



What Does Love Look Like Politically?

Bob Seidel

Many people who have become practitioners and advocates of service-learning have done so at least partially because of concern about perceived social, economic, and cultural injustices. But service-learning, as most of us know it, does not necessarily address those perceived injustices effectively. In fact, the recent report from the Service-Learning Diversity/Equity Project, authored by Verna Cornelia Simmons and Pamela Toole, suggests that service-learning faces some big issues in the areas of diversity and social justice. Two of their findings bring attention to these matters:

- There is a fundamental lack of consensus about both the central mission of service-learning and how this mission is tied to issues of social change/justice or charity and helping others.
- Diversity and equity are critical to the culture, growth, and progress of the service-learning movement, although the field struggles to integrate diversity.

The report, based in part on dozens of in-depth interviews with people experienced in service-learning, makes a number of valuable recommendations, including:

- Clarify the mission of service-learning.
- Clarify the importance of diversity and equity to the growth of the service-learning field.

A big part of the challenge of clarifying the mission of service-learning is that we hold among us many different ideas of what “diversity,” “equity,” and “social justice” are as well as of their importance in society generally and in service-learning particularly. What are we really talking about when we use such words? Can we accomplish important and challenging shared purposes if our common language is vague? Those of us concerned about the social and historical role of service-learning need to address these issues.

To encourage discussion in this arena, Gwenda Greene of Benedict College and the National Service-Learning Exchange, Southern Region, and I developed workshops for the 2002 Southern Institute on Service-Learning (“Diverse Perspectives: Do We Know ‘Social Justice’ When We See It?”) and the 2003 National Service-Learning Conference (“Diversity and Social Justice Challenges in Service-Learning”), both of which I facilitated. In these sessions, participants talked about what “social justice” and “diversity” meant to them as well as the role individuals’ life experiences play in shaping their ideas and the implications they have for service-learning. The Service-Learning Diversity/Equity Project has consciously chosen to focus its efforts first on racial and ethnic issues. In our workshops, the discussion gravitated toward that same focus.

The following notes attempt to reflect some of the thoughts expressed in these conversations, often (inadequately) recorded on flipcharts. They may suggest issues for reflection and for discussion of ways to improve service-learning programming among students, teachers, program administrators, and other community members.

Diversity

- It’s about learning from people’s differences and what they have in common.

- Does America have, and do we favor, a societal “melting pot” or a “tossed salad”?
- What is “white privilege” and how can service-learning combat it rather than reinforce it?
- Service-learning can help participants see things from diverse perspectives (multicultural education). To what extent is this orientation a luxury of white privilege in practice, if not in principle?
- Does the term “diversity” serve as a euphemism for more explicit and political language about systems of oppression and challenges to them?
- In what ways does service-learning exploit those it claims to serve?
- Are there “systems of oppression” in society? Or can we ameliorate specific social disparities without deep and wide systemic change?
- How do we define the “dominant culture” and what are its impacts on service-learning?
- Some people feel that, as service-learning has moved from the margins of education toward the mainstream, it has moved from a role of critiquing educational and other social systems toward cooptation into “the system.” Is this true? How many people in the service-learning movement care about this? What, if anything, should we do about it?
- Discussions of diversity often tend to focus on some phenomena more than others. Social or economic class often does not get the attention it deserves or seems buried within discussions of homelessness, hunger, or other consequences of class relationships.
- The service-learning movement needs to create “safe spaces” to discuss socially and politically sensitive issues.

“When I was in college, I went to sign up to be a tutor. The student staffing the tutorial office said, ‘All we have left is a white kid. Is that okay?’ (I’m white.) He was more concerned with giving me a ‘diversity experience’ than with the child’s learning problem.”

—The Author

Love

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Continued

In one conversation, some folks expressed the concern that they had originally embraced service-learning because it was “outside the system”; it raised hard questions about how we live and the institutions that serve or control us. It encouraged us to work on solving social problems as part of our education; it was deeply meaningful education and exposed the shallowness of so much other teaching and learning. But, as it has become institutionalized by schools and in legislation, students and practitioners have increasingly faced frustration. Probably the most common challenging situation occurs when students advocate for policy changes that bureaucrats, politicians, business leaders, and community opinion leaders find threatening and somehow inappropriate, particularly when it comes from a program in a public institution or otherwise using public dollars. The result can be a challenge to the very existence of the service-learning program. By its own widespread use, service-learning seems to have lost some of its ability to innovate and challenge. Some old hands find this demoralizing.

Social justice is...

- about equitable relationships. But what are equitable relationships? It's hard to come up with a short definition that doesn't use other words that need definition.
- about meeting basic needs for everybody in a nonviolent way plus “something.”
- what love looks like politically.
- about treating everyone the same way.
- about equal access to resources and opportunities.
- about advocating resolution (rather than amelioration) of social problems.
- about addressing structural issues/ root causes.

Social justice involves learning. Does democracy conflict with social justice? What if the majority wants to do harm to or exploit or ignore the needs of the minority? When students say, for example, that they want to do tutoring, should our programs require them to explore the underlying systemic causes of group differences in learning reading and then offer them options, including advocacy for education reform as well as tutoring, as a meaningful response to what concerns them? Are we doing harm when we structure our programs around specific activities rather than around addressing issues?

These are generally not new questions and discussions, but they continue to generate intense and important conversations. Some of us feel more comfortable than others addressing the systemic roots of the community problems that service-learning often engages. The service-learning movement clearly needs “safe spaces” to encourage such discussion.

In the 90-minute workshops I facilitated, most folks did not know each other going in and had to make assumptions or learn very quickly about the attitudes and beliefs of others in the room. In addition, it took most of the sessions' time to put people's issues on the table and little time was available for deeper discussion of any of them.

I hope that we can continue to develop forums for meaningful reflection on our practice and theory. That will take time and effort. I personally do not believe that the service-learning movement will ever speak with one voice on its mission, but discussion around mission can still help each of us to clarify and advance our own thinking and practice and can help us to identify and collaborate with others in the movement who share the same ideas. Such discussion in itself should enhance the relevance, quality, and impact of service-learning.

Diversity, equity, and social justice: “What are we really talking about when we use such words?”

References

Simmons, V.C., & Toole, P. (April 2003), “Service-Learning Diversity/Equity Project Research Report.” For The National Youth Leadership Council Service-Learning Diversity Project.

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