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Lauren Collins

Michaela Niva

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Infusing Critically Reflexive Service Learning into Honors

LAUREN COLLINS AND MICHAELA NIVA

University of Montana

Abstract: This essay describes a service-learning course designed with heart-centered pedagogy. Authors examine the relationship between individual and society in service learning and discuss the rationale and processes involved in curricular design to suggest an alternative approach to community engagement. Understanding service learning as going beyond merely the attainment of hours requisite for course completion, students are asked to develop critical reflexivity by first considering the focus, identity, and needs of community partners. Authors suggest that this curriculum provides practical opportunities for engaging students intellectually and emotionally in order to strengthen self-concept and cultural awareness of a vulnerable population.

Keywords: critical service learning; power dynamics; activist scholarship; International Rescue Committee; University of Montana (MT)—Davidson Honors College

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Suketu P. Bhavsar writes that to have “the greatest positive impact on the academy, we must strive to be aware of and to present our wholeness in class and in our professional lives.” Bhavsar’s guidance can generate a positive impact not only on the academy but also on the communities that surround our academic institutions. During the spring of 2020, the first author of this paper, Lauren Collins, had the opportunity to create an honors course focused on teaching critical service learning based on grappling with what it means to do service as part of an academic experience. Broadly defined, service learning is a linking of teaching and learning within a higher education

institution to the needs of the surrounding community. The second author, Michaela Niva, was a student in the course.

Universities are anchor institutions in their locations (Birch, Perry, & Taylor, 2013), which means that, unlike businesses which are often not tied (anchored) to their locations, universities are very much a permanent and vested partner in community development and social change. Additionally, universities possess large economic, human, intellectual, and institutional resources that can serve to improve and grow local economies and build stronger communities. Community-engaged partnerships and programs, of which service-learning programs are a central component, are vitally important to the impact of the academy on the surrounding community. Honors colleges are inherently well-suited to these types of programs as interdisciplinarity and connections to the public good are sought out, embraced, and central to their missions. As Knapp, Camarena, and Moore (2017) argue, “when intentionally directed, honors education promotes the full transformation of the student” (p. 121).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching describes community engagement as “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie, 2006). Higher education institutions, especially land grant colleges, have been called “democracy’s colleges,” and commitment to the public good is typically included in the mission statements of most public higher education institutions (Boyte, 2015). Community-engaged programs like service learning provide opportunities for students to engage in the complicated work of solving big problems and participating in a diverse democracy. However, service and community engagement have historically been seen as unidirectional, with universities providing knowledge and service to the public while the community stakeholder remains a passive recipient (Bortolin, 2011). The course that Collins designed and in which Niva was a student was in response to this tension.

CHALLENGES WITH SERVICE-LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

In university service programs, a variety of power dynamics are typically at play between people affiliated with the institution and a community partner. One common dynamic is that faculty and students work with under-resourced communities that are different from their own, especially in relation to race and social economic status (Green 2003; Mitchell, 2012).

Another is that the people who work at partner organizations, which are typically nonprofit and social service organizations, often have to invest a large amount of time and energy into working with students while the quality of student work varies and is not guaranteed.

At the same time, I have seen firsthand how working on an identified challenge in partnership with a community partner is a deeply powerful process that helps students engage with course content in a more meaningful way. This work can also help facilitate the civic engagement and responsibility in community development that are crucial to our ability to live and work across difference and to address big shared “wicked problems.” In my courses I increasingly hear from students that they feel a profound sense of disenfranchisement and disconnection between their daily lives and national or global events and politics. Too often students express a sense of apathy and frustration with the current world order as they struggle to feel empowered to make lasting change in their communities. Traditional academic classes can feel boring or formulaic for many students, and opportunities to apply what is being learned are far too infrequent. Community-engaged projects can bridge theory and practice while at the same time helping students sharpen their skills in leadership, communication, cultural humility, and critical thinking. In Niva’s words,

As a social science student, many classes that I have taken in college focus on all the injustices in the world. When you are aware of injustice but do nothing to address it, it is hard not to be complicit. I have always been interested in addressing social injustice, and have had desires to engage with my community, but felt apprehensive about taking the first step or worry that my contributions won’t amount to anything. Offering a class that unpacks those social injustices while simultaneously providing the students with the ability to address them is invaluable. For me, this class provided the *first experience* of community engagement needed to push me over the threshold of *maybe someday* to *today*.

