Educating for Social Justice Through Activist-Oriented Sites

Colleen Rost-Banik
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

ABSTRACT

This study combines critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008) and antioppressive pedagogies (Kumashiro, 2002) to highlight the importance of using community sites aimed toward transformational social change. How sites are structured and how students are positioned influence what students learn from the experience. Using ethnographic methods, I analyze experiences of college service learners working with a labor union to illustrate how activist-oriented organizations are fundamental to providing critical spaces of learning and social change.

Keywords: critical service learning, antioppressive pedagogy, critical ethnography, community partner sites

INTRODUCTION

Service learning is considered a high-impact practice for college students (Kuh, 2009), resulting in greater college completion rates (Lockeman & Pelco, 2013), higher GPAs, a commitment to civic engagement, and an understanding of racial differences (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000). However, the power dynamics inherent to service learning have been historically neglected. More recent scholarship has attended to these power discrepancies noting the ways in which service learning can actually reinscribe the racial, economic, and intellectual biases of universities and service learners alike (Becker & Paul, 2015; Cann & McCloskey, 2015; Mitchell, Donahue, & Young-Law, 2012). A paradox within service learning is that we have a pedagogy that yields strong student learning outcomes but is often structured to work against its more hopeful aim of positive social change (Stoecker, 2016). While the challenge of this paradox may lie in the very roots of charitable service itself (Marullo & Edwards, 2000), even critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008) cannot escape the current neoliberal reality of how institutions of higher education entice students to engage in service learning as resume builders and career boosters (Raddon & Harrison, 2015) as opposed to revolutionizing societal structures to be more racially and economically just (Stoecker, 2016).

I contend that one of the fundamental ways to address the shortcomings of (critical) service learning, is to be more deliberate in how the community experiences are framed and how students are positioned in the process. Educational scholarship on antioppressive pedagogies (Kumashiro, 2002) and a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) can offer insights into effective ways of constructing learning opportunities that push both student and societal change. After reviewing literature of critical service learning and theoretical frames, I delve into students' experiences with an activist-based community site. I illustrate how working with groups that intentionally build coalitions to disrupt unjust systems holds more promise for critical service learning's goal of social change than typical service sites, which often reinforce the status quo.

CRITICAL SERVICE LEARNING AND PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Mitchell (2008) posits that critical service learning can correct the unbalanced power dynamics of traditional service learning (e.g., a charity orientation to service) by having service learners analyze power sys-

tems and relations, reflect on their privileges, work alongside community members on issues defined and framed by the community, and build collaborative relationships with community partners. She argues that critical service learning attends to power imbalances and is aimed toward social justice. In Mitchell's framework, the responsibility to ensure that service learning takes this critical turn lies in the relationship and dialogue between faculty, students, and community partners. Course readings, assignments, discussions, reflections, and capstone experiences are strategies wherein critical theory can be incorporated. In short, space is created to encourage students to not just think critically, but to think with critical theory.

As for the community context, in order to engage in critical service learning, Mitchell admits that practitioners "*may* need to work outside traditional non-profits and community-based organizations to partner with groups actively working to change systems and structures (in contrast to 'simply' offering services)" (p. 54, my emphasis). Examples of traditional community sites that simply offer services include schools and afterschool programs where college students tutor, mentor, and facilitate games for younger (often economically impoverished) students; drop-in youth centers where college students distribute toiletries to houseless youth; and nonprofits where college students teach English skills and elements of the citizenship exam to adult immigrants. There are, of course, many other sites, but suffice it to say that the scenario with traditional nonprofits is one wherein service learners assist the site in providing services. In exchange, students are exposed to how individuals experience societal challenges, such as underfunded schools, unaffordable housing, and the arbitrary nature of an exam to determine citizenship. As Mitchell implies in her suggestion, even though it is possible to trouble the social factors that have led to the disparate conditions that traditional organizations address, these community sites ultimately support the status quo rather than alter it.

From this point, I launch the current study with the following research question: How are social justice issues taught and learned within college students' service learning experiences? I take Mitchell's (2008) suggestion that practitioners "may need to work outside traditional nonprofits" (p. 54) and contend that changing community sites to locations of resistance and transformation is fundamental to students' learning and social change. I rely on Tuck (2009) and Kumashiro (2002) to critique traditional service sites and to illustrate greater possibilities for both student learning and societal change through activist spaces. After offering this explanation, I share ethnographical data from students' experiences with a labor union to illustrate how important the site's framing of a societal issue is for both student learning and societal change.

When service sites focus on the deficits people experience, it can be difficult to see beyond the deficiencies. Tuck (2009) refers to this dynamic as a "damage-centered framework" (p. 413). Even though Tuck is explicitly writing about how researchers approach marginalized communities, her argument can easily apply to what nonprofit organizations convey to the people they serve as well as to the general public. Tuck notes that the logic of a "damage-centered framework" assumes that there needs to be evidence of damage in order to secure material and political resources for those who have been marginalized. While there is no denying that social stratification has left many people without sufficient access to resources, when deficits or damages are the point of researchers' attention, the complexity of individuals is often ignored. As Tuck details, marginalized people's hopes, dreams, desires, and creativity are dismissed. She advocates for researchers to take a "desire-based" approach to their work in order to illuminate the fuller context of how people experience and express the broad range of life, including joy, pain,

ambivalence, confusion, need, and aspiration. Similarly, in service learning, when middle-class college students go to an elementary school in a low-income neighborhood to tutor students who struggle with math homework, it is easier to focus on the challenges the younger students face as opposed to recognizing all the ways in which the students are knowledgeable, want to learn math, and/or the reasons they refuse to learn the material in the style proposed to them.

