

## Toward a Social Approach to Learning in Community Service Learning

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*The authors describe a social approach to learning in community service learning that extends the contributions of three theoretical bodies of scholarship on learning: social constructionism, critical pedagogy, and community service learning. Building on the assumptions about learning described in each of these areas, engagement, identity, and community are key concepts through which learning can be questioned and evaluated. The authors offer assessment concepts based on the social approach, such as privileging the absent, engaging resistance, and terms for identity and practice. Techniques for assessing learning are also included, such as using videotape and cross-group focus groups.*

Education reformers, policy makers, teachers, scholars, and citizens have become concerned about what they perceive to be the disconnection between schools and society. Recent efforts to bridge the chasms between academe and community, students and schooling, and citizens and government (among other social, cultural, and economic chasms) have begun to look closely at efforts to engage students as citizens and leaders in a democratic community. At the forefront of these efforts in systems of higher education is community service learning (CSL), or learning that combines service to the community with classroom or academic learning.

Scholars in economics, nursing, and communication have put forward designs for teaching and learning with/in a CSL format. Civic engagement is a central theme among several CSL scholars, who argue that CSL should promote and extend students' participation in democracy and community. Common among these discussions of engagement is the notion of CSL as the acquisition of skill sets that will help students participate, problem solve, and become civic-minded leaders. Battistoni (1997), for example, attempting to summarize most of his and others' efforts to develop students as "engaged citizens," identifies three essential areas that should guide practical skill development of service-learners: intellectual understanding, communication and problem-solving, and public judgment and imagination. Intellectual understanding develops students' cognitive abilities to make connections between theories and application, and think critically about their experiences and assumptions about people and society. Communication and problem-solving skills allow people to participate productively in any civil society. Battistoni identifies speech, argument, listen-

ing, and persuasive communication as skills essential to problem-solving in a democracy. Public judgment and imagination acts as a kind of moral compass, helping students to locate themselves and reposition their understandings of others. Service-learning can also encourage creativity through working cooperatively with members of the community toward new solutions.

Battistoni's (1997) framework importantly brings communication into the mix. Other scholars emphasize engagement in their research, such as Schensul, Berg and Brase (2002), and Toole (2002). Specifically, the role of communication in establishing the basis for learning all skills for engagement in society is emphasized in this paper. Yet, as the authors increasingly acknowledge a world where cultures and identities are constantly in a state of encounter, negotiation, and flux, we also must recognize the very situatedness of learning itself. As service-learning educators attempt to understand how, when, what, and where students learn, we must also account for the ever-shifting social, relational, and cultural meanings which construct our own (as pedagogues, practitioners, and scholars), our students', and our communities' frames for making meaning of education and the educational process.

Following from this point and important for the purposes in this paper, the authors posit the idea that communication is not only the outcome of learning an individual skill (through which one's competence in society can be measured) but is also central to the process of learning, and key to constructing engaged participation in a civil society. If individuals make meaning of themselves and society through communicative processes, then participation is itself defined in and through communication; without communication, participation in soci-

ety would be impossible. As scholars who focus primarily on communicative processes, we are interested in a learning approach that embraces skill sets as important to competent communication, but situates those skills within their cultural and relational frameworks; in other words, as skills which have a variety of meanings, occasioned in specific circumstances and contexts, and assessed accordingly. The goal of this paper is to develop theoretical concepts that point to the ways CSL enhances understanding of learning as communal, relational, cultural, and critical, while providing a context for applying and challenging course concepts and curricula.

Borrowing from social constructionist theory, the authors view society as constructed through communicative action and view participation in society as relationally- and culturally-created and interpreted. Communicative action is defined here as the conjoint activity of meaning-making (symbolic) that is mutually negotiated, although not necessarily mutually understood. Actions are coordinated among people in conjunction with their coherence to a larger system of values and beliefs. From this view, the perspective that students become engaged citizens through CSL says much about the way that ideas are constructed about engagement and citizenship (e.g., what are the moral obligations of engagement? who are/are not engaged citizens?). Beyond analyzing the dimensions of engagement, the authors promote the process of participating in CSL as important to developing certain affordances (Cronen, 1995) or as opening ways of connecting and engaging with others as moral and relational beings.

In this paper, the authors introduce an approach to thinking about and assessing learning in CSL that places social interaction and social construction at the center. In so doing, we bring together three perspectives on learning: the aforementioned social constructionist position that places the act of communicating as fundamental to the construction of civic learning; the philosophical and theoretical concerns of critical pedagogical scholarship; and the scholarship on CSL that addresses learning. Scholarship on learning within the CSL literature is examined first. Next, we move to the structural and ideological critiques of learning and education developed within the scholarship of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy shares with CSL a commitment to students' development as part of an informed and active citizenry, and with learning as part of a dialogical process. Our third theoretical contribution to a social approach is developed through discussion of the *situated*, *developmental*, and *relational* nature of learning put forth in social

constructionist theory. This body of theory shares with CSL its focus on engagement and context, but challenges notions of learning based in individual cognition and of knowledge separate from the social world. The final section reviews concerns identified in the previous literatures on learning in democratic society—to discuss what each contributes to a social approach to learning in CSL. We then suggest a variety of applications of this approach to learning and assessment of CSL.

