

Service-Learning Pathologies and Prognoses

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ABSTRACT

This essay diagnoses and suggests treatments for several pathologies that afflict service-learning. Structural challenges include geographic isolation and optimization of institutional administration. Student challenges include reinforcing stereotypes, deficiencies in practical skills, elitism regarding suitable service, underdeveloped empathy, and excessive focus on time spent in service. Community partner challenges include appropriately defining student labor and systematically underreporting negative experiences. The prognosis explores how service-learning projects could instigate student engagement with the systemic nature of social injustice.

INTRODUCTION

Computer guru Marvin Minsky (1995, p. 156) praises Freud's concept of "negative expertise": knowing what not to do. According to Minsky, more meticulous attention to failures and their causes would advance computer science much faster because programmers would study and learn from their mistakes rather than repeat them. Minsky used this process of heuristics to develop artificial intelligence. The same holds for practitioners of service-learning. A massive and rapidly expanding body of literature touts the promises of service-learning, with theoretical optimism fueled by glowing case studies that pile success upon success. While this literature certainly has proven important and useful, little research has been devoted to the obstacles attendant to implementing service-learning projects (Jones, 2002). Quite the contrary: rapid chronicling of service-learning projects has outpaced research that can anticipate, identify, prevent, or correct potential problems. The proliferation of service-learning has outpaced

systematic studies of best practices (Densmore, 2000; Eyler, 2002). Billig and Furco (2002) lament that "there is a glaring lack of research attention to issues that have plagued the field of service-learning and little study of its phenomenal growth" (p. 222). As Minsky suggested, perhaps devoting more attention to negative expertise would enrich understanding and improve future practice.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, and Colby (1996) enumerate several barriers to implementing service-learning programs, including reluctance of faculty to participate in service, organizational resistance to perceived outsiders in the community, limited institutional funding, and lack of recognition in promotion and tenure considerations. This essay complements such research by directly engaging difficulties that actually have arisen in implementing service-learning projects based on several iterations of campus-community partnerships in an upper-

division communication studies course.

Communicating Common Ground (CCG) is a nationwide service-learning project that connects undergraduates with K-12 students in efforts to promote appreciation for diversity, combat hate speech, and foster intercultural understanding. The National Communication Association, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and Campus Compact jointly sponsor the project, which began with 30 partnerships in 2000. The network of partnerships has more than doubled since the program's inception. This essay stems from administering several iterations of CCG partnerships over two years in a course titled Propaganda, an advanced communication studies course populated primarily by juniors and seniors majoring or minoring in communication. The course was among the menu of selections to fulfill requirements for the major. University students collaborated with sections of sixth- and tenth-grade public school classes to create public programs that would promote appreciation of different cultures and population groups. Events included a public reading of reminiscences collected from interviews with senior citizens, an arts and crafts fair featuring work created by mentally challenged youths, and locally televised panel of Muslim students discussing their faith in a post-9/11 world, and a joint presentation by a Holocaust survivor and a liberator of a concentration camp. Approximately two-thirds of the undergraduate majors had a public relations concentration. All the service-learning projects grouped the university students into teams of four to six that worked collaboratively with the younger students to design, administer, and publicize the events. The projects occurred at a small (enrollment ~6,000) Midwestern university in a rural setting (city population ~11,000).

The pathologies cluster in three categories: structural challenges, student challenges, and community partner challenges. Each category will be explored in light of how it emerged in specific service-learning contexts and the preventive or corrective measures that practitioners might take

when confronting these pathologies. The three types of pathologies lead into a broader prognosis of service-learning as a sustainable activity, urging a critical reconsideration of sustainability more along the lines of deep civic engagement rather than sheer duration of a project.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Rural Revision of Urban Bias

Typically service-learning triangulates the partners in the educational enterprise, linking educational institutions with community service organizations to serve a clientele. This trifurcated structure (college/community/clientele), however, is not always feasible. Sometimes, particularly in rural settings, organizational structures do not already exist to fulfill community needs, such as advocacy for underrepresented groups or care for underprivileged populations. For example, in the locale of the projects discussed in this essay, no local community organizations existed as advocates for African-Americans, Jews, Muslims, or many other groups in a geographically isolated, rural county. The absence of community organizations as advocates for specific populations might signify the urgency of devising educational programs that orient local residents to those groups and their needs. On the other hand, working beyond the purview of formal advocacy or anti-discrimination organizations did not limit students to developing familiar, "tried and true" projects.

The geographic inequity in service opportunities hardly receives mention in service-learning literature. The typical picture of service-learning portrays a community awash in service agencies craving student volunteers. The reality is that far more service opportunities arise in urban than in rural areas (Télliez, 2000). A latent urban bias infuses discussions of service-learning. Chronic labor shortages in rural community service agencies can limit the ability of

community partners to provide adequate on-site supervision. In fact, lack of full-time personnel can make very small service organizations—often those most desperately in need of volunteer labor—reluctant to engage in service-learning partnerships that would require monitoring student workers. The personnel limitations often plague rural environments where service organizations maintain skeleton crews and lack resources to train and oversee a large influx of student volunteers.

