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Reading and Writing the World: Charity, Civic Engagement and Social Action in Service-Learning

The critical lenses provided by the author's framing of the domains of charity, civic engagement and social action highlight the assumptions and implications of different service-learning models. Classroom practices and writing assignments are interrogated for their affinity with each of the domains and their inherent power to shape students' reading of the world.

Introduction: From Conversation to Curriculum

Why don't the kids like me as much as Leon?

Why is the new girl trying to 'make friends' by fighting?

How come these old people have more fun with their friends than I do with mine?

How come instead of feeling good about this work, I just feel mad whenever I think about it?

The peer conversations I overhear on the bus as we come back from community sites let me know that students are entering a cycle of action and reflection, beginning to explore conflicts and contradictions worthy of the complex world we inhabit. In fact, these conversations are usually far more telling than students' formal writing, writing that is often crafted in response to students' belief that questions are asked so that they can be successfully and completely answered in error-free, teacher-directed prose.

What to do with the complex learning reflected in students' conversations occupies my mind—fuels *my* action and reflection—as I make curricular choices day by day, week by week, and semester by semester. I realize that not only the books I assign and the community sites I choose, but the whole ecology of the work embodies and shapes what I and my students learn and underlies our satisfactions and dissatisfactions with community-based projects. In this essay, I make this struggle to learn and to teach explicit as I bring to consciousness and conversation a framework for thinking about the domains of service-learning and the curricular practices that may support or repress different forms of thinking and action.

Community-based teaching is risky business, and it makes even discussion-based writ-

ing workshops seem quite teacher-centered and tightly controlled. By honoring and promoting the dimension of peer reflection in service-learning, teachers demonstrate a faith in the strength of democracy to contain and benefit from dissent. We model a faith in the potential of students both to take in received knowledge from authorities and to use their range of abilities to work out multiple ways of "reading the world" in the Freirean sense. I suggest here that as students learn to name the experiences they encounter and to frame and re-frame their experiences in historical, political, social, religious and cultural contexts, they will become able to integrate their experiences and form new knowledge about themselves and the world.

Integrating service-learning into the liberal arts curriculum depends, therefore, on both teachers and students making the move from seeing events as singular, magical and incidental to seeing in them the possibility of themes and understandings—even contradictions and paradox. Exploring those themes through writing, research and the arts, again and again, throughout the curriculum, offers students practice in habits of mind and spirit that can carry them into the complexity of life with more power and insight. Practice in understanding their own agency and the power of collaboration make their complex work in community sites and in the classroom possible, and I would like to suggest some ways of thinking and some specific practices that support this goal.

The Domains: Charity, Civic Engagement and Social Action

Theorizing the deep structures of moral and ethical development embedded in curriculum has been an ongoing project in the service-

learning literature (see Deans and Morton). Here, I organize my discussion and invite interaction around three domains of engagement: charity, civic engagement and social action.

Charity

Charity, with roots in the religious practice of the giving of alms, is ameliorative in nature. Its intention is to ease suffering. Charity challenges the invisibility of the sufferers and expresses a good intention towards them, often in an interpersonal way but also in institutional forms, as in sending flowers to the bereaved from an established group fund. Charity acknowledges that all is not right in the world, yet it does not necessitate the examination of the wrong or always imply an intention against the sources of wrong. As in the cases of the Special Olympics and Habitat for Humanity where regular, personal interactions and relationships across class and ability are built into the work, direct contact between sufferer and helper may awaken the helper's awareness of the humanity of the sufferer and the reality of his or her circumstances.

Charity, however, is also part of smoothing over the rough workings of the world. In addition to having religious roots, much charitable work is an outgrowth of stratified privilege linked historically to the upper class European social ideal of noblesse oblige, a concept of moral improvement in which superiors demonstrate good character to the people "beneath them," those whose moral failure results in poverty. This "improvement by contact" ideal is echoed in the current emphasis on mentoring programs across family income and often across race. Here, charitable work clarifies the role and status of the giver in relation to the receiver and expresses the power of the giver to initiate or discontinue action between the two, sometimes within a complex, dynamic relation (Mosle).

