

Transformative Community Service Learning: Beyond the “Poor,” the “Rich,” and the Helping Dynamic

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Service-learning in many universities has focused on student learning through “service” to the “poor.” In both domestic and international contexts, many scholars and practitioners of community service learning are redefining what this means to both students and communities, including considering power dynamics between universities and community organizations and focusing more on a partnership relationship than a hierarchical, charity model. This redefinition process promises to yield more effective, transformative programs for students and communities. This article considers service-learning programs in the context of the “helping dynamic;” discusses the case for a partnership, community-engagement approach; and briefly considers how a case of one university’s international service-learning program could be reoriented.

INTRODUCTION

Service-learning as it has been historically practiced in many universities has focused on student learning through “service” to the “poor.” Whether the focus of such programs is domestic or international, many scholars and practitioners of community service learning are redefining what service to the poor does and should mean to both students and communities. Such redefinition includes considering power dynamics between universities and community organizations and focusing more on a partnership relationship than a hierarchical, charity model (Worrall, 2007; White, 2009; Crabtree, 2008). This redefining process holds the promise of yielding more effective, transformative programs for both students and communities. In light of Robin Crabtree’s (2008) assessment a few years ago that there was much research and theoretical work to do on international service learning, we examine our university’s programs based on our practical experience with several such semester experiences. We seek to re-frame the experience from one in which the implicit context is the “rich” helping the “poor” through the “helping dynamic” to one in which students learn from those who have demonstrated experience and effectiveness in various aspects of social wealth, such as civic engagement and citizenship. To this end, we will briefly consider how our Jesuit, Catholic university’s international service-learning program could be reoriented in this direction.

SERVICE LEARNING, THE “RICH” AND THE “POOR”

The service-learning programs we are most familiar with have arisen from social justice perspectives, with spiritual or theological origins. At many Jesuit, Catholic universities, service-learning programs talk of “solidarity with the poor,” following the language of Peter-Hans Kolvenbach in his well-known address on “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Higher Education,” given at Santa Clara University in October 2000 (Kolvenbach, 2000). Indeed, the Jesuit mission as reflected in the preferential option for the “poor” comes out of an intellectual and spiritual appreciation for the suffering that the powerful inflict on the less powerful, a point of view that is important and sorely neglected in discourse and policy-making on world affairs. Indeed, Kolvenbach’s use of the phrase “the promotion of justice” in his address reflects his recognition of imbalances in power that are central to understanding and changing our world. And it comes out of an aspiration that our students and we, as faculty, achieve solidarity with others. But solidarity based on “the poor” and “the rich” is another manifestation of “us” vs. “them” as Albert Nolan, O.P. wrote in the 1980s (Nolan, 1985). Thus, the use of the term “poor” is one that bears examining, and is not merely an exercise in semantics. Its origin is grounded in tremendous political inequality, its use obscures other valuable facets of human existence, and actions following from its use to promote difference and hierarchy as well as charity rather than political engagement or citizenship. Further, its continued use promotes an ethic of production and consumption that is endangering our planet.

The language of “service to the poor” comes from a worldview that assumes that there are poor people and rich people, and that the rich should help the poor. This certainly implies that poverty is something to be avoided, something that needs to be changed; what it implies about riches is more difficult to parse. If rich is the opposite of poor, and the goal is to eliminate poverty, does this mean the goal is to be rich? Is there some in-between category of moderation between the two that constitutes the real goal, and if so, how is it to be defined, and by whom? In fact, the dichotomy of rich/poor reflects the priorities of Western industrialized peoples more than anything else; if we did not seek riches, we would not define those without them as poor. Some of the reactions that students have in service-learning experiences reflect this, as when they come back to the university community articulating, “I am now so much more thankful for what I have.” Certainly, it is a worthy accomplishment for such programs to allow students to realize the material and economic disparities that exist in their society and their world, yet it could also reflect a failure to learn deeper truths about the costs of their “riches” or the setting in which they studied and “served.”

