like any and every other academic program, working to build students’ skills, knowledges, and dispositions in a particular content area through sustained and structured pathways overseen by academics committed to rigor, quality, and impact.

We, however, simply cannot accept that service-learning and community engagement are as limited as the reviewer suggests. We cannot simply “walk side-by-side with the devil” confusing our complicity with inevitability, excuse our choices because of fate.

If we just ignore the big questions about our values and principles, our commitments and our goals, then simply refining an academic map of curricula and assessment, requirements and tenure rewards, may make sense. But it leaves in place and unchallenged the oppressive forces of neoliberalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Such a mission either resigns itself to such things, or worse bolsters such forces by offering a kinder, gentler, “settler institution” willing to establish ethnic studies but do nothing about post-colonial exploitation; willing to expand African American and women’s studies, but do nothing about police violence, the degradation of women’s health care and reproductive rights, or the gentrification of low-income neighborhoods and institutional investments in repressive regimes and corporations that pollute the planet. Given this especially nihilistic period in American history and its profound reverberations, we fiercely advocate for respectful and civil intellectual explorations, dialogues, and exchanges in order to create a vibrant and potentially transformational field. Community engaged work is quite little if at the end of the day it does not help us ward off the shrinking imagination.

References


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