When "Doing With" Can Be Without: Employing Critical Service-Learning Strategies in Creating the "New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History" Digital Timeline

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ABSTRACT

Analyzing the development of the "New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History" digital humanities timeline, this case study addresses the inevitability of transient partnerships between students and community members, while pushing back on the notion of "authentic relationships" in service learning. Embracing the ephemerality of service-learning projects, I focus more on intentional strategies that can lead to transformative learning experiences and help to create a more even playing field in knowledge production. I link critical service learning with feminist pedagogy to offer collaborative strategies that better leverage resources to bridge campus and community.

Keywords: digital humanities, critical service learning, feminist pedagogy, authentic relationships, New Orleans

INTRODUCTION

"You got the Tulane students to work with us, man, if we didn't have this collaboration we wouldn't have time to create such a timeline," said Alfred Marshall, an organizer with Stand with Dignity (Stand) in 2019, when I reconnected with him to begin planning the second phase of the "New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History" timeline. Alfred's comment sheds light on the relationship between community partners and students involved in service-learning projects, addressing the potential value of this type of collaboration for stakeholders. The project began when another Stand organizer, Colette Tippy, reached out to me during a fundraiser in New Orleans in 2014. She asked casually how we could combine forces between Stand and Tulane University to highlight Black workers in New Orleans' political history. "No one's talking about this stuff," she

convincingly argued. I was familiar with the work of Stand, a grassroots organization of Black workers dedicated to racial equity in the New Orleans economy. Unsure of the exact strategy, the brief conversation led to coffee dates; those meetings led to including more stakeholders; and more voices led to collaborative visions and plans of action aimed to create a platform to elevate the stories of Black-led organizing in New Orleans.

By June 2016, our informal sidewalk talk resulted in the production of the "New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History" digital history timeline—a collaborative project researched and designed by a cadre of Stand leaders, Tulane students, library staff, and a team of volunteers. But Alfred's initial comment raises questions regarding "collaboration" in short-term community engagement projects, because my service-learning students never met in person with Stand members. Would service-learning students have had a more transformative experience if they had face-to-face encounters

with their community partner? Did working in figurative silos limit the effectiveness of this collaborative project?

Responding to Tania Mitchell's call for more critical approaches to community engagement, particularly the idea to "center the knowledge, perspectives, and voices of marginalized people to advance community engagement practices in ways that might yield more just communities" (2017, p. 38), this paper focuses on the redistribution of power in service learning and offers a reflexive view of the processes employed in the development of the digital timeline project. Understanding that many service-learning projects are short-term, one-semester undertakings, this case study foregrounds the inevitability of transient student participation while pushing back on the notion of "authentic relationships" in service learning (Eby, 1998; Donahue & Mitchell, 2010; Mitchell, 2015). While embracing the ephemerality of service-learning projects, I focus more on intentional strategies that can lead to transformative learning experiences and help to create a more even playing field in knowledge production.

This article links critical community-engagement with feminist pedagogy and offers collaborative strategies that better leverage resources between the campus and community. I argue that expectations to forge that level of "authentic relationships" between students and community partners may set projects up for failure and/or may deter instructors from wanting to engage in such programming. Moreover, as this paper illustrates, seeking authenticity can be a privileged act, and the pressure to create authenticity within a one-semester timeframe can be detracting for community partners who must redirect time and attention from campaigns and membership development in order to satisfy service-learning expectations.

Nevertheless, through the case study, I illustrate that "doing with" can be without, meaning collaboration between community partners and students can still be achieved by working concurrently on projects, but not necessarily interacting in the same space

(Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Fostering transformative experiences for service learners, a fundamental part of critical service learning, can help to boost understanding of this collaboration and can be reached by the following: interrogating systems of inequality, setting out clear project objectives, sharing progress, addressing commonalities of project methodology, exercising reflexivity, and incorporating feminist pedagogy that is grounded in strategies to undo uneven power structures.