For Dewey (1915), a philosopher whose pragmatic approaches to learning are central to all three bodies of scholarship drawn upon in this paper, education cannot be simply about the proper transfer of information. Education must take into consideration humans' accountability as social and cultural learners. Taking Dewey's point further, if power/knowledge is viewed as relational and social, then communication is the central process creative of, and created through, learning. CSL scholars who place interaction at the center of the process of meaning-making are well situated to make the connections between learning as an individual skill, a relational process, and structurally- and ideologically-wedded to the political and cultural institutions that maintain social hierarchies. Critical pedagogy is uniquely poised to describe the social practices and social agencies that contribute to "educating," while scholars in CSL are positioned to offer possibilities in describing the concrete practices that connect learners, citizens, and the mechanisms of democracy.

### Community Service Learning's Perspective on Learning

CSL scholarship cuts across disciplines and draws from a variety of perspectives on the meaning of the CSL experience; however, there are several commonalities across most published work on the topic of learning, engagement, and democracy. Much of the CSL scholarship can be characterized by its focus on establishing and strengthening connection among students, teachers, university, and the community, and developing students' "skills needed to participate actively in the public sphere upon graduation" (Rimmerman, 1997, p. 18). Whereas most of the work in this area concerns itself with addressing the disconnection between educational institutions and the community, none of the scholarship reviewed for this paper builds a theoretical basis for critiquing existing democracy or education. Along these lines, Kahne, Westheimer and Rogers (2000) argue that, "although questions about citizenship and democracy have long been of interest to philosophers,

political theorists and educators, the literature on service-learning currently lacks the conceptual complexity associated with those disciplinary inquiries” (p. 44).

While Kahne and colleagues (2000) are interested in deepening the conceptualization of service associated with citizenship and democracy, our emphases are on the ways that learning is defined, expressed, and assessed in these contexts. The conceptualization of learning in CSL necessarily frames the ways the relationships between service, citizenship, and course content are understood and expressed. The authors believe that the flexibility and openness of CSL scholarship and the overarching CSL objective—to produce engaged and knowledgeable citizens through education in and with the community—lends itself to a variety of philosophical and theoretical conceptualizations that should strengthen claims for learning.

Many of the learning approaches in prior CSL scholarship, and the assessment of that learning, emphasize the importance of individual students as they reflect upon their experiences in the community (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). Thus, the theoretical foundation underlying the various learning approaches and assessment builds from an assumption of the individual as the basis of development and unit of analysis, rather than suggesting that meaning-making resides in relational or social units of analysis. Within the early CSL literature, the focus has also been placed more on experiential possibilities of the community partnership, and less on the theoretical and pedagogical benefits of service-learning.

In response to the need to further understanding of the relationship between democratic participation, educational experiences, and social analysis, some CSL scholars have advocated the need to reconceptualize foundational factors: primacy of analytical thinking in educational settings (Clinchy, 1989), conventional models of learning and teaching (Stewart, 1990), and intersections between knowledge and experience (Cone & Harris, 1996). Clinchy, for instance, points to the notion of “connected knowing” as a means of learning. She describes the process of connected knowing as a layering of individual perspectives in which learners commenting on a topic after another, operate from a stance of looking for common ground in their perspectives. In other words, learners consider other’s point of view and the reasons for that point of view, framing their participation in the discussion by looking for agreement (rather than disagreement, as is common when emphasizing “critical thinking”). Stewart applies Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model to CSL, finding

many fruitful similarities, including most central to the present focus, the opportunity for CSL to shift attention from individual learners to a community or culture of learners.

The theoretical contributions of Cone and Harris (1996) offer a fairly close parallel to those advanced in this paper. Cone and Harris discuss the concepts of critical pedagogy as they pertain to CSL, applying the ideas of David Moore (1990). Moore advocates for examining power relationships in communities and educational institutions, and understanding the politics and power behind the making of meaning. Cone and Harris also explore the contributions of Paolo Freire (1990), who argues against education as solving students’ inadequacies. Freire contends that education as it has typically been defined undermines the validity of students’ lived experiences. Cone and Harris introduce their own CSL model combining theory and practice, envisioning students not as “blank slates but as individuals with different learning styles, skills, histories, philosophies of life, attitudes, values, expectations, and perspectives” (p. 46), and emphasizing a critical understanding of perspective in the interpretation of meaning.

