Rethinking Service Learning:
Reciprocity and Power Dynamics in Community Engagement

Jason Wollschleger and Mark Killian

Whitworth University

Kayla Prewitt

Communities in Schools

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to challenge existing power dynamics both within the service-learning classroom and between the classroom and community by offering a model of an alternative approach to community engagement. The class partnered with a community organization, at their request, to engage their community as the organization worked through a change in focus and identity. Within the classroom, the research project was led, designed, implemented, and ultimately written solely by the students.

Keywords: critical service learning, reciprocity, power dynamics, student-centered

INTRODUCTION

This article will reflect on one iteration of an upper division sociology course (SO 425 Making Change: Social Intervention Strategies) that I designed in response to my own critical engagement with service learning. Having used "traditional" service-learning approaches (see Mitchell, 2008) in past courses, I had become concerned about a number of aspects of this model. I began to feel that the traditional service-learning components of my courses were actually diminishing the capacity of local organizations by asking them to invest a non-trivial amount of time and energy to providing educational opportunities for my students and not really getting anything back from student involvement. I also became concerned about power dynamics in relationships—both in the classroom and between the university and the community partners.

I became concerned about student development in the service-learning process. My goals were for my students to gain independence and begin to apply knowledge and skills they had gained in a "real world," non-classroom setting. However, my course design was limiting their agency and not really providing a context for growth and application. Upon reflection, I also realized that I (as an agent of the university) had been asking my community partners to meet my instructional needs while offering an incentive of free, undergraduate labor, rather than asking how my students and my course could best

serve the needs of my community partner and our broader community. Additionally, I began to recognize that this was just one manifestation of a lack of reciprocity in the relationship. Service learning and community engagement that actually want to work toward social justice need to turn the directional flow of resources around so that the vast stocks of human capital and knowledge that are stored up in universities flow toward the community rather than—what was happening in traditional service learning—draining resources away from the community.

This article will use one iteration of my Making Change class as a case study of an alternative approach to service learning. I hope to illustrate my (and my students') effort to challenge the existing power structures in service-learning relationships in the classroom and between the classroom and the community, engage in reshaping reciprocity in order to benefit our community partner, and to employ our resources for real change in the community. This article is a co-authored collaboration that will include sections written by the community partner, as well as a recent alumnus who was a student in the course. Following Alexander et al. (2018), the author of each section will be indicated in the section heading both so that the reader knows from what perspective the section is written as well as to preserve the voices of each collaborator.

Critical of Service Learning (faculty)

I was not alone in these concerns over the traditional service-learning model; in fact, there has emerged a growing body of literature focused on critical service learning. As early as the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars were criticizing the dominant model of service learning and calling for new approaches (Marullo, 1999; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Robinson, 2000; Brown, 2001). Others voiced concern over the "forced volunteerism" (Boyle-Baise, 1998) and the paternalistic nature (Cipolle, 2004; Robinson, 2000) of traditional service-learning practices, but it was the publication of Mitchell's 2008 article that really pushed the field forward and laid

the groundwork for understanding and defining a critical service learning. Mitchell identified three key aspects of critical service learning that come to define the field (e.g., Latta et al., 2018): "working to redistribute power amongst all participants in the service-learning relationship, developing authentic relationships in the classroom and community, and working from a social change perspective" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50).

Traditional service learning has tended to privilege the needs of the class and of the students over those of the community partner (Brown, 2001). Following Butin's (2003) post-structuralist approach to service learning, Mitchell (2008) argues that a critical service learning "pedagogy names the differential access to power experienced by students, faculty, and community members, and encourages analysis, dialogue, and discussion of those power dynamics" (p. 56). Mitchell, drawing on the literature, provides a couple of strategies for doing just this: empowering the community (Marullo & Edwards, 2000), students and faculty working alongside of the community and using campus resources to address community needs, and focusing on long-term partnerships to prevent burnout among community partners (Brown, 2001).