Tapping into Positionality, University Access, and Community Engagement

When Colette reached out to me in 2014, I was teaching a survey course in Latin American Studies to undergraduate students at Tulane. My class included a service learning tier-one component, which is a graduation requirement for each Tulane student. In reshaping its university curriculum after Hurricane Katrina, Tulane launched the Center for Public Service in 2006 with the mission to forge collaborative, community-based partnerships to promote empowerment, understanding, civility, and justice (Tulane's Center for Public Service). Part of that mission is a requirement that all Tulane undergraduate students must complete two tiers of service learning during their university career. When done carefully, these projects allow students to apply knowledge beyond campus, highlight community voices, and provide organizations with university resources. But, the short-term nature of service-learning projects inevitably leads to much turnover in service learning.

My role in this digital humanities project commenced through my connection with Stand, a branch of the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ). As a NOWCRJ researcher and volunteer for over three years, I overlapped significantly with Stand through shared office space, campaigns, marches, and other social-justice-oriented projects. In my own research, I use accompaniment as a theoretical and methodological framework to help inform my scholarship. As part of social movement

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organizing, accompaniment is used by organizers as a way for allies to listen and go with individuals in order to better respond to injustices and help break down barriers through movement building strategies (Farmer, 2011; Lynd, 2012; Tomlinson & Lipsitz, 2013). Accompaniment refers to my experiences going with members of the NOWCRJ to drive them to community meetings and protests, and to help them navigate vulnerable spaces like traffic court and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) check-ins. These experiences at once provided a service while also supporting the movement, allowing me to better grasp these structural challenges and understand the members' resistance strategies to these challenges.

Through my accompaniment work, I began to earn the trust of NOWCRJ members and leaders. Together, we brainstormed ideas on how to better leverage my position of privilege and access to university resources (e.g., students, funding, space, archives) with NOWCRJ projects. Colette's partnership request on the timeline project presented an important approach to service-learning projects: the community organization *coming to* the university with an idea rather than the other way around. Once the project was underway, I took on the role as listener and project facilitator. As a queer, White scholar, I took cues from the organizers and followed the lead of Stand members who were central to identifying the key events, collecting data, leading workshops, and finalizing design. I focused my work on connecting with local resources and maximizing social and financial capital (i.e., small grants) to complete the project.

During various meetings, I met with organizers of Stand to develop a community-based project curriculum grounded in popular political education and capable of satisfying Tulane's service-learning requirements. Overall, the "New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History" timeline lasted for two semesters and included the year-and-a-half-long community partnership, spanning from the Stand organizer's initial request in 2014 to the culmination of the timeline, which included a teach-in launch on Juneteenth 2016.

Collaborative Strategies and Feminist Pedagogy

Much of the literature that links critical community engagement with feminist pedagogy centers on collaboration with stakeholders to help undo power structures through a social-justice-oriented framework (Costa & Leong, 2012; Jacob, 2012; Mitchell, 2017). For example, situating community-engagement in the context of feminist pedagogy, Costa and Leong (2012) argue that critical engagement reinforces the link between critical analysis and action "in a way that allows us both to relate to and challenge different positions within the civic engagement movement" (p. 174). Costa and Leong further argue that critical community-engagement "can *never* be apolitical and always already questions what is at stake and for whom" (p. 175), underscoring the importance of addressing the roots of inequalities and then leveraging resources to dismantle power structures.

Likewise, Mitchell (2017) argues that "intersectional community engagement recognizes the assets of the community and looks for opportunities to leverage those resources—individual, communal, and structural—toward meaningful change" (p. 41). Here Mitchell shows how practitioners of critical community-engagement can maximize on community assets to confront structural racism through a collaborative framework, rather than seeing individuals as deficits—an unfortunate byproduct of increasingly neoliberalized university settings (Mitchell, 2017; Takacs, 2002). When possible, with community members, it is important to complement on-campus learning by developing popular education pedagogy, defined by Toth et al. (2016) as "a process of collective study and action that engages people who have been marginalised, politically, culturally and/or socially, with taking charge of their own learning…as a

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means to movement for social justice and change" (p. 201).

For example, training students in archival methodology allows them to "hone research skills in the digital humanities age, while concomitantly teaching them how to delve into the past so they can better understand the future" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 41). Like Ferguson, Gaillet et al. (1996) suggest that "getting students into archives opens up new worlds of possibility in building multimodality and critical thinking skills and in encouraging service learning and civic engagement" (p. 8). But also introducing community members to archival research allows for a collaborative process in knowledge production, one that provides a methodological commonality in creating the timeline. Focusing on archival methods allows students and community members to develop problem-solving tools using primary sources, and fosters firsthand, historical understandings of social justice issues to connect the past with the present. This practice can help to demystify the archives, as it becomes both a collaborative research space and a resistance act that links the project and its participants.