As Collins, Rogers and Garner argue, to participate in the giving of public charitable gifts of time and money is often also implicitly to acknowledge one's power to do so and thereby to enhance one's privilege and status as an individual or representative group member (28). Charity does not, in and of itself, require the helper to move through interpersonal reality to an examination of social and political reality or to call accepted practice into question. And, if social practice and power relations are not significantly challenged, then "fault" for suffering

can only lie in the sufferer. The helper is called upon perhaps to feel saddened, but to "adjust to this reality."

Civic engagement

Civic engagement, a second domain of service, implies a faith that the functioning of society depends on citizens' good will participation in the enterprises that make society work. It has Calvinism as a major historical root and values the structures that make and maintain a good society through government, parallel institutions and the professions. Civic engagement can take the form of civic practices such as voting, serving on juries, and participating in formal and informal advisory or advocacy groups, such as a school board. This form of civic engagement is predicated on the privilege of citizenship and as such is unavailable to the alien, the young or the disenfranchised. For the most part, it also depends on geographical stability and on literacy, particularly in English. Civic engagement also takes the form of participating in the helping professions and of financial or personal contributions to help out "those less unfortunate than ourselves" through participating in public and accepted forms of action. Familiar examples include initiating and participating in open hearings about schools, police service, or agencies that monitor physical and social hazards. Civic engagement in this context can be understood as the organized shadow of political disregard for the poor or other targeted groups and of unregulated profit seeking in business.

The term "civic engagement" resonates with other meanings, as well. In elementary schools the ideal of "good citizen" with its attendant awards has been attached to cleanliness, politeness and compliance with authority rather than with other expressions of concern for the well being of the class. Today, the term "civic engagement" is found in the value statements of secular institutions of higher education, perhaps as a stand-in for religious language or the language of virtue. The need for a literal statement of community based on shared goals is buoyed by general concern for mitigating self-serving economic values. These market values are seen as the center of meaning and power for the young, and therefore colleges "resist" by "teaching" civic engagement to promote a continuing interest in citizenship among the educated elite and to support the rule of law.

Social action

Social action is critical of things as they are and seeks change in structures, institutions and practices. It takes many forms and has strong historical roots in religious movements, most recently liberation theology. Secular institutions have also developed to critique normative social values and processes such as warfare and the notion of an acceptable level of poverty. In both cases, solidarity with the poor and suffering is expressed through immediate care and through attention to the power relations that create inequality. Both groups challenge causes of normative suffering in many ways, including direct action in which persons resist laws seen to be unjust—for example trespassing on military sites or resisting paying military taxes. In this way social action serves as a corrective to civil rule.

Social action claims a vision and marks active and accessible steps toward that vision. Some steps are symbolic and others, like boycotts, are more literal and explicitly economic. Like charity, social action erases the invisibility of the sufferers, yet unlike charity, it goes on to make visible the structures and practices which enforce the suffering. Unlike civic engagement, which relies on accepted (and often official) forms of individual or group action which are often connected with status and financial rewards, social action may go against the grain and result in the loss of social and economic privilege or necessitate the creation of new forms of expression which challenge existing structures of power.

As Keith Morton notes, there are “thin” and “thick” forms of each of the domains of service. There can be social action requiring very little of participants other than standing in opposition to some authority, while other forms may require an analysis of privilege and a questioning of personal and group norms as well as specific actions to make clear the purpose of the challenge. Narratives embodying “thick” and complex understanding are particularly useful for college students coming into ways of talking and thinking about power and identity. I suggest Eric Martin’s *Luck*, which began as a short story recounting a student’s work on a documentary project about migrant farm workers, and Melissa Fay Greene’s non-fiction *Praying for Sheetrock*, which takes its central story from the journals the author kept as a young VISTA worker.