The geographic environment also shapes service-learning in more ideological ways. Where formal service organizations already abound, the options for service-learning tend to recur in those prevailing organizations. This return to existing institutional service supports the mindset of “institutionalism,” that service has greatest effect when conducted within existing social structures (Vogelgesang & Rhoads, 2003). Grass roots activism, such as rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins, or strikes, receives almost no attention as a legitimate service-learning activity. Why? The customary structure of service-learning operates with the familiar chain of command that governs social services: work within existing organizational frameworks. Thus, it might have been fortunate that the CCG projects often provided diversity programs directly to the public instead of engaging with service organizations (had they existed). The independence of “direct” service-learning entails risks and benefits. The risk is that projects might have less structure without agency oversight. The advantage is that, unconstrained by agency bureaucracies, the projects can address social needs in more innovative ways.

At least two remedies can counteract the ailments that could confront rural service-learning initiatives. First, service-learning might gravitate more toward grass-roots activism or lobbying state and local governments to redress the labor shortages that plague remote areas. Service-learning projects could collaborate with larger, established service organizations to build

a case for a similar organization developing in the rural area. Even if the project did not focus on direct policy outcomes, it could serve a productive consciousness-raising function by alerting the local populace to the need for under-acknowledged services. Second, projects could redefine their relationship with community partners to resemble consultants rather than employees. Under the consultant model, an under-resourced community partner would task the students with developing grant proposal or volunteer recruitment plans that would provide long-term relief from labor and resource shortages. The consultant model would require less day-to-day oversight than clock-measured tasks at the organization, thereby freeing the agency to conduct its daily affairs while the students work more independently as the agency’s advocates. Third, service-learning projects can focus on capacity building for community partners, equipping them with the infrastructure that could expand their ability to serve their clientele. For example, one project developed a web presence for the local senior center so the sole full-time worker did not have to physically recruit volunteers from local churches while student volunteers were unavailable during the summer.

Centralized and Diffused Administrative Approaches

The degree to which service-learning is centrally guided and implemented affects the nature of projects. The CCG projects discussed in this essay were conducted at a university that had minimal institutional infrastructure for service-learning. Each instructor located and recruited community partners, developed assessments, and oriented students to service-learning. Ad hoc service-learning initiatives can allow greater flexibility in developing service-learning projects, since individual initiatives do not pass through the additional bureaucratic level of a service-learning office. This decentralized

approach can provide the university enormous flexibility in responding rapidly to immediate, unanticipated needs in the community. Faculty also may find ad hoc service-learning programs much less restrictive because there exists no structured monitoring of service-learning beyond the agreements reached between faculty and community partners. Decentralized service-learning removes the administrative tensions or territorial disputes that can develop between academic departments and student affairs or administrative divisions that oversee service-learning. Such tensions can prove troublesome if an institution has not clearly defined the responsibilities of faculty and administrative personnel on issues such as appropriate service-learning course requirements or considerations for the increased student and faculty workload in service-learning courses.

Furco (2002) identifies centralized service-learning programs as an indicator of a more advanced stage of service-learning development. Centralized service-learning reflects greater institutional commitment because of its greater staffing and funding requirements. More important, centralized service-learning can enable more consistent relationships to be maintained between community partners and the academic institution. Thus centralized service-learning programs can assure a baseline level of academic rigor, formality of partnerships, and training for faculty and students more than decentralized programs typically can enact. Institutional oversight of service-learning can monitor the quality of community partnerships, continuously educating faculty and community members about best practices. Most important, a service-learning office can match courses and instructors with the community organizations most suitable for achieving instructional objectives.

The degree of a service-learning program's centralization depends on the individual institution's preferences, although more centralized approaches are associated with more mature programs. From a programmatic

perspective, an especially healthy approach is to adopt a practice of shared governance based on shared ownership of service-learning. Recalling that service-learning triangulates faculty, students, and community partners, the administrative structure for service-learning should reflect that same balance. Service-learning is administered with all these participants rather than to or for any one of them. Ideally, institutional administration and oversight of service-learning should include faculty, administrative staff, students, and community partners. These four sets of stakeholders enable shared governance to account for the variety of concerns and priorities they represent: academics, institutional image and development, personal development, and social improvement. In this way, a diverse and customized service-learning project can arise (as with more diffused systems), but the shared governance method enables collaborative development of standards and evaluative criteria that render service-learning experiences more consistent and attuned to the priorities of the participants.

STUDENT CHALLENGES

Attitudinal Backlash: Service-Learning's Boomerang Effect

Bourdieu, Passeron, and de Saint Martin (1994) observed that students from privileged class backgrounds tend to view their university education as "a search for symbolic confirmation of their hereditary right to occupy positions of power and prestige" (p. 101). Some students experience service-learning as reinforcement of their ethnic provincialism and class snobbery. Exposure to and collaboration with unfamiliar populations drives students past their comfort zones, sometimes retrenching rather than redressing pre-existing mindsets. One student who was collecting oral histories of a dwindling rural Jewish community temporarily refused to contact elderly congregants of a synagogue. His

initial contact with a senior citizen who wanted to record some recollections reminded this student that he disliked dealing with “old people.” A graduating senior who worked with seventh graders at an impoverished rural school enjoyed the experience but in his final presentation repeatedly referred to the youngsters as “rubes” and “rednecks.” Granted, such examples are anecdotal. But they raise a serious question about the ways service-learning projects can revitalize the narrow mindsets they were designed to revise.