HUMAN WELFARE, HAPPINESS, ECONOMIC RESOURCES

Student observations regarding their material plenty highlight the fact that economic distinctions foreground a country’s (and its’ peoples’) economic status as more informative and important than some other measure, such as replenishment of natural resources, children in homes with multiple caregivers, or a deep cultural knowledge embedded in a local landscape. Both economic measures and the discipline of economics as typically construed are limited in scope and vision. GDP, or even more broadly conceived indicators of human progress that have been recently championed and include measures such as literacy rates and life expectancy, can only tell us so much.¹ Gilbert Rist, a Swiss professor of development studies, argues that economics as a field of study suffers from trying to “make reality conform to a simplified model or turns the results of possible observation into the basis of general ‘laws’ which supposedly explain all social problems related to the use of goods” (Rist, 2002, p. 245). In fact, a movement of more than 10,000 economists, launched by economics students in France, called ‘post-autistic economics’ makes the same critique, that the discipline is theoretical and ideological with little foundation in reality. They call for a methodology that is problem led, not method led, knowledge-driven, and pluralistic (Fullbrook, 2007).

Thus, a focus on poverty reinforces the very narrow thinking it is meant to challenge. A successful program would enable our students to engage with others in broadening our global understanding of what

it means to live well with limited resources. Part of an international service-learning experience would allow students to experience the ways in which peoples and cultures work and live beyond what they have come to know as the normal but narrow economic ideology that drives much of North American culture.

Dividing the world into “poor” and “rich” has its roots in the post-World War II era. President Truman’s inaugural address in 1948 is an oft-cited early public statement of such a belief system. In it he identifies the “ancient enemies” of “hunger, misery, and despair” as problems to be overcome. He called upon the international community to aid and develop the less fortunate, decolonizing states to overcome such enemies (McMichael, 2008, p. 274). Sociologist Philip McMichael argues that:

Classifying colonials and ex-colonials in this way conflated three conditions: frugality (subsistence lifestyle), destitution (when frugality is deprived of its foundations in community ties to land, forest, and water), and scarcity (modernized poverty within the cash/commodity economy). Arguably, Western ‘modernized poverty’ was projected on to a largely frugal world (albeit in transition) (McMichael, 2008, p. 276-7).

Thus, poverty or ‘modernized poverty’ is new and constructed by outsiders, not those thus labeled. This is not to say, McMichael continues, that poverty should not have been addressed nor that those in the decolonizing world did not welcome some forms development; but it is crucial to recognize the historical context of such terms and ideas. And, the ways in which systems of power—including those at the university level, where many service-learning programs are based—reproduce them. For, as McMichael argues, the ‘have/have-not’ division has not only been created by Northern power but has been perpetuated by it as well. Thus, the WTO (World Trade Organization) promotes corporate agriculture, driving farmers off their land, while the World Bank seeks to eradicate poverty, a poverty that is most readily apparent in urban slums, where failing farmers flee. “Then its [the WTO’s] success (abundant commercial food) is simultaneously its failure (a billion slum dwellers)” (McMichael, 2008, p. 274). We argue that no matter how well-meaning our service-learning semesters, they are bound up in this history and in this power dynamic and, thus, are perpetuating it more than they should.

There are a variety of ways in which we as people can be “rich” and “poor.” More profound than the service-learning student’s reaction, “I am now thankful for what I have,” are student descriptions of their struggle to understand how the people they met were often so accepting or even happy with their lives, in the context of what appeared to the students to be material deprivation. These students are confronting the idea that happiness is not a direct function of material resources. Economists have recently challenged dominant views on utility and happiness (sometimes referred to as “subjective well-being”); sometimes working on interdisciplinary teams with neurologists and psychologists, economists have begun to corroborate a broader view of human welfare and happiness that has clarified the role of economic and material well-being (Easterlin, 2001; Layard 2006; Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Frank, 2007). British economist Richard Layard notes that surveys of people asking them to rate their happiness levels turn out to correlate highly with objective measures of happiness gathered by neurologists’ monitoring of brain activity. And these surveys show the following as the seven most important factors affecting happiness (listed in order, with most important first): family relationships, financial situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, and personal values (Layard, 2005). It is immediately clear that narrow notions of economic well-being are important for human happiness and welfare, but not more so than family, community, and so on.