To better understand how service learning practitioners and educators can shift attention from damage to desire, I use Kumashiro's (2002) work on antioppressive pedagogies. While many scholars have offered various suggestions of critical pedagogies for teaching about power, privilege, oppression, and social change (e.g., Freire, 2002; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1994; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995), Kumashiro (2002) draws on a broad range of scholarship and perspectives to offer a nuanced framework of four major antioppressive pedagogies. He names these pedagogies as "education for the other," "education about the other," "education that is critical of privileging and othering," and "education that changes students and society" (pp. 32-70). I use Kumashiro's framework of antioppressive pedagogies to think through service learning pedagogy for two significant reasons. First, Kumashiro's work, most often matched with teacher preparation curriculum, has been underutilized by the variety of higher education disciplines that employ service learning. Second, Kumashiro's analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of each antioppressive pedagogical approach can easily be applied to the practice(s) of service learning in ways that are straightforward and accessible to faculty, students, and community partners alike. In what follows, I provide a brief description of how Kumashiro's four antioppressive pedagogies map onto service learning projects.

Applying Antioppressive Pedagogies to Service Learning

The learning and interactions that occur in typical service learning sites, such as tutoring elementary children, handing out toiletries to houseless youth, or teaching language skills and questions of the citizenship exam, fit closely with Kumashiro's (2002) antioppressive pedagogies of "education for the other" (p. 32) and "education about the other" (p. 39). While Kumashiro acknowledges some possibility with these pedagogies, there tend to be more weaknesses than strengths. When applied to community service sites, the main antioppressive learning potentials include: 1) marginalized people receive free, focused attention and assistance; and 2) college students are exposed to settings and interactions they have not experienced before, thereby gaining greater empathy for "others." The hope in both cases is that individual service learners will use their knowledge to better the conditions of people marginalized by society. The weaknesses of these pedagogies, however, are multiple and can reinforce inequalities.

The first point to consider with teaching "for the other" is that service learners are expected to have certain content knowledge and skills (e.g., knowing U.S. history and having the skills to teach it for citizenship exam prep). In a sense, service learners are positioned as expert. The expectation of college students offering their knowledge and skills ignores the fact that most students have not been sufficiently trained to do the work they are doing. Placing untrained college students as tutors in an afterschool program discredits the teaching profession by assuming that anybody can teach or tutor in any content. Unless service learners are education majors, they most likely have not learned various instructional strategies for different learning abilities and styles. In my experiences as a practitioner and researcher, I often have heard college students admit they do not recall how to do their tutees' math problems or say they do not know the answers to citizenship test questions. Yes, the service learner can spend one-on-one time with a

learner, muddling through the content together, but this raises the question of why learners in under-resourced institutions are not provided the most experienced teachers rather than free, inexperienced college students (Darling-Hammond, 1994).

Secondly, teaching "about the other" assumes that there is an "other" that can be fully understood—that there is some essential truth about a group of people in the first place (Kumashiro, 2002). This can have the effect of generalizing a group of people, thereby reinforcing old, or even creating new stereotypes. This structure entrenches a binary "us" and "them" perspective rather than having college students explore how they are implicated in the disparities that exist (Kumashiro). Similar to Tuck's (2009) point about a damage-centered framework that constructs certain people as "needing" and other people as "offering," recipients of service are stripped of the agency they use to navigate oppressive systems in society. Further, there is an inference that the empathy gained through exposure to various people will commit college students to social action. However, that commitment is not guaranteed.

A third challenge to using traditional nonprofits as a way to teach "about" and "for" the "other" is that the focus remains on individual behaviors rather than the structural factors that have created these conditions in the first place. For instance, when a college tutor in Hawai‘i helps a Chuukese child sound out the words of his reading homework, it can be difficult to understand how this moment directly relates to U.S. colonization of both Hawaiian and Micronesian islands unless fully processed in service learning classroom.

This connects to a fourth challenge. When college students are positioned as teachers or tutors, it emphasizes the dynamic that the university is the place of privileged knowledge and that this knowledge must be disseminated to those outside the academy (Cann & McCloskey, 2015). This setup ignores the knowledge of people in the tutoring programs. Families and communities often teach multiple literacies and knowledge forms that have not officially entered formal education settings (Masny, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Thomas & Hubbard, 2013). Yet, this does not render the knowledge meaningless or unimportant.

