

Double Consciousness and the Future of Service-Learning

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Twenty years ago, Zlotkowski's (1995) article "Does Service-Learning Have a Future?" called educators to attend seriously to the academic aspects of service-learning (SL), to situate the pedagogy strongly within the academy as a means of legitimizing and expanding the work. Today, for SL to not only have a future but have one that includes all students, we must attend to the ways demographic shifts at the collegiate level have changed the dynamics of the classroom – changed, specifically in the case of SL, who is "served" and who is "serving." Although SL has largely established itself within the academy, we must now do the hard work of ensuring that all students have access to and a positive experience with it. I focus in this essay on improving the nature of experiences across demographic groups. This begins by questioning what SL experiences look like across identity groups and working to ensure the pedagogy truly becomes a space dedicated to social justice, community, and equality – values it has always championed (see Hartman in this collection of essays).

As a Black, female, second-generation college student who is the first in her family to attend an Ivy League institution, I personally wonder if the scholarship about SL in higher education was written with myself and students like me in mind – much less *by* students like me. This is why I feel blessed to be a senior at Cornell University who has participated in three SL programs, facilitated two, and now contributes my own scholarship and leadership to the field. Even though I have had mostly positive experiences with SL, I cannot help but wonder if this is true for others like me. From 1999-2012, college attendance rose by 58% among Hispanics/Latinos, 30% among African Americans, and 16% among Whites (Lieberman, 2015). A "New American College" has indeed emerged, although perhaps not in the way Boyer (1994, as discussed in Zlotkowski, 1995), who coined this phrase, or anyone else thought it would. Higher percentages of underrepresented students enrolled in colleges and universities today means that to have a future – because the student population will only continue to diversify – SL needs to consider once again what is involved in addressing the needs of "today's students, in today's economy, in today's society" (Zlotkowski, p. 14).

Participating in SL programs at Cornell has enriched my college experience and taught me in a very real way that the world is bigger than my own backyard. It is one thing to learn about the history of other communities, but it is a game changer to actually engage with them in a way that, when done correctly, leaves all parties wiser, more interculturally competent, and more aware of their shared humanity than they were prior to a connection being made. I have seen the world through SL experiences, traveling to places I likely would not otherwise have seen. The exposure to new places, people, and ideas, in a way that links theory and practice, encourages active learning, and creates opportunities for the development of leadership, communication, critical thinking, civic responsibility, and cross-cultural understanding, is what SL is all about (Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012; see Pisco in this collection of essays). My experiences with SL have been a central part of my Cornell experience and have helped shape me into a successful college student prepared for life post-"ivory tower."

But, as a Black woman dedicated to community-engaged work, I have often felt a double-consciousness of sorts. I have not always known how to manage the power and privilege inherent in being in a position to be of service to others. I have not always known how to handle the assumptions made about my connections to the communities I engage with, especially when those communities are made up of people who look like me. I have been conflicted about "serving" when there are members of my community who are labeled "those served" in the minds of some in SL despite their real contributions to their communities and the field's supposed belief that the field's supposed belief that all partners both serve and are served. As Du Bois (1903) wrote, I, too, ever feel my "two-ness." I am "serving" but I am traditionally thought to be the "served" due to my identity as both a woman and Black. I am a student at an Ivy League institution, but having been told "You got into Cornell because you can code switch" and "You only got into Cornell because of affirmative action" by professors and peers alike has led me to spend many days wondering if I truly deserved to get that admissions letter in the mail or if I just happened to get lucky. I look at

myself through two sets of eyes: those in my classroom and those at home in my community. I wonder and worry about what both sets think of me. I question if my community will want anything that I have to offer, while also challenging myself to use the blessings and privileges that come with a Cornell education to uplift my people, community, and ideals. I wonder if #BlackLivesMatter¹ indeed, because I know that people like me, people who could be me, are being killed in the streets, in their homes, even in jails, due to their Black identity – and I know that my Cornell education cannot protect me from that. Even with an Ivy League education, I am still a Black female who consequently is made of “two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, p. 8).

I have taken courses about participatory action research and the ethics of community engagement. I have read countless foundational texts and ideas from thought leaders in this work. But I also have had to struggle through how to manage my subject position in my classes because so often I am the only person who looks like me in the room. So often I am spotlighted, asked to speak to and represent “the” experience of people who look like me even though my experience is probably in all actuality not indicative of the struggles faced by anyone else, within or beyond my gender, ethnicity, or home community.

