

## Service-Learning Pathologies and Prognoses

Roy Schwartzman, Ph.D.  
Professor  
Department of Communication Studies  
109 Ferguson Building  
University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Greensboro, NC 27402-6170  
[docroy@triad.rr.com](mailto:docroy@triad.rr.com)  
<http://www.roypoet.com>

Paper presented at the National Communication Association convention  
Chicago, IL  
November 2007

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Abstract: This essay addresses how to cope with several potential barriers to implementing effective service-learning projects. The discussion builds on experiences of developing and refining service-learning in upper-division communication courses, including several years conducting Communicating Common Ground service-learning projects. Difficulties arise in three areas: the institutional and physical setting, student attitudes, and community partners.

Challenges in the setting include coping with rural environments with few community resources and with centralized vs. diffused administration of service-learning programs. Student attitudinal issues include reinforcement of existing prejudices, persistent elitism, and misplaced measures of the value of service-learning. Community partner factors address selecting appropriate tasks for student volunteers and dealing with the strains that service-learning places on organizational infrastructure. The paper concludes by reflecting on the most effective ways to integrate service-learning with active civic engagement. Paradoxically, the goal of service-learning may be to render itself unnecessary by developing the social structures to redress social injustice.

## Service-Learning Pathologies and Prognoses

Computer guru Marvin Minsky (1995, p. 156) praises Freud's concept of "negative expertise": knowing what not to do. According to Minsky, more meticulous attention to failures and their causes would advance computer science much faster because programmers would study and learn from their mistakes rather than repeat them. Minsky used this process of heuristics to develop artificial intelligence. The same holds for practitioners of service-learning. A massive and rapidly expanding body of literature touts the promises of service-learning, with theoretical optimism fueled by glowing case studies that pile success upon success. While this literature certainly has proven important and useful, little research has been devoted to the obstacles attendant to implementing service-learning projects (Jones, 2002). Quite the contrary: rapid chronicling of service-learning projects has outpaced research that can anticipate, identify, prevent, or correct potential problems. The proliferation of service-learning has outpaced systematic studies of best practices (Eyler, 2002; Densmore, 2000). Billig and Furco (2002) lament that "there is a glaring lack of research attention to issues that have plagued the field of service-learning and little study of its phenomenal growth" (p. 222). As Minsky suggested, perhaps devoting more attention to negative expertise would enrich understanding and improve future practice.

Kolenko et al. (1996) enumerate several barriers to implementing service-learning programs, including reluctance of faculty to participate in service, organizational resistance to perceived outsiders in the community, limited institutional funding, and lack of recognition in promotion and tenure considerations. This essay complements such research by directly engaging difficulties that actually have arisen in implementing service-learning projects based on several iterations of campus-community partnerships in three upper-division communication

courses: persuasion, propaganda, and the senior capstone (known as senior seminar). The pathologies are pinpointed as arising within three contexts: the service-learning environment, student mindsets and skills, and community partners. The prognosis for improvement reflects adjustments made to service-learning programs in several iterations of Communicating Common Ground (CCG) projects implemented at a small mid-western university in a rural setting. Although the CCG projects spanned several courses over more than three years, all involved campus-community partnerships to implement programs that would improve appreciation for diversity and foster respect for different population groups.

### **Environmental and Institutional Factors**

#### **Urban Bias**

Typically service-learning triangulates the partners in the educational enterprise, linking educational institutions with community service organizations to serve a clientele. This trifurcated structure (college/community/clientele), however, is not always feasible. Sometimes, particularly in rural settings, organizational structures do not already exist to fulfill community needs, such as advocacy for underrepresented groups or care for underprivileged populations. For example, in the locale of the projects discussed in this essay, no local community organizations existed as advocates for African-Americans, Jews, Muslims, or many other groups in a geographically isolated, rural county. The absence of community organizations as advocates for specific populations might signify the urgency of devising educational programs that orient local residents to those groups and their needs. On the other hand, working beyond the purview of formal advocacy or anti-discrimination organizations did not limit students to developing familiar, “tried and true” projects.

