



Service-Learning and Authenticity Achievement

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Abstract: In the current Age of Globalization a neo-liberal ideology has come to the forefront, and scholars have pointed out that the effect of this market-oriented approach on society has been catastrophic. In particular, many argue that the field of education is producing self-absorbed students, as each individual simply prepares to enter the labor market. Moreover, the emphasis on individualism has destroyed any sense of community solidarity. In the end, these outcomes have resulted in inauthentic behavior; that is, people simply treat one another as a means to gain access to the marketplace. However, in the field of education, service-learning—which links academics to community service—is seen as a remedy for the lack of social responsibility visible in today’s world. Nonetheless, the current dualistic conceptualization of service-learning only perpetuates the individualistic mind-set, because the focus of service has been to change student consciousness. But this emphasis is flawed and ignores institutionalized practices that promote and perpetuate inequality. The point of this article is to demonstrate that a conceptual change in service-learning is necessary for students to achieve authenticity. Specifically, service-learning programs must convey that consciousness and the world are coterminous, and thus reality is shaped by the human presence.

INTRODUCTION

The world has entered what some critics call the Age of Globalization. Their point is that the world is experiencing the rapid integration of markets. Due to the increasing “compression of time and space”—brought about by communication and other electronic networks—information

and money circulate almost unimpeded throughout the globe (Giddens 2000). And this breakdown of earlier barriers is thought to spawn incredible freedom.

This new liberty is attributed to the restoration of markets as the centerpiece of modern society. Contrary to the state, markets supposedly allocate resources in an efficient manner. In this regard, markets

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are presumed to be decentered and thus respond quickly and accurately to local demands. Every area of social life, accordingly, will be improved greatly with the introduction of the discipline introduced by markets.

This economic philosophy is referred to nowadays as neo-liberalism. In policy circles, the term that is used often is the "Washington Consensus" (Harvey 2005). In either case, the emphasis is shifted to the individual, as persons are expected to prepare themselves sufficiently to compete and win in the marketplace. Through uninhibited competition, the best ideas and performance are believed to emerge. And through the efforts of this sorting mechanism, widespread social progress is presumed to be inevitable.

But this optimistic vision is not shared by everyone. Specifically problematic is the version of individualism championed by neo-liberals. They extend the liberal ideal of personal sovereignty to the extent that individuals are envisioned to be atoms. Accordingly, *anomie* appears to be emerging gradually throughout contemporary societies.

As persons compete, and thus pursue their aims and ambitions, the community fades into the background. In point of fact, entire segments of society have been left behind with very little public outcry (Wilson 1997). And in this absence of solidarity, social responsibility is on the decline. After all, persons are basically rivals at the marketplace, and risk failure by collaborating with their adversaries. And worrying about the impact of their decisions on the community only detracts from their primary aim, that is, the pursuit of personal gain.

In this sense, the hell imagined by Hobbes has become, in various ways, a reality. Particularly important for this discussion is that most relationships are inauthentic. In other words, persons are merely a means to achieve ends imposed

by others. At the market persons identify, size-up, and commence to outwit their opponents. Most relationships, even some that are intimate, are deceptive and manipulative, as persons decide how to best enhance themselves. The so-called bottom line for everyone is personal enhancement, and any person can be used to reach this goal.

To borrow from Marx, most persons have thus lost any sense of their "species being" (Marx 1978). Lured by promises of personal freedom and upward mobility, they find themselves alone, with little support, and in a very hostile world. And the only exit from this untenable situation is assumed to be additional and more intense competition, with the winners forming a harmonious order. But rather than a paradise, the resulting image of social life seems to be indicative of alienation. In short, persons have no control of an economic system that requires the defeat of others, if they are going to experience any enjoyment.

Some critics have concluded that nothing short of a revolution can provide an escape from this condition. A less radical, and traditionally liberal, response is that education might provide a corrective. Both those on the moderate right and left have argued that service-learning might have a role to play in solving this problem. As students become more involved in community projects, they may become more socially responsible and less alienated. They may gain a sense of personal efficacy and appreciate the collective nature of social problems and any sensible solutions.