The above dynamics would be points for analysis in critical service learning since it focuses on how power is distributed and encourages students to examine the unearned privileges they hold within systems of oppression. While this is helpful, Kumashiro (2002) cautions that because privilege and oppression are often perceived as binary, this frame does not account for the multiple ways in which people both present themselves and are positioned by others. In other words, the framework of advantaged and exploited does not always consider a more complicated and intersectional analysis of how power operates and shifts with different conditions (Crenshaw 1991; Foucault, 1982). In fact, Kumashiro warns that in/justice is typically introduced in a way that assumes rational comprehension and action rather than acknowledging how people's identities, experiences, and interests shape both their reality and understanding of in/justice. Further, a deeper comprehension of privilege and oppression does not necessarily mean it will lead service learners to act in different ways. Harker's (2016) research on service learning revealed that students gained political consciousness but did not take political action.

By moving away from traditional nonprofits and towards activist or community organizing efforts that prioritize positive social change, practitioners might edge closer to what Kumashiro (2002) theorizes as "education that changes students and society" (p. 50). Noting that it is crucial to attend to the ways in which people resist change, Kumashiro recommends a "pedagogy of crisis" wherein dominant ideas are troubled (p. 62). While this process can be discomforting, Kumashiro asserts, "[E]ducation involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the

world. The crisis that results from unlearning, then is a necessary and desirable part of antioppressive education" (p. 63). Teaching toward crisis is similar to how Mitchell (2008) describes the importance of pushing students to a point of uncomfortableness within critical service learning. Specifically, the acknowledgement of complicity in oppression tends to upend students' perception of the way society works, leading them into "crisis" wherein they simultaneously try to unlearn something they previously understood and learn something new (Kumashiro). In these moments, students experience a breakthrough and see beyond their previous knowledge. The caveat is that students initially may not be able to act on their new understandings because they need to process their emotions and thoughts that have left them uncomfortable. Until students can work through their previously held thoughts and emotions, Kumashiro (2002) explains that they may be in a state of temporary paralysis. He suggests offering time and space to attend to the tensions that students experience.

The notion of bringing students to crisis raises the question of whether this can be accomplished at traditional nonprofits. Admittedly, for some college students, face-to-face interaction with a houseless person or an adult English learner may offer moments of cognitive dissonance severe enough to alter prior misconceptions. However, because traditional nonprofits tend to place more value on college students' knowledge and social status, a crisis might be averted by the self-soothing concept of social preference (e.g., I'm fortunate to be doing better than others in society). Looking outside traditional nonprofits and toward activist circles wherein service learners join in solidarity with a collective to explicitly alter social structures may hold more promise for offering students moments of crisis and for working toward social change.

I want to briefly note that Zembylas (2015), and even Kumashiro (2002), question the ethics of bringing students to crisis, noting that the disruption may invade students' privacy and leave them feeling hopeless. However, Zembylas (2015) suggests that the process of "challeng[ing] our cherished beliefs and assumptions about the world" makes "pedagogical discomfort…a necessary and unavoidable step in pedagogical actions" (p. 170).

Combining Mitchell's (2008) concept of critical service learning, Tuck's (2009) insight on desires and damages, and Kumashiro's (2002) analysis of antioppressive education creates an opportunity to think about fostering moments of crisis that allow service learners to practice being agents of change with others, all while realizing the complex power dynamics of interlocking social systems—and their implication in them.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I employed ethnographic methods (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) to delve into how university service learning is framed in community-based experiences. This study took place with a Minority Serving Institution that is also a research-intensive university. University IRB approval was obtained to observe service learning courses and the community site; interview faculty, students, and site coordinators; and acquire students' written coursework, all upon the written consent of participants (all pseudonyms). The community site was a labor union that worked primarily with hotel workers and described itself as an "organizing union."

In addition to attending classes, I accompanied students to their service learning site, and participated in the sites' activities. Students were required to complete 15-30 hours of service, depending on the course. In-depth interviews with students about their experiences with service, the class, and the connections they made between the two occurred toward the end of the semester. I also conducted interviews with site coordinators and instructors.

In what follows, I describe how the community site framed a societal issue (the oppressive nature of capitalism) as well as positioned service learners to experience "crisis" and work collectively with union members and other activists to challenge the negative impacts of capitalism. I contend that how the service experience is framed is fundamental to what the students learn from the experience and how they can begin to see their own identity and interests as being in collaboration with people advocating for more just conditions. This example offers a possibility of the antioppressive pedagogies Kumashiro (2002) labels as "education that is critical of privileging and othering" (p. 44) and "education that changes students and society" (p. 50), as students learned about systemic oppression, practiced advocacy and opposition, and found importance in collective action.

LABOR ADVOCACY

> Up, up with the workers!
> Yeah! Yeah!
> Down, down with the bosses!
> Boom! Boom!

This energetic chant could be heard from blocks away. About 30 union members and advocates, all wearing red t-shirts, circled in a picket line in front of the hotel. Full of enthusiasm, strikers took selfies with one another and videoed the protest with their phones. The tone and tempo of workers' responses to the chants matched that of the chant leader. Actions or one-day strikes like this were a regular occurrence for union members in order to gain better working conditions.

Service learners routinely participated in these actions. To be a service learner with the union, students met one-on-one with the site coordinator for what seemed like an interview. Allie, an instructor who worked with the site commented that the interest and commitment level required for working with the site was quite high. "It's a very selective process. They hand pick the people." She disclosed, "They want someone who shows promise in being a labor organizer."