The geographic inequity in service opportunities hardly receives mention in service-learning literature. The typical picture of service-learning portrays a community awash in service agencies craving student volunteers. The reality is that far more service opportunities arise in urban than in rural areas (Télez, 2000). A latent urban bias infuses discussions of service-learning. Chronic labor shortages in rural community service agencies can limit the ability of community partners to provide adequate on-site supervision. The personnel limitations often plague rural environments where service organizations maintain skeleton crews and lack resources to train and oversee a large influx of student volunteers.

The environment also shapes service-learning in more ideological ways. Where formal service organizations already abound, the options for service-learning tend to recur in those prevailing organizations. This return to existing institutional service supports the mindset of “institutionalism,” that service has greatest effect when conducted within existing social structures (Vogelgesang & Rhoads, 2007). Grass roots activism, such as rallies, demonstrations, sit-ins, or strikes, receives almost no attention as a legitimate service-learning activity. Why? The customary structure of service-learning operates with the familiar chain of command that governs social services: work within existing organizational frameworks. Thus it might have been fortunate that the CCG projects often provided diversity programs directly to the public instead of engaging with service organizations (had they existed). The independence of “direct” service-learning entails risks and benefits. The risk is that projects might have less structure without agency oversight. The advantage is that, unconstrained by agency bureaucracies, the projects can address social needs in more innovative ways.

## **Centralized and Diffused Approaches**

The degree to which service-learning is centrally guided and implemented affects the nature of service-learning projects. The CCG projects discussed in this essay were conducted at a university that had minimal institutional infrastructure for service-learning. Each instructor located and recruited community partners, developed assessments, and oriented students to service-learning. Ad hoc service-learning initiatives can allow greater flexibility in developing service-learning projects, since individual initiatives do not pass through the additional bureaucratic level of a service-learning office. Faculty also may find ad hoc service-learning programs much less restrictive because there exists no structured monitoring of service-learning beyond the agreements reached between faculty and community partners. Decentralized service-learning removes the perception that the service-learning staff is looking over the shoulder of faculty, perhaps unduly restricting the options for developing partnerships. Resentment of this oversight can run high, especially when service-learning offices are staffed with non-academics or with faculty outside a practitioner's discipline.

Furco (2002) identifies centralized service-learning programs as an indicator of a more advanced stage of service-learning development. Centralized service-learning reflects greater institutional commitment because of its greater staffing and funding requirements. More important, centralized service-learning can enable more consistent relationships to be maintained between community partners and the academic institution. Thus centralized service-learning programs can assure a baseline level of academic rigor, formality of partnerships, and training for faculty and students more than decentralized programs typically can enact. Institutional oversight of service-learning can monitor the quality of community partnerships, continuously educating faculty and community members about best practices. Most important, a service-

learning office can match courses and instructors with the community organizations most suitable for achieving instructional objectives.

## **Student Factors**

### **Attitudinal Backlash**

Pierre Bourdieu and associates (1994) observed that students from privileged class backgrounds tend to view their university education as “a search for symbolic confirmation of their hereditary right to occupy positions of power and prestige” (p. 101). Some students experience service-learning as reinforcement of their ethnic provincialism and class snobbery. Exposure to and collaboration with unfamiliar populations drives students past their comfort zones, sometimes retrenching rather than challenging pre-existing mindsets. One student who was collecting oral histories of a dwindling rural Jewish community temporarily refused to contact elderly congregants of a synagogue. His initial contact with a senior citizen who wanted to record some recollections reminded this student that he disliked dealing with “old people.” A graduating senior who worked with seventh graders at an impoverished rural school enjoyed the experience, but in his final presentation repeatedly referred to the youngsters as “rubes” and “rednecks.”

If students have not been thoroughly inculcated into how to approach encounters with other cultures, intercultural interactions might bolster pre-existing stereotypes because students seek confirmation of familiar beliefs (Steinke et al., 2002). Results from some CCG projects revealed this pattern. In an assessment administered to 23 Caucasian high school sophomores before the service-learning project began, all answered “yes” to the question: “Do you think racism is still prevalent in our society?” Although all students correctly identified who Rosa Parks was and generally scored well on factual information, racial tolerance might not have been

internalized as deeply as factual recall. Asked when Black History Month occurs, two students wrote that there should be a Caucasian History Month. Midterm evaluations from college students in the Propaganda course showed resistance to discussions and activities about Jews. Comments included: “This is a Jewish sympathy course” and “Too much about Jews.” Never were any such comments received from students in courses with service-learning projects that involved African-Americans, Muslims, the elderly, the mentally handicapped, or other populations.

