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Leading Service-Learning

Justin Karter

University at Buffalo

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Leading Service-Learning

Prologue:

In the fall of 2010 the University at Buffalo Honors College decided to makeover its colloquium course. Colloquium is a course mandatory for all 300 incoming Honors Freshman and it was previously set up as a large group lecture that offered advising tips, team building activities, and a volunteer project. Undergraduate teaching assistants were employed to help manage the large class and to assist small groups of the freshman through their volunteer projects. Under the leadership of both Krista Hanypsiak, Administrative Director of the Honors College, and Jessica Dudek, Assistant Director and Colloquium Instructor, the class was restructured for the fall of 2010 and a whole new curriculum was developed in order to make colloquium into a true service-learning course. In order to facilitate the reflection and discussion necessary for a service-learning course the freshman class was broken up into 14 class sections of 20-25 students each, to be facilitated by an undergraduate teaching assistant (TA). Interested upperclassman in good standing in the Honors College were encouraged apply for this TA position.

I had taken the previous version of colloquium as a freshman, rehabbing and assisting with an afterschool program at a YMCA in the city of Buffalo, and had served as a TA as a junior, helping small groups of freshman through their first semester. During my sophomore year I had co-founded a student group called Literature for Miniatures (LFM) that tutored English language arts skills to 3rd and 4th graders in the city of Buffalo. I continued to tutor and direct LFM through graduation and the experience opened my eyes to problems related to poverty, educational policy, socio-economic capital, and deepened my interest in and expanded my understanding of concepts I encountered in my classes as a Legal Studies, English, and Classics student. I saw the potential that real world experience has to truly transform a college student’s educational experience and I hoped that as a TA for the new colloquium course that I might be able to lead my students through a similar experience.

The goal of colloquium, and service-learning, is engagement. By engagement I mean a sort of active participation where students see themselves as both authors and investigators of the world. Interestingly, I witnessed the colloquium students achieve this level of engagement through the combination of two distinct methods: scientific inquiry and storytelling. Hearing the stories of those affected by social problems inspires students and encourages them to delve into complex issues. The exchange of stories creates a moment of incongruity, where the reality

Justin Karter graduated summa cum laude in 2011 from the University at Buffalo Honors College, obtaining degrees in Legal Studies, English literature and Classics, and was named one of the outstanding students in the SUNY system, winning the Chancellors Award. After graduation Justin accepted a one-year AmeriCorps position to serve as a Service-Learning Coordinator for the Honors College where he developed a number of new courses and community based activities for students. In the fall of 2012, Justin will begin a master’s program in Journalism at Point Park University in Pittsburgh, PA

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being presented to the student does not match their preconceived ideas or expectations. Students are then encouraged to explore and reflect upon this gap in their knowledge using the inquiry or scientific method, formulating a hypothesis, testing it, reformulating it, etc. Through this process students become empowered, recognizing their own ability to deal with and influence difficult issues. My students, in their reflection, recognized the benefits of this process and attempted to apply it when working with the disadvantaged children that they tutored. The following are student’s quotes which demonstrate how the sharing of stories and the inquiry method can develop engagement:

- “Ultimately, I have been forced to reeducate myself with respect to my personal privileges that shape my view of the world. By doing this and working closely with those of vastly different backgrounds, I see that most of my upbringing has been in ignorance to social issues, which are present in closer proximity than I ever expected.”
- “By learning the skills of self-inquiry, the kids will realize that they can indeed change things. They will feel empowered to take initiative.”
- “In order to create change we must be the change. In order to be the change we must recognize what must be changed. It is our role as citizens to fulfill these responsibilities.”
- “I asked a fourth grade boy why he thought math was so hard, he responded that he was scared and had given up on it… this is when the reality of the problems hit home with me, I realized I could help tremendously and I was encouraged to become active and engaged.”
- “After some time I began to wonder, “Why are fewer of these kids succeeding?” and “why is their success dictated by social status or race?” “By providing the necessary encouragement, inspiration and opportunity to discover, we attempt to stop the societal problems where they start.”
- “That is the change I would like to see... a change in people view of the world around them… to make them realize that they can make changes and to remove the sense of apathy.”
- “To make everyone come together to feel and think as a community, rather than merely as individuals, would make all the difference in the world.”