The site coordinator, Jennica, described the selectivity differently. In the one-on-one meeting with the student, Jennica was upfront about what type of work the students would be doing. She told them, "This isn't an easy site…You will be expected to come to actions…So if you're not going to enjoy holding a picket sign and walking around a hotel, then this might not be the best site for you." In that same meeting, Jennica asked the students about their goals, wanting to ensure that they gained experience in something that interested them. She commented, "I'm not trying to extract free labor from you or anything. I actually want you to learn and grow from this, but I need an understanding of why do you want to do your service learning here."

Rather than welcoming absolutely every student to do their service learning at the union regardless of their perspectives or commitment level, the site coordinator explicitly outlined her expectations. Service learners were required to participate in actions and they were asked to take an interest in their own learning. While most of the students she met took the challenge, some opted out of doing their service learning at the union and chose a different site.

Framing Learning and Positioning Students

At the first larger group meeting that service learners attended, an orientation of sorts, they were mixed in with various community members. They had been invited to the Activists meeting, which consisted of union staff members and community residents, including high school students that had an Activists club. In a field note, I wrote:

After signing in at a table, people were encouraged to help themselves to a slice of pizza and water. With plates of food, attendees settled into their seats at rectangular tables shaped in a U. Once everyone arrived, Cory, one of the staff mem-

bers, asked the group gathered what they thought of when they heard the word union. Someone called out, "Unions protect incompetence." With a mounting list, including a couple of positive connotations, Cory asked if anyone had heard that unions were corrupt. Lea, one of the college students, emphatically answered, "Yes!" Cory let out a chuckle and explained that some unions had leadership that were disconnected from their members and some unions were corrupt. But, he noted that unions had the opportunity to organize and to come together. He said, "It's a basic right we all have, no matter how much Wall Street firms and Trump wants to hurt us."

Cory continued with the mini-lesson. Unions have been shrinking in [the state] and across the country. He informed the group, "Less than 5% [of workers] are unionized in the U.S. because unions don't have the best reputation." Because unions are small, "we have to find ways to connect with the local community." Cory explained that in order to garner the support of the broader community, they formed the Activists. (Field note Oct. 10, 2017)

An offshoot of the union, the Activists was a growing group of community members who worked for justice and built collective power through various community organizing efforts. They formed not only to bolster the union's causes but also to address social and economic issues that impacted residents of the state as a whole. Believing that change could be created through the power of people collectively organizing, the Activists took on campaigns that ranged from affordable housing and minimum wage increases to immigration, citizenship, and pesticide usage around schools and residential communities. The union staff pointed out that all of these issues were connected because they affected the wellbeing of all residents in the state.

During this meeting, students also were treated to a basic lesson in capitalism and were invited to partake in an upcoming action. A staff member gave a recent history of a hotel which led workers to plan a one-day strike for better working conditions. Under the direction of a new owner, in 2009, many of the hotel rooms were sold as condos. This resulted in less work for employees. Due to the nationwide financial crisis at the time, the workers made compromises in order for the hotel not to undergo bankruptcy. Fast forward to 2017 and the hotel was thriving. However, the ownership refused to give the previous gains back to the workers. Among the complaints were that employees were not allowed to eat their Christmas dinner together, they were paid $3.50 lower per hour than other hotel workers in the city, and they had less vacation time than their peers at neighboring hotels. The staff member claimed, "We can't let these companies come in and take over. Working people suffer. These companies come in and take and take and take." This story illustrated to service learners how capitalism works on a basic level—the owners profit while the workers are exploited.

Service learners attended meetings of the Activists (like the one described above), sat in on hotel workers' committee meetings, researched political officials' positions, submitted public testimony during legislative hearings, and participated in scheduled actions outside of hotels. Through each opportunity, students were exposed to the harms of capitalism and learned components of designing and executing a community organizing campaign. Similar to Kumashiro's (2002) antioppressive pedagogy of "education that is critical of privileging and othering" (p. 44), the union offered a way to both "critique and transfor[m]" oppression (p. 45). Volunteering with the union upended prior messages service learners had been taught through school or other service opportunities: They learned information about the oppressive nature of capitalism as well as how to challenge it for change-making.

Framing issues in a way that garners support is key to social movements (Snow, 2007). What was particularly powerful about how the union and the Activists framed issues was that they were large

enough for almost everyone (excluding corporate elite, which I address later) to see themselves as deeply impacted. Issues like affordable housing and better wages were vital to the lives of all the city's residents. Thus, service learners could easily identify with the points of advocacy. Providing a common target (e.g., corporations or government) allowed union members and other community activists to join in solidarity with one another. Even if the issues were highly political or seemingly complicated (e.g., Airbnb's impact on affordable housing), with the assistance of the union's research team, a straightforward analysis was devised to help people comprehend how the given issue would benefit or harm the local community as a whole.