These experiences reveal that service-learning projects risk a boomerang effect, “actually reinforcing the negative stereotypes and assumptions that students bring with them to the class environment” (Jones, 2002, p. 10). Erickson & O’Connor (2000) explain that students often encounter marginalized populations in service contexts that confirm their marginal status, “so the contact may have the boomerang effect of confirming and hardening preexisting biases and prejudices, even though the educational objective was just the opposite” (p. 66). For example, concentrating on the Holocaust as the defining experience for Jewish culture reinforces the status of Jews as victims. Similarly, limiting interactions with the elderly to nursing homes reaffirms their image as isolated, possibly unhealthy, dependent, and not physically part of the community. Indeed, Gasiorski (2005) found that privileged students who embarked on service-learning projects without sufficient prior grounding in multicultural education used the experience as means to reinforce their colonialist elitism toward underprivileged populations. Often these same students individualize the disadvantages other groups suffer, deflecting critical attention from the social structures and practices that also reinforce their own privilege (Boyle-Baise & Efiom, 2000).



## **Spectatorship**

DeVitis, Johns, and Simpson (1998) explicitly note that students require communication skill development for them to perform community service effectively: “We need to habituate the student to education toward community by developing crucial skills in discourse and communication” (p. 9). The issue is not simply habituation, but functionality. Although all the students involved in these service-learning projects were communication majors, many lacked fundamental skills in making and maintaining interpersonal contacts. When trying to secure guest speakers for community-wide programs, many college students found themselves at a loss to locate the required presenters. Not generalizing their research skills to situations beyond the library or the classroom, students needed to learn how to use organizational and personal contacts to blaze a trail that would lead to the desired speaker. This situation adds credence to studies that show large discrepancies between the information management skills students claim to have and the skills they can demonstrate in practice (Maughan, 2001).

Students also had to learn persistence in making personal contacts. In the university environment, the primary focus of faculty and staff is to serve students. Not so in the community. Students expressed shock when their phone calls were not returned or appointments were not kept. Progress reports during the semester revealed substantial anger and frustration directed toward the community. For example, one student sharply criticized a community organization for not having voice mail. Eventually the student attitudes matured as they became less self-absorbed, recognizing that their own class performance was not the primary concern of community members beyond campus. Rather than stoke their anger and stroke their egos, student reflection shifted away from blame and toward considering the competition for the attention of

community activists and agencies. Some students noted that community members might be unresponsive precisely because their organizations lack resources to respond promptly.

These students' skill deficits did not result from apathy or incompetence, but from inadequate preparation for the under-structured and under-resourced nature of many service-learning environments. Although the students felt and sometimes acted helpless in these situations, they actually were confronted with an opportunity for empowerment (Speck, 2001). In their traditional classes and co-curricular activities, most of these students played the role of spectators when they encountered guest speakers. Not faced with initiating contact or confirming appointments, they customarily had been audiences receiving the benefits of speakers whose presence was provided for them. The lectures series at most universities engages students mainly as observers who witness the speeches. Instead, the students in the service-learning projects were empowered—and challenged—to engage speakers in a radically different way, shouldering responsibility for securing them, publicizing the event, confirming the appearances, and managing the programs. This conversion from spectator to engaged participant plays a key role in the power of service-learning to transform students into active citizens (Murphy, 2004). Approximately two-thirds of the college students were public relations majors, yet most had not coordinated an event until their service-learning project. Contrary to their experience with faculty and staff, students confronted the need for persistence after a missed appointment or lack of response. One student observed:

I have learned from our speakers how to relate effectively. Just when I thought I had informed them enough, one of them would send me an email wanting more information. I found that you can never over-inform a guest speaker; it's better to be over-prepared than

under-prepared. So, this project means to me that I am more prepared to relate to speakers and it has helped me hone my people skills.