But a key problem has emerged from this strategy. Specifically, service-learning has failed to address the development of authentic relationships. Likely due to the inability to break from charity, individual change is regularly the focus of attention, often characterized as consciousness raising or psychological change.¹ Such personal transformation, however, seldom

has anything to do with building an authentic community.

The purpose of this article is to discuss this shortcoming, along with the generation of authentic social relationships. If service-learning is going to result in real community solidarity this issue must be addressed, because in the absence of authenticity a new and more humane society will be difficult, if not impossible, to create.

EDUCATION AND CHANGE

The point of education is to promote change. In fact, the etymology of the word education refers to leading persons out of somewhere, presumably of ignorance or darkness. Through education students are supposed to reflect on their lives, the human condition, and the future, with the aim of becoming more enlightened. And implied by this entire process is that the future can be different from the past.

The general idea is that education should cast the world in a new light. New possibilities are opened, while relics of the past are abandoned. Through the accumulation of knowledge and critical reflection, not to mention novel experiences, self-examination can be initiated that leads to personal insight and growth (Dewey 1966/1916). At least this is the theory.

¹The focus of much of the research has been solely on the outcomes of the students and their relationship with institutions, the underprivileged, and the world in general. For example, see Eyler, Janet S., Dwight E. Giles, Jr., Christine M. Stenson, and Charlene J. Gray. 2000. "At a glance: What we know about the effects of learning on college students, faculty, institutions, and communities, 1993-2000: Third edition." Corporation for National Service Learn and Serve America National Service Learning Clearinghouse. This article can be retrieved at <http://www.compact.org/resources/downloads/aag.pdf>. In this comprehensive review there is less than half a page of studies on community impact compared to seven pages for student outcomes.

Many critics believed that service-learning could perform a similar function (Wade 1997; Jacoby 1996). Students who are enrolled in these projects would become sufficiently enlightened, in order to overcome their lack of social responsibility and alienation. As a result, service-learning has been installed in many high schools and places of higher learning. Some even require a certain number of service hours to graduate.

What service-learning does is to require that students collaborate with community members to undertake various projects. In this way, students fulfill certain educational requirements while specific problems in a community are addressed. But service-learning does not operate properly, unless service is integrated clearly into the curriculum. The message must be conveyed to students that service is as important as their classes, and that their school and the service community must be highly integrated. The students' involvement in service, accordingly, is not haphazard but a normative expectation (Wade 1997).

Once this background is established, students can now begin to collaborate seriously with community representatives to address certain issues. Fundamental to service-learning is that this sort of collaboration gradually transforms students. As students become more aware of their connection to others, they acquire an increased sense of social responsibility. They begin to appreciate how the lives of persons are intertwined, and, as C. Wright Mills (1959) once stated, why personal problems are always social issues. That is, personal behavior has a history that includes both psychological and institutional elements.

Additionally, students begin to learn that social problems are rooted in individual and collective decisions. And any effective remedies, accordingly, must take into account both of these dimensions. A sense

of relatedness thus begins to develop that affects the identities of students and their relationships. They begin to recognize, in short, the collective nature of problems and any successful solution (Henry 2005). They are thus led away from atomism to a much more holistic image of social existence, where their fate is tied to the destiny of others.

This transformation is linked to two important facets of the service-learning experience—contact and critical reflection. The first relates to the contact hypothesis. The theory is that when persons who were formerly segregated are brought together they begin to develop positive views of one another (Braddock 1980). But of course this contact should be initiated under specific conditions—such as status equality and strong normative expectations—that foster this outcome (Allport 1954). As Gordon Allport and his colleagues have pointed out, interpersonal contact can be very transformative within a specific context (Pettigrew 1998).

