

## Beyond Superheroes and Sidekicks: Empowerment, Efficacy, and Education in Community Partnerships

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In his 1995 article “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” Edward Zlotkowski calls us to heed the recommendations of Kendall (1990) in *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service*. To support the work of service-learning and community engagement (SLCE) being done in a high-quality, sustainable way, Kendall offers three Principles of Good Practice: (a) integrating service-learning programs into the central mission and goals of the schools and agencies where they are based; (b) establishing a balance of power between educational and community partners; and (c) wedding reflection to experience.

Today, we find ourselves still grappling with Kendall’s recommendations, notably establishing a balance of power in partnerships. For example, we are just scratching the surface of understanding the difference between technocratic and democratic partnerships (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009), and funding mechanisms still largely define higher education institutions as the catalysts for community-engaged research and social impact interventions. This thought piece focuses on these partnerships challenges, calling the SLCE movement to live the principles of what the two of us think of as *transformative reciprocity* – a deep, thick collaboration that holds the possibility for all stakeholders to be transformed by the partnership (Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2010) – and thereby cultivate partnership power dynamics that are just, fair, and inclusive.

How do we establish a balance of power in genuine, life-giving ways – ways that support the self-actualization and growth of all stakeholders? How do we ensure that partnerships are flexible, inclusive, and encouraging of the growth of everyone involved? And how do we avoid the pitfalls of dysfunctional helping when power is unbalanced and community partners are diminished or paralyzed by the social and economic privilege of the academy? In what ways can we build a culture of humility and reciprocity to bring about a balanced power dynamic?

Through our experience building a strong, sus-

tained community-university partnership, we have seen first-hand the importance of and obstacles to reciprocity in relationships. Albeit well-intentioned, the messages young people receive from many directions as first-year students (if not before) – that they should become innovative entrepreneurs – over-emphasize a particular conception of leadership: one that assumes technocratic power centered on innovative individuals at the top of social hierarchies. Similar expectations of faculty, staff, and community partners – for instance, as expressed in many funding opportunities – encourage us to *found* and *create* new programs, initiatives, and research projects rather than to enhance those that already exist or to support the work of colleagues. The role of follower or nurturer is implicitly or explicitly discouraged, and a power dynamic is thus created that elevates single individuals into the role of “hero.” The value placed on that role is wrapped up in the ideal image of ourselves as helpers. This superhero mentality can lead to bold action, but it can also relegate others – often, community partners – to the role of sidekick, or worse, *recipient*.

Our bold call for the SLCE movement is to name and avoid the superhero mentality and to focus instead on *connecting* and *sustaining*, with the goal of collective empowerment at the forefront. According to Freire (1970), education and engagement are political acts that can bring about empowerment. We see reflected in both society at large and within partnerships unbalanced power, personified as a distinction between oppressors and the oppressed. The remedy to that power imbalance is education, through which the oppressed regain their sense of humanity and agency. Freire also affirms the need for oppressors – those who hold privilege and power in a way that marginalizes and disempowers others – to honestly acknowledge power imbalance and re-examine their role through “conscientization” (critical consciousness). By addressing those imbalances, we move toward partnerships in which all partners are truly empowered and thus in the best position to contribute to lasting change.

Let us recast our roles as multifaceted, empowered partners and leave behind the notion of

community-campus partnerships as binaries that often devalue half of the partnership. Let us take care in our rush to provide assistance and right wrongs that we not assume a role that disempowers and reduces agency. As Illich (1968) reminds us, the road to hell is paved with good intentions: Good intentions without consideration of community voice can create damaging power structures. It is only through mutual empowerment and transformative reciprocity that we can work toward a future that is co-created and just.

### About our Partnership

First, we must establish the context within which we operate and which gives rise to our thinking about partnerships. Marla has worked with refugee resettlement agencies in Allentown, Pennsylvania for over a decade and is currently the director of the Refugee Resettlement program for Bethany Christian Services, the sole refugee resettlement agency in the Lehigh Valley. Sarah is a faculty member and director of the Center for Community Engagement at Lehigh University, located in neighboring Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. We have worked together over the last six years to provide meaningful, reciprocal SLCE opportunities to Lehigh students, our new neighbors, the resettlement agency, and ourselves. While our roles have shifted and agencies have come and gone over the years, the constant has been our partnership: weathering the changes through our commitment to strong communication and empowerment of all stakeholders.

Through our partnership, we have catalyzed deep learning, research, and engagement from first-year projects to senior capstones. An ongoing SLCE practicum involves third-year students in facilitating cultural orientation classes to support refugees' transition to the United States. Each semester we formally evaluate the SLCE activities and impacts, address concerns, and make changes to maintain flexibility and responsiveness to new opportunities. Our partnership process includes frequent meetings to check in and share concerns, lessons learned, new information, and opportunities. Programming is co-planned and supported through grants identified and pursued together. Further, Sarah participates in reviews by the state and the State Department to represent the partnership and connect the work that is being done under the auspices of the partnership as part of a larger effort to provide holistic services within a wide network of support systems (e.g. counseling programs, English as a second language training). These reviews are necessary for continued federal and state support of the refugee resettlement agency and demonstrate

the importance and functioning of our partnership to meet the state's priority for high-quality refugee resettlement and support.