Learning Through Conflicts and Contradictions

Each of the forms of social practice—charity, civic engagement, and social action—has the potential to engender conflict between competing values both within individuals and between individual students and their affiliate groups. For example, Angela, a sophomore, returned from fall break with a story about her unhappiness on a road trip. She and her friends had stopped to eat at a fast food place and had seated themselves next to a group of senior citizens. The friends had begun almost at once to mimic the seniors and to create a performance that Angela perceived as disrespectful. She tried distracting the group and subtly changing the focus of attention but was unsuccessful and soon gave up. She spent much of the day brooding, thinking how easily she could have ignored her friends’ behavior in the past, before her affiliation with elders began in a service-learning class focused on aging. She struggled with her inability to confront her friends and with her disconnect with the culture of her peers—and she had the premonition that this was only the beginning of a large, painful transformation.

A service-learning teacher or mentor may respond to the inevitable conflicts illustrated by Angela’s story by helping open up the issues for examination, or by acting in ways that bury, deny or collapse the contradictions. Indeed, the actual pacing and curricular choices of the class are themselves ways of being and responding to anticipated conflict. If class time is pressed full of “content” and if the processing of experience—especially conflict—is seen as an interruption, then the class implicitly teaches students to ignore and suppress public acknowledgment of crises. Students recount that one of the most trying aspects of this “shutting down” style of mentoring is the repeated admonition that they will “get over it” and be more adjusted to the world “as it is” when they become adults. For example, Kurt, in responding to the question, “What was the most important thing we did in this class?” named the visit from Marliese, a lifelong activist. He reflected on her passion and courage as an antidote to the belief that idealism is the province of youth. Conversation with Marliese helped Kurt affirm that he need not “learn to live in the world as it is” and that his response to injustice could be a resource throughout his life.

Teachers and mentors who choose directly

to address conflicts in values and social- and self-perceptions may do so in many ways. Making response to conflict and contradiction the work of the community rather than a private interaction between mentor and student strengthens the interaction. For example, in most service-learning courses, a regularly scheduled time of “checking in” can be established by asking students to read journal selections in small groups or to pass journals around for silent reading and response on “post-its.” Connecting through group interviews with community workers who have addressed similar conflicts and issues in their own experience is helpful. An assignment to interview activists about what they do when they feel out of step with mainstream culture or feel overwhelmed by doubt can bring a broader range of experience and wisdom into the class dynamics. And sharing the essence of the interviews in class or in small groups allows students another opportunity to put themselves in the place of others working out ways of being in the world.

Student-led studies of the equivalent of “lives of the saints” in each domain—Mother Teresa in charity, Eleanor Roosevelt in civic engagement, and the Burmese activist San Suu Heji (*Beyond Rangoon*) in social action—can also help students see the possibilities for transformative action in each domain and in specific contexts. Again, Morton’s description of the realms of service-learning is helpful. He notes the presence of “thin versions” of each that are disempowering and hollow in contrast to “thick versions” that are sustaining and potentially revolutionary. Students can learn to distinguish the domains of service, note their levels of complexity, and interrogate their interaction and contextual overlay. This analysis can take place close to home, as well. For example, I hope my elderly mother’s neighbors will bring her soup when she is sick and pick up her prescriptions from the drug store. I also want them to be informed about the political candidates’ platforms concerning prescription drug plans for Medicaid recipients. As well, I also want them to organize to fight pollution to ensure better health for my mother and for everyone.

Distinguishing the domains of service and recognizing their points of overlap and of conflict is complex work. However, texts helping students explicitly understand the domains of service are available and accessible. *Robin Hood Was Right* by Chuck Collins, Pam Rogers and Joan Garner guides an understanding of philan-

thropy and social change through direct teaching about personal and social economics and by presenting examples of groups which span the domains described here. The story of the Newtown Florist Club (33) helps students understand that groups and individuals can move fluidly through different domains of service and provides an excellent example of the range of humanitarian work possible inside one grassroots group. In addition, *Robin Hood Was Right* is a text that students are likely to share with families, thereby opening up more opportunities to test out their growing understandings in conversations in existing social networks. The book also provides descriptions of groups that students might contact for developing their internship, community service and career options.