But these initial contacts often produce conflicts and consternation. And at this juncture of service-learning the process critical reflection becomes vital. A first encounter with poor persons, for example, can introduce students to an environment and behaviors that they find frightening or do not understand. A skilled teacher, nonetheless, can intervene to explain the history of these situations and contrast the numerous theories of poverty. As a result, students can begin to reflect on their prejudices and stereotypes, in order to comprehend better the experience of poverty. Various causes of this problem can thus be identified, along with the effective interventions.

Service-learning is supposed to stimulate on the part of students a new awareness of their place in the world (Jacoby 1996). In the end, atomism should be replaced by a more communal picture of social life. A change in their consciousness

is expected, whereby students begin to appreciate the collective nature of social existence. They are led to understand that, to a large degree, they must be responsible for one another, if social cohesion is going to be maintained. Furthermore, social problems are not likely to abate without this change in perspective.

The general theme is not simply that persons are basically social in character, as if human nature is being redefined. At first persons are atomistic and later recognize their true social character. But rather, the point linked to service-learning is that students can become aware, as a consequence of their community involvement, of how they are implicated in a web of social relations. And based on this understanding, they can begin to act responsibly toward their neighbors. They can begin to act as if they are a part of a community.

The implication is that following this insight, new values will begin to rise in importance. As opposed to personal gain, love and trust may increase in value. Non-market values may gain ascendancy, so that society becomes a more commodious place. And as relationships become less mercenary, suspicion and hostility will decline. Who can argue with such a prognosis!

In some ways the market orientation includes the social dimension. Indeed, personal gain is touted, especially by conservatives, to improve society. At best, however, an indirect relationship is presumed to exist among persons. The sum of personal gain is somehow thought to enhance the common weal.

What service-learning is trying to instill in students, instead, is that they are directly related to others. This relationship is not mythical but real. And therefore, their behavior should reflect this awareness. Specifically, as part of a community, the impact of their actions on others should be always on their minds. Rather than superficial, as required by the market, they recog-

nize their profound connection to the fate of others. Clearly, a community rises and falls together; in fact, persons are not alone, even in an atomistic world.

But an important issue must be mentioned in this juncture. Simply because persons share a common fate, as members of a community, does not mean necessarily that they treat one another authentically. And those who advocate the use of service-learning have not recognized this difference. The question that remains is, therefore, what is authenticity and how does this trait influence building a community?

A COMFORTABLE TRANSFORMATION

Advocates believe that service-learning has a positive impact on students. The first outcome that is usually mentioned is a transformation in consciousness. As a result of taking part in community projects, the social awareness of students is expected to broaden. As part of this change, they can begin to empathize with persons who are less fortunate (Astin & Sax 1998; Eyster & Giles 1999).

But such a transformation does not necessarily lead to social solidarity (Warren 1998). In fact, this way of thinking is consistent with the neo-liberal outlook. Specifically, persons experience some personal enlightenment that may or may not have any social impact. Often these experiences are characterized as "magical moments" that are very idiosyncratic and unrelated to any wider changes. Nonetheless, students may begin to feel better about themselves and talk more about social responsibility.

This way of conceptualizing change is based on an unproductive dualism. The focus of change is the consciousness, or subjectivity, of persons, while the world is untouched. In this sense, consciousness is raised or expanded, although social reality remains autonomous or disconnected from

this internal change. In fact, Miller (1997) did not find support for the hypothesis that undergraduates who participated in a service-learning program would have an increased sense of their own ability to alter the world.

Such a personal transformation is relatively easy for a person to make. A pertinent example can be found in the field of race relations. Most white persons, for instance, do not believe they are racists because they do not harbor hatred toward Blacks. But they make assumptions about Blacks that they do not make about Whites, and they benefit from certain institutional arrangements related to, for example, hiring practices or housing (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Studies show that if persons are given a choice, Blacks will fare worse than Whites in these and other areas (Massey & Denton 1993; Royster 2003).

