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The Editor's Notes

In *Common Fire: Learning Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (1996), Daloz, et. al. interviewed approximately 100 people who had a sustained commitment to working for the common good in order to glean what could be done to foster that kind of commitment in our students. Daloz and his colleagues were not on a mission to persuade people to give up their careers and seek a life completely devoted to social justice working for those underserved. Rather, they are seeking to understand how we might foster 21st century citizenship in a world of deepening complexity, diversity, and ambiguity. They are seeking to learn how we could foster “reasonably decent human beings” and “committed and caring reflective citizenship” and with “an empathetic bond”. Daloz, et. al. hoped that we could help our student learn to engage otherness in way that encourage a sense of “we” within the interdependent realities of the global community in which we invariably live.

Daloz, et. al. raise interesting questions for those of us who work in service-learning, especially if our personal interests are grounded in social justice work. What do we hope to achieve by our students engaging in service-learning? For instance, if our interests are grounded in a belief that through our work we can change systems of oppression and inequality is this congruent with helping our students better understand what it means to be “reasonable and decent human being”? Do we believe that from service-learning students’ empathy develops? Should we claim that from the service-learning experiences our students will learn not to think in terms of “them” and “us” and that they will be better able to empathize others? Is this what we hope for? That they – anyone – can better “vicariously” experience what others live? At best, we might claim that our students might sympathize. Do I have to care to be concerned? Do I have to be empathetic to be compassionate about the service-learning projects I try to develop? Do our students? Does this lead to a commitment to a common good or reflective citizenship?

How we address questions like these raises a critical question – what do we hope our student get from a service-learning experience? Do we want them to somehow mirror ourselves? Should our aim be to have our students see their projects as the first steps toward social transformation? Should we hope that from their experiences our students begin to learn to critique systems of inequality and, as some have hinted at, reflect on their own privileges?

I think not. Our students are not us. Our work should not be to foster in our students either our own socio-political leanings or to hope that through our efforts our students’ become politically active. “Politically active”, after all, can have so many venues and meanings. There are so many other ways to demonstrate caring reflective citizenship. My own view is a bit more fundamental – through service-learning I hope to foster is my students’ their sociological imagination.

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Mills argued, in *The Sociological Imagination*, that our lives are shaped as our biographies intersect with both the socio-cultural historical moments in which we live and the immediate social milieu in which we live. Our “social setting” shapes our norming, our social and cultural capital, our beliefs, the ways we value, and whether we apprehend opportunities and can take advantage of them. Sharpening our sociological imagination let’s reflect on these relationships and understand what these mean for our inner life and the life we lead with others. Mills notes that by understanding the relationship between what he calls “issues”, socio-political systems and “institutional relationships” which shape, norm and impact our lives, and “troubles”, the character of our immediate relations with others, we begin to understand how bias, implicit bias, privilege, and more impact us daily.

I have found that service-learning and the reflective prompts we use can prove to catalyze students’ changing their sociological imaginations. First, service-learning challenges students’ “experiential commensurability”. Benford and Snow talk about “experiential commensurability” in their work on collective action frames. For Benford and Snow, commensurability arises when new experiences are congruent and resonates with our own lived experiences. Service-learning challenges our students’ commensurability. Our prompts can challenge students to reflect on their own lives-as-text, the assumptions they carry and their normings. Through the lenses of their service-learning experiences, we can set up parallaxic contexts. Our students view of their own norming becomes displaced because service-learning challenges and changes their positions as observers. This is reflected in the voices of each student who has published through the *Journal*. But I have found captured best by one of my students:

I found this class hard to grasp at first because I was thinking about every issue from the black and white perspective, not discovering yet how I had been normed to do so. I started dealing with issues in the “grey” or “make it messy for ya” area. The challenging of a person comes with a certain risk. Either the person will become offended and deny the truth heading their way, or they will face it with open arms and kneel at the altar of humility.

This, I believe, are first steps to committed and caring reflective citizenship. What more does service-learning have to do.

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--Ned Scott Laff, Ph.D.—

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