University faculty and staff try to accommodate students whenever possible. In service-learning the relationship becomes more mutual, with students also accommodating the limited time and resources of community organizations. Students are no longer the “customers” who must be pleased at all costs (Schwartzman & Phelps, 2002). A student astutely observed in his final reflection paper that he had learned the importance of compromise. Service-learning taught many students valuable lessons in perseverance and assertiveness. Taking liberties with John Milton, “They do not serve who only stand and wait.”

### **Service Snobbery**

Some students may approach service-learning with an “I don’t do windows” mentality, believing some tasks too menial and unworthy of serious dedication. This attitude seems more prevalent among students who define their education in narrowly vocational terms, complaining that some service-learning activities fail to train them in relevant job skills (as if education were equivalent to training). Similar concerns arise when students lack the experience to understand why some apparently menial tasks serve important purposes. For example, one service-learning project in the senior capstone teamed a group of students with the local animal shelter. This shelter suffered from chronic overpopulation, often having to reject animals and accelerate their euthanization schedule. Initially the students complained that the animal shelter was an “unprofessional” environment so uncivilized that it that lacked voice mail. The students also resented that they were asked to walk the dogs as part of their service. “We’re communication majors; we shouldn’t have to do this,” became a weekly refrain during class meetings. The problem stemmed partially from a mentality of entitlement, as if the students could remain

distant from the day-to-day problem and offer solutions from afar, never encountering the daily pressures that chronic animal overpopulation caused. Another part of the problem arose from failure to approach the situation as a communication problem.

The students eventually recognized that walking the dogs helped acclimate them to the issues the animal shelter faced. Volunteers must gain some understanding of organizational culture in order to determine how best to serve. The overwhelming demands of keeping the animals, fed, healthy, and clean quickly demonstrated the severity of the issue. The turning point came when every experience began to connect with communication issues. The superficial communication issue was to promote animal adoptions, spaying, and neutering. More deeply, the issue transformed into the commodification of animals. In an agricultural area abounding with horses and cows, why would domestic pets have so little value? The answer was that the dogs and cats had no apparent commercial value. For the first time, some students began to realize that fuzzy puppies and cuddly kitties had little impact on animal adoption rates. They recognized the competing discursive forces of commodification and emotional attachment. Cuteness succumbed to commercial value. Without suffering the frustration of dealing with orphan animals and their needs, the complexity of the issue never would have emerged.

Service-learning might seem mundane to students because it does not need to extend to exotic locales or dramatic causes that snag news headlines. More often, service-learning remains embedded in the everyday struggle to improve the lives of people close to home. bell hooks explains how the ongoing nature of service can dull its allure and thereby reduce the potential for long-term social activism.

Like a charity one has donated capital to and need never give again because the proof of generosity was already on record, their one-time contribution could take the place of any

ongoing constructive confrontation with class politics in the United States. The starving in a foreign country are always more interesting than the starving who speak your language who might want to eat at your table, find shelter in your house, or share your job. (hooks, 2000, p. 148)

Service from a distance might require only mailing a check or some other documentable sign of support. Service learning, however, gravitates toward serving alongside community partners, service with an ally in a cause rather than service to a recipient that deserves sympathy.

### **Attenuated Empathy**

Teaching respect for a population group remains futile as long as they remain known only as abstractions. Before their service-learning project began, one group surveyed a sophomore class (n = 25) at the local high school. Twenty (80%) did not know what anti-Semitism was, and 21 (84%) claimed never to have encountered a Jewish person. In pre-tests of another sophomore class at the same high school (n = 38), 24 students (63%) stated that they knew “nothing” about Jewish beliefs, with 2 other students listing their only knowledge as “The men wear funny hats.” Direct interaction with marginalized populations thus became crucial to compensate for lack of first-hand knowledge. A student from the same recognized the knowledge gap, commenting in the final reflection essay: “Before this project I never really realized how much I DIDN’T know about Jewish people and the Holocaust.” Since peer pressure and apathy foster racist attitudes (Short, 1999), concrete experience with underrepresented groups could allow the students to feel more empathy and concern for them as individuals.

