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Robert Shumer's *Where's the Wisdom in Service Learning* (2017): A Reflective Review

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Robert Shumer's
***Where's the Wisdom in Service-Learning* (2017)**
Charlotte: Information Age Publishing
A Reflective Review

Introduction

At twenty-three years old, my dream of working at Walt Disney World ended and I found myself crawling back to my parents in Chicago. I never imagined this would happen to *me*- I had a college degree, was that not enough? After three months of desperate job searching, I applied to South Carolina Campus Compact as an AmeriCorps Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA). Little did I know how much that one job application would change my career path.

I began working at Columbia College, a women's college, as the Coordinator for Service-Learning. I scoured the internet for resources on service-learning, a concept that was unfamiliar for me. Under the supervision of Dr. Ned Laff, Director of the Center for Engaged Learning, we went into the community and learned firsthand the importance of engaging the local community. Robert Shumer's (2017) *Where's the Wisdom in Service-Learning* would have been an invaluable resource to understand the context, history, and current trends in the field. This essay will explore his book chapter-by-chapter and relate his lessons to my personal experience in service-learning roles within higher education.

Chapter One: "History and Precursors of Service-Learning Theory, Development, and Research"

Their Wisdom:

Shumer, Stanton, and Giles (2017) explore the roots of service-learning and its purpose within the field of education, which lied grounded in three concepts: the common good, civil society, and learning by doing. They reference early literature on service-learning, stressing social justice and themes of empowerment. Finally, explore examples of service-learning and experiential learning at various K-12 and higher education institutions decade-by-decade. The most prevalent theme throughout the chapter is that service-learning is not solely about those who we serve, but also for those who gain a voice by being served.

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Connection to Practice:

For those of us working in service-learning, we are accustomed to confused stares when describing our jobs. Yes, many of us work in education, no, it is not charity work or fundraising, and yes, we get paid to change lives. We come from various educational and career backgrounds, but share the common passion for civic engagement and meaningful service in our local communities.

The authors reference Sigmon's (1979) three principles of service-learning. First, those being served should control the services provided. During my work in South Carolina, we asked the local community to elaborate upon on their greatest needs. We helped write grants and seek donations, allowing them to decide where resources were spent, including time, money, and people-power. In all aspects of our project, the community was in control of decisions.

Sigmon's (1979) second principle of service-learning explains that those being served should become better able to serve and be served by their own actions. In other words, community members should benefit from the service, and they should not be doing service under ulterior motives of an institution. Rather, their skills should be honed in a way that better themselves and their community. In South Carolina, elderly church members were gardening alongside preschool aged children. As the neighborhood was lacking in grocery stores and produce, our efforts focused on creating a sustainable source of food. When the infrastructure was complete, we completely pulled out of the project and allowed community members to run with it, using skills they acquired.

Sigmon's (1979) third principle explains that those who serve are also learners and should be allowed significant control over they learn. When done right, service-learning balances both service and learning, with equal emphasis on each. Students working on our project explored cultural capital and the lack of food access in low-socioeconomic neighborhoods while also learning how to plant and maintain a garden with a variety of plants. Other students were involved with a yoga-mentoring program, which explored privilege, power, and oppression within the education system.

The authors round out the chapter by going through an exhaustive history of service-learning and significant literature written on the topic. This would have been a very helpful read during my first year working in civic engagement, and an excellent read for any practitioner in higher education. It leads into the second chapter, written by John Duley, focusing on how ordinary people can accomplish amazing undertakings.

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Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change Fall 2017
Chapter Two: "The Wisdom of John Duley"

Their Wisdom:

John Duley begins his chapter by stating “This chapter is not about how people gain new knowledge through experience. It is about how ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things” (2017, p. 34). He discusses a project in which Michigan State University and Mississippi’s Rust College partnered to create the Student Tutorial Education Project (STEP) in the 1960s. The needs were expressed by those being served, not prescribed by Michigan State University students and staff, allowing meaningful service.

Duley pulls from Kolb’s (1984) theory of experiential learning, stating that civic engagement and service-learning can be life-changing experiences. When we consider the common good, we must reflect on our own values and investment of resources. For students involved in service-learning, discussions about core beliefs and can provide meaningful contemplation. Additionally, Kolb (1984) stresses that service-learners should not be exploiting the communities they serve. The benefits of service should always far outweigh the costs of the community.

Connection to Practice:

The climax of our community garden project occurred on March 31, 2012. I remember waking up early and looking out the window to see if rumors of rain were true. Unfortunately, they were, and I was quite nervous that our 100 scheduled volunteers would fail to show. Ms. Hart, the matriarch of St. John’s Baptist Church, had been worried for months that the project would fall through. We met her during a statewide meeting many months prior, and she was gravely concerned about the spread of Type II Diabetes in Eau Claire. We connected immediately, realizing her church was only blocks from our university. This was how the Columbia College garden project began: her desire for health-based programming, and our passion for service-learning and gardening.