Connected to how the union framed issues was how they positioned service learners. They expected that students would maintain their role as learner as they volunteered with the union. Starting with the one-on-one meeting with the site coordinator, students were positioned as individuals who had their own learning goals. They were not treated simply as bodies in a production line of work that needed to be accomplished. Nor were they viewed as students needing to complete service hours for a class requirement. Even though most students were not very familiar with unions and did not know how to articulate their own goals or interests, the fact that the question was posed to them framed the relationship as one wherein students were positioned primarily as learners who were there to better understand labor issues, organizing, and advocacy as well as join in solidarity with workers. Specifically, the structure was designed so that college students could learn from working-class people who were exercising leadership and challenging authority by speaking up for themselves and for one another. There was great power in this, partly because working-class leaders, particularly women of color, are rarely highlighted in dominant society or media. Acknowledging, respecting, and bolstering everyday leaders and workers offered models who were relatable to students, many of whom had family members employed in tourism or other working-class jobs.

In addition to valuing students as learners (rather than expecting them to be an "expert," as might be the case with tutoring), the union intentionally positioned students as workers. Most students worked either a campus job or a minimum wage job. If they viewed themselves and those they knew as workers, they could more readily connect with challenges, conditions, and tensions that union members faced, and therefore join them in advocacy. If the union did not recognize the students as workers, it may have been easier for students to buy into dominant corporate messages that hotels support the region's tourist economy, and therefore dismiss the concerns and power of laborers as well as corporations' ever-increasing profit margins. Most businesses associated with the tourism industry advanced the rhetoric that workers should be grateful for jobs (e.g., what other jobs would there be if it wasn't for the tourist industry?).

Positioning students as both learners and workers was intentional; it was a way to garner more support for the union and the Activists. It was an "investment we're making." Cory explained that working with service learners "really is about building community and investing in ourselves." He continued, "It is very much in our self-interest…[T]his is not charitable work that we're doing to make ourselves feel good… this is very much part of the strategy to build a movement." In other words, educating students about labor issues and community organizing around common interests was a way that the union could ensure that people were trained to work together for a "kind of [society that] we want to live in… that meets our needs."

Experiencing Crisis

As a service learning site, the union had a very different look and feel than traditional nonprofits. Working-class people, most of them women of color, joined to-

gether to demand better labor conditions. They learned to tell their personal stories of struggle and resilience to policy makers. They confronted the boss. They chanted. They striked. And, as they made noise and addressed serious tensions, they had fun with one another. They did things that working-class people have been socialized not to do; namely, challenge authority and make waves (Anyon, 1980). Cory, a staff member for the union commented that these things can be "uncomfortable" because they are "not something we are trained to do… growing up through K to 12 [and] in college."

One of the service learners whose public school education did not teach him to challenge authority was David, a tall, skinny, first-year student with a crew cut and a big smile. Another service learner was Alyssa, a third-year student with infectious energy. Both David and Alyssa were in different university courses during different semesters, but coincidentally, they attended the same high school and grew up in the same low-income neighborhood.

At the start of the semester, David was unemployed. When he heard descriptions of each service learning site, he opted for the one affiliated with hotels. He thought the experience was going to be like an internship that would "help [him] get experience with the hotel industry" so that he could get a job. Needing employment, he jumped at the opportunity. He was quite "surprised" when he learned more about the site. David admitted that at the outset, he thought unions were "corrupt." He heard from an uncle who worked for the hotels that protests and strikes were "useless." David said, "I thought the effort they put towards actions and strikes [wa]s a waste of time because only the authorities with power can make changes." Despite his surprise about the service learning opportunity and his misgivings about unions, David kept the union as his service site.

For both David and Alyssa, attending the union's actions was the first time that they had participated in anything of the sort. David said that going to the union protest "felt scary at first because of how the audience looked at us weird or commented negatively." When he arrived at the front of the hotel for his first action, he picked up a sign and joined the line, chanting along with the workers. He noted that some of the tourists told the strikers to "keep it down" since they didn't "pay this much for the hotel stay to be hearing us rallying." But, he realized that by "irritat[ing]" the guests, the strikers were "getting people's attention and informing them on the issue." Despite his initial nervousness, David noted that it "turned out to be cool." As he excitedly pulled out the sheet of paper with the list of chants, he shared, "I see it makes a difference. It brings community attention and annoys hotels" that aren't paying fair wages.

The interesting part for Alyssa was "seeing the reaction from the guests [and] people just walking on street." She initially thought that people, especially tourists, would be "snobby" because they would view the action as a disruption to their "fancy" vacation. However, her experience was different. She said that people were interested in learning more, and they responded with, "Yes, you're fighting for your benefits and you need that." Pleasantly surprised, she noted, "And like literally some would come and join, like right straight off the street kind of a deal." She was most impressed with "when we saw the workers themselves…walk out and join the rally. Like it was just amazing to see like th[e]… energy that they had. Like, they were just screaming at the top of their lungs." The energy of people coming together and advocating for better working conditions felt inspiring and powerful for Alyssa.

For most service learners, like David and Alyssa, this was their inaugural engagement with a union, let alone a worker protest or strike. While they had already met one-on-one with a union staff member and had typically attended a community organizing meeting or hotel worker meeting prior to participating in an action, this was the first time they gathered with workers in

a public setting, carrying a sign, and chanting for union members to receive better working conditions. Students were unsure what to expect. Jennica, the site coordinator, revealed:

> For a number of students, our actions are the very first action they have ever been to.… A lot of them afterward would tell me like, "Oh, I was really scared at first because I didn't know what to expect. And, um, I thought it would just be like a riot or something. And then…I finally went and I was like, oh, I was actually surprised at how calm it was. And that it was actually fun and that, you know, people were pretty disciplined. And like, it's not a riot." And so, I get a lot of those comments.