Lack of direct experience with non-Christians allowed the high school students to express complacency about prejudice. Morden and Demson (2003) contend that minimal contact with Jews could lead Christians to become indifferent toward anti-Semitism since its effects would be

invisible. Responses to a post-test administered at the conclusion of the project showed that some high school sophomores saw anti-Jewish attitudes as a problem, but not an immediate threat.

When asked, “Do you think that there is a problem with negative attitudes toward Jewish culture in this area?” a student answered: “No, because we don’t have many Jewish people around here.”

In a similar vein, one service-learning student who surveyed an undergraduate teacher education class (n = 17) found that 2 respondents did not plan to teach about multicultural issues if their classes did not already have much cultural diversity.

Service-learning can impel productive social change if students have “the opportunity to personalize social issues” in the educational experience (Jones, 2002, p. 14). Direct encounters with the human impact of social problems can disrupt comfortable assumptions about universal equality.

The opportunity to personalize complex social issues and to see the real effects of social and public policies on the life situations of certain individuals does more to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions than anything else we have designed into our service-learning courses. (Gasiorski, 2005, p. 19).

One student noted a similar effect from two other projects: an exhibit of art created by mentally handicapped children and a panel discussion featuring several Muslims explaining the tenets of Islam.

For instance, the group that set out to design a campaign for the mentally handicapped basically provided an outlet for the community to see this population in action. They reduced the foreignness of this population with up-close and personal interaction. Our group, on the other hand, examined the culture from the population’s own point of view and heard personal testimonies. This included the repetition of a main theme that the

Islamic religion is one of peace. ... By documenting the panel discussion on videotape, the message of tolerance can be disseminated over and over again.

The panel on Islam aired in its entirety repeatedly on the local cable television station. The high school sophomores who collaborated in learning about different religions comprised an ideal age group for such a project. Adolescents are especially receptive to learning about and becoming socialized into religious practices (Smith et al, 2003), so they are eager to encounter different religious traditions.

Experience with the CCG projects revealed how intercultural appreciation and respect for diversity needs to grow from the inside out. Students must recognize their own cultural identities, including ways that their heritage might have contributed to systematic oppression or skewed accounts of history. Respect for diversity requires acknowledgment that differences do exist among cultures, and equality does not always operate as the default or norm in multicultural settings. Diversity education needs to personalize prejudice by developing awareness that any person could be the next instigator or object of bigotry. Intolerance has little personal resonance when no members of other cultures are present. The homogeneous classroom presents few encounters that forces reconsideration of one's own cultural norms. Students may find it difficult to conceive of being an object of discrimination, and self-serving bias often hides the potential for anyone to consider their own actions intolerant. Recognizing that intolerance need not arise solely from overt maliciousness (the extreme cases such as Hitler), but from taken-for-granted privileges manifest in everyday experiences (such as the elitist assumption that Hurricane Katrina victims had personal transportation to escape, a personal support network to house them, and phone service to contact family) could lead to realization that "I could be next"—as perpetrator or object of intolerance.

## The Clock Watchers

In their zeal to quantify service-learning impact, many faculty measure project productivity in hours spent. Some baseline time requirement seems appropriate to set realistic expectations for duties and to assure a minimum level of participation. A fairly common story from colleagues, however, attests to students inflating their time records to give the appearance of higher productivity. While some of this behavior qualifies as simple dishonesty, it raises deeper issues about student perceptions of service-learning. Just as dissatisfied employees “watch the clock” anticipating the moment they can leave, some students have learned to equate service with “doing time.” No wonder. From elementary school to the judicial system, service becomes attached to punitive experiences as much as educational opportunities. Instead of “doing time” in jail, convicted criminals “do time” through “sentences” of community service. Service acquires an aura of compulsory time spent, devoid of intrinsic value. Faculty and community partners may inadvertently reinforce such associations, confusing quantity of time spent on a project with the quality of a project’s outcome. Tallies of student labor hours have become common sights in institutional reports of service-learning activities. Some estimate of average service time per week seems reasonable for students to plan their schedules. Service quality, however, is not measurable by a stopwatch. Service-learning is not about “doing time,” but about doing tasks that address pressing social problems and needs.

