Review Essay

Toward Liberation

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Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement

Randy Stoecker

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A recent report from the National Association of Scholars, the conservative “association of academics and others working to sustain the tradition of reasoned scholarship and civil debate” (Randall, 2017, p. 2) is concerned by the rise of service-learning and community engagement in higher education. Seeking to “end funding for service-learning and civic engagement programs and bureaucracies” (p. 10), the report argues that service-learning has been allowed to proliferate unfettered without drawing “much critical attention from the public” (p. 9). In the report, community service learning is “an effort to divert students from the classroom to vocational training as community activists” (p. 9). “If only!” I imagine Randy Stoecker musing.

In his new book, Stoecker (2016) levels heavy criticism at what he labels “institutionalized service learning” for its failure to realize what the National Association of Scholars claims has already been implemented. The practice of higher education community engagement – nearly every attempt to organize students to do service off-campus – is implicated in Stoecker’s profound “disappointment with what we have not accomplished” (p. xii).

Civic and community engagement has become near ubiquitous in higher education (Brint, 2015) with hundreds of thousands of hours of service in nonprofits and schools performed during the academic year (Campus Compact, 2014). As Campus Compact celebrates its thirtieth year, as the Michigan Journal publishes its twenty-third volume, there is a wealth of evidence to suggest that higher education civic engagement has been a transformative practice that has changed how civics are taught, but far less to demonstrate that this practice has created “radical activists” (Randall, 2017, p. 9) or contributed to much significant community change.

This renders the criticism levied by the National Association of Scholars confusing, and Stoecker’s disappointment understandable.

When Stoecker explains:

I write as a service learning practitioner who is dissatisfied with my own practice as well as the practice I see in the literature and at conferences. I want to figure out a service learning practice that doesn’t stop at totaling hours from time sheets, “building relationships,” and providing a tick box for the university’s community engagement Carnegie classification. I want a practice that becomes part of real social change – that helps to end conditions of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion in society. (p. 4)

I recognize myself in his words. I have shared similar sentiments (Mitchell, 2016). While I certainly worry, as Stoecker does, about the potential of service-learning to do more harm than good, I think I have more faith in my peers and colleagues than he does.

In his new book, *Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement*, Stoecker (2016) introduces the concept of liberating service learning (LSL). LSL, from Stoecker’s perspective, differs from “institutionalized service learning” because it changes our focus and, therefore, the order by which we develop and orient experiences. LSL begins with a theory of change, prioritizing the community impact – work that moves a constituency toward a social change goal – above all others. In institutionalized service learning, Stoecker asserts, student learning takes priority. The pedagogy begins with learning outcomes and expectations for students. The impact of that decision is “superficial unskilled volunteerism

that puts student learning in front of social change impact” (p. 159). Outcomes for the community are rare or nonexistent in most “institutionalized” community engagement efforts. Stoecker is adamant that this must change.

Decentering student learning may be the most challenging aspect of Stoecker’s LSL for service-learning practitioners. And I understand why it would be challenging – service-learning and community engagement are products and projects of institutions of higher education. The education of the student (often to work in service of a better world) is central to most missions of colleges and universities. Stoecker’s conception of LSL renders the student almost inconsequential in this work. In a liberating practice, from Stoecker’s view, students can play a part in work that advances community outcomes but their learning and development is never the priority. I do not mean to suggest that in an LSL practice students do not or cannot learn – in fact, Stoecker insists that student learning is “absolutely crucial” (p. 164). The difference is that students learn “*for* the service, rather than *from* the service” (p. 164, emphasis in original). The emphasis is in how students are prepared to participate in a community experience – to support community leaders in advancing a movement for social change. To do so, they must learn about the community, about the social change sought, and how to do the work effectively that the community needs in order to continue pursuing the change desired.