Students' prior assumptions about protests and strikes offer insight into why David was initially "scared" and Alyssa thought they would be looked down upon for causing disruption to tourists' vacations. Messages from media, schools, and families told them that people coming together and demanding different conditions would result in something akin to riots. This inevitably created a sense of "crisis" or dissonance for the service learners prior to participating in their first action. When they realized that protesting did not equate to rioting, they fairly easily worked through any crisis or apprehension they initially experienced. Even though messages from social institutions, especially formal education, teaches working-class people not to challenge authority (Anyon, 1980), the service learners at the union were beginning to appreciate that protesting could happen in a collective, disciplined manner, and that dissent could yield positive results.

Working Collectively for Social Change

Whether on the strike line or in the union headquarters, the oppositional frame to authority was palpable. Even though union members and staff greeted one another with hugs and smiles, the common understanding that people came together to push against capitalism's unfair conditions generated a sense of agitation. Rather than entertaining dominant messages about trickle-down economics, or advocating for charity, union affiliates were clear that corporations and government institutions needed to be held accountable for disparate conditions. And, they believed that collectively demanding better conditions would give them the strength needed to achieve these demands. The union rubbed against dominant norms by teaching the perils of capitalism and how to collectively challenge authority. While formal education in the United States has traditionally imbued students with values of individualism and meritocracy (White, Ali-Khan, & Zoellner, 2017), the union cracked those myths wide open. They explained how capitalism relies on inequality and how workers must remain vigilant in order to not be overly exploited.

Lea, an energetic third-year student who also happened to be in the military, commented that the labor union "really gave me a lot of insight on…capitalism." She continued, "That's like the one thing that really drives everything around here, like profit over people." David's perspective was similar as he spoke about the work of the union: the workers "can't get paid the wage they…deserve because of the company's greed of money, to profit more by paying workers less." Alyssa shared a similar perspective. She claimed, "We think we're in debt so we need all these business people to come in, but," she continued, "we forget about the little people when you start bringing in all these business people." Alyssa was referencing how large corporations were encouraged to enter the local market to create jobs. However, she knew that corporate executives were more concerned about profits than they were the needs of workers.

The union reiterated pitfalls of capitalism to the service learners through each point of advocacy. Whether explicitly addressing union members' working conditions or larger community issues like af-

fordable housing, the union operated from the fundamental orientation of conflict theory (Marx & Engels, 2012). And, because the students could relate to this message from their life experiences, they internalized it and were able to articulate it with ease.

Service learners also learned that an effective way to confront capitalism was through collective campaign efforts. College students joined with Activists' efforts to address affordable housing through a campaign to tighten regulations on vacation rentals. Arguing that vacation rentals drove up the cost of housing, the Activists lobbied city council members to propose legislation that would create restrictions on short-term vacation rentals. Through meetings about the proposed legislation, David learned about how corporations like Airbnb worked and how their operation in the city negatively impacted hotel workers, renters, and homeowners. He submitted testimony online in support of the proposed legislation and informed others (friends and family) about the legislation so they could do the same. Then, David, along with union members and staff attended the hearing to support the stricter regulations. Working to propose legislation that would reign in corporate exploitation, spreading awareness about the issue, and then showing up, together, was part of the strategy of opposing capitalism.

Reflecting back on his experience, David told me, "I didn't expect it to be like this." What he liked is that he "got to be a part of the community." He stressed, "It is important for people to realize if we participate and stay together as one then we could have authority." He shared that the government "serves the people, but they need to know what we want. This is why community groups are so important." The meetings and actions David attended showed him how people could come together, make hard decisions, articulate their demands, bring attention to unfair treatment, and create change. Citing the Activists meetings at the union headquarters as "the most memorable experience," David was impressed by the power of collective decision-making and the actions taken to challenge unjust conditions, including capitalism.

The critiques of capitalism and advocacy strategies modeled by the union and the Activists impacted students' perspectives and stances. Lea said from her time volunteering with the union she learned, "It's okay to question [public officials] if they're not being accountable." This felt different than what she learned through formal education. Noting the distinctions, Lea commented that the knowledge she gained through the union and the Activists felt more "relevant." She shared, "I'm actually learning a lot more about the government and issues through my interaction with people in [the Activists]." She reasoned, "Maybe school is biased." Speaking directly to the way that most formal education encourages conformity to dominant norms, she commented that people are used to listening to authority and "just learn to live with it" despite circumstances being hard. Lea expressed, "I'm done dealing with things. I don't think it's a very constructive way to live. To just deal with circumstances. You should probably just change them." Lea started not only to question authority, but also challenge capitalism and how it shapes the institutions that structure everyone's lives. More specifically, Lea spoke to how social institutions, like schools and employment, did not always work for the people they were intended to serve. Rather than simply following the whim of decision-makers, Lea felt it important to demand accountability. She brought this insistence from the union to her university.