Well-known pedagogical activities that have attempted to address and alleviate critiques of CSL have some common elements on which a theoretical CSL contribution can be formulated, such as goal setting, critical reflection, detailed activities, student-teacher connections, protracted experiences, and community empowerment. Therefore, for CSL to succeed, educators must first identify: the goals of CSL; their students’ backgrounds, skills, and learning styles; and the teaching modes that will best develop those particular goals and skills. Further, educators cannot promote student engagement with the communities they serve, or a commitment to democratic values, unless they acknowledge the historical conditions and greater social and educational contexts that shape students’ lives, values, and knowledges.

Morse (1992), noting the need for students to define for themselves what they mean by democracy and have a college curriculum to develop those skills, discusses several approaches to citizenship education: learning by doing, talking, practicing, and through intellectual preparation. Learning by doing (the public service component) means that students should be involved in hands-on community service experiences outside their college campuses. Learning by talking (acquiring deliberative skills) is learning how to deliberate in public. This enhances students’ participation in public debate, therefore contributing to democracy. Learning by practicing (democratizing the campus) is for stu-

dents to transform the campus into an egalitarian, participatory community—"citizenship has to be practiced in order to be learned" (p. 6). Learning through intellectual preparation (learning by learning) is the classic academic model.

Of the four approaches, CSL is most often characterized by the first, learning through doing. Rimmerman (1997) suggests that CSL is an opportunity to connect the first and the fourth type of learning, and discusses the need for students to "connect ideas that they confront in the classroom with their service experiences in the surrounding community. The goal, then, is to ask students to bring together the intellectual with the experiential" (p. 21).

Yet, as CSL critics note, learning through doing does not necessarily provide the foundations for advocacy and sustained change, a condition necessary to being a citizen in a functioning democracy. Some critics observe that service alone cannot achieve all it is supposed to because students fail to make the connection between micro events in their service experiences and the larger structural frameworks that perpetuate inequalities. Boyte (1991) voices this critique, describing CSL as:

...a conceptual framework that distinguished between personal life and the public world. This therapeutic approach, with its focus on the individual, cannot begin to deal with the inequalities that structure the relationship between the so-called servers and the served. In the end, then, service activity is devoid of politics, and, as a result, is an empty way of tackling complex structures that arise out of the conditions that prompt service activity in the first place. (p. 766)

Other scholars feel that CSL supports the social and structural inequalities that characterize American society and reinforces claims of clientelism (Rimmerman, 1997).

Indeed, CSL scholars draw from Freire and Dewey (Battistoni, 1997; Reeher & Cammarano, 1997; and Rimmerman, 1997) to discuss the need among CSL teachers to expand beyond a superficial understanding of experience. Yet, this literature rarely offers a challenge to the hierarchical nature of the teacher/student/learning relationship or to the institution of education itself that critical pedagogy provides. Although mention is made of different service experiences based on one's location in the social structure (e.g., the importance African Americans assign to serving their own community, or the need for some students to work versus volunteer), CSL scholarship does not seem to expressly advance the goals of critical pedagogy; namely, a concern with the ways the schooling experience sustains hierarchies found in daily social life.

Thus, while democratic methods of teaching and listening to students and community members are common themes in the CSL literature, it is uncommon to read critiques of the models of banking education (Dewey, 1913; Freire, 1970) that can be perpetuated in CSL classrooms. Seldom, too, is the maintenance of sometimes authoritarian and often hierarchical relationships among students, teachers, administrators, and community often found within educational systems and institutions questioned. Howard (1998) provides a rare exception.

Still, relative to critical approaches to education that often theorize empowerment in the abstract, CSL does offer an experiential opening to empowerment. CSL provides the concrete social interaction and application of theory that have the potential to better probe ideological critiques of education brought forth by critical pedagogues.

### Critical Pedagogy's Perspective on Learning

Critical pedagogy is a broad body of theory that conceptualizes education as inherently ideological and problematic in its positioning of objectivity as the means to discovering knowledge and understanding. In other words, traditional educative practices have emphasized separating the knower from that which is known, obscuring the processes through which power (via knowledge) is distributed and maintained. Critical pedagogy can be identified by its central goal: to critically examine the system of education and work toward the transformation of dominant social and cultural values. Critical pedagogy offers a strong (and quite diverse) set of theoretical approaches to understanding and researching how educational systems have reinforced the status quo, and limited or neglected opportunities for rethinking the process of learning and the goals of educational institutions in a changing democratic society. This body of scholarship has much to offer the scholar and/or practitioner of CSL regarding the purposes of education, where and how learning can occur, and emphasizing citizenship as central to teaching and learning.