If students have not been thoroughly inculcated into how to approach encounters with other cultures, intercultural interactions might bolster pre-existing stereotypes because students seek confirmation of familiar beliefs (Steinke, Fitch, Johnson, & Waldstein, 2002). Results from some CCG projects revealed this pattern of confirmation bias. In an assessment administered to 23 Caucasian high school sophomores before the service-learning project began, all answered “yes” to the question: “Do you think racism is still prevalent in our society?” Although all students correctly identified who Rosa Parks was and generally scored well on factual information, racial tolerance might not have been internalized as deeply as factual recall. Asked when Black History Month occurs, two students wrote that there should be a Caucasian History Month. Midterm evaluations from college students in the Propaganda course showed resistance to discussions and activities about Jews. Comments included: “This is a Jewish sympathy course” and “Too much about Jews.” Never were any such comments received from students in courses with service-learning projects that involved African-Americans, Muslims, the elderly, the mentally handicapped, or other populations.

These experiences reveal that service-learning projects risk a boomerang effect, “actually reinforcing the negative stereotypes and assumptions that students bring with them to the class environment” (Jones, 2002, p. 10). Erickson and O’Connor (2000) explain that students often encounter marginalized populations in service

contexts that confirm their marginal status, “so the contact may have the boomerang effect of confirming and hardening preexisting biases and prejudices, even though the educational objective was just the opposite” (p. 66). For example, concentrating on the Holocaust—especially in forced labor and concentration camps—as the defining experience of Jewish culture reinforces the status of Jews as victims. Similarly, limiting interactions with the elderly to nursing homes reaffirms their image as isolated, possibly unhealthy, dependent, and not physically part of the community. Indeed, Gasiorski (2005) found that privileged students who embarked on service-learning projects without sufficient prior grounding in multicultural education used the experience as means to reinforce their colonialist elitism toward underprivileged populations. Often these same students individualize the disadvantages other groups suffer, deflecting critical attention from the social structures and practices that also reinforce their own privilege (Boyle-Baise & Efiom, 2000).

The CCG experiences illustrate that students may need more grounding in the systemic issues that fuel prejudice before they embark on direct intercultural encounters. In its first iteration, the Propaganda course met with strong resistance from a homogenous white, middle class, Christian student demographic who remained skeptical of the need for any programs that would embrace diversity. Having had minimal association with diverse cultures, the students simply denied that prejudice existed in their own communities. To the extent it was a problem, it occurred in other times and other places. A stark realization was that in such an attitudinal environment, the justification for the service-learning projects was not self-evident. The students needed some direct experience that demonstrated why diversity was desirable and relevant, especially since they found that diverse environments often were more fraught with tensions than their homogeneous communities. What the class needed was a learning experience that pointed out how anyone

can be a perpetrator or a victim of discrimination and how discrimination can assume more subtle forms than overt persecution. Practitioners who engage in service-learning related to diversity should consider how to create a sense of need for the project, which later will invest students with a sense of ownership over the project's progress. One high-impact tactic is to invite speakers who have inflicted or have been on the receiving end of various types of discrimination. When students listen to these personal stories, these testimonies bring a personal and direct face to the fruits of intolerance.

Spectatorship: Student Deficits in Life Skills

DeVitis, Johns, and Simpson (1998) explicitly note that students require communication skill development for them to perform community service effectively: "We need to habituate the student to education toward community by developing crucial skills in discourse and communication" (p. 9). The issue is not simply habituation, but functionality. Although all the students involved in these service-learning projects were communication majors, many lacked fundamental skills in making and maintaining interpersonal contacts. When trying to secure guest speakers for community-wide programs, many college students found themselves at a loss to locate the required presenters. Not generalizing their research skills to situations beyond the library or the classroom, students needed to learn how to use organizational and personal contacts to hunt for the desired speaker. This situation adds credence to studies that show large discrepancies between the information management skills students claim to have and the skills they can demonstrate in practice (Maughan, 2001).

Students also had to learn persistence in making personal contacts. In the university environment, the primary focus of faculty and staff is to serve students. Not so in the community.

Students expressed shock when their phone calls were not returned, e-mails were ignored, or appointments were not kept. Progress reports during the semester revealed substantial anger and frustration directed toward the community for its unresponsiveness. For example, one student sharply criticized a community organization for not having voice mail. Other students routinely complained that their e-mails received no replies, assuming the lack of response was from a choice to be unavailable. Eventually the student attitudes matured as they became less self-absorbed, recognizing that their own class performance was not the primary concern of community members beyond campus. Rather than stoke their anger and stroke their egos, student reflection shifted away from blame and toward considering the competition for the attention of community activists and agencies. Some students noted that community members might be unresponsive precisely because their organizations lack resources to respond promptly.

