September 2013

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Available at: https://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol3/iss1/4

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Thoughts on Service Learning from the Perspective of an Undergraduate Teaching Assistant

My freshman year at college I took a service learning course in the city of Buffalo, NY. This past semester as a junior, I was a teaching assistant for that same course. In both positions, I learned a great deal about the benefits of service learning – first, as a student working with my peers on a service project, and then as a TA, seeing the experiences of all of my students and gaining a more holistic perspective. As a TA, I both taught my section of the course on a weekly basis and served as a liaison between the students and their community partners. Through this role, I worked closely with the students in class as we engaged with a variety of topics related to service learning through discussions and other activities, and I read their weekly reflections on their service learning and the course material. Below, I have gathered a collection of quotes and sentiments that students expressed to me directly or through their written reflections during the past semester about their experiences with service learning and have in turn reflected on those sentiments to gauge some of the challenges and benefits of service learning.

“When our group finished raking the leaves and mowing the lawn, we noticed that the neighboring homeowner was doing the same. It was like our work actually inspired others to take pride in their neighborhood.”

Service learning gives students the ability to understand the power of a positive environment. Students feel empowered when they know that their efforts actually spread beyond their efforts. In class, we discussed Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* (2000) and specifically focused on what he describes as the Power of Context that “we are more than just sensitive to changes in context. We’re exquisitely sensitive to them.” (p. 14). One way to ensure that students grasp their own power is to have them reflect on how the attitude and energy they bring into their service affects the community they’re working with as well as their peers. When I did my service learning as a freshman I remember just how much the positive attitude of one person helped the rest of our group to feel good about what we were doing and press on.

It also gets them to start thinking about how positive environments and setting positive examples can be used to combat larger scale societal problems. Gladwell expands on his discussion about context by introducing the Broken Windows Theory by criminologists James

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Wilson and George Kelling. This theory states that “crime is the inevitable result of disorder. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken and the sense of anarchy will spread…sending a signal that anything goes” (p. 141). It is a theory of crime that certainly relates to the city of Buffalo and to the work that the students were doing. Once students understood that the physical environment of the city actually affected the level of crime, what they were doing became more relevant. The organization these students were working with worked to build and maintain community gardens – taking empty and abandoned lots and making them beautiful. Similarly, a housing organization a different group of students were working with fights to keep houses from being torn down and tries to repaint the outside of as many homes as possible within a neighborhood. The improved appearance of the neighborhood actually reduces crime and increases property values. Whether or not the organization knows the name of this theory, they certainly would agree with it and value its importance.

“I always thought poor people were lazy, that if they really wanted to not be poor they could. But it is way more complicated than that.”

This student was part of a group that had a unique experience during their service learning assignment. In order to help the students understand how difficult it is for refugees to get out of poverty, they were sent on a “scavenger hunt” where they went through all of the different government offices that a newly arrived immigrant would have to go through to get all the proper paperwork in order to get housing, welfare, and a job. In their papers, the students reflected on the incredible frustration they felt going between offices and experiencing the slow churning of bureaucracy. From their experience with the scavenger hunt, coupled with the time they spent getting to know the refugees, they learned that these people worked just as hard as anyone but poverty is cyclical – it reinforces itself so that the person cannot find a way out. Suddenly our class discussions about privilege held weight. Students in the class were seeing how elements in their lives they took for granted counted as privilege – even American citizenship.

“We ended up spending most of our time carrying boxes. I honestly don’t feel like we made a real difference.”

This is probably the biggest challenge of a service learning assignment: either the project will fail to allow students to take an active role in addressing the problems they see in the community they are supposed to be changing and it simply deteriorates into volunteering, or the students are incapable of seeing the bigger picture of what they are doing.
With the former, this can be the fault of those who setup the service assignments, of the community partners the students work with within the organization itself, or of the students. It is oftentimes the result of a lack of understanding of what the students are to be doing. The community partners chosen must be able to provide the students with an opportunity to do work that requires critical thinking, creativity, and hopefully gets them directly involved with the key aims of the organization. Once the organization has the students, they often instinctively give them simple, basic tasks in order to get the group familiar with the routine business of the organization and also to see how they well they handle their tasks, before giving them open-ended assignments that require that critical thinking and creativity. The students need to understand beforehand that the community partner is going to move them from structured to unstructured tasks because by this point the students oftentimes adapt to their tasks and fail to take initiative and to take on more responsibility – simply wanting to “get it done”. Since they have already resigned themselves to possibly mundane tasks, they may close themselves to the “learning” half of service learning.