Critical pedagogy builds on the Marxist assumption that education is one of many public institutions in a capitalistic society that is in the business of creating private identities. Schools, as institutionalized (and institutionalizing) systems, offer few opportunities to think and learn outside of socially prescribed and predictable areas. This "institutional knowledge" reflects the capitalistic and modernist tendencies of society in general: educators and students alike view the system as one that produces consumers through the reproduction of existing identities (Apple, 1982; Aronowitz, 1981). The experiences of those on the margins of

the cultural paradigm, those not reflected in the hegemonic ideology of the institution, become worthless—or worse, invisible.

Democracy is a central theme of much of the research on critical pedagogy (see, for example, Ellsworth, 1992; Freire, 1970, 1998; Giroux, 1981, 1988; Lather, 1991; Shor, 1980, 1992). Democracy, for these scholars, is both an object of critique and goal for transformative and/or empowering education. For many critical pedagogues, any hope for education lies in a transformed understanding of democracy and citizenship, through developing and enhancing communal knowledge and the critique of social inequality and injustice.

Most of the literature in critical pedagogy views learning as a process of both engagement (between and among teachers, students, and community, as part of a larger citizenry) and a critique of the terms on which such interactions have been grounded. In *Empowering Education*, Ira Shor (1992) raises the concerns of Bettelheim (1950) and Piaget (1979) with regard to the gap between learning about life (socialization) and learning the “three Rs.” Both Bettelheim and Piaget argued that children needed to learn the process of critical thinking to adapt and function well in the social environment.

While Shor (1992) and others (e.g., Ellsworth, 1992) have focused on the lack of attention paid to the process of growing and adapting to institutional structures imposed by society, much remains to be done to move beyond the critique to the actual practice of teaching and learning. For Shor, this move to practice means an active agenda of unlearning socialization, of actively learning to recognize and critique how social hierarchy, inequality, and injustice are embedded in everyday schooling practices. The implications for CSL are numerous and compelling, as its goals, too, address the gap between perceived legitimacy of personal experience compared to formal education, as well as between issues from “the real world” versus those raised in schools.

Shor (1992) states that when faced with a teacher’s unilateral authority and power, students often resist by “playing dumb” (p. 137) and “getting by” (p. 138), suggesting teachers should democratize curriculum design and classroom

dynamics by including students in curriculum design organized around their own problems and experiences. However, many critical pedagogues warn that critical pedagogy, itself an ideology that critiques dominant ideologies, may become an impediment to learning because of student resistance and/or student compliance with what students perceive to be the teacher’s agenda. Rather than dismiss students’ resistance as “false consciousness,” as do some critical pedagogues (e.g., Aronowitz, 1981; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985; Giroux, 1988), Patti Lather (1991) expresses how resistance makes educators reflect on their own “imposition tendency” and how resistance “honors the complexity of the interplay between the empowering and the impositional at work in the liberatory classroom” (p. 76).

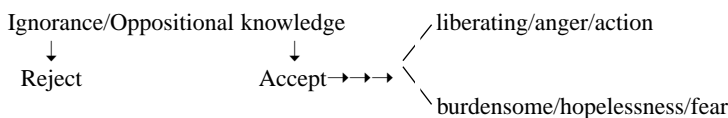
While most critical pedagogy scholars critique formal models of learning as limiting the creativity and complexity of learning processes and imposing a hierarchy of intelligence that obscures social, economic, and cultural differences, Lather (1991) puts her theoretical perspective and concerns about learning in more concrete terms. Her model (perhaps the only existing model in this scholarship) attempts to address learning in the context of *unlearning* oppressive knowledge and developing a critique of systems of inequality (see Figure 1).

In Lather’s (1991) model, *oppositional knowledge* refers to information and experiences that may directly contrast the education, beliefs, and values with which students are comfortable. Students may accept this new knowledge (for instance, of White, male privilege) or reject it. If they choose to reject, avoid, or deny this new knowledge, the process ends. If the student accepts this knowledge, the process can be burdensome, lead to hopelessness or fear, or can possibly be liberating, making students angry and inspiring them to take action toward change. While Lather’s model can be criticized for overly simplifying the learning process, it was the first model to offer a snapshot of uncomfortable knowledge, incorporating the processes of resistance and acceptance as well as mind and body in a feminist pedagogic framework.

Although Lather’s (1991) model is designed for the feminist classroom, placing it in any context

Figure 1  
*Lather’s (1991) Model*

Stages of Feminist Consciousness Raising



dealing with oppression and social inequalities helps to acknowledge the relationship between the learner and what Lather calls “uncomfortable” information. Lather’s discussion, from which this model is drawn, also emphasizes the importance of “self-reflexivity” (p. 79) on the part of teachers/scholars. She believes that educators need to examine their value systems and frameworks of understanding to develop “the skills of self-critiques, of a reflexivity which will keep us from becoming impositional and reifiers ourselves” (p. 80). Ellsworth (1992) also stresses the importance of reflexivity and challenges critical pedagogues to examine the contradiction that when they set out to “emancipate” their students, they often leave the teacher and students’ unequal power untouched.