I focused the majority of my efforts as a teaching assistant on drawing these ideas out of my students. While most classes focus solely on increasing the amount of information you must know this class was designed with the hope that it might also increase the student’s ability to know, and create a passion for applying their knowledge to the world in which they live. I felt this goal could be accomplished by using the inquiry method of questioning to help lead students to their own answers rather than simply stating my own conclusions and expecting them to either accept or dismiss them wholesale. The student’s service learning encouraged them to use the same inquiry process when teaching the underprivileged children they served thus allowing them to both observe and experience the sense of empowerment which derives from recognizing one’s own ability to understand and alter the world around them.
In this class we encouraged each student to consider their own story, the narrative that they write with each action they take, and then taught them about the power that individual stories have to change the world for the better. The student’s read anecdotes about individuals who managed to create massive change, and while impressed they were unmoved, considering the individual an anomaly—something different from themselves. However, when the students were introduced to underprivileged, racially oppressed, and systematically undereducated children who unknowingly offered their personal stories of daily struggle—as if it were unremarkable—they were suddenly called to action. The student’s shared their budding stories of growth with me through each of their reflections and as I read their descriptions of their service, marked by sudden insights and newfound curiosities, and I could not help but to be similarly inspired. So now I present my story of the semester, a pioneering journey— as it was often described—which traced the same path as my students; beginning with nervousness and wondering if I could make any impact on those I hoped to lead, navigating through frustrating logistical issues, finding encouragement in the stories of others, and eventually realizing I could help them most effectively by simply empowering them to help themselves. The following essay is my personal story. It is a reflection I wrote following my time as a service-learning teaching assistant.

Logistical Challenges and What We Learn From Them

Judging from my experience, the number one complaint about the service-learning course is the amount of confusion that typically surrounds the logistics of transportation and scheduling. However, the fact that students must find their way into and through the city of Buffalo themselves, either through negotiating rides from generous classmates with cars, seeking out bus schedules, or researching and exploring new transportation initiatives such as car share organizations, adds an aspect to the course which requires organization, planning, and real world creativity that I believe fits with the goals of service learning in general.  

The Learning Through Serving (Cress, et. al 2005) reading assigned to the students states, "the whole point of service learning is for you to grow in skills and knowledge precisely because you are bringing your capabilities to real world problems,” and it seems that having the students manage their own logistics similarly teaches such pragmatic, real-world skills. While the students of the course complain about the transportation logistics, I believe at the end they acknowledge that they are better off because of it. One student begrudgingly commented in her final reflection, “I had to figure out how to balance my time and fit in all of my volunteer hours without allowing it to take time or focus away from my school work,” however she later admitted “finding enough time to make a trip to [the service]… travel time and coordinating schedules with other people in the class forced me to plan ahead… which I think helped prevent me from procrastinating.”

In addition to teaching them time management skills, many students also remarked that having to use public transportation taught them about the city and encouraged them to plan future excursions into Buffalo. A student, who had to take public transportation to his center,
reflected, “Commuting to and from the program provided an opportunity to see and learn about the community.” All of these experiences navigating Buffalo contributed to the experience of the service, leading one student to remark, “my service learning experience has actually made me feel like I can call myself a member of the city.”

Managing student travel to and from the agency was not the only logistical hurdle to clear this year. As it was the first year of the newly structured course, there was a good amount of uncertainty regarding the specific requirements and machinations of each service agency. Firsthand Science was an overall great organization to work with, however early on in the semester uncertainty regarding our class contributed to a shaky start for the class.