This is problematic because life experience, including experience in a SL program, differs across identities. In *Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Whiteness*, Mitchell and her co-authors (2012) discuss the idea of “border-crossing” – exposure to new places, people, ways of life, and ideas – for SL participants. We must remember that a border looks different for an African American high-income student than for a White low-income student or for an Asian American first-generation student; they belong to different home communities and have experienced different cultures, ideas, and norms over the course of their lives. If one of the goals of SL is exposure to new ideas or ways of life through border-crossing, then SL projects have to be created and framed based on the particular experiences of the border-crosser (Mitchell et al.). If educational institutions are indeed “central places where race is made and remade everyday” (Lewis, 2003, p. 11), then practitioners committed to the values of SL need to make it okay for students of color to be their full selves in a way that lends itself to true dialogue about how identity informs experience. All students need to be invited and enabled to be “brave” – to give up the illusion of “safety” for a “learning that involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things” (Arao & Clemens,

2013, p. 141). If the field as a whole – colleges/universities, instructors, program facilitators, community partners, student leaders, and student participants – can make a concerted effort to understand that service and learning happen at different junctures for everyone involved based upon their subject position (Green, 2003), then more nuance can be brought to the work, which should improve SL experiences across demographic markers.

I offer the following suggestions to help us move in this direction. To facilitate learning and conversation across difference in ways that all participants can be comfortable with and learn from, everyone involved with the SL project should work to build trust – in the classroom and in the community. Participants who have connected on a human level are more likely to be comfortable discussing race, class, gender, and how these and other facets of their identities interact in the context of SL and in their life experiences in general. Discussions about identity and various “-isms” that interact with identities should be built into the project or course, not be an add-on or neglected until and unless a conflict arises. Weaving these topics into discussions should lead not only to less “spotlighting” of students whose demographics suggest they might identify with a particular form of oppression but also to greater comfort among those who may have less direct experience with reflecting on identity and related “-isms.” It is also important that the privilege that, in our society, comes from being white, male, and middle or upper class is acknowledged, discussed, and questioned in order to cultivate a pedagogy of diversity.

Race, class, gender, and all other “-isms” should be contextualized both in and out of the SL classroom. It is one thing to read about the Civil Rights movement or feminist pedagogy, but it is another to begin to understand, as a result of an experience in community, that racism, classism, and sexism are social constructs with consequences that impact SL students and communities in various ways across differing demographics. To have a meaningful impact and move the work forward, all participants must see these “-isms” as systematic forms of oppression and understand how they interact with and affect society – even if they themselves do not directly experience said forms of oppression and perhaps especially if they think, probably inaccurately, that their own lives are not caught up in these systems. Service-learning is not doing its job if all students do not understand how being a member of the dominant race, class, or gender is a source of privilege and learn to question prejudiced beliefs they may hold – indeed, may even have held their entire lives. One way to do this could be through a discussion of the American Dream when preparing to engage in under-resourced areas

or with communities of color. In my experience, students who do not understand how “-isms” affect people, due to not experiencing them themselves, often believe that poor people or people of color should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But how can people do that if they do not have shoes? In addition, critical reflection about all participants’ subject positions and how they interact with their work and with society at large is necessary if SL is to become a space that moves all who are engaged closer to becoming democratic citizens who operate with values that bend toward justice, equality, and freedom.

Lastly, all participants, but especially those who develop SL experiences, need to ensure they are engaging with communities from an asset-based perspective (see Bauer, Kniffin, & Priest in this collection of essays). An asset-based approach stands in contrast to a deficit-based approach that frames communities only in terms of their need for resources by looking instead at community assets, strengths, skills, and passions. Undertaking SL with a deficit-based approach actually risks “disrespecting ... students who come from these very neighborhoods [and who] do not view their neighborhoods as ‘broken’ [but instead] respect and admire their families and friends, their schools, and places of worship” (Lieberman, 2015, para. 8). Approaching “served” communities from an asset-based perspective can help remove barriers to SL and civic engagement for students (Lieberman), especially those whose identity is also one traditionally deemed the “served.”

According to Rachel Remen (1996), “We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch...service [is] the work of the soul...Only service heals.” So maybe, if we do this right, 20 years from now students of color will know how to manage the identities and worlds they straddle in ways that trend more toward healing than toward “two-ness,” confusion, and disempowerment. Maybe, if we do this right, there will no longer be a “served” versus “server” dynamic, leaving students of color with nothing to reconcile, allowing for true healing and reconciliation across difference, and finally fulfilling the original spirit of SL in which no partner would be defined only as teacher or learner, server or served.

Note

¹ #BlackLivesMatter is a call to action and a response to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society. Black Lives Matter was created by three queer black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti. #BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation. (Retrieved from: www.blacklivesmatter.com)

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