A Visual Model for Critical Service-Learning Project Design

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Abstract

Drawing from Stith et al.'s (2018) Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool, this article provides a visual model for developing critical service-learning projects. This model proposes to assist the analysis of critical service-learning projects by grounding them in contemporary scholarship and literature. The model also reveals the interplay of the five key themes in critical service-learning literature: understanding systems, authentic relationships, redistribution of power, equitable classrooms, and social change skills.

Keywords: critical service-learning, community engagement, project design, visual model

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This article seeks to provide a visual, conceptual model for developing critical service-learning projects that is grounded in contemporary scholarship and literature on critical service-learning. This effort began as a project for a community engagement faculty fellows' program in which I attempted to design a critical service-learning project for a class. I was having trouble holding all of the components and the relationships between them together, so I designed this model. It enabled me to view all the critical service-learning themes identified by Stith et al. (2018), my operationalization of these themes into project goals, and the connections and relationships between them. I ultimately found my project in the space in the center of the conceptual model. The existing literature offers a number of excellent models for service-learning: models for assessing learning (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Ash et al., 2005), creating an engaged campus (Saltmarsh et al., 2015), critical reflection and assessment (Ash & Clayton, 2009), and designing projects with long-term impacts (Bringle & Clayton, 2012; Bringle et al., 2011; Stith et al., 2018). This current model offers the unique ability to help faculty build projects that incorporate the key elements of critical service-learning in their design from the very beginning.

This aspect of the conceptual model is drawn from Stith et al.'s (2018) self-assessment and reflection tool for faculty, Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool, and their summary of the five key themes in critical service-learning literature: understanding systems, authentic relationships, redistribution of power, equitable classrooms, and social change skills. This model operationalizes these concepts for project design and puts them into a visual format that is intended to help faculty examine the interplay among these five key themes while they design critical service-learning projects.

Critical Service-Learning

The rise in popularity of service-learning at the end of the 20th century led to the widespread establishment of a dominant model of service-learning that was rife with problems. Recognition of these problems led to early calls for alternative approaches from critical scholars (Brown, 2001; Marullo, 1999; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Rhoads, 1997; Robinson, 2000). Early critics focused on the paternalistic nature (Cipolle, 2004; Robinson, 2000) and forced volunteerism (Boyle-Baise, 1998) of traditional service-learning practices. The critical perspec-

tive on service-learning finally coalesced with the publication of Mitchell's (2008) literature review, "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models." In this piece, Mitchell clearly identified parameters of critical service-learning in relation to and against the traditional, dominant model. Latta et al. (2018) argued that Mitchell's article redefined the field by observing three key aspects: "working to redistribute power amongst all participants in the service-learning relationship, developing authentic relationships in the classroom and community, and working from a social change perspective" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50). Traditional service-learning was embedded in a set of relationships with unequal power dynamics. Traditional service-learning tended to privilege the needs of the university and its students over those of the community partner (Brown, 2001). Mitchell (2008) argued that an effective critical service-learning model must identify this differential power distribution and seek ways to analyze and discuss power dynamics and to work to equalize the relationships by empowering the community (Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Liu et al., 2020), working alongside the community and using campus resources to address community needs, and focusing on long-term partnerships to prevent burnout among community partners (Brown, 2001). Additionally, critical service-learning should question the distribution of power within the classroom (Mitchell, 2008; Wollschleger et al., 2020). Strategies for community empowerment include incorporating community knowledge and input into the course curriculum (Brown, 2001) through involving community members in the classroom. Mitchell (2008) also suggested reconfiguring the physical layout of the traditional classroom to decenter the class and create opportunities for shared leadership among teachers, students, and community members, as well as creating a "professorless" environment where students and community members can interact without the influence of faculty (Addes & Keene, 2006).