I met with the leader of Firsthand Science and the manager who had been designated as the contact between me and the program during the first week of the semester- at their office within the Tri-Main building in the city of Buffalo. At that point the structure of their organization was explained to me, and they informed me that they would require a training session for all of my students before they would be allowed into the service centers. While understanding that the training would be beneficial, and possibly even essential, I expressed my concern that it would be extremely difficult to find a time within their manager’s availability (Monday – Friday, 3-6) where all of my students would also be free. Upon further negotiations we agreed that it would be easiest for Firsthand Science to come to the students, and present their training/orientation during class time. Luckily enough, there was no class scheduled for the upcoming week and it would be easy enough to have the students attend as if we had class and allow the agency to conduct their orientation at that point.

Upon clearing the idea with the Honors program, I proceeded to attain a visitor parking pass for their representatives, provide them with turn by turn directions from their office to the visitor parking lot to the classroom and then notified the students of the schedule change. Knowing that the students were already nervous about completing all of their hours before the deadline, I promised that they would be able to count this orientation toward their service- they all showed up.

Firsthand Science called another meeting where they hoped that I- along with all 13 of their site managers- would be able to meet and discuss a time for another training event as well as a way to divide all of my students amongst their centers. We ran into a small problem however, when the managers expressed their expectations, that they would only be receiving one or two students from my class and that they would only be at the center for an hour or so, as they had limited time in which they could actually present the science experiments during the program. Realizing that carpooling was essential to my students availability, and that extended visits would be necessary for them to be able to complete their hours, we managed to negotiate new expectations; whereby the students would help in other areas of the centers such as homework assistance, recreation, and dining, while taking turns helping with the science experiments.
While I negotiated for these changes for purely logistical reasons, I believe that it is during all of these extra activities, when my students began to meet with, talk to, tutor, and learn from the all of the children at the centers, that the service learning really took hold. It seems that it was the collection of all of these small encounters that allowed the service learning to become a truly effective and potentially even transformational experience. Paul Loeb explains in his Call of Stories (1999), “we rarely change when we’re cruising along-insulated from the world,” however when we hear the individual stories of those suffering, in this case right from the mouths of young impoverished children, we “admit that we don’t have all the answers, listen to closely to others,” and “our heart becomes so open,… that ‘the wind blows through it.’” Similarly, the colloquium students had a newfound enthusiasm for readings, discussions, and their service once they got to know the children, witness their circumstances, and hear their stories.

While this logistical decision, concerning the manager’s individual expectations regarding the student’s involvement at the centers, proved to be a huge success, the solution to providing training and orientation remained elusive. Feeling the pressure of the student’s deadline, and understanding that service would be essential for their upcoming assignments, we tentatively agreed on a location for training which, as it was located near campus, would be accessible to the students. Considerate of the student’s conflicting schedules, we agreed to hold two training sessions, and only require that they attend one-- we agreed to shoot for the morning of the upcoming Thursday and Friday. While the two day idea and the Thursday-Friday idea both proved appropriate, the morning idea did not, as virtually none of my students were able to attend either day. At this point I was distressed, I called Firsthand Learning, apologized for the conflict, and began poring through my student’s schedules for a common availability.

This was the climax, in what seemed- at least in my mind- to be an inevitable tragedy, where I would surely be impugned by an irritated service agency and savagely immolated by twenty five desperate freshmen in revolt. I resigned myself to the fact that my bones, undoubtedly the only surviving remnants of my TA existence, would be strewn throughout the abyssal lyceum; some ensconced in the shadowy corners of the catacomb-like basement of Capen library, others (snatched up by the murderous mob as souvenirs) would be exhibited as trophies in the vicious fledgling’s dorm rooms, and an ill-fated few- as retribution for their role in the symbolic failure of the new colloquium- would be cemented into the foundation of the heralded new parking structure- shanghaied into the perpetual employ of the university, ignominiously denied peace, incessantly burdened and trampled for all of eternity.

Turns out I was being a tad melodramatic.

The Journey

The training sessions, although initially difficult to manage, turned out to be a huge success.
Every student was able to attend one of the newly scheduled sessions and, from what I was told by the managers and from what I witnessed myself, they all appeared excited to learn, participated enthusiastically, and left with a better sense of their service and its potential impact on the community. The managers broke the students into groups and each demonstrated a science experiment that would be appropriate for the children but, more importantly, they simultaneously demonstrated the process of questioning and involving the students in the experiment which encourages scientific inquiry and promotes critical thinking. The following week the students, prepared by their training session, and inspired by an undoubtedly enlightening class discussion (thanks to yours truly), began adventuring out into the city to begin their service learning experience.