In many ways I think Stoecker paints the community engagement field with too broad of a brush. He sees little redeemable in our work, and when I say our – indeed, when Stoecker says our – all of us who see ourselves as scholars or practitioners of community engagement are implicated. But this indictment of service-learning practice assumes a universal embrace of charitable, depoliticized service that makes no effort to challenge, trouble, or question. It does not account for those who choose to involve students in what is oft considered a presumptive good “precisely to raise critical questions about its benevolence” (Nadinne Cruz, personal communication, September 29, 2016). It does not consider service-learning efforts that embrace the political intentions of community work (Mitchell & Coll, 2017). It dismisses place-based efforts as more public relations than progressive change. And while Stoecker acknowledges that some “are doing great things,” he concludes, “I don’t know anyone, including me, who is even close to achieving better practice” (p. 165). Hence, *Liberating Service Learning*.

However, Stoecker admits, “[LSL] is more easily and consistently practiced outside of formal re-

quirements and institutionalized sanction” (p. 166). The structure of LSL – which Stoecker suggests is only possible if courses are created responsive to community demands, when institutions hire community organizers to facilitate movement-building, and developed independent of traditionally recognized 501(c)3 nonprofits – means there is little hope of the field fully embracing the practice he introduces. And yet, I respect the truth he tells about the limits of “institutionalized service learning” and the potential of our work to do harm. He names the ways service-learning perpetuates injustice through practices that do more to exploit than to uplift. He is willing to confront the possibility that community engagement perpetuates hegemonic structures that oppress and serves to tamper resistance. The indictment that struck me most powerfully was his suggestion that service-learning

helps children adjust to oppressive and ineffective schools rather than organize them to change their schools. It helps parents cope with the ravages of an exclusionary and exploitive economic system rather than challenge it . . . It helps people conform to, and fit into, the existing social system that does not allow them to do more than eke out an unrewarding and unfulfilling survival. (pp. 6-7)

As someone committed to social justice and the process of liberation, this view of service-learning is painful.

I can understand Stoecker’s concern that institutionalized service learning provides “those most abused by the current political economy with just enough therapy, necessities of living, and individualized attention to drain off their energy that could otherwise support organizing for collective action” (p. 90). A service-learning practice that prioritizes student learning and engagement and emphasizes community placements focused on charitable work without attention to social change – what I have previously named “traditional service-learning” (Mitchell, 2008) – fails to galvanize the urgency needed (on the parts of our students and the community members we purport to serve) to realize the transformation service-learning often promises. Institutionalized service learning, from this perspective, feels representative of “the undeniable triumphs of liberal individuals and consumer capitalism over oppositional movements dedicated to equality, collectivity, and mutuality” (Lipsitz, 2001, p. 272). It is an expression, Stoecker asserts, “of neoliberal hegemony” (p. 52).

The absence of a community organizing theory of change seems at the crux of Stoecker’s criticism for service-learning. He references students protest-

ing at the Wisconsin state capital as exercising far more civic engagement than most service-learning students, and laments that these students are not just denied academic credit for this civic work, but penalized for it. Similarly, Heinecke and colleagues (2016) questioned why higher education institutions privilege community engagement activities that do not challenge or seek to transform systems while aiming to silence or dismiss actions that may be viewed as combative or outside of the charitable acts seen as synonymous with service-learning practice. We see this conflict emerging more with the recent increase in campus activism (Barnhardt & Reyes, 2016; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). As students organize collectively to bring attention to and demand change for acts of injustice experienced on campus and in the community, it is rare to hear support for those students from their campus leaders or the center for community engagement.

The warnings Stoecker offers about the political intentions of our work are not new. Robinson (2000) warned of service-learning's potential to be a "glorified welfare system" if we continued to privilege charitable work over advocacy (p. 145), and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) perceived "a vast majority" of service-learning programs as "devoid of politics," lamenting:

They share an orientation toward volunteerism and charity and away from teaching about social movements, social transformation, and systemic change. These programs privilege individual acts of compassion and kindness over social action and the pursuit of social justice. (p. 243)
and

We find the emphasis placed on personal responsibility and character an inadequate response to the challenges of educating a democratic citizenry. (p. 243)

While Stoecker is not the first to sound the alarm about a depoliticized community engagement practice (see also, Butin, 2006; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Simpson, 2014), this text comes at a critical moment for civic and community engagement. A time when we are being challenged to defend this work. A time of rising inequality and declining civic freedoms (World Economic Forum, 2017). A time when the work of strengthening democracy seems most urgent.