These students' skill deficits did not result from apathy or incompetence but from inadequate preparation for the under-structured and under-resourced nature of many service-learning environments. Although the students felt and sometimes acted helpless in these situations, they actually were confronted with an opportunity for empowerment (Speck, 2001). In their traditional classes and co-curricular activities, most of these students played the role of spectators; rarely asked to take initiative, they remained content to watch their teachers perform. Not faced with initiating contact or confirming appointments, they customarily had been audiences receiving the benefits of speakers whose presence was provided for them. The public lecture series at most universities engage students mainly as observers who witness the speeches. Instead, the students in the service-learning projects were empowered—and challenged—to engage speakers in a radically different way, shouldering responsibility for securing them, publicizing the

event, confirming the appearances, and managing the programs. This conversion from spectator to engaged participant plays a key role in the power of service-learning to transform students into active citizens (Murphy, 2004).

Approximately two-thirds of the college students were public relations majors, yet most had not coordinated an event until their service-learning project. Contrary to their experience with faculty and staff, students confronted the need for persistence after a missed appointment or lack of response. One student observed: I have learned from our speakers how to relate effectively. Just when I thought I had informed them enough, one of them would send me an email wanting more information. I found that you can never over-inform a guest speaker; it's better to be over-prepared than under-prepared. So, this project means to me that I am more prepared to relate to speakers and it has helped me hone my people skills.

A recurrent preparation problem was telephone skills. In a textually rich environment rife with e-mails that log dates, times, and sources of messages, virtually no students recognized how to leave an effective phone message and to note the names of people they conversed with. The service groups found an explicit orientation to telephone messaging highly beneficial. Important points included: stating the student's project affiliation, following up with more than one message, and contacting other people who could urge the desired party to return the call. University faculty and staff try to accommodate students whenever possible. In service-learning the relationship becomes more mutual, with students also accommodating the limited time and resources of community organizations. Students are no longer the "customers" who must be pleased at all costs (Schwartzman & Phelps, 2002). A student astutely observed in his final reflection paper that he had learned the importance of compromise. Service-learning taught many students valuable lessons in perseverance and assertiveness. Taking liberties with John Milton,

"They do not serve who only stand and wait."

The prescription for the spectatorship malady resembles more a lifestyle regimen than a simple pill. More students would be ready to participate fully in service-learning and engage more rapidly if they had more experience shouldering genuine responsibilities and empowered with more decision making within and beyond the classroom. Complaints about student apathy miss the mark. The issue may simply be that too many students have been socialized into an educational system that equates obedience with excellence. Service-learning may provide harsh medicine for those students who are unprepared to function in an environment that does not place them at its vortex. Practitioners and advocates of service-learning need to extend experiential learning opportunities to more introductory-level courses so students have firmer grounding in the practical life skills that service-learning projects require.

Service Snobbery

Some students may approach service-learning with an "I don't do windows" mentality, believing some tasks too menial and unworthy to deserve serious dedication. This attitude seems more prevalent among students who define their education in narrowly vocational terms, complaining that some service-learning activities fail to train them in relevant job skills (as if education were equivalent to training). Similar concerns arise when students lack the experience to understand why some apparently menial tasks serve important purposes. For example, one service-learning project (a pilot program that developed into the CCG initiative on this campus) teamed a group of students with the local animal shelter. This shelter suffered from chronic overpopulation, often having to reject animals and accelerate their euthanization schedule. Initially the students complained that the animal shelter was an "unprofessional" environment so uncivilized that it that lacked voice mail. The students also resented that they were asked to

walk the dogs as part of their service. “We’re communication majors; we shouldn’t have to do this,” became a weekly refrain during class meetings. The problem stemmed partially from a mentality of entitlement, as if the students could remain distant from the day-to-day problem and offer solutions from afar, never encountering the daily pressures that chronic animal overpopulation caused. Another part of the problem arose from failure to approach the situation as a communication problem.

The students eventually recognized that walking the dogs helped acclimate them to the issues the animal shelter faced. Volunteers must gain some understanding of organizational culture in order to determine how best to serve. The overwhelming demands of keeping the animals fed, healthy, and clean quickly demonstrated the severity of the issue. The turning point came when every experience began to connect with communication issues. The superficial communication issue was to promote animal adoptions, spaying, and neutering. More deeply, the issue transformed into the commodification of animals. In an agricultural area abounding with horses and cows, why would domestic pets have so little value? The answer was that the dogs and cats had no apparent commercial value. For the first time, some students began to realize that fuzzy puppies and cuddly kitties had little impact on animal adoption rates. They recognized the competing discursive forces of commodification and emotional attachment. Cuteness succumbed to commercial value. Without suffering the frustration of dealing with orphan animals and their needs, the complexity of the issue never would have emerged.

Service-learning might seem mundane to students because it does not need to extend to exotic locales or dramatic causes that snag news headlines. More often, service-learning remains embedded in the everyday struggle to improve the lives of people close to home. bell hooks (2000) explains how the ongoing nature of service can dull its allure and thereby reduce the potential

for long-term social activism: Like a charity one has donated capital to and need never give again because the proof of generosity was already on record, their one-time contribution could take the place of any ongoing constructive confrontation with class politics in the United States. The starving in a foreign country are always more interesting than the starving who speak your language who might want to eat at your table, find shelter in your house, or share your job. (p. 148) Service from a distance might require only mailing a check or some other documentable sign of support. Service learning, however, gravitates toward serving alongside community partners, service with an ally in a cause rather than service to a recipient that deserves sympathy.