Students might not embrace clock watching as readily if faculty and institutional practitioners had more varied and sophisticated ways of documenting the impact of service-learning. Using cumulative hours as the primary “proof” of service-learning’s benefits recalls the traditional measure of industrial age effort. Instead of relying primarily hours expended, service-learning measurements of efficacy could document impact in many other ways. For example, a



campus-community partnership could track numbers of clients served, measure quality of life indicators before and after the project, longitudinally track the course of clients receiving services, generate publicity and keep clipping files to document increased community visibility, and quantify the influx of donations or volunteers from non-student sources. All these indicators satisfy the desire (or requirement) to quantify impact, and combining several such indicators gives a more thorough picture of a project's results. Broader measures of service-learning effects might broaden the minds of students—and perhaps administrators—to look beyond the clock.

### **Community Partner Factors**

#### **Appropriate Activities**

From the beginning of any service-learning project, community partners need full involvement in devising and approving appropriate tasks for student volunteers. Often the community partners lack full access to or understanding of the educational objectives at the heart of service-learning projects. Failure to include the community organization as a full partner may result in the students entering the prevailing frameworks for incorporating voluntary labor: marginalization or indentured servitude. These labels summarize common concerns among students in internships, and they apply equally to service-learning. In the marginalization scenario, the students do not become functional partners in the organization's operation. Fuzzy integration of course objectives with the organization's mission and everyday function relegate students to the periphery of daily operations. The result: students become lackeys, performing tasks that have little educational value (e.g., brewing coffee, sweeping floors, etc.). This syndrome should not be confused with so-called menial labor (as perceived by the service snobs discussed earlier), since what might appear as lowly tasks can yield important educational

benefits. Marginalization distances students from the substance of work that the organization does.

In contrast to marginalization, the indentured servitude scenario blurs boundaries between student volunteers and full-fledged organizational members. This situation may arise when dedicated, effective student workers prove so valuable to an organization that their role evolves far beyond the scope of the service-learning project. A community partner may assign duties too extensive for volunteers to handle, taking advantage of the free labor to make student volunteers unpaid full-time employees. Well-intentioned on-site supervisors may not recognize appropriate limits to student involvement. Students, who may feel genuine connection with the organization, rarely turn down opportunities to deepen their commitment, especially when grades hang in the balance and they do not want to appear uncooperative.

The marginalization and indentured servitude scenarios, while depicting possibly extreme situations, point to the need for precise specification of student duties. Community partners and the faculty member should establish definite ranges of activities. Including concrete examples of expected and off-limits behavior helps establish a precedent for drawing appropriate boundaries.

### **Organizational Infrastructure**

Vernon and Foster (2002) caution: “Agencies need to develop and implement a strong infrastructure of resources to support and sustain a strong volunteer base” (p. 172). One of the challenges of service-learning—especially in a rural environment—is to assist community service organizations without debilitating their staff and resources from the rapid influx of new, temporary labor. Can the community partner devote necessary personnel or infrastructure to prepare volunteers for the tasks they will perform? If not, service-learning might kill community partners with kindness, overburdening the very agencies whose functionality should improve.

Several factors combine to conceal limitations with infrastructure. Community partners may be reluctant to report any shortcomings for fear of losing volunteer labor, especially if the organization has become dependent on this labor to serve its clientele effectively. Fearful of terminating a service partnership, and organization might overstate the willingness or ability of staff to monitor student volunteers. Obtaining accurate information about student participation from community partners presents another challenge. Grateful for any assistance, community partners may feel an obligation to supply only positive reports (Gelmon, 2003). After all, the risk of biting the hand that furnishes volunteers might be chronic labor shortages. Negative feedback might come across as ingratitude, and organizations would not want to jeopardize their campus partnerships.

Since community partners might not self-report potentially incriminating information, additional assessment sources could provide more detailed data. Students should assess not only the service experience itself, but also the quality of the supervisory staff's interactions with the students. Faculty and the service-learning office staff can set up regular observations of on-site activities. Most important, community partners may need periodic orientation and review regarding expectations that apply to students, faculty, and themselves. Many community partners may have a rich background with student supervision, but lack experience in identifying appropriate experiences consistent with a course's educational objectives. Continuing education of community partners becomes essential when the organization has high turnover. One of my student service groups arrived at the senior living center for what they thought would be another ordinary day. They discovered that their on-site supervisor had quit without informing them, and the new supervisor had to be oriented not only to the project but also to the concept of service-learning. While such a situation was unpredictable, mechanisms should be in place to provide

regular outreach to new community partners, offering consistent information and grounding in service-learning.