Scholars interested in critical and feminist pedagogy from a communication perspective have offered alternatives to the traditional conceptualizations of student learning (and resistance to learning) in the classroom as behavioral matters. Where the focus in traditional education research has been on cognitive and behavioral indicators of learning, critical theorists have countered with their own theories of resistance as power from post-structural (Ellsworth, 1992; Lather, 1991), critical, or postmodern standpoints (Althusser, 1977; Giroux, 1988). Feminist theorists such as Lather, Ellsworth, and Kelly (1997), following Foucault (1980) and Gramsci (1971), assume that the social is an integral part of the constitution of the subject. Nonetheless, their analyses often close down possibilities for meaning-making located in people’s interactions (as opposed to people and communication technologies, people and texts, institutions, and so forth). Shor (1992) and others, such as Giroux (1994, 1998), McLaren, (1991) and Lather, do not include or theorize actual interaction as part of their conceptualization of classroom power and resistance.

These concerns raise important implications for learning that happens as meanings are confronted and negotiated in interaction. Placing learning in context also means displacing culturally- and socially-embedded beliefs and practices. It is this understanding of the struggle over the “nature” of learning and of knowledges that are always partial and incomplete, that social constructionist thought shares with many (if not all) critical pedagogical scholars.

### Social Constructionist’s Perspective on Learning

Research on learning from a social constructionist perspective essentially equates learning with the process of communication, putting primacy on

interaction among social and cultural beings. From this view, units of analysis are located in social and cultural processes that construct individuals’ interpretations and identities. Theorists who advocate social constructionist approaches to learning (e.g., Cronen, 1995; Lannamann, 1991, 1992; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992, 1995; Sigman, 1992) have argued that communication must be viewed in social and cultural patterns that influence both intentions and consequences of interaction, rather than as an individual process of sending and receiving information.

About learning and knowing, Shotter and Gergen (1994) observe:

We are not speaking here of a theoretical kind of knowledge specifiable ahead of time in rules, maxims or other forms, but of a practical skill differentially realized in different, concrete contexts. But it is not simply a form of individual skill either—in the sense that an individual can master and apply alone—for its proper use depends upon the judgment of the others around one at the time of its application... This knowledge, embodied in our collective practices, is thus of a special “third kind,” neither simply theoretical nor practical-technical. It is a form of knowledge from *within* a relationship, in which, in its articulation, others around us continually exert a morally coercive force *to be* persons of a particular kind, to assume a particular kind of *identity*, and to exhibit a particular kind of *sensibility*. (p. 6)

This “third kind” of practical knowledge, which Shotter (1993) calls *knowing from within*, is knowledge of a moral kind, “for it depends upon the judgments of others as to whether its expression or its use is ethically proper or not—one cannot just have it or express it on one’s own, or wholly within oneself” (p. 7). Moral/practical knowledge is present in any discourse, but emerges as a primary concern in discussions of learning in the classroom and community.

Implicit in all the literatures reviewed for this paper is the assumption that education should lead to participation (if not leadership) as an engaged citizen in a democratic community. Even more evident in the scholarship on critical pedagogy and CSL is the assumption that learning (in the classroom and community) should make students better citizens, and empower them to transform and change unjust practices and institutions. The “shoulds” of learning direct attention toward the moral imperatives of communicating and—as Shotter (1993) notes—a moral other for whom such actions are presented as moral or immoral. Empowerment in this context occurs when a student/citizen recognizes her responsibility and ability to critique and change pre-

viously taken-for-granted or previously avoided or ignored social relations.

Social constructionist scholars such as Lannamann (1991) and McNamee (1988) emphasize learning as it occurs in the details of communicative situations. McNamee uses Bahktin's (1981) notion of dialogism to argue for the analysis of interactions in understanding learning, rather than working to assess individual cognitive states. Lannamann (1991) is interested in how everyday interactions are sustained through larger ideological and institutional (here, schooling) practices. From this perspective, the unspoken rules for teachers, students, and classroom interaction should be examined both for their connections to dominant social structures as well as for how they create new possibilities for engagement with community issues and concerns. Communities should be examined as they organize and order their practices to coordinate meaning among participants. Learning thus occurs at sites of connection, which can both imply coordination and conflict, relationships, and resistance.

Taking into consideration the concerns voiced by Cronen (1995), Lannamann (1991, 1992), Leeds-Hurwitz (1992), Shotter (1993) and others, social constructionist research could make an important contribution to the theoretical foci on learning advanced in critical pedagogy and CSL. A social approach to learning that combines these three perspectives can provide a fresh approach to studying human action and agency that addresses learning, both in the immediate context and as part of the larger social structure. With attention to notions of identity and moral knowledge as part and parcel of social action, CSL research from a social constructionist and critical perspective can emphasize the intimate details of interacting subjects as framed within the ideological and hegemonic practices of the larger social structure.