Although everything worked out, and I avoided the grizzly downfall of my histrionic imagination, I do have a few ideas and suggestions for avoiding many of these logistical complications in the future. The majority of all the issues that arose were born out of the fact that as a TA for a new class, I was potentially a guinea pig: testing a recently developed product, which undoubtedly possesses life-changing potential, but nonetheless still needed some fine tuning. (Possible side effects include: headache, increased blood pressure and, in very few cases, even delusions of an imminent and inevitable doom) Or, to adopt the more euphemistic metaphor suggested by the course instructor, I was a pioneer, heroic and dashing (I’m utilizing my artistic license here), leading a group of inexperienced young travelers out on an odyssey across previously uncharted terrain, navigating ominous chasms, withstanding inclement conditions and shrewdly playing the diplomat when working with other well-meaning groups. This is in fact a good example of Paul Loeb’s claim that the power of a story is to some degree tied to how it’s told. The pioneering odyssey does seem to more appropriately describe my colloquium experience- not only because I’d rather be a folkloric leader than a trapped rodent, but because any suggestions I have are more accurately captured within the story of the journey, than in an analogy of a fixed scientific formula. Organizing the relationship with the service agency was the major mountain scaled this semester, and although it seemed an uphill battle at points, my class and I successfully avoided becoming the allegorical Donner party of lore.

Smaller obstacles, like a rusty wheels on the carriage, temporarily slowed the progress of my band of pioneers over the course of our shared odyssey. One such squeaky wheel was that some of the students did not actively and consistently contribute to class discussion. As a whole, all of the students were polite, engaged, and thoughtful and their discussion responses demonstrated that they had not only done the readings but that they had actually thought about them. This was a far cry from what I anticipated. Perhaps I was being cynical but I expected that the majority of the freshman would skim the readings and that I would have to forcefully draw out the key concepts during discussion. That being said, there was still about a fifth of the class not offering their insights to the discussion. In an attempt to get some of the quieter students to participate in class I began sending out the PowerPoint I had prepared for class in advance. This way any students who like to take time to process their thoughts and may
not necessarily have an idea to offer immediately in class may have time to think through some of the questions and prepare a response. I explained my theory for doing this to the students while reminding them of their participation grade and the previously reserved students immediately began contributing. So I am unsure if the success was due to the PowerPoints, my explanation of purpose of the PowerPoints, or the specter of a diminishing final grade, but the whole combination seemed to do the trick.

Stories, Inquiry and Reflection

The fact that the whole class actively engaged the material each week was evident in their reflections and reading responses. I think that all of the readings lent themselves to an active discussion and when coupled with the in class activities they really got the students thinking about their role in shaping privilege and oppression in the communities in which they do their service learning.

The ideas presented in the readings fit extremely well with my section’s discussion because Firsthand Learning, their service agency, operates primarily in low income and racially oppressed communities and it was important for the students to be cognizant of the cultural stressors, which underlie many of the children’s identities. As the student’s became more involved in their service with Firsthand Learning, I noticed a steady improvement in their assignments; they grew more thoughtful and explored deeper conceptual issues. I think that in the course in general, and especially in my section- where our service agency aimed at promoting the process of inquiry, we should strive to convey the importance of abstract and critical thinking over the standard, structuralized, methodical pedagogies which encourage students to accept and memorize rather than challenge and conceptualize.