Working collaboratively on projects through a feminist pedagogical framework allows a balance of leadership and participation, yet ensures that maximum ownership of the project goes to the community-partner (Lizarazo, Oceguera, Tenorio, Pedraza, & Irwin, 2017). Facilitating service-learning courses in this way can provide transformational pedagogy that offers students and faculty solutions to better understand our complicity in reinforcing ownership and power structures, and to learn ways to change these patterns (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Jacob, 2012).

Accepting the Ephemerality of Student and Community Partnerships

Because service-learning projects tend to fluctuate between direct and indirect service, classroom lectures that address the "doing for" and "doing with" dichotomy can help introduce students to ways critical

community-engagement in the form of "doing with" can shape change, rather than just offer Band-Aid solutions in the form of "doing for" (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Nevertheless, as proponents of critical service learning advocate for more community-engaged projects oriented around social justice, the concept of "doing with" leaves much room for interpretation in how the "with" materializes.

Scholars like Eby (1998) and Mitchell (2015) call for "authentic" partnerships between campus and community to better address service-learning projects. Eby's (1998) recommendation importantly emphasizes establishing a deep relationship between faculty/staff and the community partner to provide continuity for programming (p. 6). Meanwhile, Mitchell (2015) argues that "critical service-learning is an approach to civic learning that is attentive to social change, works to redistribute power, and strives to develop authentic relationships" (p. 21). Mitchell's work (2015) centers on longer-term projects ranging from one to four years, allowing more space for the development of "authentic relationships" between community partners, students, and staff. Yet some calls for "authentic relationships" in critical service learning (Donahue & Mitchell, 2010; Mitchell, 2017) do not provide a timeframe for these relationships to develop with students, nor do they operationalize a clear meaning of "authentic relationship," which is understandable given the general vagueness of the term "authentic" and the variety of service-learning projects.

When "authentic relationships" are interpreted as face-to-face interactions, this component presents potentially discouraging expectations for all stakeholders. Highlighting the role of the community partner in service-learning projects, Eby (1998) warns that "most agencies are already stretched beyond their capacities" and "have limited resources to respond to unending need" (p. 6). Trying to manage logistics—something seemingly as simple as scheduling a meeting between students and community partners—can be a burden to the community partner, when the

organization already has limited time and more urgent priorities.

Moreover, creating ersatz spaces for face-to-face meetings may force a spectacle-like approach that reproduces power inequalities, rather than working to redistribute this power. Costa and Leong (2012) are critical of universities reinforcing power inequalities "that feminists have worked so diligently to expose and challenge" (p. 171) and contend that civic engagement pedagogy should be rooted in equal partnerships. Complicating this sense of "equal partnerships" and Ward and Wolf-Wendel's concept of "doing with" provides an alternate version of these collaborations, one that does not necessarily equate to physical interactions; rather, it suggests that collaborative can be concurrent (Costa & Leong, 2008; 2012). In this sense, concurrent means working over the same time period on a communal project and communicating progress with stakeholders via email, phone calls, meetings, etc., rather than in-person meetings and presentations.

Rather than focus on "authentic relationships" for students in critical service learning, an emphasis can instead be placed on the collaborative activities paired with transformative learning. bell hooks (1994) notes the significance of "that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance" (p. 47). Mapping out the project design, using an intersectional framework to address structural inequalities, and encouraging discussions that interrogate positionality and power are all strategies that can help to maintain this sense of collaboration and ethos of "doing with" (Takacs, 2002; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000).

Additionally, accepting the ephemerality of student and community partnerships and not trying to force in-person interactions can take the burden off of the agency, the faculty, and the student to share the same space. This allows for the community partners to continue focus on their priorities and the instructor can use this example as part of the transformative learning experience. As Suckdale et al. (2018) argue, transformative learning "enables students to see a potentially familiar problem in a new light and reevaluate prior notions" (p. 80). Therefore, the instructor can help students better understand the challenges that grassroots organizations face when they are spread too thin and their campaigns are vast. Embracing these realities and removing the pressure of face-to-face encounters can open up new possibilities for collaboration and understanding of structural barriers.