Further, Layard explains that the happiness from economic factors is subject to two mitigating factors: habituation and social comparison. Habituation means that while a new material possession might bring short-term pleasure, the owner gets quickly used to it and the pleasure fades, while in comparison, the happiness from family and community does not appear to be short-lived. The social comparison factor is also crucial in understanding the relation between economic status and happiness, for as people gain economic rewards or status past a certain threshold of comfort, much of the happiness gained from these rewards is tied to feeling superior—i.e., I have something most people don’t have, so I feel better-off. But if others gain the same rewards or status, the feeling of welfare is decreased or even eliminated, and this

appears to explain the following well-documented paradox: as western nations' economic welfare has grown immensely over recent decades, the happiness reported by their populations has appeared to stay fairly constant. In other words, as a society grows richer, individuals who feel their *relative* status is unchanged do not feel richer. In this view, the whole process of economic growth (beyond the threshold of comfort and well-being) appears as pointless, indeed as a kind of economic arms race.

And if the efforts to achieve economic growth are harmful to other factors affecting happiness, such as family, community, health, personal freedom, or values, then these efforts are actually counter-productive. A focus on what Robert Putnam has called social wealth, a series of interconnections within a community, would simultaneously promote a non-economic approach to service learning as well as meet a gaping need in modern American culture (Putnam, 2000). Acting theorist Anne Bogart tells a story of a fellow theatre professional who was growing disillusioned with her work in the U.S., and who was able to speak with Mother Teresa in person when she visited New York City. Her friend spoke of her decision to go to India where she could be truly useful, but Mother Teresa answered her definitively, "In my country there is a famine of the body. In your country there is a famine of the spirit. And that is what you must feed" (Bogart, 2007, p. 43). This story highlights an important element of our critique. Our global future welfare rests on students in the United States learning about social wealth.

SHOULDN'T WE "DO SOMETHING"? THE "HELPING DYNAMIC"

The focus on material wealth is too narrow, but it also assumes superiority on the part of the Northerner that is not necessarily conscious on the student's part but is a facet of the relationship nonetheless. We have found that, at times, even the most well-meaning and most experienced students believe that they are going to somehow make a difference in the lives of those less well-off (in economic terms) than themselves. Such a belief stems from the same widespread characterization of poverty as described above. It is almost impossible for a well-informed, morally attuned Northerner not to feel a compulsion to "do something" out of a sense of injustice, but also pity.

Our students are not alone in feeling pity. William Easterly writes in *The White Man's Burden* that this 'burden emerged from the West's self-pleasing fantasy that 'we' were the chosen ones to save the Rest" (Easterly, 2006). Gilbert Rist (2002) argues, "the 'development'/ 'underdevelopment' couplet maintained a gap between different parts of the world, but justified the possibility—or the necessity—of intervention on the grounds that one cannot remain passive when one is confronted with extreme need."² World leaders demonstrate the same attitude and rhetoric, as Tony Blair declared earlier this decade, "no 'responsible leader' can now choose to 'turn their back' on Africa" and Gordon Brown (BBC, 2009) recently urged leaders in the G20 to "take action" and to help the world's poorest countries, because "doing nothing is no longer an option." Claire Mercer et al claim that such sentiments stem as much from imperial guilt as a desire "to bring order to an apparently chaotic landscape," a vision similar to that used to justify colonialism (Mercer, 2003, p. 421).

The "helping dynamic" that has come to characterize North/South relationships may have a variety of negative consequences that must be considered. This "helping dynamic" or need to do something manifests itself during the Academic Service Learning Semesters in two ways. First, in the direct service work in countries deemed 'poor' and 'developing' and, second, in a very full schedule of activities, field trips, speakers, and classes. William Easterly, an economist and aid critic, has argued that it is precisely this 'white man's burden' that has produced so many ill-conceived, poorly executed, and failed development projects. As Crabtree argues (2008, p. 22) our rethinking of service-learning can benefit from scholarship on development and aid, which are effectively "industries" that have been built on the belief that "poor" countries need to be improved by "developed, rich" countries that have the experience, material, and motivation to help. Serious questions need to be raised about both the efficacy and moral probity of such efforts. Indeed, a solid fifty years after the beginning of formal North-South development efforts, few in the South are relatively better off than they were in the mid-twentieth century. Development has not worked overall, as more than two trillion U.S. dollars has been spent over the last five decades with little substantial result (Easterly and Pfitze, 2008). Moyo submits that foreign aid,

instead of enabling constructive economic development in Africa, has actually crippled African economies by enabling large-scale corruption, stifling innovation, and causing inflation that discourages African exports (Moyo, 2009).