With the latter, those in charge of the service learning course have the power to guide students towards understanding the big picture versus the small picture. For our course, we had the students read an article about Buffalonians choosing to “Dream big [and] build small” (Dabkowski, 2011). The article discussed how local leaders had spent millions of dollars trying to attract sporting goods store, Bass Pro, to build an outlet in Buffalo, but ultimately Bass Pro Shops never did. This humiliating failure to try to help the failing Buffalo economy is contrasted in the article with the efforts being made by community activists in Buffalo to improve the city one small thing at a time, ultimately making strides towards the bigger dream of revitalizing the city. The article advocates for “community-based development works” such as is being done by groups such as PUSH Buffalo which builds community gardens, tries to create affordable housing, and works on some alternative energy projects (Dabkowski, 2011). We then used this article as a platform for leading students into discussion about how small projects ultimately work to achieve larger goals. They could then take their experiences (including the seemingly mundane ones) and understand how it relates to the ideals of community-based development in general, and what its effects towards progress are in the long run. By teaching students about matters of context and having them reflect on what they do day to day within the organization and how that helps the organization to reach their larger goals, students can have a better appreciation for what their work achieves within the big picture – hopefully giving them an optimistic attitude about their service learning.

“One of my favorite parts was the time when I sat with Harvey Garrett on his front porch and he explained exactly how what they were doing was helping that area of the city and what he had been doing with the organization for many years.”

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Another really valuable aspect of service learning is the way that students can learn from the examples set by community leaders who make community improvement their careers. This student was working directly with Harvey Garrett, executive director of Westside Community Collaborative (WSCC) in Buffalo which since 2001, “has rallied residents to paint abandoned homes, mow vacant lots, and drive away drug dealers” (Ward, 2011). The organization focuses on increasing home values without causing “gentrification” (making the homes unaffordable to those already living in the area). His work has allowed the property values of entire neighborhoods to triple over the past decade – to go from an average value of $25,000 to $79,000 – and for crime to significantly decrease (Ward, 2011). For a student to be able to work with and learn directly from a person who is actually making huge strides in sustainable change, the opportunity can be invaluable and particularly memorable.

The students were also quite inspired by some of the stories Garrett shared with them from his work with WSCC. There were two stories particularly interesting to the students: the first involved him tricking a drug dealer to move out of a vacant home he had been staying in, and the second was about the time he physically protested and saved one of the beautiful Olmsted traffic circles from being torn out of a Buffalo street. Both of these stories were shared eagerly with me by multiple students who worked with Garrett. These stories, along with ones shared by students in other groups, directly relate to our class discussion on the power of stories. We read from a chapter of Paul Loeb’s Soul of a Citizen (1999) which details the point that although statistics inform us of the exact details or scope of a situation, they do not connect with us in the way that stories do which help us really understand the significance of something. He says that statistics “can’t provide the organic connection that binds one person to another” while “powerful individual stories create community” (p. 119). Just as the students were experiencing how powerful it can be to hear about the experiences and stories of others in the community, we were encouraging them to learn how to tell their own stories. If we want students to be effective leaders and changers, they need to know how to inspire and how to convey the importance of an issue by relaying the information through a carefully-chosen story that will connect with their audience’s emotions.

“I have never been so self-conscious of being white. It made me uncomfortable.”

While indirect to the explicit purposes of service learning but part of its relevant dialogue, I found this sentiment quite common among my majority white students – and found it to have serendipitous results. We took time in the classroom to discuss our notions of privilege, power, stereotypes, and race, and were able to directly discuss and examine what their attitudes were and why. Through their written reflections, I could see them analyzing their natural reactions to their environments while at the sites and see how they had begun to reevaluate what

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is true and what they had assumed. In class, we discussed the Beverly Tatum essay, “The Complexity of Identity: Who Am I?” from the book *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* (2010), which discusses how we are least likely to notice the traits we possess that we share with the dominant culture. Specifically for these students, they do not naturally think of being white as one of their most important identifiers. It simply is assumed and not worth isolating. Tatum expands by saying, “their inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. In the absence of dissonance, the dimension of identity escapes conscience attention” (p. 6). One only becomes self-conscious of a trait when it is the exception. For the students, going to their service learning sites in the city and being the only white people around, they distinctly noticed their “dissonant” trait of being white. Most of them had never before considered the idea that simply being part of the dominant culture can be a privilege. I was glad that they were able to begin to think critically about what counts as privilege, and perhaps begin to reconsider how race affects one’s perception of identity, depending on the context.

“The cops pulled over our car after we left our site. They searched us because they assumed the only reason we were there was to buy drugs. We had parked right across from a drug house.”