New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History Timeline Development Process

To begin the project, Colette and I met with members of Stand and knowledge bearers from the New Orleans Black community to develop a skeleton of a timeline for the project. Over the course of 2015, I met one to two times per month with Stand members at their weekly Tuesday meetings. Until we got closer to the completion of the timeline, we dedicated approximately one meeting per month to locate events, identify potential interviewees, and conduct trainings.

At the same time, over a one-year term from 2015 to 2016, I taught two service-learning courses with projects committed to research the New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History timeline. Justifying a service-learning project on New Orleans Black organizing history for my *Introduction to Latin American Studies* course was one of my first challenges. Interdisciplinary in design and with a unit focused on New Orleans, the course allowed for versatility in service-learning projects. I found I could easily rationalize the project because it fit within the thematic framework of our course on subaltern voices, labor, and resistance across the Americas.

I included lessons on what Mitchell (2017) considers "recognition of structural inequities and the roles of multiple manifestations of oppression in the maintenance of social concerns" (p. 41), and I addressed the lack of representation of

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marginalized voices in dominant historical narratives (Spivak, 1988). Consistent with this framework, I taught a unit on the Haitian Revolution, with a focus on White planters in Haiti that fled to Louisiana with their chattel property during the late 18th century (James, 1989; Waters, 2013). In the classroom and following Stand's popular education informal curriculum, we centered on Louisiana's Untold Slave Revolt in 1811, in which 500 enslaved people led a mass uprising against White planters (Waters, 2013). Further, drawing from literature on monuments and mis/representation, we reflected on the lack of recognition of Black labor in New Orleans. Examining the intersectional work of the NOWCRJ allowed us to map the experiences of the working class Black community in New Orleans onto the experiences of undoc-umented Latinx laborers in post-Katrina New Orleans.

For a class of 25 students, I had two field sites—the timeline project and tutoring English as a Second Language (ESL) high school students—as part of the mandatory service-learning sections. At the beginning of each semester I provided an outline of both projects and let students select which site better fit their interests and scheduling needs. The first semester, five students conducted archival research in historical newspaper databases. We set the initial timeframe of our research from 1800 to 1960 and arranged for a library training session on historical newspaper research methodology taught through Tulane's Latin American Library. The students divided up time periods and used ProQuest and NewsBank, Inc. to collect data and create an annotated bibliography detailing each of the newspaper articles on Black worker-led movements.

Throughout the course, we read articles about the work of the NOWCRJ and discussed the overarching ideas of the project as well as Stand's role in this knowledge production. As evidenced through their initial reflections, it was challenging to sell the idea of the timeline simply because we had not fully fleshed out the design or the full scope of the project. Nevertheless, during the semester, students presented the initial data they collected and how it fit within the work of Stand and course materials.

As a formal evaluation, students responded to a midterm essay question that asked them to reflect on course materials that covered state-sponsored memorialization and underrepresented voices in the Americas, linking these concepts to their work with the labor history timeline. In some cases, students connected the essay to the importance of highlighting resistance movements and the disenfranchisement of people of color:

> Black Lives Matter has a lot of connections to the Service Learning, while it focuses on the struggles of African Americans and the changes that America still needs to make in order to improve and remember these struggles… This connects to the labor timeline because it mentions the struggles that people have faced due to nationality and color. It also connects to the movements by people in an attempt to change these struggles such as labor strikes. (Comment from midterm course evaluation, Fall 2015)

In other cases, students focused their essay on memorialization. For example,

> …the idea of the timeline itself is a monument. Working with the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, to determine and organize local labor movements into a timeline will allow for a visual representation of the past, just like the statues. For both the Congress of Day Laborers and Stand With Dignity, the timeline will serve as a reminder of their history, monumentalizing the laborers of the past and the protests or movements that they

stood for. (Comment from midterm course evaluation, Fall 2015)

The first essay response reflects the student's experience in connecting the service-learning project to resistance movements and links historical resistance to racial injustices to the Black Lives Matter movement. The student also connects the project to the necessity to "improve and remember these struggles." The second essay recognizes the timeline as a "monument," illustrating how the service-learning project provides a representation of the past events for the Black community. It also highlights the collaborative element of the project in which the students worked with the NOWCRJ to develop the timeline. Teaching students about systemic issues, in this case about whose history is and is not memorialized, enables students to connect historical events to current struggles and, to some degree, allows students to envision their own role in making space for these narratives.