When the university sent out an email saying that it would be shortening library hours, Lea was livid. She often worked at the library late into the night because her daytime hours were consumed with classes, work, and service. Lea visited several university offices before discovering that administrators did not seek any student input before making the decision. This infuriated Lea, especially since a few weeks

earlier, she paid a higher tuition bill than prior semesters. She made the connection that her tuition bill increased yet student services shrunk. In other words, the university was operating in an economic framework that was concerned about the bottom line. Lea recognized the theme of "profit over people" and began to organize students to send complaints to the library. Lea and her peers cautioned university administrators that they could not simply count the number of library users during certain periods and conclude reduced services as a cost-saving mechanism. Instead, they needed to engage the people who would be impacted by the decision. The library ended up reversing the decision. Lea admitted that before her time with the Activists, she likely would have been disappointed but would have gone along with the change. Now, she felt "more justified" to question the legitimacy of shorter library hours. She stated, "I know that they shouldn't be doing that and…we can do something."

DISCUSSION

In students' service with the union, they learned about the perils of capitalism, experienced crisis as they were invited into the union's actions, and engaged in collective action to create social change. These points of learning were, in part, due to how the service site framed the experience for the students. The union modeled these lessons through their actions and meetings, allowing students to maintain the role of learners and practice social action. Traditional nonprofits, such as afterschool programs, teach "for the other" as service learners are expected to help younger students with homework (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 32). Afterschool programs also teach "about the other" as college students learn about the conditions that younger students, often lower-income students of color, face in under-resourced schools and communities (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 39). In contrast, the union offered education that was critical of the extreme stratification caused by capitalism. In the process of being exposed to the power dynamics of capitalism, service learners learned how to organize and advocate for better working and living conditions. This process closely aligns with the antioppressive pedagogical approach that Kumashiro (2002) calls "education that is critical of privileging and othering" (p. 44). Students were being encouraged to "critique and transfor[m]" oppression (p. 45). This method is difficult to replicate at traditional service sites because they tend to operate on a charity model that relies on stratification. Despite traditional nonprofits wishing to ameliorate unjust conditions, most are not designed to critique and transform the structural forces that greatly influence oppression.

It is important to note that Kumashiro cautions that focusing on an us/them binary can essentialize positions rather than acknowledge the intricate ways in which power, privilege, and oppression is fluid and complex. With the labor union, the duality of bosses and workers was evidenced in the protest chant above. This was strategic but not absolute. The union welcomed anyone who wanted to join in solidarity with them—from politicians to those heavily involved in real estate investments to wealthy people. Regardless of individuals' social status, if they wanted to use their social capital to advance labor conditions, they were welcome.

The partial and contradictory aspects of people's identities that Kumashiro (2002) asserts is vital to the antioppressive pedagogy of "education that changes students and society" (p. 50) was further evidenced as students learned that even though people were differently positioned due to diverse social identities, they could still advocate for similar demands. For instance, the financial reality of union members (and of the Activists) varied and so did their access to income. As mentioned, the union advocated for legislation that would create stronger regulations on short-term housing rentals, like those offered by Airbnb, because the rentals impacted the housing

availability for the city's residents and took away business from the hotels. Even though some union workers and Activists relied on income from short-term rentals (via additional properties they owned), not everyone did. There was an understanding that making affordable housing more accessible to the city's residents took priority over a limited number of families earning extra income by renting apartments on a short-term basis. College students were exposed to how workers and community activists occupied different and sometimes contradictory positions within the social structure and yet made collective demands. The students were learning, experientially, that there was a greater chance of reaching collective success by maintaining solidarity than there was by fostering tension between workers about who had more privilege. Since the vast majority of laborers were exploited by corporate profit, the collective tent was big enough to include everyone who desired different social relations within capitalism.

Because the union was overtly political, hegemonic understandings of capitalism and the tourist industry were disrupted, as were students' ideas of their roles as workers, consumers, and residents of a state with few affordable housing options. As is common in two of Kumashiro's (2002) antioppressive pedagogies (education that is critical of privileging and othering and education that changes students and society), service learners experienced a "crisis" when they attended their first action (p. 48). As they experienced the field of protest, their concerns of a "riot" dissipated. What was initially viewed as scary was actually a space of smiles and chants for better working conditions. Students experienced cognitive dissonance, but they were not paralyzed by crisis, in part, because they witnessed workers functioning through their own discomforts.

Supporting students in the positions of learner and worker in solidarity, the union invited the students to observe and develop their skills as they joined in collective action to alter the conditions of capitalism. This positioning challenged the competitive and individualistic neoliberal expectations of advancing students' careers and instead focused on advancing a collective good. Pairing service learners with activist groups permits them to: 1) see people taking agency to alter unjust power dynamics (rather than simply receive services that maintain the status quo); 2) learn tactics to address the systemic issues that create inequitable conditions; 3) practice being overtly political in their civic engagement; and 4) experience the power of collective action. I contend these four points are vital to critical service learning projects wishing to practice the antioppressive pedagogy of changing both students and society.