THE CLASS:

SUPPORTING REFUGEES IN OUR COMMUNITY

This course was designed to positively affect refugee resettlement in our community; it focused on how we could help the local International Rescue Committee (IRC) support newly arriving refugees to navigate life in our small,

insular town. At the same time, the class was just as much about complicating notions of help and service and focusing our collective energies on understanding each person's unique motivation for taking action on this issue. We met weekly for two hours and spent class time engaging with a range of texts, interactive activities, and guest speakers from the community, who taught us about their work with vulnerable communities and refugees. To build student activism skills, I incorporated training on civic power as well as assignments that required students to interview local activists, research local politicians, and write and submit an op-ed piece to a news source of their choice. Embedded in these assignments was a learning goal that students would come to see themselves as civic actors with civic power who could take a stand in many ways.

PEDAGOGICAL ELEMENTS

Rather than Working as Direct Service Providers, Students Provided Service to the Administration of an Organization That was Working on a Social Problem

In this course, while students did have a preexisting interest and concern for refugees, none were refugees themselves, and they had limited past experience engaging with refugees. To address this power imbalance, our class focused our service project on work for the nonprofit's administration because, as Bargerstock and Bloomgarden (2016) describe, the benefits of university-community partnerships are weighted disproportionately in favor of "insider" constituencies (mainly students and faculty) over external (community) entities. *Democracy's Education* (Boyte, 2015) showed the results of assessing 600 service-learning programs across the nation and found that only one percent "focus on specifically political concerns and solutions such as working with groups to represent the interests of a community" while more than half provide direct service, such as surveying in food shelters and tutoring.

Disruption of the Traditional Classroom Power Structure

Another feature of the course was that I stepped back from centering learning on content that I was delivering and instead turned over much of the classroom facilitation and learning to students in the course. I also incorporated community-based knowledge through listening and learning sessions with a variety of stakeholders who worked with refugees in our community,

including state officials, service providers, an immigration lawyer, and experts on the refugees' home country conditions. Students could choose one of four books to use as their textbook, with the caveat that they had to transmit key takeaways from their chosen book to their classmates. For the final contribution to the International Rescue Committee, students provided the IRC with a cultural orientation curriculum based on needs that were identified and articulated by the IRC staff who had visited the class; students scoped the curriculum and determined what they would work on and how. Additionally, an honors program alumnus who was working at the IRC through AmeriCorps served as a teaching assistant and co-creator of the course. Unlike models of learning that rest on the knowledge of the professor, this course leaned into the knowledge of the community outside and inside the classroom.

Reflection and the Heart Space

Tisdell and Tolliver (2011) write that “for learning to be truly transformative, it must engage one’s whole being. . . . It has to get into our hearts, souls, and bodies and into our interactions with others in the world” (p. 93). In *After Virtue*, Alasdair C. MacIntyre notes, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” One of the key foci of the course was the importance of students first knowing themselves and how their life experiences and dreams drew them to working with refugees. We addressed these questions through class discussions and a “Self, Service, Action” paper that each student ultimately read aloud to the class. While not religiously oriented, this course drew on the theological tradition of vocation, and at the end of our discussions with each community partner and guest speaker, we talked about what drew them to their work and what inspired them to want to serve their communities.

LIVING THE QUESTIONS

By the time the class delivered their final cultural orientation curriculum to the IRC, the class had been a success by the traditional methods of assessment. The students felt satisfied, their work was exemplary, the community partner’s feedback was positive, and the products the students created were put to use shortly thereafter. Still, after the conclusion of the course, I have continued to reflect on how I can bring my whole self—as well as my critical lens on power dynamics and my work toward societal equity—into the

classroom with an appropriate degree of political engagement. I sometimes question whether college students should be getting involved with complex human rights and social welfare issues, and I wonder if the classroom is an appropriate place for explicit connections between service and civic action.

Although college campuses are often viewed as isolated or removed from the issues of their surrounding community, the reality is that classrooms are microcosms of the larger worlds in which they exist. Engaged, activist, service-learning courses are a moral imperative (Hartman, 2016). This class had just within its small circle the perspectives of international students, students from small towns in Montana, and students from opposite sides of the U.S. This diversity fulfilled part of that moral imperative. The relationship between the personal and the societal in service learning is inescapable. Although I strive to demonstrate political or partisan neutrality for my students, the very existence of this class takes a partisan stance that refugees' lives are important, that their success upon arrival in our communities is important, and that we cannot remain neutral on these issues. Service-learning courses offer a physical and temporal space for students to meet, reflect, and engage with power, an important part of contemporary higher education.

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The author may be contacted at

lauren.collins@mso.umt.edu.