We follow more closely than we might like to think in the footsteps of development thinking. Thus, universities such as our own, send students to study abroad in places such as London, Paris, and Rome, but to do service learning in locations like Africa, India, Central and South America, and urban U.S. cities. The message for many is that London and Rome are the nuclei of civilization, while places like Africa and India are in need of help and development. Even though, as most who participate in service learning would recognize, we have much to learn about civilization in all these locations.

With such thinking, the service that is accomplished is often closer to acts of charity than anything else and while some of the effects of such acts may appear helpful, we must squarely face the challenge that the acts or service-learning that follow tend to “disable the civic, silencing the citizen as a political force,” or as an agent for change (Boyle-Baise, 2006, p.17). To the extent this is the case, service-learning may be unwittingly supporting short-term, non-systemic change over more politically-engaged, long-term change and an ethic that acts of charity are sufficient rather than band-aids for larger, systemic problems. Even worse, the semesters might be promoting an ideal of material consumption as well: Thus, we are not doing as much as we might to encourage students to see that their own impulse to help and to experience relative civic disengagement are part and parcel of a larger system that fuels narrow conceptions and economic inequalities and unsustainable use of the planet’s resources.

A need to do something says more about our own culture and its privations than it does about the culture within which the service or aid is performed. In fact, as Bertrand Russell argued over a half century ago, there is tremendous value personally, socially, and nationally in idleness, or leisure, or non-working, unscheduled time. Only having to work four hours a day would enable people, he argued, to devote the rest of the time to leisure and other pursuits, such as those of “some public importance.” Yet, as a nation, we have consistently chosen to work longer and harder than not. The accompanying result is exhaustion, illness, a demand for “passive and vapid” amusements, as well as a market-takeover of the domestic arts (Russell, 2004). In a related fashion, the service-learning semesters tend, also, to move in the direction of providing a rich, sometimes very busy schedule of experiences to students, encouraging them to become consumers of experiences, as one former service-learning semester student described it, rather than reflective and observing students and citizens. To relate to Nicaraguans, Ghanaians, or others on their own terms means not only learning about their privations and their civic aspirations but also about their way of experiencing time and social connection, something that is not possible if we fully export our academic and social models.

To move beyond helping and busy schedules would open up space to promote mutual improvements in citizenship and to experience and build social capital. Such work would acknowledge that the terms “development”, “poverty” and “wealth” are globally applicable, rather than the “exclusive domain of specially demarcated ‘third world’ provinces” (Mercer et. al., 2003 p.420). Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., in his 2000 Santa Clara speech appeared at times to use the terms “the poor” and “those who suffer injustice” interchangeably (Kolvenbach , 2000). Such a conflation must be guarded against, since our global hypercapitalist economy renders injustice, in various forms and degrees, to the vast majority, not just those who are materially deprived (though it certainly renders many materially deprived as well). Specifically, such a conflation may cause students to lose sight of the common ground they share with people they seek to help.

SOLIDARITY AND SERVICE LEARNING

Our current economic system, which some have characterized as “disaster capitalism,” “supercapitalism,” and “sociopathic capitalism,” can be critiqued as far too narrow for promoting a humane and sustainable (defined by a recognition of ecological and human capacities) existence for those in the South and the North, but it also tends to render most of those within the system powerless.³ The erosion of the sovereign power of nation-states, the increased might of corporations that are beholden to

the few and to profit-seeking, as well as the predominance of consumer messages and behavior all have combined to create a remarkably disengaged citizenry, locally, nationally, and globally. It can be argued that what we all need is not charity but examples of engagement, of acting in the face of such power and consumer messages to create more just and sustainable circumstances for one's family, community, and larger society.