Drawing explicitly on Mitchell (2008) and others, Stith et al. (2018) at Duke Service-Learning have developed a Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool. This tool serves as a "self-assessment and resource tool to help faculty implement critical, justice-oriented service-learning" (Stith et al., 2018, cover). The tool itself serves as a useful instrument for faculty to assess the degree to which their community engagement/service-learning projects incorporate critical theory and a social justice orientation (Stith et al., 2018, p. 1). But importantly, for this article, Stith et al. identified five key themes for critical service-learning: understanding systems, authentic relationships, redistribution of power, equitable classrooms, and social change skills. Critical service-learning as an approach is still developing (Mitchell & Latta, 2020), but these themes provide a solid grounding in existent literature.

Understanding systems is the first theme that Stith et al. (2018) drew from the critical service-learning literature. This theme relates specifically with students' ability to analyze and understand the root causes of social problems, moving from a shallow and simplistic understanding to one that is more nuanced and complex that considers the context—both the historical conditions that have shaped the social problems and structural causes (Buttaro, 2009; Kahne & Westheimer, 1994; Liu et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2008; Stith et al., 2018). *Authentic relations* is the second theme, specifically between the community partner and the university. Projects that are built on authentic relationships allow both the community partner and the university to "understand each other's history, culture and positionality" (Stith et al., 2018, p. 4), as well as making sure both parties' needs are met (Liu et al., 2020; Mitchell, 2008; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Stith et al., 2018). Building projects based on authentic relationships requires a long-term commitment, clear communication, and a willingness to listen.

Redistribution of power is the third theme identified by Stith et al. (2018) in critical service-learning. This theme is based on the recognition that service-learning relationships between community partners and universities often create an unequal distribution of power in which the university's educational needs are given priority over the needs of the community partner. Such relationships also often include an implied assumption that students are assets or resources and the host communities are deficient or in need (Arnstein, 1969; Eby, 1998; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993). In projects developed from a critical service-learning framework, these potentials for unequal distribution of resources are acknowledged

and addressed, as are inequalities between the community partner and the university as well as in the classroom by reframing students' understanding of need and resources or strengths in the community.

Equitable classrooms, the fourth theme, relates to the work performed in Theme 3. In their approach, Stith et al. (2018) emphasized that universities have a history of exclusion of certain voices, including those of "women, low-wealth students and racial minorities" (p. 8). In order to create a critical service–learning course, it is essential to bring to the foreground the voices and perspectives that have been marginalized (Landis, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2012). Other ways to create equitable classrooms for critical service–learning include engaging with underrepresented authors, fostering a classroom environment for engaging diverse perspectives, and bringing to center nontraditional sources of knowledge from community partners.

Social change skills is the fifth and final theme emphasized in Stith et al.'s (2018) Critical Service–Learning Conversations Tool. Its focus equips students with social change skills (Bobo et al., 2001; Mitchell & Coll, 2017; Rost-Banik, 2020; Yee, 2020). This may be accomplished through hands-on instruction and practice of these skills, assessing the impact of the course on social change, and partnering with community partners who themselves are making real change for their communities.

