A Strategy for Community-Driven Service-Learning and Community Engagement: Fair Trade Learning

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The field of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) needs enhanced intentionality with respect to what we claim, what we attempt, and how we speak about our various, related approaches to producing civic, student, community, institutional, and broadly public outcomes. Zlotkowski’s seminal piece (1995) was insightful in this regard; it directed SLCE practitioners and scholars to focus necessarily limited resources on academic concerns. Yet the need for intentionality is particularly acute with respect to our claims to being community-serving, social-justice-promoting, public-purposes-oriented, and reciprocity-infused. A systematic set of standards developed to enhance reciprocity, protect vulnerable populations, and continuously re-ensure community voice has recently emerged from a collaboration among community organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and universities. Called fair trade learning (FTL), it is fundamentally a strategy to enhance the intentionality of SLCE in relation to community-driven ends.

When we approach SLCE through the lens of academic concerns, because “only in this way will service-learning practitioners find access to institutional reward structures – and without such access, the movement can never be more than a fringe phenomenon” (Zlotkowski, 1995, p. 10), we necessarily limit our attentiveness to other important considerations that led many of us to the field (see, for example, Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999). This issue is compounded by the reality that caused Zlotkowski to recommend an academic and disciplinary focus: namely, higher education institutional structures reward focus on students over community members or community issues almost every time. While there are several important exceptions to this characterization (for example, see Siemers, Harrison, Clayton, & Stanley in this collection of essays for a few alternatives to this dominant disposition), such examples are exceptions to the rule. Talk of public purposes, reciprocity, and mutual learning is destined to remain only rhetoric when measures of success are centered on student learning, student development, and/or “exposure” of students to “high-quality service-learning” (however defined).

I entered the field of SLCE because of a belief in its authentically public-serving potential. As a citizen, nonprofit executive, and engaged academic, I am particularly interested in the capacity of SLCE to support local, national, and global efforts to create increasingly just and sustainable communities and societies. Community and student development are in no way mutually exclusive, and, in fact, some of the classic essays on SL establish its distinctiveness in terms of its integration of learning goals and service goals (e.g., Furco, 1996; Sigmon, 1979). Yet all individuals working with finite time and resources must choose where to place emphases, and too often that has resulted in approaches to SLCE that prioritize student over community outcomes.

Additionally, since the publication of Zlotkowski’s 1995 article, higher education institutions have dramatically increased not only SLCE but also study abroad. When integrated, these movements to engage with communities and to internationalize the curriculum and co-curriculum have contributed to the rise in global service-learning (GSL; see Pisco in this collection of essays). GSL has often occurred in the context of international development programming, extraordinary resource differentials, and explicit attention to cross-cultural understanding coupled with the emergence of a new global community imaginary – the effort to educate for global citizenship. This extraordinarily complex space has both challenged SLCE practitioners and scholars and led us to insights that will arguably help us look at domestic community-campus partnerships in new and increasingly intentional ways (Hartman & Kiely, 2014).

In my own work – as an NGO director in partnerships with numerous leading universities, as a visiting professor in a program recognized as a national leader in civic engagement, as a committee member planning a major annual international service-learning conference, and as a tenure-stream faculty member – I have repeatedly experienced the power of settled assumptions regarding the pre-ordained importance of student-, discipline-, knowledge-centered approaches to SLCE. I, therefore, have come to suspect that service-learning as a process-oriented pedagogy that focuses on students as subjects – in other
words, prioritizing their learning and growth – may not always align with outcomes-oriented efforts in community development, public health, or human rights, where the central focus is instead on community members as subjects – on changes in communities and among community members. This possibility deserves further theoretical and empirical inquiry. Whatever the case with respect to the plausibly inherent tension between student and community orientations, it seems that many in SLCE take up the practice because of an interest in just ends and clear results as envisioned with community partners.

There is an important caveat to the notion of tension between student outcomes or disciplinary focus on the one hand, and community outcomes or justice focus on the other. Several fields are themselves built around advancing student professionalization and (more broadly) knowledge development related to community-based methods and through community-driven approaches. Participatory action research, community-based participatory research, and asset-based community development are all vital practices at the intersection of student learning, community-driven partnerships, and faculty disciplinary expertise. This convergence is illustrated, for example, in Community-Campus Partnerships for Health’s (CCPH) position statement on authentic partnerships (2013). Although CCPH offers resources and frameworks intended for faculty and community members working with any discipline, it is no surprise that this framework emerged from a network of public health professionals given that field’s emphasis on engaged, participatory methods. The challenge I am articulating for SLCE, however, occurs when the many faculty who are outside of the participatory versions of public health, social work, or community development – and other disciplines with similar epistemologies and practices, such as critical approaches to education – engage in SLCE absent a clear strategy for reciprocity, thus not necessarily ensuring mutual benefit on the part of both communities and students.

This concern is part of a long SLCE tradition of agitating for deeper community consideration (e.g., Crabtree, 2008; Sharpe & Dear, 2013; Sigmon, 1979; Stoecsker & Tryon, 2009). Agitation leading to publication is one thing; concrete community outcomes and structural-institutional reforms are another. Or, as articulated by Crabtree (2008) and later echoed by Sharpe and Dear (2013), “we need more than an ethos of reciprocity as a guide; we need to learn the … on-the-ground strategies that are more likely to produce mutuality” (Crabtree, p. 26; see Hicks, Seymour, & Puppo in this collection of essays). Fair trade learning (FTL) may be such a set of strategies.