Similarly, critical service learning should question the distribution of power within the classroom (Mitchell, 2008). Butin (2005) argues that it should challenge "our static notions of teaching and learning, decenters our claim to the label of 'students' and 'teachers,' and exposes and explores the linkages between power, knowledge, and identity" (pp. vii-viii, as cited in Mitchell, 2008, p. 57). Strategies for accomplishing this include incorporating community knowledge and input into the course curriculum (Brown, 2001) through involving community members in the classroom, having teachers serve alongside of students, or having classes in the community. Other possibilities include reconfiguring the actual physical layout of the traditional classroom; shared class facilitation between teachers, students, and community members (Mitchell, 2008); and creating a

"professorless" environment where students and community members can interact without the influence of faculty (Addes & Keene, 2006).

The Community Partner: Liberty Park Child Development Center (LPCDC) (community partner)

In the early 1960s, construction began on an interstate highway in Spokane, Washington, that would bisect historic neighborhoods. One of these neighborhoods was Liberty Park, named after an 18-acre park that was surrounded by working-class residences. Upon completion, the highway swallowed up 16 acres of the park as well as a large number of houses in the Liberty Park neighborhood, displacing many families.

In response, the Presbytery of the Inland Northwest—the associated body of all Presbyterian Churches (United States) in Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho—started a nonprofit housing agency called Proclaim Liberty. Incorporated in 1974, Proclaim Liberty developed Liberty Park Terrace, a 48-unit apartment complex that originally housed poor elderly residents displaced by the highway. Over the next decade-and-a-half, families receiving housing assistance from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) began to occupy the apartments as the original occupants died or moved away. By the early 1990s, nearly half of the residents had refugee status, and the other half met federal poverty standards.

Understanding the structural conditions in which their residents were constrained, Proclaim Liberty petitioned the Presbytery of the Inland Northwest to start a separate nonprofit agency that would serve residents of the complex through day care and child development services. In 1992 Liberty Park Child Development Center (LPCDC) was incorporated, providing a subsidized day care service, free early childhood education, as well as a faith-based after-school tutoring program.

Over the ensuing decades, LPCDC specialized in services for children in poverty. However, it eventually ended the day care program in order to pour more time and effort into the early childhood education and tutoring programs. Despite its relative success with these programs, in the early 2010s the newly hired executive director started to question the center's focus on children. Arguing that LPCDC had an obligation to care for the needs of all residents located in neighborhood, the executive director urged the Board of Directors to consider expanding the center's services. Subsequently, we commissioned Dr. Wollschleger to conduct a needs assessment of the center.

SO 425 Making Change*: Course Design, Project, and Processes (faculty)

In line with the goals of critical service learning, I developed my SO 425: Making Change course in the hopes of engaging in reciprocity between the community partner and university, decentralizing the power dynamics in the classroom so as to facilitate student growth and learning, and to create an opportunity for real social change. My hope was that the community partner would benefit, my students would be able to apply their skills and knowledge from other courses, and the outcome would make a difference for our community.

In previous iterations[1] of this course, I

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[1] Not every iteration of the course has been this successful. There has been a time where we were unable to complete the project in a semester. This failure has led to good, in-class reflection and contributed to student learning in its own way, and I did recruit students to continue working on the project through independent studies and some paid summer research positions. But, it is worth considering the scope of the project and what is feasible in a semester.

had partnered with local organizations that had reached out to our director of community engagement for assistance doing research or projects that they did not have the human capital to do themselves.[2] Usually these are small, local nonprofits who need to do program evaluations or learn how to best serve their population of interest or community through a community needs assessment or SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) assessment. In this case, the director of the organization reached out directly to me. We had an initial meeting in which he informed me that the organization was seeking to redefine itself and its programming in order to better serve the community, but they did not have the human resources or the know-how to engage the community in a systematic way that would allow them to both truly hear the community and identify gaps in services. In this meeting I described my class and students—senior sociology students with research methods training who were preparing for careers in social and human services—and outlined what he could expect us to be able to do. Once the course started, the first couple of weeks were focused on theory and practice applying previously learned content and research skills. Then the students (without me) went to meet with the director on-site, and we then began the research process (explained in detail in the student's section below).