### A Social Approach to Learning in Community Service Learning

Given the contributions and limitations highlighted in the approaches to learning posed above, it is helpful to introduce an approach to learning that brings together contributions from each area of scholarship to a relational mode of learning in the classroom and community context. From each approach, we can build an understanding of learning as a process of engagement with and in a diverse community of people, as negotiated among individuals positioned in and through social and cultural meanings, and as imperative to producing social change in existing democracy.

Central to the authors' social approach are three concepts: engagement, identity, and community, each outlined briefly for our purposes here. The first concept, engagement, is emphasized in CSL scholarship, but is expanded and extended through the critical pedagogical and social constructionist perspectives discussed above. Thus, borrowing from a social constructionist perspective, engagement can be obligatory, given the rules of interaction and roles one is assumed to play in the service-learning context. Engagement can also emerge in the coordination of meaning within particular interactions. Building from a critical pedagogy perspective, engagement in service-learning can be naïve (e.g., unaware of the ways one's participation in CSL may be perpetuating inequalities in the social system) or critical (aware of systemic inequities and focused on potentials for redistributing or changing the flow of power).

Engagement does not ignore students' potential resistance to knowledge that conflicts with preexisting beliefs. At times in CSL courses or projects, students may challenge the service agency's role in providing a means for social change. These students may resist their part in what they see as a process that perpetuates the alienation or marginalization of some citizens through social programs. At other times, students may be engaged in a project and yet resist connecting with those who are culturally different, out of fear of changing long-held values or beliefs. In this manner, engagement can encompass both opposition to, and the embracing of, new learning experiences. Because engagement is viewed as relational and cultural knowledge, all social interaction produces knowledges that may or may not produce the outcomes educators desire.

The second concept, identity, is also important to the authors' social approach and influenced both by social constructionist and critical pedagogy approaches to learning. Using a social approach to learning, identity always stands in relation to others, and is thus only understood in and through our interactions with others. In a CSL context, we learn about ourselves and others through use of language and the stories we tell about what we are doing. Yet, the social approach also includes a critical perspective on identity that assumes identities are created and given meaning through ideological discourses and corresponding structures in society.

Community, the third key concept in the social approach to learning, emphasizes the ways meanings for groups of people are created within and through interaction. The term "community" can invoke, for example, nostalgia, envy, fear, loneliness, or responsibility. Being part of a community may be a choice for some, an obligation for others,

and a system of oppression for those on the margins of society. So what, then, does the term “community” mean in discussions of CSL? The roles assigned to ourselves and others within community narratives tell us a good deal about social positioning and the implied morality of such discourses.

Each of the three concepts and the social approach itself might be visualized as a kind of web, where meanings are entangled with and informed by each of the perspectives on learning (CSL, critical pedagogy, and social constructionist). In this manner, all learning occurs as connection, as social and cultural processes organized into daily life. In bringing together the pragmatic (learning through doing) and democratic (students as citizens) objectives of CSL, the theoretical focus of critical pedagogy on the ideological functions of education and democracy, and the emphasis on learning as negotiated in and through interaction from social constructionism, educators can strengthen each body of scholarship and contribute to our understanding of learning in the social and cultural context of school and community. In short, we can begin to ask different questions about the “nature” of learning and test our assumptions in interaction with others in community contexts.

### Assessing the Social Approach: Asking the “So What” Questions

After arguing for and explicating a more complex theoretical approach to learning in CSL, it is appropriate to ask “so what?” What does the social approach offer that will result in a different understanding of learning, and what is the impact of such an approach? More to the point, what is enhanced, changed, and improved as a result of using this approach?

In what follows, the authors use ongoing CSL projects as examples of the social approach’s assessment potential. In our work with this approach over the years,<sup>1</sup> several of the techniques—including analysis of videotapes, surveys, focus groups, and guided journal entries—have been structured to include questions asking students to describe their engagement with the project, other students, community members, and concepts such as participation, community, and service. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to detail the various implementations of our assessment approach, we hope to provide a glimpse of the ways CSL projects exemplify the possibilities for a social approach to the learning process.