Teaching Events and Writing Assignments

Forms of teacher/student interaction parallel and correspond to each of the domains of service. In the charitable mode the mentoring work is most often done through counseling the suffering student; in civic engagement through advisement and pointing him or her to institutional forms which explain or remediate the circumstances; and in social action by encouraging a power analysis and either participation in a range of existing action to challenge unjust practices or the creation of new forms of action to address structural change. World views and social and political practices are modeled and implied in each form of response. Each approach to service is attached to certain rewards and habits of social interaction established by teachers as their accustomed way of being with students and functioning in the wider world.

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The charitable mode often privatizes the relationship between the sufferer (student) and the giver (teacher), implying a belief in the quasi-parental role of protecting the weak and interpreting the world on his or her behalf in order to reduce suffering. Communication is often individual and private and writing primarily takes place in a personal journal intended for both supervision and counseling.

Within this charitable domain, interaction is often one way—mirroring the route of charity from the authority to the needy. The authority may indeed “suffer” with the student, but the energy of the interaction is focused on repairing the individual sufferer’s world view. In this mode, intact rationales for dealing with the in-

evitable tragedies of the world are passed on either indirectly or directly. Cynicism—sometimes the other side of idealism—may be challenged in discussion, but may be modeled all the same. Personal authenticity and social remediation are seen as resulting from patching up unchangeable systems and identifying with “the good” of distance and dissociation while creating a personal “niche” of harmony.

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In contrast, civic engagement necessitates an invitation to examine social structures, and is often focused on the powerful future role the student may take in these structures as a professional helper or wealthy philanthropist. It requires a belief in existing social institutions and their corrective processes. Recommendations for dealing with internal conflict are sometimes framed as career advisement: “We (you) can’t do anything about this bad judge now, but you can work to be an appointed judge in 10-20 years. Develop your merit and your contacts.” The implication of this approach is that as a society we are on the track of progress and that the achieving student can get on board that project and thereby do good, often by way of professional status. Many student organizations provide practice for this “leadership” approach, assuming, for example, that skills learned in working out student government conflicts will turn into skill in broader civic enterprises; awards to students are often based on this premise of “junior” civic engagement. Research and assigned writing within this domain of service-learning usually involve argument and advocacy and take the form of public writing—plans and proposals, letters to the editor or to officials, progress reports, proposals for legislation. There is likely to be a public, external audience for the writing, and the writing is seen both as practice for the “real world” and as having power and agency in itself, as in a published letter to the editor.

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Social action service-learning requires a critique of power relations and knowledge of the culture of social change. Working in this realm requires confidence in the moral and ethical vision of the students and of our culture, as well. Pedagogical decisions are often based on looking at the issues around which students themselves are organizing and learning what they are doing and why. Taking students along on activities organized by recognized groups

that challenge social norms through protests and demonstrations, having students observe activist planning and coordination efforts, bringing in activists for interviews and following them in their work are all popular activities. Reading historical texts and seeing films in class may place this work in context and help to clarify the roles of activists in multiple times and places. For example, viewing a popular film focusing on a heroic individual (e.g. Spielberg’s *Amistad*) and then contrasting it with the historical vision of a social movement may serve this function. Writing assignments are often reflections on these components of material culture or analyses of real events that are part of the class’s experience. Unlike private writing in the charitable mode, however, students’ writing routinely becomes open to the learning group and is synthesized with attention to multiple perspectives. Components of the civic engagement—public writing such as letters to the editor, to officials, etc.—are also part of the writing in this domain of social action but they are not considered sufficient. Action writing can be the result of inquiry connected with social and ethical analysis projects which open up contradictions and suggest action for change.¹ Forms of writing that imagine alternatives by portraying the conflicts and contradictions in fiction and theater pieces and include visual and performance arts are also essential to social action.² Envisioning alternatives is central to social action, which honors what Freire calls “social dreaming” and assumes that “‘what is’ is not all there can be.” Modeling teaches. From seeing others who act on a premise of change, students begin to create.

