

Voices of Partnerships Within the Critical Service-Learning Framework

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the past three decades, service learning has become a major component in higher education. Heretofore, however, there has been limited published research that focuses on the community partner or that assesses the role of the community partner within the community-service-learning (CSL) model. This paper fills that gap by focusing on the community partner relationship as delineated by Mitchell (2008), the community partner's position in CSL, and the authentic relationships between the community partner, class, and instructor. Specifically, we address the following question: How do community partners articulate their voices within the CSL framework? This paper argues that community partners may articulate their own voices and concerns through the use of autoethnography, as well as through involvement in all stages of the CSL process, including course-planning and subsequent collaborative scholarship.

Keywords: autoethnography, community partner, critical service learning, traditional service learning, collaborative research

VOICES OF PARTNERSHIPS WITHIN THE CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Over the course of the past three decades, service learning, as a teaching pedagogy, has become a major component in higher education. Faculty in higher education recognize the value of partnering with community organizations outside of university structures to facilitate learning and to provide valuable service to the community (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Ostrander, 2004; Sandy & Holland, 2006). In the field of service learning, there are three established components that when present create a transformative

experience for students and provide valuable service to the community (Eyler & Giles, 2014). These three components are: (1) intentional service acts designed to enrich communities, (2) making a clear connection between the learning and the experience, and (3) ensuring that all participants engage in opportunities to reflect (Buckley, 2016). These three components effectively reinforce the "relationship between service and learning" (Jacoby, 2015, p. 2). Although the above have consistently been recognized as essential components to designing service-learning experiences for decades (e.g., Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Campus Compact, 2003; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Heffernan, 2001; Howard,

2001; Jacoby, 1996), the process and approach to service learning has also been met with challenges and critiques (e.g., Butin, 2005; Butin, 2006; Cruz, 1990; Mitchell, 2008; Stoecker, 2016; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004).

In 2008, Tania D. Mitchell published the important article “Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models.” In the article, Mitchell provides a model of service learning that allows for a democratized social-justice approach to educating students within the service-learning process. Mitchell (2008) labels the pedagogical approach as “Critical Service Learning” (CSL), differentiating it from traditional service learning with the inclusion of three additional components, all necessary in promoting a democratized approach to service learning. These are: (1) the redistribution of power so as to allow for the community partner to have a voice in the process, (2) the incorporation of a social change component, and (3) developing authentic relationships. According to Mitchell, when these three components are in place, students will experience the service component of the course more profoundly and often report it to be life changing (Mitchell, 2008, p. 62). This pedagogical approach also allows for a deepening relationship between the community partner, the class, and the instructor. The deepening of this relationship will then lead to ensuring that the partner’s needs are met by the sharing of long-range goals, having an active role in the development of the course as it relates to the service-learning component to make clear that the service-learning aspect meets the needs of the community, and that community values are transmitted throughout the service-learning project (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Research has found that CSL offers a transformative experience for students, and therefore the effect of such projects can offer lasting change for

communities in addressing social-justice issues. However, there has been no published research that focuses on the community partner or that assesses the role of the community partner within the CSL model. This paper fills that gap by focusing on the community partner relationship as delineated by Mitchell (2008), the community partner’s position in CSL, and the authentic relationships between the community partner, class, and instructor. Specifically, we address the following question: How do community partners articulate their voices within the CSL framework?

Community Partnerships Within the CSL Framework

Within CSL, the community partnership is built around the idea of authentic relationship-building. Mitchell (2008) defines an authentic relationship as being one that centers the community partner by cultivating long-term relationships that are sustained by “good communication” (p. 59), which allows for “on-going dialogue” (p. 60). This provides opportunities for two-way communication between the community partner and the faculty or campus that builds trust and mutual understanding (Strand et al., 2003). This authentic relationship also provides a commitment to community development. Mitchell (2008) suggests that the commitment to community development should include financial resources to address community issues, as the faculty and university become stakeholders in the community. Mitchell’s suggestion that the community partner and faculty/campus relationship within the CSL model is one that is rooted in a deep commitment to a common goal to address root causes of problems that exist within the community is also inherently tied to her idea of the redistribution of power. Mitchell’s redistribution of power suggests that community partners are at the