There certainly needs to be more room made for and recognition of organizing and activism as community engagement. As Stoecker says, "We can't support social change if we don't ally ourselves with the groups working to achieve it" (p. 111). However, he could do more to highlight those instances

of service-learning practice that manage to balance student learning with movement-building and that support change-oriented work (e.g., Calderón & Castaneda, 2007; Mitchell & Coll, 2017). He could offer more solutions and examples that strive toward the liberatory practice he imagines rather than leveling insults and false comparisons.

One of the most provocative aspects of Stoecker's text is an interlude that begins, "If fire departments were organized like institutionalized service learning" (p. 27). Stoecker then lists a series of unacceptable consequences that conclude with the houses on fire burning to the ground. The interlude is meant to raise awareness at the possibility of service-learning to do harm; at the possibility that work to involve students in the non-controversial work that Campus Compact president Andrew Seligsohn calls "simply out helping" can be disrespectful and unjust (Wexler, 2016, para. 17). This analogy, however, feels inappropriate.

To compare service-learning to firefighting advances our work to a level we do not aspire to reach. We don't fight fires. We don't even try to fight fires. For all of the hubris with which Stoecker accuses the field of bearing upon entering community, I do not think this comparison is warranted. At best – attempting to extend the analogy – those of us who plan, practice, and engage in service-learning are insurance agents. We enter homes already burned, attempt to understand why they caught fire and provide some of the resources to support rebuilding, but usually (and unfortunately) depart before the work is done. Our efforts are inadequate, no doubt, but we do not risk engaging efforts that might lead us to be seen as responsible for the problem (i.e., that the house burned down); instead, we target the aftermath – houses already burnt and cool – and do our best to make those circumstances better.

I do not offer this shift in Stoecker's analogy as praise for our work. I think the criticism is important but I think the critique must be appropriately placed. Stoecker is right to question and criticize the focus on student learning, and to challenge our comfort with charitable work over changemaking.

Stoecker positions his new imagining of service-learning as a liberating practice. Harro (2000) identifies liberation as "system-level change" (p. 618), so Stoecker's focus on organizing and movement-building is important to the work of community engagement. But Harro also defines liberation, in part, as "the *belief that we can succeed*, a sense of confidence in ourselves and in our collective efforts" (p. 624, emphasis in original). And I worry that Stoecker's criticism of service-learning practice is filled with despair. There is, in his writing, a

hope that this critique laid bare will challenge and change us so that we do better – and I hope it will – but there is also the accusation that university administrators “wouldn’t know what ‘better’ was if it came up and hugged them” (p. xi). I worry that the criticism in *Liberating Service Learning* is so thick that readers will be unable to see the possibility or the hope. Stoecker offers very few examples of LSL that might allow practitioners to model or consider how they might advance LSL in their own institutions. So my admiration for his urgency is tempered by my concern that his demonization of our work may be paralyzing. To encourage the field toward a liberating practice, we must figure out how to challenge practitioners toward more effective and more daring work rather than becoming defensive or simply giving up.

Liberation is sustained “by the vision that there can be a better world and we can help to create it” (Harro, 2000, p. 625). Stoecker’s question of “whether our contribution is enhancing the capacity of the constituency, furthering social change, and working toward community” is necessary and must be persistent if we are to shift our practice toward one that is liberating (p. 139). And so must our commitment to continually engage in work with and for community. Liberation is not a linear process and neither will be our work to develop a service-learning practice that is truly liberating.

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