One potential application of this approach to a CSL project is based on one of the author’s work to structure student reflections in a project on homeless parenting. A local agency asked graduate stu-

dents in a qualitative methods class to discuss the agency’s parenting program and parenting practices with homeless parents, and describe (importantly, not assess or evaluate) their stories with regard to the local community and services available to them. Utilizing a social constructionist framework, the students reflected on the following questions: What is the relationship between my understanding of home and that of the parents I am working with? What assumptions about home and identity are embedded in the meaning and use we make of the terms *homeless* or *homelessness*? What are the shoulds of my and others’ knowledges about parenting present in our conversations and assessments? What new knowledges/meanings arise from our negotiations and coordination of meaning over these terms?<sup>2</sup>

Building on these questions, if we return to critical pedagogy and Lather’s (1991) model described above, we can also extend a critical and feminist framework to a social approach. Importantly for CSL students and scholars, acceptance or rejection of uncomfortable knowledges and possible consequences is theorized in Lather’s model; this process could be utilized as structure for students’ journals. Using the example above, students could not only look self-reflexively and critically at their own (dis)comfort, but also toward the consequences of this knowledge. In other words, acceptance or rejection does not stop the learning process.

Examples of the course instructor’s questions used to extend the critical framework to this CSL project were: What is or might be the relationship between learning and resistance expressed by students with regard to interacting with homeless populations? How might or did they respond to their discomfort in confronting knowledge and people who might have previously been invisible to them? What about their schooling has helped to conceal knowledge of social inequalities? What happened that allowed them to continue their work? What hindered their relationships?

Applying critical and feminist pedagogy also demands self-reflexivity on the instructor’s part. In this example, the instructor examined the situatedness of her own social positions by keeping a journal of her interactions with community representatives, agency members, constituents, and students. Positioning herself meant questioning her own areas of resistance and biases about homelessness as well as assumptions about what could and *should* be learned—and by whom.

In another ongoing CSL project, the authors held focus groups and interviews with community members and video recorded interactions among undergraduate students and community members. In the focus groups, project participants (in this case, sixth-



graders) were asked about the relationships they had formed with the college students, as well as about what they liked or would have done differently with the project. Backing up their comments, recordings provided multiple layers in which to assess their relationships, as well as the complexities of social positions and roles played in the project.

Each of the “so what?” questions posed above reflects the theoretical contributions of social constructionism and critical pedagogy. At the center of this approach is engagement. Students must be motivated and excited, self- and socially-reflective, as well as critical of the CSL experience to undergo the type of personal and social growth that CSL promises. Assessment of the social learning introduced here should also reflect the different and varied goals of CSL courses. Assessment can be used to determine whether and to what degree students, as individuals and part of other social groups and contexts, are engaged. It can also be used to help outline pedagogical and larger (societal, critical, relational, etc.) goals associated with the CSL course and measure progress toward reaching them.

Asking theoretical and pragmatic questions that reflect the concept of engagement and building techniques for evaluation around that concept can help structure and organize the ways in which learning is assessed. Assessment models and techniques for CSL (Batenburg & Pope, 1997; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Gelmon et al., 2001; Giles & Eyler, 1999; Levin, 2000; Renner & Bush, 1997) do not always assign an explicit role to the notion of civic and social engagement, although it is often an implied element in the outcomes tested. In an exception to that rule, Astin, Vogelsang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) studied open-ended student feedback responses specifically for signs of engagement in the CSL course. Others, however, do not necessarily specify how they looked for signs of engagement in students’ feedback measures (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups, or written journal or other assignments), yet it was presumably among the outcomes examined.

In placing engagement at the center of CSL planning, execution, and assessment, the authors have applied a number of assessment concepts and assessment techniques, all of which stem from the reflection process that characterizes CSL.

### Assessment Concepts

#### *Privileging the Absent (Journaling and Class Discussion)*

Building from the work of feminist and critical pedagogy scholars, the authors use this process to

assess what and who is absent (or invisible) in our process, in the project, and in the knowledge we bring to bear on the topic. For instance, early in a media literacy program, the students assumed race was not an issue due to the lack of student racial diversity. After discussion of who and what was made invisible in this discourse, students decided to make Whiteness a part of the curriculum.

#### *Engaging Resistance (Journaling and Class Discussion)*

As discussed earlier, acceptance or rejection of uncomfortable knowledges or one’s own complicity in maintaining privilege and the status quo is part of the process of a social approach. Through focusing on how meanings for normalcy and deviancy, visibility and invisibility, etc. are negotiated, students can be moved toward an examination of their learning that does not blame them, but rather involves them in a critique and raises accountability for the consequences of discursive and nondiscursive actions that maintain status quo.

#### *Role Negotiation (Journaling, Multi-Level Focus Groups, Class Discussion)*

Building from social constructionist theory, students and community members are asked what they thought their role was prior to interacting with each other and how (if at all) they felt their roles shifted as they worked through the process. The emphasis here is on the ways individuals understand their own and others’ social roles, and how roles are continually structured and restructured in negotiation with others in the community project.

#### *Terms for Identity and Practice (Class Exercises, Journaling, Class Discussion, Focus Groups)*

Again, using social constructionism as a theoretical basis, students are asked to identify prominent terms used for being (who they think they are—a leader, conservative, problem solver) and for local practices (what it is they do—help people transition into society, “fix” people’s problems) by community workers, clients, in their academic reading for the course, and among themselves. They then examine these concepts across groups to discuss social and cultural assumptions embedded in their own and others’ use of these terms, and how their understandings of the terms are reconstructed through relationships with others in the community.