Attenuated Empathy

Teaching respect for a population group remains futile as long as they remain known only as abstractions. Before their service-learning project began, one team surveyed a sophomore class (n = 25) at the local high school. Twenty (80%) did not know what anti-Semitism was, and 21 (84%) claimed never to have encountered a Jewish person. In pre-tests of another sophomore class at the same high school (n = 38), 24 students (63%) stated that they knew “nothing” about Jewish beliefs, with two other students listing their only knowledge as “The men wear funny hats.” Direct interaction with marginalized populations thus became crucial to compensate for lack of first-hand knowledge. A member of the college student team recognized the knowledge gap, commenting in the final reflection essay: “Before this project I never really realized how much I DIDN’T know about Jewish people and the Holocaust.” Since peer pressure and apathy foster racist attitudes (Short, 1999), concrete experience with underrepresented groups could allow the students to feel more empathy and concern for them as individuals.

Lack of direct experience with non-Christians allowed the high school students to express

complacency about prejudice. Morden and Demson (2003) contend that minimal contact with Jews could lead Christians to become indifferent toward anti-Semitism since its effects would be invisible. Responses to a post-test administered at the conclusion of the project showed that some high school sophomores saw anti-Jewish attitudes as a problem, but not an immediate threat. When asked, "Do you think that there is a problem with negative attitudes toward Jewish culture in this area?" a student answered: "No, because we don't have many Jewish people around here." In a similar vein, one service-learning student who surveyed an undergraduate teacher education class (n = 17) found that two respondents did not plan to teach about multicultural issues if their classes did not already have much cultural diversity.

Service-learning can impel productive social change if students have "the opportunity to personalize social issues" in the educational experience (Jones, 2002, p. 14). Direct encounters with the human impact of social problems can disrupt comfortable assumptions about universal equality: The opportunity to personalize complex social issues and to see the real effects of social and public policies on the life situations of certain individuals does more to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions than anything else we have designed into our service-learning courses. (Gasiorski, 2005, p. 19).

One student noted a similar effect from two other projects: an exhibit of art created by mentally handicapped children and a panel discussion featuring several Muslims explaining the tenets of Islam: For instance, the group that set out to design a campaign for the mentally handicapped basically provided an outlet for the community to see this population in action. They reduced the foreignness of this population with up-close and personal interaction. Our group, on the other hand, examined the culture from the population's own point of view and heard personal testimonies. This included the repetition of a main theme that the Islamic religion is one of

peace. ... By documenting the panel discussion on videotape, the message of tolerance can be disseminated over and over again.

The panel on Islam aired in its entirety repeatedly on the local cable television station. The high school sophomores who collaborated in learning about different religions comprised an ideal age group for such a project. Adolescents are especially receptive to learning about and becoming socialized into religious practices (Smith, Faris, Denton, & Regenerus, 2003), so they are eager to encounter different religious traditions.

Experience with the CCG projects revealed how intercultural appreciation and respect for diversity needs to grow from the inside out. Students must recognize their own cultural identities, including ways that their heritage might have contributed to systematic oppression or skewed accounts of history. Respect for diversity requires acknowledgment that differences do exist among cultures, and equality does not always operate as the default or norm in multicultural settings. Diversity education needs to personalize prejudice by developing awareness that any person could be the next instigator or object of bigotry. Intolerance has little personal resonance when no members of other cultures are present. The homogeneous classroom presents few encounters that forces reconsideration of one's own cultural norms. Students may find it difficult to conceive of being an object of discrimination, and self-serving bias often hides the potential for people to consider their own actions intolerant. Recognizing that intolerance need not arise solely from overt maliciousness (the extreme cases such as Hitler), but from taken-for-granted privileges manifest in everyday experiences (such as the elitist assumption that Hurricane Katrina victims had personal transportation to escape, a personal support network to house them, and phone service to contact family), could lead to the realization that "I could be next"—as perpetrator or object of intolerance.

The Clock Watchers: “Have I Completed My Required Hours?”

In their zeal to quantify service-learning impact, many faculty measure project productivity in hours spent. Some baseline time requirement seems appropriate to set realistic expectations for duties and to assure a minimum level of participation. A fairly common story from colleagues, however, attests to students inflating their time records to give the appearance of higher productivity. While some of this behavior qualifies as simple dishonesty, it raises deeper issues about student perceptions of service-learning. Just as dissatisfied employees “watch the clock” anticipating the moment they can leave, some students have learned to equate service with “doing time.” No wonder. From elementary school to the judicial system, service becomes attached to punitive experiences as much as educational opportunities. Instead of “doing time” in jail, convicted criminals “do time” through “sentences” of community service. Service acquires an aura of compulsory time spent, devoid of intrinsic value. Faculty and community partners may inadvertently reinforce such associations, confusing quantity of time spent on a project with the quality of a project’s outcome. Tallies of student labor hours have become common sights in institutional reports of service-learning activities. Some estimate of average service time per week seems reasonable for students to plan their schedules. Service quality, however, is not measurable by a stopwatch. Service-learning is not about “doing time” but about doing tasks that address pressing social problems and needs.