### **Lessons Learned About Civic Engagement**

While perhaps heuristically useful, the organizational scheme of this essay—covering environmental/institutional factors, student volunteers, and community partners—risks placing the responsibility for correction on only one party in the service-learning partnership. More accurately, all participants can collaborate in preventing or reducing the effects of the pathologies. For example, a student's skewed attitude about what counts as appropriate behavior in a service-learning project can be changed by an attitude adjustment. Realistically, however, attitudinal improvement should stem from measures all the partners can implement. For example, the student volunteer could gain a more realistic picture of service by more thoroughly researching the community partner. In addition, the community partner could formulate its needs more clearly so volunteers have more realistic expectations. The educational institution also might conduct more thorough needs assessments and matching of course objectives with service opportunities. Most snafus in service-learning can be solved best after careful examination of how the faculty/institution, student volunteers, and community partners can contribute to solutions. Since the pathologies probably did not arise from causes that can be assigned solely to one component of service-learning, they demand collaborative remedies. Just as successful prevention and treatment of illness requires active participation from the physician, the patient, and the patient's immediate family and friends, avoidance or escape from service-learning pathologies is just as much a team effort as the service-learning projects themselves.

Especially troubling, however, are studies that show the rate of civic activity has not kept pace with the amount of community service (Jacoby, 2003). While the amount of volunteer activity among college students has been rising, there has not been a concomitant increase in political involvement (McMillan & Harriger, 2002). This disconnect raises questions about whether and how long the enthusiasm for civic engagement persists among service-learning participants. Enthusiastic reports of service-learning activities accompany growing concern that students harbor deep reservations about political involvement as a solution to social problems (National Public Radio, 2003). It remains unclear whether service-learning translates into the sort of social advocacy that many service-learning proponents envision.

### **Limits to Sustainability**

Although sustainability has become a watchword of service-learning, the CCG experience reveals a more complicated situation. The duration of campus-community partnerships supposedly indicates the health of town-gown connections, but sustained service-learning may signify a structural pathology that creates continual need for supplementing community organizations with volunteer labor. Perhaps service-learning should strive for its own extinction.

Paradoxically the objective of service-learning should not be sustainability, but the opposite: to progress toward ending the need for such projects. The most successful service-learning partnerships are those that contribute to social changes that make communities more self-sufficient, reducing dependence on infusions of student labor. By compensating for chronic labor and resource shortages, service-learning projects might bolster the under-resourcing of social programs that created the need for service-learning within the community. In this way “amelioration serves to prop up the very structures that created the problems in the first place”

(Purpel, 1999, p. 101). For example, the local school district could rationalize not supporting intercultural programs aggressively, since they could rely on the university's Communicating Common Ground projects to infuse such events into the high school. Rosenberger (2000) recognizes that sustaining service organizations without addressing the reasons for the perpetual need of the services amounts to "what Freire called 'false generosity'—acts of service that simply perpetuate the status quo and thus preserve the need for service" (pp. 32-33).

### **Social Impact**

The results of service-learning need to be measured in ways that gauge proactive measures to address social injustice rather than reactive responses to factual questions. Macedo (1994) observes that calls for dialogue, for example, ring hollow if they result only in idle self-disclosure or chatting about social issues. He recommends a more aggressive community engagement "that turns experience into critical reflection and political action" (p. 182). To realize the connection between service-learning and citizenship, service projects need to go beyond simply using communities as laboratories to observe communication principles at work. Service-learning becomes transformative when students not only recognize but participate in the use of communication to effect social change (Murphy, 2004). Many college students began the CCG projects with benign assumptions that cultural enlightenment was the norm—until they conducted preliminary needs assessments of the community's intercultural knowledge. Results of the preliminary needs assessment spurred the college students to participate in the service-learning project more aggressively. Noting the knowledge gaps demonstrated by the high school sophomores served as a turning point for a student in the Propaganda course. She wrote in her final reflection essay:

I think the starting point for me actually caring about this project was when I got the first assessment results back. I learned through the assessment a lot of the students didn't know very much at all about the Holocaust or Jews. I saw that there was an actual need to educate these students.