Further, this is a need that is felt both in the North and the South. Nolan argues "Real solidarity begins when we recognize together the advantages and disadvantages of our different social backgrounds and present realities and the quite different roles that we shall therefore have to play while we commit ourselves together to the struggle against oppression" (Nolan, 1985, 9). Intellectuals and activists from the South are also increasingly calling for other ways of viewing civic and economic renewal, beyond the narrow paradigms of development and the state, such as focusing on restoring ecosystems, indigenous peoples' rights, and local institutions (Deb, 2009; Shivakumar, 2005).

A successful program would enable our students to engage with others in broadening our global understanding of what it means to live well with limited resources, over and against an implicit model of sending students out into the world to help fight poverty. It will also result in students who have an attitude of local civic work with a global understanding of civic action. Scholars such as Moyo (2009), Easterly (2008) and Rist (2002) are increasingly inclined to believe that the best way forward for all is to "rely upon their own forces" as much as possible. As Rist (2002) argues, there is much to be gained from mobilization within one's own community, "Very quickly, self-confidence liberates people's initiative, restored social ties lead to the revival of solidarity, refusal to obey the old powers opens up new ways not only of opting out but also of acquiring new resources." Similarly, Nolan argues that the most important form of solidarity worldwide is the solidarity that exists and is created between the marginalized themselves." (Nolan, 1985, p.9)

Thus, our discussion to this point does not mean the North abandons half the globe but rather that we actively create a new paradigm of engagement, one that allows students from the civically disengaged and hyperconsumptive United States to learn from those for whom these are not dominant cultural descriptions. (Sachs, 2009; Collier, 2007; Rist, 2002, p.245) Some of the historically significant ways in which societies have met challenges and sustained themselves is by emulation and cultural diffusion. The former, as described by economic historian Erik Reinert involves a desire to equal or surpass others (Reinert 2007, p.15). The latter as described by African historian Christopher Ehret involves the spread of ideas from one society to another (Ehret 2002, p.16-17). Engagement would allow for both emulation and cultural diffusion, historically proven means of altering societies for the better as opposed to the ideals embedded in the rich/poor dichotomy. A "rich/poor" polarity assumes that a hoped-for future of shared plenty is in the offing; that the poor and poorer countries will get richer and then many, if not all, of their problems will be solved as a result.⁴

From the community perspective, service learning opportunities where the hosts have expert roles, knowledge is multidirectional, and there is an opportunity for dialogue about current social issues are far more "on equal ground with their university counterparts (d'Arlach et. al., 2009, p.6). Ideally, this dialogue would be more than one-time or short-term, since longer-term relationships are more fruitful (Tyron, 2008). Crabtree argues that communities with strong problem-solving capacities and self-sustaining organizations make more effective sites for international service learning. Thus, the model that we are building here is substantiated by recent research as being in line with some of the best practices in service-learning. Further, as successful development and institution-building are always local initiatives (Shivakumar 2005), community members from strong communities teaching students how to engage in civic action is one of the best ways we can conceive of promoting service-learning. In turn, the community gains contacts and knowledge that others know and care that they have something to offer, something that turns the colonial, development and rich/poor relationships on their heads (Crabtree 2008, p.30).

Thus, we would like to see our community service learning courses and semesters step back from the dominant poverty/wealth paradigm on which they are based and engage our students in larger questions about our common human plight. A focus on the economic poor obscures other kinds of poverty, such as

social poverty; tends to promote hierarchies rather than horizontal linkages, or commonalities; and tends to make those engaged in service-learning charity-performers and charity-receivers rather than citizens.⁵

RE-DESIGN OF A SERVICE-LEARNING IN GHANA

In the spirit of thinking anew about our programs, a re-design of the service-learning component of Academic Service Learning Semester in Ghana is being envisioned at Xavier University (in Cincinnati, Ohio), with a goal of promoting citizenship and collective action that explicitly re-focuses the relationship between students involved and the local population with whom students spend their service-learning time during the semester. The following then is but one possible scenario for beginning to re-design our semesters which take about ten students to a foreign country to live with families, do service work, and take classes (including language, Theology, and Service Learning among others). As a class, during the preparation seminar that is held the semester before departure, and during the pre-departure week of activities, we would first decide what are the biggest challenges to creating a humane and sustainable existence for each of us. Then we would identify moments in which we felt potent as well as impotent in the face of such challenges. We would then construct for ourselves some possible paths/plans for collective action upon our return.