Students might not embrace clock watching as readily if faculty and institutional practitioners had more varied and sophisticated ways of documenting the impact of service-learning. Using cumulative hours as the primary “proof” of service-learning’s benefits recalls the traditional measure of industrial age effort. Instead of relying primarily on hours expended, service-learning

measurements of efficacy could document impact in many other ways. For example, a campus-community partnership could track numbers of clients served, measure quality of life indicators before and after the project, longitudinally track the course of clients receiving services, generate publicity and keep news clipping files to document increased community visibility, and quantify the influx of donations or volunteers from non-student sources. All these indicators satisfy the desire (or requirement) to quantify impact, and combining several such indicators gives a more thorough picture of a project’s results. Broader measures of service-learning effects might broaden the minds of students—and perhaps administrators—to look beyond the clock.

COMMUNITY PARTNER CHALLENGES

Student Engagement in Appropriate Activities

From the beginning of any service-learning project, community partners need full involvement in devising and approving appropriate tasks for student volunteers. Community partners may lack full access to or understanding of the educational objectives at the heart of service-learning projects. Failure to include the community organization as a full partner may result in the students entering the prevailing frameworks for incorporating voluntary labor: marginalization or indentured servitude. These labels summarize common concerns among students in internships, and they apply equally to service-learning. In the marginalization scenario, students do not become functional partners in the organization’s operation. Fuzzy integration of course objectives with the organization’s mission and everyday function relegate students to the periphery of daily operations. The result: students become lackeys, performing tasks that have little educational value (e.g., brewing coffee, sweeping floors, etc.). This syndrome should not be confused with so-called menial labor (as perceived by the service snobs

discussed earlier), since what might appear as lowly tasks can yield important educational benefits. Marginalization distances students from the substance of work that the organization does.

In contrast to marginalization, the indentured servitude scenario blurs boundaries between student volunteers and full-fledged organizational members. This situation may arise when dedicated, effective student workers prove so valuable to an organization that their role evolves far beyond the scope of the service-learning project. A community partner may assign duties too extensive for volunteers to handle, taking advantage of the free labor to make student volunteers unpaid full-time employees. Well-intentioned on-site supervisors may not recognize appropriate limits to student involvement. Students, who may feel genuine connection with the organization, rarely turn down opportunities to deepen their commitment, especially when grades hang in the balance and they do not want to appear uncooperative.

The marginalization and indentured servitude scenarios, while depicting possibly extreme situations, point to the need for precise specification of student duties. Community partners and the faculty member should establish definite ranges of activities. Including concrete examples of expected and off-limits behavior helps establish a precedent for drawing appropriate boundaries.

A particularly troublesome case of marginalization occurred with a public school teacher. An enthusiastic service-learning partner and accomplished instructor, the teacher had no frame of reference for collaborative projects led by students. When the college student teams arrived to work with her pupils, the teacher treated them as an extension of her own class. Instead of working collaboratively in groups, the college students were told to implement the teacher's proposals, and the teams could address the teacher only by raising their hands and being recognized by the teacher. The teacher clearly defined this experience as full participation,

but it qualified as such only on the terms she had established for interacting with her class. More explicit prior planning with the teacher could have included productive negotiations about what inclusive participation meant for the college student teams as well as for her own class. Procedural ground rules could have been established that recognized her need for order and discipline with the project's goals of student-initiated event planning.

The instance of marginalization also underscores the importance of finding systemic ways to include community partners in the administration of service-learning programs. Had the principal or another school administrator worked alongside university personnel in reviewing learning objectives and developmental goals of service-learning, the school's instructional culture might have proved more accommodating to a more democratic style of student involvement.

Weak Infrastructure and Self-Serving Evaluation Bias

Vernon and Foster (2002) caution: "Agencies need to develop and implement a strong infrastructure of resources to support and sustain a strong volunteer base" (p. 172). One of the challenges of service-learning—especially in a rural environment—is to assist community service organizations without debilitating their staff and resources from the rapid influx of new, temporary labor. Can the community partner devote necessary personnel or infrastructure to prepare volunteers for the tasks they will perform? If not, service-learning might kill community partners with kindness, overburdening the very agencies whose functionality should improve.

Several factors combine to conceal limitations with infrastructure. Community partners may be reluctant to report any shortcomings for fear of losing volunteer labor, especially if the organization has become dependent on this labor to serve its clientele effectively. Fearful of

terminating a service partnership, an organization might overstate the willingness or ability of staff to monitor student volunteers. Obtaining accurate information about student participation from community partners presents another challenge. Grateful for any assistance, community partners may feel an obligation to supply only positive reports (Gelmon, 2003). After all, the risk of biting the hand that furnishes volunteers might be chronic labor shortages. Negative feedback might come across as ingratitude, and organizations would not want to jeopardize their campus partnerships.

Some specific measures can counteract the bias toward uncritically positive evaluations. Since community partners might not self-report potentially incriminating information, additional assessment sources could provide more detailed data. Students should assess not only the service experience itself, but also the quality of the supervisory staff's interactions with the students. Including this item on student course evaluations actually led to the termination of one service-learning partnership. Apparently the supervisor at an assisted living center for senior citizens remained absent throughout the entire project after the initial visit by the student team. This supervisor had negotiated the service-learning partnership and evidently used the influx of student labor to reduce time spent on the job. The candid student comments revealed a situation that never would have been noticed from the enthusiastic reports of the community partner.