The Power of Context reading by Malcolm Gladwell (2000) lent itself particularly well to such a discussion. One concept that struck me was the role of symbols in the Theory of Context. David Gunn, who oversaw the rebuilding of the subway, insisted “graffiti was symbolic of the collapse of the system.” I attempted to, in discussion, bring out larger conceptual ideas, such as the importance of symbols and their ability to hold meaning and affect behavior. Using the inquiry model – asking student’s questions in an attempt to entice their ideas out of them – I began to explore the idea of symbols in general, asking questions such as; why did graffiti symbolize “collapse” to the people of NYC? How might the symbols themselves be context dependent? How are these connections formed and how might they be dispelled? I then challenged the idea that the particular symbol of graffiti was necessarily negative, asking the students if they could think of any symbols that inspire both negative and positive feelings and reactions. They were able to think of quite a few, recognizing that while symbols may influence an environment, they are also limited by their own context. I then put up a slide detailing how some major cities (Geneva and Washington D.C.) had decided to formally fund the use of graffiti to change the look of neighborhoods. I found that this connected to not only the graffiti in the
NYC subway but also to the Broken Windows Theory and the Buffalo News article by Abram Brown, “Painting a Better Neighborhood” (Brown 2012).

I then talked to the class about the inquiry method, noting how it had fueled our discussion, and discussed how it might similarly benefit the students that they were teaching through the service agency. The student’s reflected on the implementation of the critical inquiry method in their assignments and a number of them, when discussing how to improve education as a whole, emphasized the inquiry method as a necessary component of an improved curriculum. One such student commented, “The inquiry method proves useful especially when used to teach children as it makes them learn for themselves and grow as true thinkers which can only enhance their educational experience.” The student’s involvement with critical thinking was twofold; they facilitated it in their tutoring, and practiced it in class discussion. When reflecting on the entire service learning class, one student said of the experience that it “has shown me that teaching kids to think scientifically and question everything will give them skills that they need to succeed, not only in school, but also throughout their lives.” The process of inquiry is empowering, in that it makes seemingly insurmountable problems seem manageable.

Inquiry breaks down large problems into several smaller ones, and requires analyses at each step. When reflecting on the problems that First Hand Learning seeks to address, one student acknowledged a direct link between being taught to think critically and being an active and engaged citizen: “The problem that the center faced was learned helplessness… by learning the skills of self-inquiry; the kids will realize that they can indeed change things.” The service learning is therefore causing the students to make the all-important leap from seeing negative actions as isolated events, which can simply be judged, to seeing these events as a wrinkle in a larger societal tapestry, which includes themselves and their own actions and behaviors, and therefore empowers them with the knowledge that they can influence and shape the world around them. The students sought to use this newfound power of change not to directly solve all the problems in the lives of their pupils but instead to similarly make them aware of their ability to influence their circumstances or as another student explained, “to create skeptical citizens; those who are capable of questioning and thinking critically… and thus creating a new kind of future generation,” whereby “the potential for community revival and city revitalization becomes boundless.”

Not only does the process by which we discuss the readings create more engaged citizens but I believe the topics of the discussions themselves also improve global understanding. I was often reminded of certain current events when preparing for class and I tried to incorporate them into class discussion in order to make the readings even more salient and to demonstrate the process of applying academic articles to the events we see play out in the world around us. I remember discussing the reading, “Who Am I?” (2008), in which Beverly Tatum explains that disadvantaged people who have been angered by their oppressor’s obliviousness to their struggles are sometimes oblivious to their own privilege and that “it may be useful to attend to the experience of dominance where you may find it- as a heterosexual, as an able bodied person…etc.”

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We then applied our critical understanding to a recent historical event by discussing the 2008 elections and the nearly contemporaneous voting concerning Proposition 8 in California. Many African-Americans after voting in favor of Barack Obama and celebrating a new found sense of equality for their race immediately turned around and voted for Proposition 8 which took away the right to marry from another minority group. Exit polls showed that even after “Obama had publicly backed the "No on Prop. 8" effort, African American voters had no trouble voting overwhelmingly for the man who will be the nation's first black president and then voting 70 percent in favor of Prop. 8” (Wildermuth 2012). The students demonstrated an ability to think critically about an academic theory and then apply it to the events that occur in the world around them. I believe that upon recognizing that they can understand the forces at play in the society in which they live will defeat the sense of apathy and helplessness which often accompany structural oppression.