center of the relationship in the service-learning experience. Although Mitchell does not clearly outline the extent of the role of the community partner, she ascertains that the community partner should be central to the service-learning experience and suggests that this centralizing should also extend to the production of artifacts and research that stems from the service-learning experience. It is our belief that the community partner's voice and story should always be articulated in ways that the community partner finds appropriate. Allowing the community partner(s) to articulate their voice(s) within the reporting of the outcomes of the project should be seen as a normative aspect of CSL. Shifting power should not just occur during the project but also when reporting findings, sharing artifacts, and discussing other tangentials of a CSL project. The degree to which community partners decide to participate in the output of research that stems from a CSL project should be left open for them to decide. In some cases, that may include co-authoring research that articulates the various aspects of the service-learning process. Two of the co-authors of this paper are community partners who have worked with the faculty member for the past three years utilizing the CSL model. It was important to all three authors that the voices of the community partner be articulated without interruption or alteration to allow for them to have the power to speak their truth using their own voices. As a result, having the community partners serve as co-authors becomes a natural part of CSL.

METHODOLOGY

Although the benefits of CSL for student learning have been documented (Mitchell, 2007; Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012; Warren-Gordon & Santamaria Graff, 2018), there have been few studies that have given opportunities to the

community partners to articulate their voices regarding the service-learning (for example, Dorado & Giles, 2004). Existing studies focus on methodological techniques that provide a summative analysis of the community partners' voices via quantitative and qualitative methods (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2012; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Cruz & Giles, 2000). These methods have emphasized few if any of the voices of the community partners and do not operate within the framework of the CSL model, because the power of framing the narrative thus remains with the writer and not the community partner. Using an autoethnographic method allows for the community partners and faculty to articulate their lived experiences in their authentic voices. Autoethnography combines characteristics of ethnography and autobiography, and this approach allows for the researcher(s) to become participants in the research and for individuals to explore cultural understanding through self-observation, which results in individual narratives (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017; Waymer, 2008). Based on the above, we concluded that autoethnography is an appropriate tool for community partners and faculty to articulate their lived experiences within the CSL context.

The community partner for this service-learning initiative is the Whitely Community Council. Whitely is a community made up of over 1,500 residents in the city of [masked]. The community has been overwhelmed with crime, unemployment, and a lack of trust in social service agency support. Working with the Whitely Community Council allows students to develop a hands-on understanding of the relationship between individual problems and social issues and how social service agencies can help people who are at risk of committing crimes, as well as those who

have committed crimes and are under the supervision of the criminal-justice system. As a member of the Security Community of the Whitely Community Council, the faculty member has worked closely with members of the community and the executive council to develop an understanding of the needs of the community, their goals within the specific service-learning course, and the ways in which they seek to make their voices heard in the subsequent research. When determining the thematic concepts for the following sections of this study, we sat down together and discussed some of the themes that had developed from our previous conversations that could be used to construct this text. It was around those themes that we created the subsequent subheadings in this paper.

IN OUR VOICES: THE COMMUNITY PARTNER AND FACULTY PERSPECTIVE

Frank's Story

I serve as the President of the Whitely Community Council and have lived and worked for [masked] all my adult life. My work overlaps with my service in the community. The President of the Community Council is an elected position that requires I carryout many tasks often simultaneously. I work with the many organizations that support Whitely. My work with Dr. Warren-Gordon's class was seamless due to our working together on the Safety Committee. Dr. Warren-Gordon has a long history of partnering with Whitely, and we have always recognized the value of the relationship. We recognize that Whitely offers the community a unique opportunity to take advantage of resources that many communities don't have, but we also recognize that we offer the University a unique opportunity to develop hands-on experiences for its students. Dr. Warren-Gordon's course is unique in that it is

the first class that allows for us to have a voice in exactly what the project will be and how it will be implemented.