Faculty and the service-learning office staff can set up regular observations of on-site activities. Most important, community partners may need periodic orientation and review regarding expectations that apply to students, faculty, and themselves. Many community partners may have a rich background with student supervision but lack experience in identifying appropriate experiences consistent with a course's educational objectives. Continuing education of community partners becomes essential when the organization has high turnover. One student service groups

arrived at the senior living center for what they thought would be another ordinary day. They discovered that their on-site supervisor had quit without informing them, and the new supervisor had to be oriented not only to the project but also to the concept of service-learning. While such a situation was unpredictable, mechanisms should be in place to provide regular outreach to new community partners, offering consistent information and grounding in service-learning. One of the most effective ways to accomplish such buy-in and orientation is to engage in collaborative administration of service-learning programs as described earlier.

PROGNOSIS: SUSTAINING SERVICE-LEARNING AND REVIVING DEMOCRACY

In light of these pathologies and their treatments, what prognosis emerges for the potential of service-learning to move students toward deeper social involvement? Although sustainability has become a watchword of service-learning, the CCG experience reveals a more complicated situation. The duration of campus-community partnerships supposedly indicates the health of town-gown connections, but sustained service-learning may signify an underlying pathology that creates continual need for supplementing community organizations with volunteer labor. Perhaps service-learning should strive for its own extinction.

Paradoxically the objective of service-learning should not be sustainability but the opposite: to progress toward ending the need for such projects. The most successful service-learning partnerships are those that contribute to social changes that make communities more self-sufficient, reducing dependence on infusions of student labor. By compensating for chronic labor and resource shortages, service-learning projects might bolster the under-resourcing of social programs that created the need for service-learning within the community. In this way "amelioration serves to prop up the very structures that created

the problems in the first place” (Purpel, 1999, p. 101). For example, the local school district could rationalize not supporting intercultural programs aggressively, since they could rely on the university’s Communicating Common Ground projects to infuse such events into the high school. Rosenberger (2000) recognizes that sustaining service organizations without addressing the reasons for the perpetual need of the services amounts to “what Freire called ‘false generosity’—acts of service that simply perpetuate the status quo and thus preserve the need for service” (pp. 32-33).

The key question service-learning partnerships need to bring to the table relates to the more systemic long-term health of the community: How can partnerships contribute to the long-term amelioration of the problems or needs the community partner addresses? This question poses especially difficult challenges, since it requires facing the institutional underpinnings of social problems. For example, the CCG teams that worked with the battered women shelter should begin to investigate the roots of domestic violence, especially why formal preventive programs receive minimal attention or funding. Critically interrogating the ordinarily accepted notion of sustainability helps students move from participating in service-learning toward deeper social engagement, recognizing skewed social priorities and how to address them. A critical approach to sustainability forms a bridge from service-learning to social reform.

The results of service-learning need to be measured in ways that gauge proactive methods to address social injustice rather than reactive responses to factual questions. Macedo (1994) observes that calls for dialogue, for example, ring hollow if they result only in idle self-disclosure or chatting about social issues. He recommends a more aggressive community engagement “that turns experience into critical reflection and political action” (p. 182). To realize the connection between service-learning and citizenship, service projects need to go beyond

simply using communities as laboratories to observe communication principles at work. Service-learning becomes transformative when students not only recognize but participate in the use of communication to effect social change (Murphy, 2004). Many college students began the CCG projects with benign assumptions that cultural enlightenment was the norm—until they conducted preliminary needs assessments of the community’s intercultural knowledge. Results of the preliminary needs assessment spurred the college students to participate in the service-learning project more aggressively. Noting the knowledge gaps demonstrated by the public school students served as a turning point for a student in the Propaganda course. She wrote in her final reflection essay: I think the starting point for me actually caring about this project was when I got the first assessment results back. I learned through the assessment a lot of the students didn’t know very much at all about the Holocaust or Jews. I saw that there was an actual need to educate these students.

Recognition of need added urgency to the project, which shifted from another class assignment to an opportunity for the student to improve the community’s knowledge base and thereby prevent cultural misconceptions. Actually encountering intercultural ignorance had far more impact than the simulations and case studies manufactured in textbooks and classrooms (Murphy, 2004).

Experience with the CCG projects reveals a need for more direct confrontations with institutionalized prejudice. For example, consistently linking Judaism with the Holocaust risks historicizing anti-Semitism as an artifact of Nazi Germany. Answering a questionnaire that asked how many Jews the respondent knew personally, several college and high school students stated that they had no idea whether people they met were Jewish. Yet several high school respondents included in the post-project assessments spontaneous testimonials affirming their Christian faith. Never did anyone consider

why Jews—especially in small communities—might have reservations about openly discussing or displaying their religious identity.

Several CCG projects tried to address potential ignorance or prejudice without sustaining cooperative relationships with the potential targets of discrimination. Usually the student groups remained content with inviting some speakers or staging an event rather than delve into the reasons why certain populations experience ongoing problems with intolerance. Consistent with what other researchers have found, the students exhibited “a tendency toward premature agreement that seeks to preserve the peace and the illusion of harmony,” proving that actively “engaging the Other—person, race, color, fraternity, gender, political persuasion, personality, point of view, social background—is the most difficult aspect of deliberative training” (McMillan & Harriger, 2002, p. 249). Premature agreement most often took the form of affirming in reflection essays that “everyone is the same.” Such cultural whitewashing, of course, fails to acknowledge that what counts as “equality” obeys normative values and benchmarks embedded in social power structures. The college and high school students who collaborated to develop community programs concentrated more on staging the events than confronting the uncomfortable reasons why intercultural encounters might have to be “staged” in the first place.