The goals for this project were to increase the scope and reach of the organization (rather than diminish it) by going out in the community on their behalf, and to provide the organization with access to the intellectual and human capital resources of the university. Additionally, it was essential that students get an opportunity to collaboratively lead a real-world project without faculty direction, but with faculty guidance and supervision.

To facilitate these goals, the whole course was built around this project. Once we had a research design, students selected into groups where each group had tasks to perform (e.g., literature reviews, interviews, transcription and coding, designing and analyzing surveys, etc.), and then everybody's work was shared with the whole class so that each student had access to all the resources created by all the groups. Students then wrote their own community needs assessment, complete with literature reviews, qualitative data analysis, quantitative data analysis, and proposed recommendations for the organization. These were then used to create a final, edited report that was given to the organization in time for their board of director's retreat. Students were graded on their participation in the group tasks (through a combination of self-assessment and peer evaluation), their own written report, and a final reflection paper; and the organization received a report that allowed them to better engage their community and to therefore rethink their identity and role in the community, a report that was completely created by undergraduates. The subsequent sections are written by a student in the class and the community partner. Each will discuss the process and outcomes from their own perspective.

Impacts on Student Empowerment (student)

On the first day of Making Change, the professor commissioned my classmates and I with the responsibility of creating a comprehensive needs assessment for a local nonprofit agency looking to improve their

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[2]Our university has an excellent center for community engagement that maintains deep contact in the local community. The director maintains a list of organizations that have reached out to her in need of help on a short-term, research project. These are usually under-resourced nonprofits that would benefit enormously from hearing from their community, but do not have the staffing, money, or know-how to do this themselves in a systematic way. Thus, for them, it is worth taking the risk of having undergraduates represent their organization for a single project.

community interventions and practices. The task at hand was made less daunting by our collective presupposition that our professor would lead the process, and our own contributions would be modest at best and useless at worst. After all, unlike the many "problems" that had been posed throughout my undergraduate career, there was no hypothetical component to this project: our research findings were to be presented to the Board of Directors and used to make real policy changes in their programs. Clinging to the assumption that the professor would provide the blueprint to this project was a form of reassurance for all of the students listening to the course syllabus. A few weeks into the class, it became evident that our assumptions had been entirely incorrect.

The professor provided the theoretical foundation that undergirded our research process, but we were responsible for the direct application of the concepts. Our required reading by Kettner et al. (1999) provided the basis for in-class discussions and lectures. If we asked the professor questions about the direct application of our readings to the Liberty Park needs assessment, we were told to consult one another or were posed a question in return. For example, asking, "Should we focus on finding the normative need through a comparison study, or should we diagnose perceived need through an interview process?" would be answered with, "What would be the pros and cons of either?" The professor played a role of sounding board rather than project leader—not that we didn't frequently try to challenge that role.

The process began with an initial meeting with Liberty Park's executive director, which was arranged—but not attended by—the professor. The other students and I arranged carpools with one another and arrived across town at LPCDC with independently compiled lists of questions for the director. Our objective was to get a complete picture of Liberty Park's current services as well as what specific topics they hoped to address in the needs assessment. I specifically remember my initial hesitation to

ask questions that were off the predetermined script, but I was emboldened by the realization that any gaps in understanding would directly impact the quality of the needs assessment. If we did not ask the questions, nobody else would be doing damage control.

Once my classmates and I had a firm understanding of the job due to our meeting with the director, we began the process of detailing a multipronged research plan. A small group of students collected and shared census data that painted a picture of the South Perry neighborhood as a whole in order to provide a greater context to Liberty Park. With these community attributes in mind, we spent class time in the library compiling an extensive review of the academic literature pertinent to Liberty Park Child Development Center, looking at factors such as community efficacy in low-income neighborhoods, attributes of successful acculturation processes for refugees, and traits of other thriving community centers around the world. The literature review was shared with all students in class to ensure that we would all be viewing the project through the same academic lens.