By the spring of 2016, we increased the pace on the production of the timeline with Stand members because June 19th was our target launch date. At monthly Tuesday meetings, we identified contemporary worker movements, trained members on archival methods, and completed two sessions on oral history collection methods. Stand members identified potential interviewees, designed interview questions, and practiced recording interviews with each other. Throughout the next year, Stand members and organizers conducted more formal oral history interviews with community members involved in these movements.

On one weekend in May 2016 a group of seven Stand members visited the Amistad Research Center to conduct archival research exploring collections on worker movements. As Stand members engaged in the collection—documenting materials by taking photographs of pamphlets, signage, and newsletters, they recognized the names of friends and family in some of the labor movements during the late 20th century.

While they had more connection to the special collections than the students, the archive served as a commonality between the two groups as they both linked strategies of the past to contemporary issues and contributed primary source data to the timeline project.

Managing a limited budget, we had pro bono help from a radio producer to produce short oral history clips, and a computer coder who introduced us to software from Knight Lab to develop the timeline. Stand organizers and members identified the images to upload on the timeline. We edited oral history interviews into one-minute clips that feature workers recounting their organizing experiences. The digital timeline launched on Juneteenth 2016 through a powerful teach-in and workshop at the McKenna Museum of African American Art. Stand members organized and facilitated the event, which directly engaged a wider audience—teachers, union members, and community organizations. Tulane students who participated in the project were invited to the launch, but had already gone home for the summer.

CONCLUSION

Combining critical community-engaged scholarship with feminist pedagogy and applying this theoretical framework to a digital humanities project helps to elevate these histories and allows students to look critically at structural issues that continue to leave Black voices underrepresented. Involving Tulane service-learning students in this project helped them to understand the broader theoretical frameworks in examining social movements and labor organizing history. It also allowed practical application of esoteric information to bridge the campus with the community. For Stand members, engaging them in archival research, oral history, and design allowed them to take on a direct role in the telling of their history, fostering a strong sense of ownership and pride, and making these important histories more accessible.

As we embark on the second phase of the timeline in 2019, a project that will expand the digital access and offer a physical exhibition of the "New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History" timeline, I spoke again with Alfred, one of the organizers with Stand, about the role of the students in the process and how they can potentially fit in for this next iteration. Reflecting on the process and the role of the Tulane students, Alfred posited,

> Stand was so busy focusing on the living wage campaigns and other campaigns floating
> around, it was hard to find time to even just get those [oral history] interviews. We didn't
> have to sit in the same room for them to help us…for those white students at Tulane, for
> them to talk about my history, research it, develop it; we wouldn't have had the time and
> the access and the know how to get it done that way.

For both Stand members and Tulane students, this relationship extended to a collaborative partnership as noted by Alfred here—a concurrent collaboration where each group could rely on the other to complete tasks and produce knowledge to develop the contents for the timeline. The service-learning students offered support to Stand in a way that allowed Stand leaders to focus on their campaigns and membership development. These groups did not work in figurative silos; rather, they worked together, just not in the same space.

During the project, I witnessed different ways in which "authentic relationships" can be interpreted, rather than simply understanding "authentic relationship" as face-to-face encounter between Stand and the Tulane students. At the most basic interpretation, "authentic relationships" did mean the deep, established relationships I made with Stand in order to develop and expand this project under Stand's leadership,

an undeniably integral component to building and sustaining service-learning projects. However, other types of interpretations of "authentic relationships" materialized, as the concept of "doing with" can allow much room interpretation in how the "with" takes place.

"Authentic relationships" played out in other, perhaps even more sustainable ways. Stand members developed relationships to oral histories and elders that gave background to their own organizing histories. And Tulane students formed relationships with historical newspaper archives and city activism, better connecting them beyond the campus bubble and with the history of their city. Stand members also developed relationships with special collection archives, where they recognized names of family members in pamphlets advertising historical labor movements further developing their ownership of this history. Cultivating projects with transformative learning experiences, a fundamental part of critical service-learning, can benefit both the community partner and the service-learners. This learning can help to expand new understandings of collaboration through "authentic relationships" and better leverage resources to redistribute power to work to undo this unevenness.

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