When I initially connected with St. John’s Baptist, Ms. Hart was skeptical of our offer to assist in fighting diabetes. She stated that many other local universities had come into Eau Claire, conducted research, and left without contributing anything beneficial. We promised that our motives were purely out of love for the common good, and she gave us her trust. On that rainy day in March 2012, as students piled out of cars and the local news came to conduct interviews about our community gardens, she looked at me and exclaimed, “We did it!”

Chapter Three: “Service-Learning Memories and Perspectives”

Their Wisdom:

While those of us working in service-learning sometimes struggle to explain how it differs from other experiential opportunities, William Ramsay applies a concrete definition that

leaves little room for confusion. According to Ramsay, “The simple definition of service-learning is the linking of the performance of a needed community service to conscious reflection on the experience and relating it to other learning” (2017, p. 45). Service-learning is not purely for academic or extracurricular purposes, but it bridges the often-created divide. He flips the traditional scripts of community service, believing that students should be taking their learning from the community back to the classroom rather than vice-versa.

Ramsay believes that service-learning is advantageous for college students because it allows participants to be given a problem and make creative solutions. While many education systems rely on parroting back information, service-learning is highly reflective and requires critical thinking. Additionally, Ramsay explains why the hyphen exists between service and learning, something many of us cannot truly explain. He notes that it shows two-way communication, and emphasizes the equal importance of both service *and* learning.

Connection to practice:

During my work in South Carolina, we went into the project with no expectations. We had no set completion date. We simply walked into the community, asked about their needs, and offered assistance. We completed the work on their time, requiring many nights and weekends with our hands in the dirt. It was important to acknowledge our place as outsiders in the community. I was white, they were black. I was a Northerner, they were Southerners. I was in their territory, but I was not a “white savior” looking to use them as lab rats for research or personal gain.

Chapter Four: “Reflections of a Mobicentric Service-Learning Pioneer”

Their wisdom:

Bob Sigmon shares his place in the history of service-learning, beginning in the 1960s. He helped coordinate an internship program with three major focuses: 1) using student manpower to support impoverished communities, 2) assisting private and public education and service providers to create experiential learning for young people with service at the core, and 3) a desire to learn if service-based learning would benefit young people long-term for roles in community development.

Sigmon gave seminars in the southern United States focusing on two questions, “What are the major needs you see in your setting?” and “In what ways has your college education prepared you for addressing those problems?” (p. 71). He states that most often, the students did not feel their preparation for the real world was adequate, and I’d wager that students today feel similarly. The students I brought to St. John’s Baptist church for service-learning experiences

were in shock that such financial need existed only blocks from their campus, and I would wager this sentiment could apply to many college communities. After participating in service-learning, it becomes impossible to ignore disparities in resource distribution in our local communities.

Connection to practice:

Sigmon finishes the chapter discussing his regrets and hopes in his career. He wishes he brought more attention to the concerns of the community and its practitioners. In terms of hopes, he would love to see all young people be required to participate in public service, a notion with which I wholeheartedly agree. This would be a complicated process to create and maintain, requiring cultural competency at a high level, but every participant would have enhanced worldviews upon entering the workforce. To conclude, he pushes the “sit down, be quiet, pay attention” mantra, instructing service-learners to spend more time listening, less time talking- a helpful reminder for us all.

Chapter Five: “Half-Full or Half-Empty... Who Knows?”

Their Wisdom:

Timothy Stanton’s undergraduate years left him yearning to learn more about practical solutions to the major problems in the world. He found significant value in out-of-class reflection and social gatherings with other similar-minded people. As he began professional work in non-profits, he found that agencies were hesitant to take young, short-term volunteers, and when they did, the tasks assigned were menial at best. He felt that internship and volunteer opportunities should balance learning and service, yet he was not seeing this play out. Academics and service were disjointed, yet there was so much potential for integration.

Stanton discusses his most successful service-learning project, a mentorship program between high school and middle school youth. The middle school students were quickly showing improved social skills, and the high school students felt they were learning more through experiential learning than in an academic setting. Stanton’s wheels began to turn, knowing there were better ways to engage youth and young adults, and he provides wisdom on connecting fieldwork to the classroom.

Connection to practice:

During Stanton’s time at Cornell University, he was surrounded by a set of colleagues who were equally impassioned. However, when they tried to get faculty on board, there was hesitation. In higher education, academic and student affairs are often siloed. Faculty are protective over their time, understandably, and can struggle to see the value of experiential learning. Stanton felt isolated, relying on colleagues at other universities to support his work.