But most of the work would not be able to be done until we reached Ghana, for to work equally with Ghanaians, they must be part of the planning process (Boyle-Baise et.al., 2006). Thus what follows is put forward in the spirit of helping us think about these issues in a new way but with a deep recognition that no such program can be conceived or planned from our perspective alone. The first few weeks would be spent with those close to the program designing what might become a mentoring program. Then the following weeks would be spent with the students making contact with an individual (who would become a mentor) who is working in an organizational or informal way to face the challenges of our current economic system. Ghanaians close to the program would identify these mentors. The student would spend approximately five hours a week with a mentor on a schedule and in ways that are agreeable to the host. These hours could mostly involve time shadowing the mentor in his/her work of societal transformation. This experience, ideally, would be something close to the “theology of accompaniment” in that the students would be learning how Ghanaians interpret their own circumstances and priorities.⁶

During the final four weeks, the student would continue to spend about five hours with his/her mentor but also now begin to engage in reflection and conversation with his/her mentor about the overlap between the students’ concerns and those of his/her mentor, about the overlap between the mentor’s work and that that the student has begun to design for him or herself upon returning home. The aim of these conversations would be to identify for these Ghanaians what feels the most empowering and the most disempowering for them as they seek to create a more humane and sustainable existence for themselves and their families and communities.

In this way, both Ghanaians and North Americans would be thinking together about their cultural and institutional strengths. North Americans would not be trying to change anything or even necessarily to perform tangible work within Ghana or within a Ghanaian agency in the span of a few weeks. They would, instead, seek to learn from a different context the ways in which others have sought to create better situations in the face of narrowly-conceived systems and ideas. And, as they return home, the experiences and stories of their mentor would, of necessity, become part of their thinking about a sustainable and humane future. Just as in accompaniment, in this process, Ghanaians are put in a position of equality with their North American mentees, as they demonstrate from their own experiences and backgrounds how they seek to create social change from the periphery. They also have a chance to reflect on their actions, ideas and successes with an international audience. Ghanaians and U.S. students mutually seek active engagement with those in power not because some of them are materially poor and others materially rich, but because they know that the way forward is through building social capital and reducing our obsession with material capital.

NOTES

¹ Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and others have criticized the excessive focus on GDP growth rates, and their work has led to the United Nations' Human Development Report, with its broader index of welfare indicators, the Human Development Index. (United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

² For a cogent analysis of "development" and the historical makings of a Northern belief in growth as the Holy Grail, see Rist, 2002, p.46. For the quotation, see p. 76.

³ The last term comes from Mitroff and Silvers, 2008, p.28. "Supercapitalism" is Robert Reich's term from Reich, 2007); "Disaster Capitalism" is Naomi Klein's from Klein, 2007.

⁴ For examples of this argument, see Friedman, 2005. Both Robert McNamara, former president of the World Bank and Renato Ruggiero, the first Director-General of the WTO have made statements that inequality and poverty are on their way out. For McNamara's philosophy see Peters, 2008. Ruggiero said in 1998, "the potential for eradicating global poverty in the early part of the next century—a utopian notion even a few decades ago, but a real possibility today" thanks to the new world order, quoted in Chang, 2002, 15. He also noted that the "borderless economy" had the potential to 'equalize relations between countries and regions,' quoted in Reinert, 2007, xviii.

⁵ Benjamin Barber's most recent book (Barber, 2007) discusses the mechanisms by which our market economy has worked to create consumers of us all rather than citizens, a process that our service-learning work is embedded in.

⁶ Jim Barnett, O.P., "Accompaniment from El Salvador on . . .", 3, accessed at <http://www.domcentral.org/preach/accomp.htm>. Boyle-Baise et al note that in one situation in Mexico, students who were asked to serve through accompaniment, not engaging in acts of direct service, after four days asked to "build a school or make some other visible difference in local life," 23. Clearly, a move away from service will be challenging for some students.

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