The point is that focusing on a change in individual consciousness does not necessarily address institutionalized practices. Indeed, this internal search may distract students away from the source of problems, that is, institutionalized patterns of behaviors. And given this dualism, the social side of issues such as racism may be reified, or come to be viewed as beyond change. After all, according to this paradigm, consciousness is distinct from objective reality and incapable of altering this framework.

And in many ways, charity is consistent with dualism. For example, charity is a very individualistic endeavor and, from the neo-liberal perspective, optional (Levinas 2001). If a student's consciousness is altered by a teacher or preacher, individual acts of kindness may be viewed as appropriate. But larger social or institutional relationships are not necessarily linked to these actions. Almost by definition, charity does not oblige persons to care for others or preserve the common good.

In fact, persons who engage in charity are often trying to simply better themselves. As an attempt to become better indi-

viduals, students perform good works that testify to *their* worth. In short, they demonstrate they are good persons because of their charitable acts. In this regard, charity involves a personal trial, rather than a challenge to unjust institutions. Charity is certainly tied traditionally to personal introspection, but broader insight is rare.

Although a transformation in consciousness is not inherently worthless, such a focus does not necessarily impel persons to do anything. They may begin to feel productive without having to actually intervene in the world. Producing community solidarity directly, in other words, is not often an outcome of consciousness raising. For this reason, the charge is made that service-learning does not often promote authentic behavior, whereby students are expected to undermine activities that build true communities.

AN AUTHENTIC EXISTENCE

The problem is that change in consciousness does not necessarily lead to an authentic existence. Such a focus, in fact, often reinforces what Sartre calls the "serious attitude."² When in this condition, students respond to service-learning as individualized atoms who assume no responsibility for the situation they confront. They are thrown into a community that has problems they did not create but are asked to solve. Yet the question could be asked: Why should they empathize with persons outside of their immediate ambit?

They are asked to sacrifice time and effort in a community, with little sense of obligation or duty to these persons. For the most part, students are from a different

world that is disconnected from their service community. Nonetheless, to be worthwhile persons, their involvement in service is expected, but there is little sense of obligation or affinity with those who are helped. They have no real duty to correct or bear any responsibility for the problems they might confront through their service activities. In this regard, they simply perform a civic ritual required to become responsible adults.

The point is to illustrate that consciousness is not merely subjective and unrelated to the world. Indeed, following modern trends in philosophy, consciousness and the world are co-terminous, and thus reality is shaped by the human presence. In less esoteric terms, students are not³ consigned to merely confronting an autonomous world, but through their actions can alter reality. The implication is that they may not be personally responsible for everything that has happened to a particular community, but have the ability to either simply acknowledge or change future social conditions. What they chose to do, stated simply, has consequences. But in order to achieve a more authentic sense of duty, the focus must be shifted beyond personal consciousness. Students must be shown that their "serialized" conception of social life—atomistic with no-one responsible for the whole affair—is predicated on a questionable philosophy. The initial move away from inauthenticity, accordingly, is to reveal the futility of dualism.

Service-learning, therefore, should stress human activity, or *praxis*, instead of consciousness. *Praxis* can lead to substantial transformation, while consciousness is personal and unimportant in the face of autonomous reality. On the other hand, emphasizing a change in *praxis* may actu-

² The serious attitude consists of persons rationalizing the current condition of the world and relinquishing any control over this situation (Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*. NY: Philosophical Library, 1956, pp. 39-40).

³ The serial world is segmented and arranged in a concatenated manner. The whole, therefore, is not revealed in any part. See, Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, I. London: NLB, 1976, pp. 256-269.

ally culminate in transformative behavior, once this capability is recognized. The world has no future, in other words, unless they act on this reality in one way or another and reclaim their existence.

This challenge to dualism reveals that students are in a new relationship with the social world. Simply put, they are in the world. The general idea is that students are not atoms but exist in the presence of others. The moral theme that arises at this point is quite interesting: due to this openness to others, all persons share a common fate. Students are thus part of a broader community that is implicated in their behavior, despite what dualists assume (Levinas 1969).