In a fashion similar to the CCPH partnership principles mentioned above, FTL emerged from community-based organizational networks to offer a rethinking of dominant structures of SLCE practice (Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014). The emergence of FTL is detailed elsewhere (Hartman, 2015); important to note here is simply that it grew from a community development vision first articulated by a small community organization in rural Jamaica. These principles, in other words, emerged from a community-articulated vision of what partnerships should embody. A broad network of community organizations, non-governmental organizations, and scholars has continued to advance FTL in the decade-plus since its earliest articulation.

FTL intends to make educational partnership exchange embody its idealized ends: human and community flourishing on both sides of an exchange should be enhanced through it. FTL prioritizes reciprocity (i.e., mutual benefit) in relationships through cooperative, cross-cultural participation in learning, service, and civil society. It explicitly advances the goals of economic equity, equal partnership, mutual learning, cooperative and positive social change, transparency, and sustainability. FTL engages the global civil society role of educational exchange in fostering a more just, equitable, and sustainable world (Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2014).

The list below (see Table 1) identifies key questions derived from an FTL stakeholder discussion rubric developed through consultation with scores of community organization staff members, development professionals, and academics (see Hartman, 2015). The set of questions is intended to prompt and facilitate stakeholder (particularly community organization staff members, community members, faculty, staff members, and students) discussion of the numerous components of mutually empowering learning and service partnerships.

There are several extraordinary demands embedded in these dozen questions. For instance, in more ways than one, FTL challenges campuses and community partners to be explicit about economic models embedded within partnerships. Some NGOs have begun the practice of financially supporting host community members’ accredited participation in programming (e.g., Amizade Global Service-Learning, Pachaysana Institute). These organizations, through their actions, are expressing a profound commitment to mutual support for not only co-learning but accredited co-learning. This practice is a significant departure from the market-driven rationale influencing how learning is recognized at most U.S. institutions of higher learning and therefore within most community-campus partnerships.

Another extraordinary departure from the norm that is embedded in FTL practices is the effort to explicitly integrate thinking about the economic foot-
Table 1
Fair Trade Learning: 12 Questions for ALL Partnership Stakeholders

1. Do stakeholders, including several and diverse community members, agree on long-term mutuality of goals and aspirations?
2. Do all stakeholders understand the nature of partnership commitments, including whether the partnership is ongoing or time-bound and under what conditions or processes it might end?
3. Do community members have clear teaching and leadership roles as well as clear roles in driving research direction, process, and publication, with fair authorship rights?
4. Are vulnerable populations, such as children, clearly protected through appropriate safeguards and relevant training for all individuals involved in the partnership?
5. Do students’ same-age-peers from the community have financially underwritten opportunities to participate in programming (in an accredited way)?
6. In terms of community impact, are the reasons for the partnership understood and embraced by multiple and diverse stakeholders?
7. In terms of student learning, are the reasons for the partnership understood and embraced by multiple and diverse stakeholders?
8. Do recruitment and any other outreach materials serve an educative function, shaping expectations for ethical engagement?
9. Do all stakeholders know whom to communicate with about what, through what channels, at all times?
10. For all interested community members and students, does carefully selected text and facilitated discussion support learning about responsible engagement, cross-cultural cooperation, and growth in global community before, during, and after community-campus engagements?
11. Is the economic impact of the partnership deliberately distributed among multiple stakeholders (such as community organization buildings where classroom space is secured, local restaurants that host students and community partners, and/or host families working with overnight programs)?
12. Do all stakeholders have access to information regarding financial commitments and disbursements that support the partnership, along with opportunities to openly and critically discuss those commitments with the other stakeholders?

print of SLCE. In the context of international, immersive programming, this can mean ensuring that – over the course of several years – literally hundreds of thousands of dollars that would otherwise be spent for student lodging in hotels is instead spent in a deliberately constructed, community homestay network. Such a structure may ensure that economic earnings are spread across numerous families and perhaps directed toward commonly held community investment funds (see, for example, Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2012; and Toms, 2013). There is space in SLCE for more creative thinking regarding how physical plant funds (used to procure meeting spaces, for example) can be employed in ways that dovetail with community economic development goals. FTL also draws attention to the question of how accredited learning that occurs through community engaged instruction might better recognize and remunerate the contributions of community instructors (who are rarely tenure-track faculty members).

As soon as the proverbial dust settled following the first several international stakeholder conversations facilitated by the FTL guidelines and rubric, it was immediately apparent that these questions should be asked domestically as well. Through no fault of current stakeholders, most domestic partnerships still reflect extraordinary resource and voice differentials borne within long-established power dynamics. Using questions such as those above to advance stakeholder conversation is a first step for anyone interested in co-investigating, co-reforming, and co-creating structures for engagement that more deeply reflect community-driven intentionality. There are several important reasons to do this. First, it is consistent with principles of good SLCE practice (i.e., shared ownership in partnerships) or, in other words, it is the right thing to do. Second, when community-engaged methods are employed, a community focus can be entirely consistent with a disciplinary focus, so it is the smart thing to do, too. Finally, commitments to reciprocity in the deepest sense lead to unforeseen and unforeseeable insights and outcomes (Dostilio et al., 2012; Hartman, Paris, & Blache-Cohen, 2012) – we learn, grow, and support one another in ways we never knew possible.

Note

1. The FTL rubric and related resources are available at globalsl.org/ftl

References


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