### Assessment Techniques

#### *Videotaping*

As mentioned above, the authors used video to record interactions within and among all groups involved in our projects, from the planning through implementation and assessment of the CSL project.

Video provides an assessment of process and performance of learning and resistance that reflects both critical pedagogy and the social constructionist perspective. In addition, video provides a check on the validity of self-reports of learning and underscores the complexity of contexts in and through which meanings (for community, service, and the project) are negotiated.

#### *Cross-Group Focus Groups*

In developing a richer context for discussing and reflecting on learning, the authors used focus groups comprised of the various populations involved in the project (instructors, students, community members).

Additionally, the authors used assessment strategies that utilize quantitative and qualitative means of measuring students' and participating faculty and community members' levels of engagement on multiple levels: with the course overall, the CSL aspect of the course that entails involvement and participation in the community setting, and the idea of service and cooperative learning, etc. In other work related to the social approach detailed here (Cooks & Scharrer, in progress; Scharrer, Cooks, & Paredes, 2002; Scharrer, Paredes, & Cooks, 2003), the authors have described and assessed a triangulated approach to data from an ongoing media literacy and violence prevention partnership. We have also built a curriculum around the social approach that provides a foundation for students to raise the "so what?" questions discussed above and offers a basis for reflective inquiry around those questions (Cooks & Scharrer, in progress).

#### Conclusions

This paper has brought together a variety of discourses on learning to move toward creating a social approach to learning in CSL contexts. While there is no shortage of research detailing modes and styles of learning in a variety of contexts, there is little work that attempts to combine critical theories of learning and education with approaches that view learning as a process of communication and engagement. The focus in this paper has been on CSL as a key context in which relational or engaged learning occurs, and the need for more theory-driven work that looks at the possibilities and constraints that learning in the community presents. The authors have worked to build connections between epistemology, theory, methodology, and application to provide a structure that addresses the call for more complex approaches to learning raised by CSL scholars (e.g., Clark, 2002; Kahne, Weshelmer, & Rogers, 2000; Warter & Grossman, 2002). In doing so, we have provided a foundation

for raising questions that place communication and interaction as central to learning and situate CSL participants and projects in their social, political, cultural, and moral contexts.

CSL is neither atheoretical nor apolitical; however, few scholars have fully addressed the political implications for this type of learning and the risks that such learning involves. The social approach to learning and its application explicated in this paper begins to explore the perception of risk involved with implementing CSL that teachers and students have expressed, and that often leads to resistance to participating in the CSL project or class. Students may attempt engagement and then reject the potential for change/growth because they fear their own knowledges may be altered. In attempting to set forth a social approach, the authors hope to demonstrate that engaged learning is a process encompassing all forms of response, because reactions to experience are constructed, inherently social, dynamic, and transformative. The idea that engagement encompasses and draws from experiences of acceptance as well as rejection of "uncomfortable" experiences and knowledge in our social approach model differs from the treatment of resistance in both the traditional and critical literatures on learning in an educational setting, which imply that rejection of knowledge does not qualify as learning.

In working toward a social approach to learning that emphasizes communicative processes in service-learning and other contexts, the authors' goal is that teachers and scholars interested in CSL can embrace the messiness of meaning-making in a complex society. We also hope to have illustrated some of the reasons why locating meaning solely as occurring within individuals obscures the civic, cultural, moral, and social dimensions of this dynamic. Scholars/teachers trying to make connections between classroom learning and community contexts can begin to see the locations where meaning is embraced or opposed as part of a process of risk, change, and acceptance, rather than simply as skills acquired or outcomes achieved. CSL is poised to be at the forefront of an international effort to bring together classroom and community, and we believe that placing communication at the center of learning will contribute to this movement. Indeed, it is the discovery of multiple layers of complexities, rather than a neat simplicity, that exemplifies the beauty of CSL praxis.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The authors have utilized this approach in a variety of projects that are beyond the scope of this paper. Here, our assessment strategies are based on our work with students and community members participating in a collabor-

orative partnership, known as the Media Literacy and Violence Prevention Project, and in a variety of partnerships with local agencies working with homeless families, families in transition, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and the Girl Scouts, among other organizations.

<sup>2</sup> From these questions, students produced journals that examined the ways their own education (e.g., using survey research) led them to distance themselves as researchers from the researched, avoided examining theories in light of their usefulness in making societal changes, and assumed the role of the private academic, as opposed to the public intellectual. Issues around the students' own position (as White, as international, etc.) and their visibility or invisibility vis-a-vis the system and discourses of homelessness were also raised (among many others).

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