CONCLUSION

This essay has diagnosed several pathologies that afflict service-learning, categorizing them according to where they emerge in service-learning projects. Structural challenges affect the ability of the educational institution and the community partner to establish and maintain ongoing partnerships. These challenges include geographic isolation and not recognizing the virtues of shared administration among community partners, academics, and students. To

alleviate geographic isolation, service-learning projects can build capacity for local organizations to support more clientele or team with larger agencies to advocate for extending their services to more remote areas. As for administrative approaches, a shared governance model can establish a baseline of consistent quality across service-learning projects while including sensitivity to educational, economic and social needs of stakeholders in the community and the educational institution.

Student challenges occur mainly at the attitudinal level. A backlash against intercultural experiences can occur when students find ways to reinforce rather than challenge their prejudices. This malady can be diagnosed and treated early by involving students in empathy-building activities as preparation for ongoing project. These activities could include personal interactions with diverse populations as ways to encounter others as individuals. Such interactions should emphasize the capacity of anyone to become a perpetrator or a victim of injustice.

Another student-centered pathology lies in basic skill deficiencies that students may not have appreciated as relevant to their careers. Practical workshops in skills such as leaving and responding to telephone messages, proper tone of e-mails to community partners, and exploring research techniques beyond the library prove valuable in making projects run more smoothly.

Two other pathologies at the student level, service snobbery and attenuated empathy, germinate from the same root: excessively self-centered definitions of priorities. Service snobbery emerges when students devalue the type of labor the community partner performs. Attenuated empathy arises from treating the community partner or its clientele as abstractions. Both pathologies can be treated with greater awareness of the universal need for the kind of labor the partner performs or the universal potential to experience the kinds of injustices that have been inflicted on others.

The final student pathology, clock-watching,

develops from the measures some instructors and programs use to measure service activity. By defining service in terms of “time served,” students may adopt the mentality of the hourly employees who “do their time” without sufficient attention to how they spend that time. Broadening the measurement of service to include accomplishment of tasks or understanding the social dynamics that challenge the service provider can add depth to the service-learning experience.

Healthy community partner relationships require students to engage in appropriate tasks, avoiding marginalization through trivial tasks and overworking that amounts to indentured servitude. Advance stipulation of the labor expectations, jointly developed and explicitly agreed to by the instructor, student, and community partner, can reduce the chances of irrelevant or unsuitable labor.

Community partners also might systematically under-report poor student performance for fear of endangering partnerships that provide desperately needed infusions of voluntary labor. Gaining a more accurate assessment of student and community partner performance requires multiple sources of data. Just as a physician should form a diagnosis only from observing multiple symptoms, the instructor should gain information from as many project participants’ perspectives as possible.

For programs that teach tolerance to have lasting effects, indignation at ignorance must transform into behaviors that counteract cultural misinterpretation and marginalization. More aggressive tracking of service-learning alumni can offer some evidence of whether students do practice civic engagement. For example, three undergraduates who participated in the CCG projects discussed in this essay later took full-time jobs with AmeriCorps. It will be difficult to prove causation or even correlation between service-learning participation and civic action. Still, evidence of service-learning efficacy should extend beyond short-term, self-reported support

of community participation (Schwartzman, 2002). Civic behaviors testify to responsible citizenship far more than attitudinal surveys that measure predispositions to act, especially when respondents probably recognize the most socially desirable responses (Pritchard, 2001). While self-reported enthusiasm for civic engagement might swell after a service-learning project (Spiezio, Baker, & Boland, 2005), observation of civic behavior would prove whether enthusiasm translates into action.

The framing of this discussion in terms of pathologies, treatments, and prognoses should not imply that the service-learning projects were misguided or unsuccessful. Instead, the experiences show that focus remained on the individual acts of service instead of on reconsidering social structures. Implementers of service-learning should recognize that learning flows two ways between classroom and community. Typically, students and instructors may understand the service component as an adjunct to the classroom, a laboratory for applying concepts to actual situations (Purpel, 1999). Learning, however, also can flow from the service experience to the classroom. As students encounter unexpected, puzzling, or frustrating situations in their service, they may seek explanations by turning to the course material—perhaps challenging or adding to concepts encountered in the classroom (Light, 2001). One danger arising from “reifying the notions of ‘server’ and ‘served’” (Henry, 2005, p. 60) is that students continually re-enact their roles as privileged helpers, the solvers of recurrent social problems. This perspective positions student volunteers as reactive, responding to social needs. A far different mindset positions students as a potentially transformative force, working to rectify the need for the social programs that provide the service opportunities for student volunteers. Rosenberger (2000) states the difference well: “The contrast, therefore, is between a revolutionary program aimed at bringing down the dominant elite and a service

program operating within existing democratic structures” (p. 29). Students and faculty might choose to travel only a few steps along the road to social reform while still recognizing how far it can lead.

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AUTHOR NOTES

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