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Students’ abilities to distinguish and honor each of these domains is shaped by many factors including their standpoint, social position and range of college experience. Service-learning tacked onto a curriculum that essentially is turned inward and based on the unexamined claims of merit can have little effect except to mask the deficiencies in the curricular vision. Courses that help students deconstruct social systems in the social sciences and those that help envision rich relational complexities in the humanities, by contrast, may support the growth that becomes explicit in service-learning and the long-term reflection that follows it. Classes that promote the students’ agency in carrying out real projects in the college community or

the wider world make effective service-learning courses more likely.

A Record of Learning

Ideally, a portfolio illustrating each of three domains as experienced across a student's college career could be the visible product connected to the service-learning component of a student's education. In this scenario, students would be able to demonstrate their understanding through representative cases, reflections, and narratives illustrating the three domains of service. But whether responding to such a portfolio or responding to a single piece of writing within the context of one course, the form that teachers', mentors' and peers' responses take is inevitably related to the notions of authority embedded in the domains. Most critically, in this analysis, student/teacher responsibilities for "reading the world" are shifted in social action service-learning, and forms of evaluation need to represent and support this shift. The teacher or mentor needs to "see" and honor the work and its documents, but does not need to evaluate it in ways that keep the locus of approval tied to mystified superior authority or a scheme that demands a unified analysis. Public checklists of criteria for successful writing that value the achievement of specific, negotiated goals make this shift in authority literal. Scheduling the writing assignments at the end of the term precludes valuable elements of community reading and forecloses opportunities for students to revisit their work from a standpoint informed by multiple peer perspectives. Scheduling papers so that they become the private text for the teacher and student turns the work back toward patronage where the "reading of the world" is primarily attuned to one's own status within it.

Conclusion: Toward Ongoing Conversation

The domains of service-learning each have their curricular underpinnings and their potential for challenging participants, students and faculty alike. Faculty need to keep their own journals, to find ways to work with others to establish communities of support, and to be mindful of the complexity of the work and the mixed results that are bound to ensue. We can be reminded that growth is painful both to experience and to witness and that we must be charitable to one another, support the community structures that promote school as a better place, and challenge those approved structures which are harmful.

So what is the intent of service-learning in your context? Which practices support the intent? Which practices might subvert the intent? Which alternative practices might be created and institutionalized? Who might use this document as a springboard for this work?

A larger question is whether we intend to operate out of our own current fixed positions or whether we are willing to dwell within the contradictions and challenges and be ourselves challenged and changed in ways that will reshape our institutional processes. What will we risk? How will we find and give support during these vulnerable periods of growth and change? And, what can we write to help ourselves?

Notes

¹ See, for example, Hollie Jones' "Ghetto Heaven," Hollie Jones and Damien Nugent's "Sister Researchers," and Betty Franklin and Richard Pringle's "On Creating Sacred Places" in "Celebrating the Experience of Young Women of Color in College: Stories of Struggle, Survival and Strength." *Vitae Scholasticae* 176.1, 2 (Spring/Fall, 1998).

² See my "Freire, Boal, You and Me." *Transformations* 10.2 (Fall 1999): 1-10.

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The World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement is a product of the efforts, contributions and support of many people and organizations. The Report represents a collaborative effort made possible by the input and contributions of experts in the field of youth and civic engagement. In particular, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs would like to extend special thanks to the Report's contributing authors, namely, Akil N. Awan, Mark Brennan, Pat Dolan, Erhardt Graeff, Sarah Huxley, Amy F. Huziak, Selina Khoo, Nur Laiq, Andre Matthias Müller, Claudia Pompa, Lakshitha Saji