I was impressed when a few weeks later the students were able to connect these same ideas presented by Tatum, which we applied to current events, to another reading. Paul Loeb’s anecdote about Chris Kim, the Korean shop-owner, who went out of his way to hire a would-be shoplifter. The fact that Kim, a Korean store owner who faced discrimination himself, hired a young black would-be shoplifter, boldly addresses the issues of racial profiling and discrimination. The class realized that Kim being a member of a minority class himself would have been likely blind to his discrimination of others and, using the inquiry process, we attempted to identify what allowed Kim to escape the societal current which pulled him toward hate. After reflecting upon his environment and realizing that he had developed stereotypes about the African American race, Kim remarked, “Through my lifetime, I didn’t have a good feeling for black people. It wasn’t from direct experiences, but you hear so much in the media, about all the violence. So I tried to treat this kid as another human being, like myself, my family, and my friends. I wanted to be a part of solving the problem.” Kim recognized his own thoughts, reflected critically about the origins of his bias, and realized his ability to change his environment. We concluded that Kim empowered himself through critically examining the world around him.

Kim plainly admits that he “didn’t have a good feeling for black people.” The quote demonstrates the store owner’s necessary admission of his bias. As a class we explored that idea that in order to understand the world around us we must be willing to think critically about our own assumptions. In TA meetings we discussed that a number of students were rejecting the lessons on privilege and diversity as they felt that the author’s theories wrongly accused them, as the privileged majority, of being prejudiced. My class didn’t have such a reaction because, I believe, they got to witness firsthand the struggles of minority children through their service learning. I came across a chapter in Gladwell’s Blink that I think might aid future classes as they explore this material.

In Blink the author, Malcolm Gladwell, discusses IATs or Implicit Association Tests, which calculate our unconscious biases by comparing the time it takes our minds to match various groups together. It explains that in order to truly understand the issues and defeat our culturally programmed unconscious discrimination we must spend time with those we have been
taught to fear. For example, the test will ask you to quickly pair women’s and men’s names with either family related or career related words and will then report how much longer it takes your brain to link a female name with a career related word. They use similar methods to measure racial preference. The tests can all be accessed for free online at www.implicit.harvard.edu. It seems like this year’s freshman, in my class and in others that have struggled to accept that discrimination still exists and that it affects them, would benefit from this reading.

The Community Partner

Upon reading the students final reflections and watching the final presentations it seems the nearly ubiquitous opinion of the class that Science Firsthand is a great organization to work with. In the beginning students complained, albeit subtlety, that they felt as though the children were so misbehaved and behind academically that there was little they as tutors could do to make any substantial difference. However as the students spent more time at the community centers the children began to open up to the tutors. When the students heard the personal stories of the children there was an obvious shift in the attitude of their reflections. The reflection papers gave the students an outlet for their concerns and channeled their fears and negative reactions into a structured assignment which encouraged them to consider these events and observations in the context of our inquiry based discussions of cultural relativism, the power of context, and diversity.

Consequently, I believe, the students are analyzing how they might as individuals, and through the agencies structure itself, minimize this unwanted behavior from these young children. This process I witnessed was very similar to the concept discussed in one of the assigned readings. In Paul Rogat Loeb’s Soul of a Citizen, chapter 6, several anecdotes are offered which demonstrate the power of individual stories as a call to action. I observed that my students went into their service thinking big picture but were dispirited by immensity of the obstacles they sensed were before them, however once they personally met and heard the stories of the victims, they began to think about the effects in inadequate public education on an individual basis, and were then inspired to consider structural- large scale- solutions.

The students decided that they were simultaneously addressing a root cause and a symptom by working with the children at Science Firsthand. While the students can only affect the lives of a small number of children the program as a whole is addressing the larger issue of a lack of empowerment through critical thinking which perpetuates a cycle of joblessness and poverty. For this reason, I believe that working with an organization like Firsthand Learning, which provides colloquium students with direct and personal contact with the victims of a larger social injustice, will encourage a substantial number of volunteers to continue working in the community.
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