The director had emphasized his desire to work harmoniously with other nonprofit agencies in the community by not offering competing or repetitive services. We used part of our meeting with him to compile a master list of people/agencies with whom LPCDC was actively collaborating. Together, the other students and I created a uniform survey to administer in-person or over the phone to all of the agencies mentioned in the previous meeting. Four community organizations were willing to let us conduct interviews: Global Neighborhood, World Relief, Odyssey Youth Drop-in Center, and the South Perry Learning Center. A small subsection of students that felt comfortable conducting interviews recorded their conversations with the community partners, and in order to ensure an equitable workload, those students who did not conduct interviews transcribed and shared the data with the rest of the research team. The scribes

also highlighted and coded the interviews for commonalities in the agency responses.

Perhaps the most memorable and impactful part of the research process was the Liberty Park community interaction via in-person surveys. As a research team, we felt like we had a solid understanding of the direction LPCDC and their partners wanted to take—but we had yet to hear from those directly impacted by LPCDC's services. Once again, I made the trek across town with three other peers on a November morning with temperatures well below freezing.[3] We had compiled a "mini survey" of two to three questions: Have you heard of Liberty Park Child Development Center? Are you currently using any of their services? Which services would you like to see in the future? The four of us entered the Section 8 housing complex and knocked on all 48 doors of the Liberty Park Terrace apartments that enclosed LPCDC. Of those 48 units, we found 21 residents willing to answer our questions. I would make an introduction—sometimes cut off by a door closing on us or a non sequitur comment—about our intent in collecting this information, and would then launch into the questions. As I spoke with the community members, my three research partners would take notes on the responses. The receptions to our questions ranged from warm and hospitable to irate and hostile. One woman invited us into her apartment—which, in retrospect, is an offer we would have been wise to politely refuse—and offered us tea. One man accused us of collecting information for the government and "sticking our noses in places they don't belong." Most of the 21 residents answered us succinctly and politely.

This process was helpful in understanding the expressed need in the community

itself; however, the results varied significantly. Some residents stated that they had no need for any service LPCDC could provide; others said they would eagerly use all the services or programs proposed to them; and still others highlighted one or two programs that could be helpful. However varied our results, the general consensus of the researchers during our data analysis was that the true need of the community was not one that was explicitly expressed, but rather implicitly implied: There was a complete lack of community efficacy. In other words, neighbors were not connected with one another, there was not a strong sense of communal ties, and more than one resident expressed unhappiness with the neighborhood environment itself. This revelation marked a significant point in the research process for all of us. I felt as though we had finally discovered the crux of the problem that seemed to elude the LPCDC stakeholders; and we had done so methodically, painstakingly, and above all else independently.

As a class, we had diagnosed various forms of need through quantitative and qualitative processes. As individuals, it became our responsibility to brainstorm interventions that could address the gaps or chasms between LPCDC services and their community members. We came together as a class to bring our individual ideas to the table, and opened up discussion to decide upon interventions or changes that would be most effective for Liberty Park. The class ultimately recommended an official collaborative model between Liberty Park and the other nonprofit agencies in the community based on our partner survey findings: Although a variety of complementary services to Liberty Park were being offered by other agencies (and vice

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[3]It should be noted that even though we are at a predominantly White institution, this was a fairly diverse class of students—diverse in terms of social class, race, ethnicity, and country of origin. The group responsible for the door-to-door community interaction was comprised of students who were most comparable to the demographics of the community (students self-selected into these groups). These were primarily students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and at least one student who was a naturalized citizen from the same country as a portion of the refugees in residence there. Her language and cultural knowledge helped facilitate some of the door-to-door interactions.

versa), a lack of communication between the agencies was preventing community members from receiving these other services. Furthermore, we recommended LPCDC prioritize facilitating connections *between* community members, rather than focusing on connecting community members to the agency itself. Our literature review indicated that high levels of community efficacy was a fundamental component to a successful community center, and our community outreach results indicated that such an atmosphere did not currently exist for Liberty Park Terrace residents. We shared a few more detailed findings from our research: programs that had been successful at other community centers, services that residents tended to dislike, etc. I compiled all of our findings into an accessible and user-friendly document that detailed our process and our recommendations. I submitted this document to the professor at the end of the term, who then turned it over to the board of LPCDC.