Having a large network with others who value service-learning is critically important in our field. Service-learning offices on a university campus are often small, with fewer than five full-time individuals employed. Additionally, practitioners must constantly justify the importance of their work, proving it is different than other community service projects on campus. Stanton ends the chapter wondering if the future of service-learning is grim, but I wish to let him know that many individuals, myself included, are still passionate about the work and will look to his example to add another 45 years of service to this field.

Chapter Six- The Wisdom of Jane Szutu Permaul

Their wisdom:

Jane Permaul spent over 40 years working on service-learning efforts. She considers several completed projects and her impact of the field of service-learning. Permaul went on to briefly discuss the founding of Campus Compact and specifically the forming of California Campus Compact. She explains that service-learning has been performed for decades, but it was given a name when large agencies were formed to propel the cause.

Among her many accomplishments is the University Year for Action project through UCLA, which linked service-learners to returned veterans. This was a mutually beneficial relationship as veterans had assistance in everyday tasks, while students learned about the realities of war and its impact on mental health. Permaul shows that students can connect with people of all backgrounds, even those who have very different life experience than our own.

Connection to practice:

According to Permaul, “Theoretically, service-learning as a pedagogy is well developed, but needs vigilance, as both the students and community needs are dynamic and changing” (p. 99). This is important consideration for those working in service-learning for two key reasons: 1) students change every year, so projects need to be considered with the student population in mind, and 2) community needs change over time, so previous projects that have been successful might need revamping. It is continually important to use community voice to create and sustain meaningful service.

Chapter Seven – A Time to Serve, a Time to Lead, James C. Kielsmeier

Their wisdom:

James Kielsmeier has contributed to a legacy of service-learning on an international scale, with service completed in the United States and South Korea. He helped creating an English tutor program where Americans could better understand South Korean culture, and South Koreans could enhance their English-speaking skills. The program was a roaring success and expanded throughout the country.

Keilsmeier notes with dismay that the U.S. government has continually de-funded service programs without replacement, losing out on valuable service-learning opportunities. In 2011, while I served as an AmeriCorps VISTA, the Corporation for National Community Service was given funding cuts, and we were unsure if our positions would exist a week later. Kielsmeier explains the financial impact of cutting such programs with hard numbers, providing a convincing argument for the tangible impact of service-learning.

Connection to practice:

Kielsmeier discussed in detail the importance of expanding service-learning opportunities to low-income and racially diverse communities. He notes, “Service, social justice, environmental stewardship, and compassion toward neighbor should be built into the growing-up experience of every citizen, starting in elementary school and culminating with a full-time service year” (p. 105). He believes opportunities not only better the individual as a person, but volunteerism is a pathway to social mobility, including future career opportunities. As service-learning is often afforded in affluent communities, low-income folks lose out on social mobility. This is supported when he says, “Allowing a growing pattern of exclusive race and class-based participation in service further contributes to the racial divide” (p. 109).

As practitioners, we must consider the privilege affixed with service-learning and volunteerism. Are we using service-learning to educate whites on diversity issues? Are we providing opportunities that are accessible and attractive to people of color? What types of students are not involved with service-learning and why?

Chapter Eight – The Wisdom of Terry Pickeral

Their wisdom:

Terry Pickeral began volunteering at a very young age, so it was no surprise that he fell into the field of service-learning. He notes, “This section is titled *Transitions* to share my journey from service to service-learning to student engagement, all based on the core tenet that we need to provide high-quality opportunities for each student to contribute to their own development, their school’s improvement, and their community’s development” (p. 121). During his time with Washington State Campus Compact, his goals regarding service learning included empowering students to design and sustain service-learning on campus and in local K-12 schools and building upon faculty skills in service-learning.

Connection to practice:

Pickeral was transparent about the difficulties of service-learning, including creating high-quality community partnerships and finding funding sources. As a VISTA, I ran into both issues when working in a low-income community. With tremendous assistance from my

supervisor and his ability to tap into cultural capital, we found grant money from the Center for Disease Control to fund our entire project. A large portion of the funds were used to hire a public health educator from the city of Columbia who better understood the health disparities and local politics. As an outsider, I was attempting to create solutions for problems I did not understand, which is *not* a best practice.

Pickeral completes the chapter with eight tangible suggestions for service-learning, including finding local champions to advocate at local and state levels. He stresses sustainability and creating projects that can last. While his initial interest in service was unintentional, he is clearly grateful that it turned into a career of compassion for others.

Chapter Nine – Where’s the Wisdom in Service-Learning? My Story – Robert Shumer

Their wisdom:

We hear from Robert Shumer, author of this book, as he describes his place in the world of service-learning. His experience begins during his time as a high school teacher, attempting to engage students who had no interest in school or learning. To reinvigorate his class, he used the method of language experience stories, developing materials using vocabulary familiar to the learner. The high school students were engaged in a brand-new way, finally feeling needed, and Shumer never returned to traditional methods of teaching.