This partnership has also helped our community maintain focus on the most important issues facing refugees resettling in the Lehigh Valley. Attention to the influx of Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016 to the area has piqued new interest – positive and negative – within the academy on a national level. Evidence of this is found in a plethora of new classes, conference presentations, research projects, and initiatives such as Every Campus a Refugee, which houses refugee families on campuses. It has illuminated a wide variety of kind-hearted, motivated individuals who seek to help as well as a lack of knowledge about the refugees who have been coming to the Lehigh Valley and the process of resettlement. Refugees who come to the Lehigh Valley, despite the pervasive thought that they are only Syrian, also come from the Karen, Chin, and Kachin minority groups of Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Iraq, and Eritrea, for example. The process by which they come to the United States is rigorous, with pre-arrival checks from a variety of agencies, which can take years. Finally, the (mis)understanding of refugees as inherently “in need” and “thankful for any support they get” is a stereotype. Most had rich lives in their home countries and are highly educated professionals. They are individuals who have agency, confidence, and a determined spirit. The partnership between the resettlement agency and the university has been intentionally asset-based to nurture both empowerment and transformation for our stakeholders and new neighbors as they transition to life in our community.

With this long-standing relationship in mind, we realize there are lessons learned worth sharing both as evidence of the value of transformationally reciprocal partnerships and as an example of the partnership's operational and philosophical mechanics for those interested in creating or maintaining something similar. We have three high priority goals for the future of the SLCE movement in mind: the need to cultivate humility and reciprocity, avoiding the narrative of heroes and protectors, and the difficult task of illuminating when service can be a disservice. At the center of these goals is the balance of power to ensure that transformational reciprocity can take place when power and agency are held in different measure by multiple stakeholders.

### Mechanisms for Empowerment: Valuing Humility and Reciprocity

Valuing humility in our students and ourselves needs to be a top priority as we navigate the wa-

ters of reciprocal, meaningful community engagement. Humility – an intentional acknowledgement of one’s modest, humble role in the larger world – serves as the essential currency of respectful, meaningful partnerships as it inherently places the emphasis on the greater good rather than on personal ego. Cultivating humility can lead to better outcomes for community organizations and students alike, while preparing students to be humble, effective practitioners (Lund & Lee, 2015). Humility is also a necessary element of adopting a more democratic form of SLCE and thereby honoring power sharing, asset recognition, and a shared sense of responsibility to one another for successful and ethical community partnerships.

Hand-in-hand with humility is reciprocity, a moral norm first introduced in academic literature by Gouldner (1960) when he described it as a pattern of mutual benefit and gratification between parties. In the context of SLCE, the term reciprocity holds and communicates an essential value of our work. Sigmon (1979) focused the concept of reciprocity on reciprocal learning, affirming that meaningful service-learning is realized when stakeholders – community partner and educational institution alike – are transformed by the experience. Jameson, Clayton, and Jaeger (2010) make the distinction between thin (mutual and transactional) and thick (transformational and co-creative) reciprocity – noting that they can coexist but that only the latter facilitates an empowering level of “co-ness.” The two of us stress the need for such *transformational reciprocity* in order to deepen relationships and ensure that all who work in partnership are supported as agents of change and collective empowerment within and beyond their role in SLCE.

So, how do we cultivate transformational reciprocity? Critical reflection, disorientation, and critical thinking are essential to the concept of praxis, which provides learners – students, educators, and community partners alike – with a continuous cycle of learning and growth. As a constant cycle of re-evaluation of our values, mistakes, and triumphs, praxis can cultivate a sense of a larger purpose in the world and responsibility to one another. This is particularly valuable when working with the knotty and multi-faceted issues of equity and inclusion for refugees. For instance, students who may be grappling with long-held political beliefs that have heretofore been unchallenged meet refugee families face-to-face and, because of this experiential connection, may reconsider their attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs. They may then receive information about differences in refugee resettlement processes between the U.S. and Europe and wrestle with national security perceptions and realities that

the two different contexts provide. Such challenges to their established understandings invite ongoing making and remaking of their place in the world and their beliefs.

In addition, appreciating our differences and holding in tension different beliefs in order to move toward a shared goal strengthens attitudes and behaviors of humility and reciprocity. The refugee resettlement agency has volunteers and supporters from many different religious and political traditions. Evangelical Christians, observant Muslims, and liberal atheists may work side-by-side, called to resettlement work for very different reasons and intersecting in some ways while diverging in others. Open lines of communication and shared decision-making are key to ensuring each partner has an equitable investment in the partnership. Further, the praxis mentality the two of us cultivate within and through our partnership ensures that each stakeholder feels valued and that there are mechanisms to continuously solicit input and feedback to sustain a healthy, engaged, and peaceful community.