Reflecting on the process, it seems remarkable that I did not participate in a fully student-led project until taking Making Change my senior year. It is important to keep in mind that this course was an upper level sociology class primarily composed of juniors and seniors well into their bachelor's degrees, yet none of us originally had the expectation of making real social change for the simple reason that we had not yet had the opportunity. This class, more than any other, equipped me with post-graduate skills that I've used every day since. The technical skills have come to good use—the first week of my job, I was asked to conduct a needs assessment of a Title I elementary school—but more importantly, I gained the experience of true academic and professional freedom. Through Making Change, I experienced true empowerment as a student by way of complete autonomy.

Outcomes for LPCDC (community partner)

After reading the needs assessment report, the Board of Directors questioned the scope of LPCDC's mission and vision. At a retreat in January of 2017, the Board of Directors adopted a new mission statement, which reads, "[The mission of LPCDC is] to share Christ's love with our neighbors through education opportunities, community connections, and empowering relationships." To mark the expansion of the center's mission, we replaced "Child" with "Community" in the organization's title ("LPCDC" now stands for Liberty Park *Community* Development Center). Although we maintain our original child development programs, we have begun to fulfill its expanded mission through two approaches.

First, to strengthen ties with other nonprofit organizations, the Board of Directors asked an employee of World Relief to join their ranks. This connection helped the center start its first English as a Second Language (ESL) program and secured services for the refugee population in the apartment complex. We also worked with United Way Spokane to fund an Americorps VISTA position that would be dedicated to refugee assistance and the development of a sustainable ESL program. The center hired a VISTA employee in the fall of 2018.

Second, in partnership with Proclaim Liberty, LPCDC started a Neighborhood Network center. Funded through HUD, the Neighborhood Network program provides computer training as well as other poverty alleviation services to aid residents of HUD-supported complexes. In the spring of 2017, we hired a Neighborhood Network Director to oversee the training requirements of the program and to provide social service counseling to residents of the Liberty Park Terrace apartments. With these direct services, the hope is to build economic self-sufficiency among the residents, allowing them to move into sustainable market-rate housing. Although these programs are less than two years old, I believe, at least anecdotally, that these actions are generating greater levels of community trust and efficacy.

Discussion (faculty)

The key aspects of this course and project that made it an effective critical service-learning experience were that we listened to the community partner and built everything around what would be beneficial to them. Secondly, we did not drain their resources, but rather expanded the scope and reach of the organization. We took issues of reciprocity and power dynamics between the community partner and university seriously, and tried to ensure that the community partner would be the beneficiary. Additionally, power dynamics in the classroom between student and faculty were turned upside down. Faculty got out of the way and the students became empowered to design, implement, and present a research project to a community organization. In this class, the course projects became an actual product that was given to a local organization. Finally, the project involved a lot of listening to community residents, stakeholders, and people receiving services. This alone is valuable from a social change perspective because it creates an opportunity for people to be truly heard, and for the community partner to better understand and engage the community that they are trying to serve.

I recognize that not all courses can do this. For those who are interested in trying, I found it is most successful with a smaller class size (under 25), a diverse student group (diverse in both identities and skillsets), upper-division majors, and a community partner whose research needs can be achieved within the scope of a single project and the timeframe of a semester. The point of this article is to show one possible embodiment of a critical service-learning course and the impacts it can have on both students and community partners in hopes that it will inspire other creative, critical service-learning courses and projects.

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AUTHORS

Jason Wollschleger is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Whitworth University. He can be reached at jwollschleger@whitworth.edu or (509) 777-4281.

Mark Killian is the President of the Board at Liberty Park Community Development Center, and an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Whitworth University. He can be reached at mkillian@whitworth.edu.

Kayla Prewitt is a recent alumnus of Whitworth University's Sociology department. She currently works as a site coordinator for Communities in Schools. She can be reached at kprewitt17@my.whitworth.edu.

AUTHOR NOTE

Jason Wollschleger, Mark Killian, Department of Sociology, Whitworth University; Kayla Prewitt, Communities in Schools.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jason Wollschleger, Whitworth University, 300 W Hawthorne Rd, Spokane, WA, 99251.
Email: jwollschleger@whitworth.edu.