Connection to practice:

Shumer stresses the 3Ms of social change, including mass, momentum, and money. Mass includes the efforts that continually build programs and participants each year. The 3Ms are vital to success in service-learning and should be considered like a tripod table. When one M is imbalanced, the others must overcompensate. Without money, programs dry up and people lose motivation. Without mass or momentum, programs remain stagnant.

Shumer has been employed in numerous roles within education over his years in the field, including K-12 and higher education. His K-12 perspective has been highly beneficial when working with higher education practitioners, which is an important consideration about who should be at the table during discussions on service-learning. He concludes the chapter with practical recommendations for the future of civic engagement, including posing a challenge to service-learners to continue being engaged throughout life by becoming involved with local efforts and running for political office. He believes that young people are the foundation for the field’s future, and we must invest in them appropriately.

Chapter Ten – Service Learning, a Journey of a Lifetime

Their wisdom:

Cathryn Berger Kaye reflects on her years in service-learning, beginning as a K-12 teacher at a small school in Maine. Her co-workers left her with two pieces of advice: first, to stop with the lesson plans and listen to the children, and second, always be asking yourself where the chaos is. Kaye discusses other major projects during her career, including Youth Leadership in Action, which helped youth understand the aspects of becoming a leader. Leadership is defined by Kaye as "... doing something of value, taking action that benefits others while engaging others in the process" (p. 145). At times, her work was met with skepticism, but she ultimately had a very successful career in service-learning.

Connection to practice:

Kaye concludes the chapter with thirteen tangible action steps for service-learning practitioners, and they complemented previous chapters beautifully. Of note were the notions of modeling risk taking, gaining stakeholder buy-in, reciprocity and seeing value in all people, and meaningful reflection. She stresses capturing the voice of participants and stories along the way. In South Carolina, we documented specific conversations and videotaped our service day so that we could implement similar service-learning projects in other locations. Practitioners who can demonstrate successful projects will attract stakeholders along the way.

Chapter Eleven – The Wisdom of Bobby Hackett

Their wisdom:

Bobby Hackett's roots in service-learning happened from a young age, as his father was active with government agencies to address poverty. Additionally, he saw value in community voice, requiring that residents of local low-income communities have a seat at the table during all discussions. Hackett strongly believes that all people bring value to service-learning, and as a young person he traveled the country mobilizing service on college campuses.

Hackett also contributed to the Bonner Scholars program, a national effort that requires a 4-year service commitment from undergraduate students. Bonner Scholars create a culture of service on college campuses, with the desire that professors will be impressed with their ability to relate academics to real world experience. Hackett also supports community-driven research, stating the basic principles are applicable to all institution types.

Connection to practice:

Community-defined research may sound intimidating, but it can be a mutually-beneficial connection to service-learning. Students and faculty help community partners articulate their

needs and step up as advocates. When our constituents in South Carolina needed funding, my team wrote grants and solicited community donations. We used our cultural capital to gain access to resources, but the community decided where those resources would be used. Hackett also recommends connecting with coalitions, alliances, and neighborhood associations for service-learning. These groups are often forgotten in lieu of partnerships with national non-profit organizations, yet they have great need and can provide valuable lessons in democracy and civic engagement for students.

Chapter Twelve – From a Chance to the Dance, or from Happenstance to Happening – Their wisdom:

Robert Shumer concludes the book with his final thoughts on the past and future of service-learning. He gives a brief synopsis of previous chapters, sharing the amazing work done by his colleagues in the field. None of the authors of this book planned to have a career in service-learning; rather, service-learning found them and they jumped on opportunities because of personal initiative and support from their networks. Their stories are all connected, completing similar projects across the world and benefiting from national service programs.

Shumer attempts to quell any fears about the future of service-learning. He believes there are many up and coming leaders in the field who will advocate for necessary change. He tells practitioners to continue creating service experiences for students, not letting the candle go out. He stresses the importance of providing meaningful professional development for all educators to understand how service-learning benefits their work. Shumer has great optimism for the field, and feels the path has been paved by great individuals who were passionate about this work before it was well-known.

Final Thoughts

This book was truly a pleasure to read, especially as a graduate student who is itching to get back into a full-time service-learning role. In student affairs roles, we are told to find meaning in our work, and service-learning fills that bucket for many of us. This book would be of value to new practitioners or graduate assistants in community service, service-learning, or experiential learning roles.

Throughout the book, authors expressed hope that service-learning would not go out of style and dissolve. Service was an integral piece of both their identities and career paths, and they saw tremendous benefit to students, faculty, practitioners, and community agencies. As government funding for service programs is seemingly always in jeopardy, the reader is left inspired to continue the often challenging, difficult but essential fight for the common good.

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