Recognition of need added urgency to the project, which shifted from another class assignment to an opportunity for the student to improve the community's knowledge base and thereby prevent cultural misconceptions. Actually encountering intercultural ignorance had far more impact than the simulations and case studies manufactured in textbooks and classrooms (Murphy, 2004).

For programs that teach tolerance to have lasting effects, indignation at ignorance must transform into behaviors that counteract cultural misinterpretation and marginalization. More aggressive tracking of service-learning alumni can offer some evidence of whether students do practice civic engagement. For example, three undergraduates who participated in the CCG projects discussed in this chapter later took full-time jobs with AmeriCorps. It will be difficult to prove causation or even correlation between service-learning participation and civic action. Still, evidence of service-learning efficacy should extend beyond short-term, self-reported support of community participation (Schwartzman, 2002). Civic behaviors testify to responsible citizenship far more than attitudinal surveys that measure predispositions to act, especially when respondents probably recognize the most socially desirable responses (Pritchard, 2001). While self-reported enthusiasm for civic engagement might swell after a service-learning project (Spiezio, Baker, & Boland, 2005), observation of civic behavior would prove whether enthusiasm translates into action.

Experience with the CCG projects reveals a need for more direct confrontations with institutionalized prejudice. For example, consistently linking Judaism with the Holocaust risks historicizing anti-Semitism as an artifact of Nazi Germany. Answering a questionnaire that asked how many Jews the respondent knew personally, several college and high school students stated that they had no idea whether people they met were Jewish. Yet several high school respondents included in the post-project assessments spontaneous testimonials affirming their Christian faith. Never did anyone consider why Jews—especially in small communities—might have reservations about openly discussing or displaying their religious identity.

Several CCG projects tried to address potential ignorance or prejudice without sustaining cooperative relationships with the potential targets of discrimination. Usually the student groups remained content with inviting some speakers or staging an event rather than delve into the reasons why certain populations experience ongoing problems with intolerance. Consistent with what other researchers have found, the students exhibited “a tendency toward premature agreement that seeks to preserve the peace and the illusion of harmony,” proving that actively “engaging the Other—person, race, color, fraternity, gender, political persuasion, personality, point of view, social background—is *the* most difficult aspect of deliberative training” (McMillan & Harriger, 2002, p. 249). Premature agreement most often took the form of affirming in reflection essays that “everyone is the same.” Such cultural whitewashing, of course, fails to acknowledge that what counts as “equality” obeys normative values and benchmarks embedded in social power structures. The college and high school students who collaborated to develop community programs concentrated more on staging the events than confronting the uncomfortable reasons why intercultural encounters might have to be “staged” in the first place.

These comments should not imply that the service-learning projects were misguided or



unsuccessful. Instead, the experiences show that focus remained on the individual acts of service instead of on reconsidering social structures. Implementers of service-learning should recognize that learning flows two ways between classroom and community. Typically, students and instructors may understand the service component as an adjunct to the classroom, a laboratory for applying concepts to actual situations (Purpel, 1999). Learning, however, also can flow from the service experience to the classroom. as students encounter unexpected, puzzling, or frustrating situations in their service, they may seek explanations by turning to the course material—perhaps challenging or adding to concepts encountered in the classroom (Light, 2001). One danger arising from “reifying the notions of ‘server’ and ‘served’” (Henry, 2005, p. 60) is that students continually re-enact their roles as privileged helpers, the solvers of recurrent social problems. This perspective positions student volunteers as reactive, responding to social needs. A far different mindset positions students as a potentially transformative force, working to rectify the need for the social programs that provide the service opportunities for student volunteers. Rosenberger (2000) states the difference well: “The contrast, therefore, is between a revolutionary program aimed at bringing down the dominant elite and a service program operating within existing democratic structures” (p. 29). Students and faculty might choose to travel only a few steps along the road to revolution while still recognizing how far it can lead.

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