However, teaming critical service learning with activist groups is not perfect. Kumashiro (2009) reminds us, "No practice, in and of itself, is anti-oppressive. A practice can be anti-oppressive in one situation and quite oppressive in another. Or it can be simultaneously oppressive in one way and anti-oppressive in another" (p. 15). An example: Even with activist organizations, community members who teach college students about activism and incorporate them into various actions are still unpaid for their labor. Specifically, union staff and members were not paid for supplementing college students' education. The university relied upon people outside of its payroll to provide a significant amount of education to students.

Another challenge is that universities and faculty members are hesitant to be candidly political. To this, Robinson (2000) writes that faculty who wish to improve society must take "political action" where they can come into "conflict with the current holders of privilege" (p. 608). He continues, noting that without political stances, instructors "are relegating students in service learning programs to acting as a glorified providers (sic) of social welfare services and ensuring that their oft-articulated promise to cure social pathologies will be little more than a platitude" (p. 608). Without faculty who are willing to partner with

groups that advance socially just politics, opportunities will be missed to fulfill critical service learning's potential. Thus, we need to structure experiential learning environments to model and invite students to advocate for systemic change rather than replicate the status quo.

CONCLUSION

This article combines the concepts of critical service learning and antioppressive pedagogies to examine how practitioners might offer civic engagement opportunities that are more geared toward social change than the opportunities provided by traditional nonprofits, which tend to impart values of social reproduction. In order to attend to critical service learning's aim of positive social change, scholars and practitioners need to wrestle with whether and how community partnerships teach hegemonic ideas and/or resist the status quo by offering alternatives to racism, capitalism, colonialism, and other forms of domination. Partnering with activist-oriented organizations may hold more promise for disrupting present circumstances.

REFERENCES

Anyon, J. (1980). Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education*, *162*(1), 67-92.

Astin, A. W., Vogelgesang, L. J., Ikeda, E. K., & Yee, J. A. (2000). *How service-learning affects students*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California, Los Angeles, Higher Education Research Institute.

Becker, S., & Paul, C. (2015). "It didn't seem like race mattered": Exploring the implications of service-learning pedagogy for reproducing or challenging color-blind racism. *Teaching Sociology*, *43*(3), 184-200.

Cann, C. N., & McCloskey, E. (2015). The poverty pimpin' project: How whiteness profits from black and brown bodies in community service programs. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 1-15.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Identity politics, intersectionality, and violence against women. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241-1299.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1994). Who will speak for the children: How 'Teach for America' hurts urban schools and students. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *76*(1), 21-34.

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Freire, Paulo. (2002). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry, 8*(4), 777-795.

Giroux, H. A. (2011). *On critical pedagogy*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Harker, D. (2016). Political consciousness but not political engagement: Results from a service-learning study. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *22*(2), 31-47.

hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kuh, G. D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, *50*(6), 683-706.

Kumashiro, K. K. (2002). *Troubling education: Queer activism and antioppressive pedagogy*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.

Kumashiro, K. K. (2009). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lockeman, K. S., & Pelco, L. E. (2013).

The relationship between service-learning and degree completion. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *20*(1), 18-30.

Marullo, S., & Edwards, B. (2000). From charity to justice: The potential of university-community collaboration for social change. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *43*(5), 895-912.

Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2012). Manifesto of the Communist Party [1848]. In C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, & I. Virk (Eds.), *Classical sociological theory* (3rd ed., pp. 156-171). West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Masny, D. (2011). Multiple literacies theory: Exploring futures. *Policy Futures in Education*, *9*(4), 494-504.

Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, *14*(2), 50-65.

Mitchell, T. D., Donahue, D. M., & Young-Law, C. (2012). Service learning as a pedagogy of whiteness. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *45*(4), 612-629.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, *31*(2), 132-141.

Raddon, M. B., & Harrison, B. (2015). Is service-learning the kind face of the neo-liberal university? *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *45* (2), 134.

Robinson, T. (2000). Service learning as justice advocacy: Can political scientists do politics? *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *33*(3): 605-612.

Sleeter, C. E., & McLaren, P. (Eds.). (1995). *Multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and the politics of difference*. SUNY Press.

Snow, D. A. (2007). Framing processes, ideology, and discursive fields. In D. A. Snow, S. A. Soule, & H. Kriesi (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to social movements* (pp. 380-412). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Stoecker, R. (2016). *Liberating service learning and the rest of higher education civic engagement*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Thomas, P. L., & Hubbard, S. (2013). Adventures with text and beyond: Education for empowerment: The link between multiple literacies and critical consciousness. *The English Journal*, *102*(4), 98-102.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*(3), 409-428.

White, J. W., Ali-Khan, C., & Zoellner, B. P. (2017). Deconstructing meritocracy in the college classroom. *College Teaching*, *65*(3), 115-129.

Zembylas, M. (2015). 'Pedagogy of discomfort' and its ethical implications: The tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education*, *10*(2), 163-174.

AUTHOR NOTE

Colleen Rost-Banik holds a masters in Sociology from the University of Hawai'i and a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Minnesota. She teaches in both disciplines at university and community college levels, including within the prison system. Her research focuses on how people in postsecondary education teach and learn about interconnected issues of racial, economic, and gender in/justice.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to
Colleen Rost-Banik
rostb007@umn.edu