Engagement with the Instructor

The process that is used in this class allows for us to have more of a voice in the course and to engage with the students differently. Dr. Warren-Gordon has provided me with an opportunity to have a voice in the class. All readings and assignments are developed, and we are given the opportunity to review them prior to the start of the course. We go into the classroom, talk to the students about our community, and answer their questions. We give the tour of Whitely, which allows for the students to hear from us the history of our community and the problems that we face day-to-day. I enjoy having the role within the class. Having a say in how the course is developed allows for me to feel as though we are 100% part of the process.

Engagement with Students

The students have direct access to me via email and my cell number, and, when they have questions, they can reach out to me directly, which allows for me to develop relationships with the students without the instructor serving as an intermediary. For many of the students, having that one-on-one interaction with me offers them the opportunity to engage with an African American man in a way that they have never had before. They also get to know me and my community members as people, not just stereotypes. I enjoy working one-on-one with the students and having the opportunity to change someone's ideas regarding living and working in predominately Black communities.

Ken's Story

As the Executive Director of the Whitely Community Council, I'm the only paid member of the council. My work involves

overseeing programs within Whitely, which includes service-learning courses that seek to partner with our community. During a given semester, we may have one to two service-learning courses working within our community. Some courses work within our neighborhood school, while others may work with one of our subcommittees of the Community Council. I enjoy watching the community grow and develop while working with instructors and students from Ball State University.

Engagement with the Instructor

Having the opportunity to work with the instructor prior to the class starts allows for logistical concerns to be addressed before the implementation of the service-learning course. It also allows us to make sure that we are all in agreement regarding the goals of the course. Being able to discuss the community needs with the instructor and discuss how we can work together to create a course to address the community needs is very beneficial. Our meetings during the spring and summer allow us to plan accordingly.

Engagement with Students

Working with the students gives me the opportunity to discuss community issues that they may not recognize as barriers to creating a thriving community. Students often don't understand the role their work can play in changing a community. I like working with students and seeing their attitudes change through the course of the semester regarding their work with community members. In Dr. Warren-Gordon's course, students often start off very uncertain of me and the community. However, as time progresses, they begin to become more comfortable with me, and they become more honest regarding their attitude toward the community.

Dr. Warren-Gordon's Story

As a woman of color, I have been intentionally integrating CSL into my university course curriculum over the past two academic years to provide students with meaningful community-engaged experiences aimed at disrupting deficit-driven perceptions of the community members with whom we collaborate. As an engaged Criminology scholar-practitioner, I have specific foci centered on enacting social justice in the settings in which I engage. My focus is on changing the mindsets of future law enforcement officers who may carry negative understandings of Black community members.

Engagement with Community Partner(s)

Working with community partners was a natural transition, as I had been volunteering with the community in various forms for three years prior to the start of our service-learning project. During the course of my volunteering with the community, I was able to develop relationships with my community partners, so that I inherently knew that they would make great community partners using the CSL model. From my volunteer work, I also was aware of the needs of the community, which positioned me to have a better understanding of the service-learning project when discussed with the community partners. Working with the community partners has been a very meaningful experience. Over the years of working with them, I have come to see them as co-teachers, in that we discuss not only the service-learning component but also the reading assignments and syllabus development (which includes the course schedule and reflection projects). My work with my community partners has evolved into rich relationships of authenticity and trust.

Engagement with Students

My focus with students is to educate them in the ways in which crime has been associated with historically minoritized