The thrust of service-learning, therefore, should not be to convince students they should sacrifice to aid a foreign community. Anyway, most students reject such logic. But in the absence of dualism, the reality is very different. Everyone, including students, is tied to a wide community that must be supported. Through service-learning, therefore, students are contributing to building a community that is common to a broad array of persons. What a service project does is enable students to fulfill their duty as members of this community. In this sense, nothing is asked of them that is not required of everyone.

But something is demanded of all community members. That is, they are required to intervene actively and forcefully to foster social solidarity. Due to the rejection of dualism, however, a community is not an abstraction, such as a collective mass of persons. Such an image would be immobilizing. After all, how are persons expected to direct their efforts to assist this anonymous entity?

Without dualism a community consists of unique persons, sometimes referred to as "others," who are connected directly through everyday discourse. These members, therefore, do not have an obliga-

tion to any abstraction but to one another. Specifically, they are expected to intervene and insure that no one is excluded or diminished in any way. Such action is not optional; in a true community, persons are obligated to one another.

With this critique of dualism, the point is not to erase the influence of consciousness, but to break with the standard formulation that conscious reflection or transformation is simply subjective. Now personal consciousness is revealed to be in the world and with other persons who are capable of engaging their neighbors. And the world, rather than something abstract and coercive, is illustrated to be a montage of potentially critical persons. Svetozar Stojanovic (1973), for example, refers to such a world as integral—that is, a collective that is comprised of unique but related persons. Atomism is thus replaced not with an abstract collective but a direct and fluid association of persons, or a *collective praxis*. Rather than coerced, the integration of persons with others is part of their personal growth.

Here, again, emphasis is placed on *praxis* rather than consciousness. But now the moral imperative is much clearer—students should promote the common weal. The community consists of concrete, rather than abstract, persons who must be protected from abuse or inattention. And to become truly authentic through service-learning, students must recognize their fundamental relationship to others, appreciate the uniqueness of these persons, and labor constantly to protect these fragile bonds and enhance the well-being of all community members. In this regard, simply feeling good about belonging to society, which can be based on something as simple as a change in attitude, is insufficient. Authentic community members, on the other hand, must act regularly in socially minded ways.

CONCLUSION

The general theme of this article is that authenticity can promote a more humane world. Such humanists, accordingly, believe in the overall unity of humanity and possibility of reducing alienation. Through service-learning, in other words, students can gain some insight into their basic connection to others and control they have over the future.

In order to reap these benefits, however, the focus should no longer be a change in consciousness in the absence of an awareness of the broader society. The point is that turning inward does not necessarily result in institutional change when divorced from efforts to understand and change broader society through praxis. In fact, such a strategy is consistent with individualism advocated by neo-liberals, whereby personal insights lead almost magically toward much broader social movements. This sentiment is reminiscent of Adam Smith's reference to a magical hand that transforms personal gain into the common good (Smith 1952).

Instead of consciousness, advocates of service-learning should stress the world. What this shift in emphasis means is that, first, students must begin to view themselves as active agents who can redirect society, instead of being the victims of human nature, tradition, the social system, or some other abstraction. They must begin to realize that they *make both themselves and their institutions, and in fact these two dimensions are related*. And therefore any improvements that are going to occur are dependant on their actions.

And second, through service-learning the idea should be instilled in students that they are basically connected to their environment and other persons and groups. Taken together, these factors form a fundamental community that cannot be abridged, although neo-liberals have tried

to ignore these connections. The central issue at this juncture is that persons are not atoms; they are interrelated and, therefore, have responsibility for one another. And similar to these connections, social engagement is not optional.

Given this new orientation, service-learning can begin to change the world more directly. An active intervention, stated simply, is not dependent on consciousness being transformed into action, while delving into the psychological mechanisms that may bring about this change in students. Now the normative expectation is action, devoid of any means to rationalize away this responsibility. In this way, students are expected to act as if they are part of a community that demands their commitment to improving their surroundings. They are no longer individual agents who, if they have the inclination, can choose to assist others.

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