#### Avoiding the Narrative of Superheroes and Sidekicks: Valuing Empowerment and Co-Creation

Another pitfall SLCE scholar-practitioners must take care to avoid is dysfunctional rescuing: compensating for past power differentials by well-intentioned, but disempowering “helping.” For instance, a student team could assume refugees coming to the United States would be in need of English as a Second Language (ESL) training. Without consulting those who are already providing language services, the students contact the resettlement agency directly with a curriculum of their own creation and a request for space to hold classes. Such planning and design that happens outside of the partnership relegates the community partner to a powerless or supporting position. It also ignores both the professional ESL teachers who offer such classes already and the work of the agency to mobilize resources, suggesting – implicitly or explicitly – that the agency is not doing enough to support the refugees. In the face of pushback from the agency on actual needs or opportunities, the students and faculty may insist that they worked hard on the curriculum and that the resources of their institution are much greater, reaffirming the presumed power differential. Assumptions regarding what refugees need and what the organization needs, even after hearing what they have voiced as their own priorities, can arise and persist when trust has not been built and when communication is not in place.

Much of this desire to swoop in and “save” is

motivated by a place in the heart that wants to be *helpful*. Bauer, Kniffin, and Priest (2015) address a similar concern in first-year service-learning, as they designed programming to be more asset-based in order to support their students in learning to appreciate community voice, assets, and expertise. While it is a noble desire to want to “help,” we must examine our own motivations when entering into a partnership with the community, especially one in which the power dynamic has traditionally been skewed to one side.

Empowerment of all stakeholders – in that they are able to exercise agency, commitment, and support – should be the goal per Freire’s (1970) vision of a just and flourishing society. Anything short of that allows for the creation of systems that exploit and perpetuate inequality. Palmer (2011) calls our attention to the fact that “insight and energy give rise to new life as we speak out and act out our own version of truth, while checking and correcting it against the truths of others” (p. 47). If we do not hold ourselves to check ourselves and reflect truth in our partnerships, we miss the accidental injustices we might continue to create. And, in so doing, we reinforce systems that disempower partners and discourage co-creation.

Further, there is sometimes a disconnect between the story we want to hear and the story that holds a more complete view of the situation. For example, a campus communications office could want to run an inspirational story on an exceptional faculty member making change in a community through grant-supported research, when the reality is more complex and multi-layered than that. This type of storytelling happens for a number of reasons – for instance, expectations of the institution or funding agency, frustration with the slow pace of change or resource allocation – yet it is important to address and avoid the danger of perpetuating myths that disempower. Ultimately, stories that put one stakeholder in the focus as a sort of hero or savior can create long-term damage by setting up a power dynamic that is dysfunctional.

### When is Service a Disservice?

Community engagement professionals and practitioner-scholars steeped in SLCE often end up taking on the role of the buzzkill. Young, enthusiastic, and optimistic faces come to us brimming with hope for the future and with big ideas for initiatives they wish to undertake. In their chapter “Mainstream or Margins?” Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) explore the dilemmas and tradeoffs of making change from inside the system using institutional mechanisms or from outside the walls

throwing rocks and shaking up norms. We argue that there is a necessary tension between those two extremes where real change occurs, and it is within that tension that we as stakeholders, partners, and community members often undergo the most transformation.

Understanding the continuum of service – the variety of ways in which individuals can engage with communities, from philanthropy to community-engaged research – and the ways in which we can and should engage – or not – based on community voice is essential. The pragmatist – in our experience, the one who manages risk, holds partners to shared values, and advises contemplation – is not always an easy role to play and can often bring scorn from those who wish to jump to *doing* in a situation that might need *considering*. We often hear questions that run the gamut from deep, reflective inquiry to well-intentioned but ill-considered action: *If there is a need, why can't I just set up a GoFundMe account? I have a bunch of clothes I collected; why can't I just drop them off? How do I found a nonprofit?* It is our duty as responsible stakeholders, facilitators, teachers, and partners to trouble the motivations, assess the situation, and keep an open dialogue to ensure that our work is living the values to which we subscribe.

### Conclusion

In the HBO television comedy *Silicon Valley*, Gavin Belson, a character embodying the Steve Jobs-esque visionary cliché, addresses his staff after his company suffers a particularly frustrating loss to a smaller upstart company. Defeated, he realizes that his company will not be the one responsible for propelling forward a new type of technology that could be revolutionary. In frustration he yells, “I don’t know about you people, but I don’t want to live in a world where someone else makes the world a better place better than we do!”

Through satire we hold up a mirror to ourselves. This may seem like a silly anecdote, but it perfectly illustrates an attitude we often see in newcomers to resettlement work. Most have an abundance of goodwill and enthusiasm in their hearts. Many want to be *originators* and *creators* when it is *connectors* and *sustainers* that are actually needed. If we are truly invested in the empowerment of all stakeholders – community, in its most inclusive sense – we must face the hard truth that we could come to a point where our helpfulness, our love, and our intense desire for change are not helpful or valid – indeed, we may already be there. Truly engaging in the community in a way that is in the mold of Freire’s vision of education and partnership is at its

core about the development of capacity and agency as the forces driving social and civic change. Community partners, researchers, students, and educators should, through these endeavors, feel agency as we move to a deeper level of co-ness. In that model, where value is placed on empowerment, we have to accept that our roles might morph, with the role of superhero and sidekick becoming obsolete and a new, equitable partnership full of opportunity emerging strongly.

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