The students that were searched were angry at what had happened to them. They were angry that the cops made assumptions about why they were in that area of the city and stereotyped them. This, ironically, allowed them to experience the very problems with stereotyping and “thin-slicing” that we had discussed in class.

Specifically, we examined excerpts from Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink* which centers around the concept of “thin-slicing” which Gladwell (2005) defines as “the ability of our unconscious to find pattern in situations and behavior based on very narrow slices of experience” (p. 23). While in the book, Gladwell’s discussion includes the usefulness of our ability to make snap judgments, we primarily focused on the excerpts discussing the dangers of how our own biases and prejudices allow us to make unfair assumptions about people we encounter. While thin-slicing could apply to an infinite number of stereotype categories, we particularly used the concept as the lens for our discussion on race. I think it is ironic that while we were really having the discussion to help students think about the assumptions they have and the subconscious judgments they may make about the minorities they would be working with, that this group of students ultimately were the ones to be thin-sliced. Their experience perfectly demonstrates both sides of the issue – on the one hand, if most of the white college-age students the police have encountered in that area were indeed there to purchase drugs, then one could say that the police were wisely learning from their experiences and preemptively trying to address the problem by
checking these students. On the other hand, from the perspective of the students, they were being unfairly judged and they hated that the police assumed that they were purchasing drugs because they were white. Ultimately, however, I think that they were motivated to consider seriously how they judge others. Gladwell (2005) says that “our impressions are generated by our experiences and our environment, which means that we can change our first impressions – we can alter the way we thin-slice – by changing the experiences that comprise those impressions” (p. 97). Their service learning sites were the perfect settings in which the students could begin to work on applying what they had learned by actively changing the catalogue of experiences from which they draw their judgments, assumptions, and stereotypes. Perhaps also even the police officers received a lesson on the problems with thin-slicing from their experience with the students.

“I’ve lived in this city my whole life and never knew that there were all these people who actually cared about it and were doing something to change it.”

The service learning experience can be especially beneficial for those who already have experience with the community they are serving, but perhaps have never seen it from the perspective of one who is trying to effect change within it. At the start, these students bring to their service groups unique knowledge about the area and perhaps about its problems. They can provide contextual understanding for how things got the way they are. Then, by the end, with proper encouragement from those teaching the course, they can begin to think of continuing with what they did during the semester throughout their college experience and perhaps beyond – when they go back to their homes for long breaks or if they chose to continue to live in that area, now having the knowledge of how to continue what they learned during service learning. There of course are benefits to not being from the community being served, and hopefully the principles being learned are universal enough to be applied to any community, but it can be a really special experience for a local student.

“Suddenly it was the like the future of the organization actually depended on me!”

The organization this student worked with was on the verge of running out of money and having to shut down. She and a few of her peers had been assigned to help write grant proposals and contact government organizations to raise funds for the organization. During the semester, she had seen how much this organization did for the community, especially within their function as a food pantry. When she realized that if they did not raise money that this organization would go under, she became even more passionately involved with the group and began to lead the others in planning a fundraiser back on campus to help the organization to survive. She knew that what they did mattered and that her group had the power to help them.
This is where all of the desired outcomes of service learning come together for the student. The ultimate key for getting students passionate about their projects and raising them up in leadership is giving them agency.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (accessed 2011) includes as one of its definitions of agency: “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power.” For the context of service learning, I am taking this definition and suggesting that students must be equipped to know that they indeed have power against the problems they encounter during their service. When students have a sense that what they learn and what difference they make is truly up to their own efforts and ingenuity, they will develop into innovators and leaders in change. For me personally, I was able to realize through service learning and similar projects I did afterwards that nothing grew me into a leader more than being given responsibility. Giving them projects where they have the agency to create the desired outcome and giving them freedom in their choices is the absolute key to success and personal growth in leadership. When they fail, it motivates them to find new solutions and to try harder. When they succeed, it makes them realize their real-world potential to change things in society and they begin to grow a passion to see it happen. Agency in service learning is the most important way to ensure that students do not view what they are doing as “forced labor”, it allows for creativity and rewards ingenuity within their projects, and it is the best way to grow students into leaders which leads in to long-term student-community engagement. I really value the leadership skills I gained through taking initiative during my service learning and I am so glad that I could apply them by leading my fellow students through this course. Though forming a service learning course at a university takes a lot of trial and error, planning and re-planning, I believe it has invaluable potential to translate meaningful coursework for undergraduates into real-life lessons gained for now and for beyond their studies.

Works Cited


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