populations. The course emphasizes the importance of reconceptualizing *crime* as a concept and practice, focusing on changing students' negative dispositional attitudes toward minoritized groups in the local area, specifically African Americans who reside near the university. I teach this course with the awareness that this population is disproportionately represented in the local criminal-justice system in arrests and incarcerations, and with the recognition of the need for students to understand the role structural racism and inequitable local policies play in criminalizing these residents. As Venus E. Evans-Winters points out, through various agents such as schools, church, peers, teachers, and friends, White youth are often socialized to believe that Black people are a deficit to White people in every comparable way (Evans-Winters, 2019). For students who maintain the socialized ideology, working in positions of power over Black people can lead to quick uneducated, illogical decision-making, which can in turn lead to unjust arrests, lack of appropriate use of discretion, and even the murder of innocent men and women. By having students work in a predominately Black community, and having the community partners, two Black men, centered within the service-learning component, we able to address long-held false notions of superiority that many White students possess. In foregrounding the connections between structural racism and inequitable local policies, students begin to understand the social problems that exist within communities. Working with community partners who identify as Black and in a primarily Black community allows for the disruption of stereotypes held by students and allows for them to see Black people in positions of authority, which is something that many of my students previously have not had an opportunity to engage.

CONCLUSION

The community partners expressed that they value the goals of CSL within the partnership. The redistribution of power (following Mitchell, 2008) allows for the community partner to have a role in the development of the course, as well as to articulate what type of service project will take place during the semester. This is something that both community partners were very comfortable with in being part of developing the goals of the course. Working with the community partner to establish the service-learning project ensures that the community partner will have a full "buy-in" of the project. It also will ensure that the project will be beneficial to the community and that, upon completion, it will remain a thing of lasting value to the community. This also means that the project is something that will create social change (another important part of Mitchell's CSL model). It is important to recognize that if the community partner does not feel as though they are part of the planning and implementing of the project, it will not offer lasting change. Having students and faculty develop authentic relationships builds trust and offers students the opportunity to unpack biases that they may have of others. In criminal justice and criminology, this is very important because many of these students aspire to become law-enforcement officers or to embark upon a career that will place them in positions of power and authority over others. Allowing these students to work one-on-one with people from diverse communities challenges them to address their biases and to create meaningful relationships. We believe that the success of one-on-one relationships between the community partners and students is due to the established trusted relationship between the instructor and the community partner as the example. Giving the community partners the opportunity to co-teach the course

allows for the students to understand the trusted and important role that they have in its success. We recognize that this type of partnership is unique and requires “partner synergy” (Jacoby, 2015) that is built on open communication to ensure that the community partner never feels overburdened by taking on the role of co-teacher. This collaborative relationship also allows for the instructor to support the community partners with projects that go beyond the scope of the class whether that is assisting with filing papers, writing grants, or working at the local food bank. This type of reciprocity is vital in ensuring the longevity of the relationship between the community partners and the instructor.

CSL provided students in this course the opportunity to have a transformative experience that will stay with them far beyond the close of the semester. For the community partner, the CSL model addresses many of the concerns that community partners express in the traditional service-learning model. For example, one criticism of the traditional model is that the instructor and students are not invested in the community, and as a result they will work with a partner once and never provide the outcome results of the project (Mitchell, 2008). Establishing authentic relationships takes time, and it is incumbent upon the faculty member to understand that establishing those trusted relationships falls upon them. Taking part in the activities of the organization that are separate from the service-learning class will allow for the partner to see that the faculty member’s commitment goes

beyond just the course and will allow for trust to develop. Finding ways to work alongside the community partner prior to developing a service-learning project will allow for faculty members to imbed themselves within the community and to gain an understanding of the ethical and logical considerations that will need to be taken into consideration with working with the community partner to develop the service-learning project.

It is important to recognize that asking community partners to take on roles that go beyond what a traditional service-learning model usually entails requires a different frame of thinking for both the community partner and the faculty member. This will also require faculty members and community partners to have discussions beyond those that focus just on the service-learning component. Discussing research protocols, research agendas, and writing plans may also have to be part of the conversation, and at the same time this requires the faculty member to adjust various aspects of how they have traditionally conducted research in order to ensure that the community partner is an equal contributor to the research process, even while they may not have the same research skills as the community partner. Ultimately, the autoethnographic voices of the community partners centralized in this study testify to the practical value of Mitchell’s CSL model. Further, it demonstrates that bringing them into the process on an equal footing can have beneficial—even transformative—results for everyone involved in the particular service-learning project.

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