The Model

The purpose of this model (Figure 1) is to facilitate the creation of critical service–learning projects that are informed by the five themes identified by Stith et al. (2018). We can think of these themes as goals for a critical service–learning project. Creating this model involved two primary steps: operationalizing the goals into something relevant to the class and then arranging them visually in relation to each other. For the first step I simply took themes and dropped them down a level of abstraction into something that was more practical for project creation while still abstract enough to allow for variation.
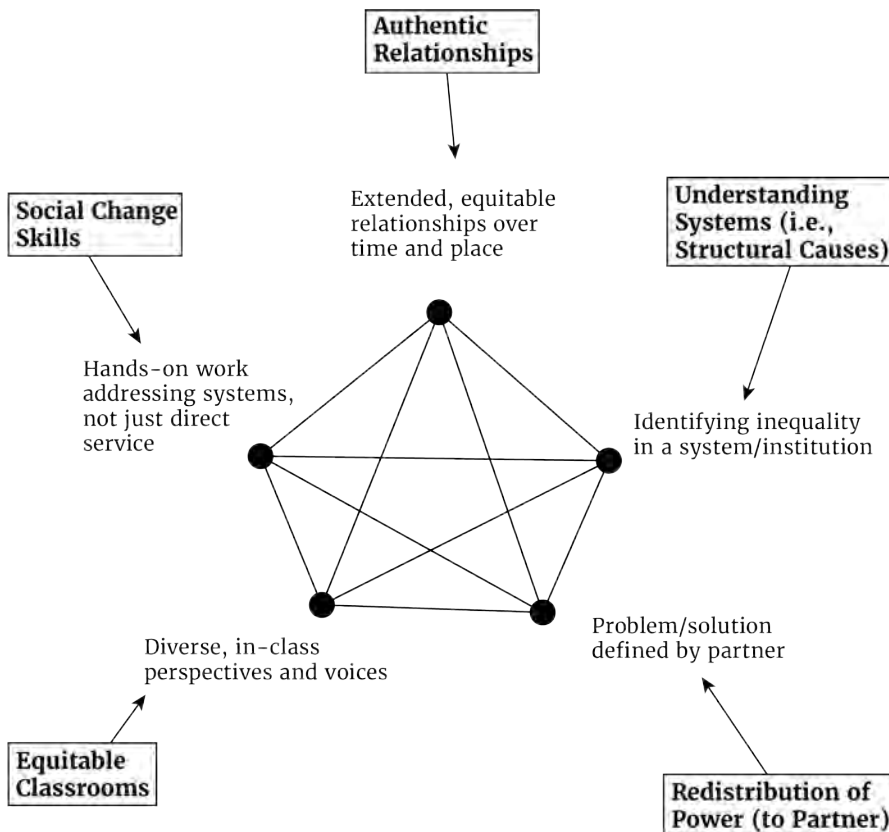

Figure 1. Visual Model of a Critical Service–Learning Approach to Project Design. Adapted from Stith et al. (2018).

Authentic relationships are foundational to the critical service-learning perspective—reflecting a critique of transactional relationships embedded in the traditional model. I conceived of authentic relationships in practical terms as extended, equitable relationships over time and place. These relationships can include faculty and community partner, community partner and student, student and faculty, and even community partner and department relationships. It may be unnecessary or not possible to facilitate extended relationships between students and community partners (Fouts, 2020), due to many factors but especially the transient nature of students and the short duration of academic terms. However, it is very feasible to develop extended faculty and community partner relationships.

From *authentic relationships* we move clockwise to *understanding systems* or identifying structural causes. I conceived of this outcome as the practice of identifying inequalities in a system or institution. Inequalities may include unequal access to resources, as well as inequalities by race, gender, social class, sexual/gender identity, and so on. The practical conceptualization must be concrete enough to focus attention but broad enough to allow for multiple critical approaches. Then we move to the *redistribution of power*, and here specifically I understood the action/practice as redistributing power to the community and/or community partner. In other words, the community partner should have the power and agency in the relationship to define the problem to be addressed and/or the solution they are looking for. It is worth recognizing here that sometimes, depending on the project, the community partner is a representative of and a member of the community, and sometimes they are not. Recognizing this upfront and working to be inclusive of all constituents in decision making and problem definition is essential to a critical service-learning project.

The next point in the model is the goal of *equitable classrooms*, which I understood in practice as the inclusion of diverse perspectives and voices within the class. Inclusion can be achieved through readings from diverse perspectives and identities, in-person discussions or lectures from outside experts, especially community members, and student-led contribution to the class environment. The final point in the model is the development of *social change skills*, which is operationalized in this model as prioritizing hands-on work to address systemic or structural inequities, not simply direct service provision. These five points together define the parameters of critical service-learning project design, but it is exploration of the relationships inside the model that creates the space for the project to be mutually reinforcing.

For example, if we start tracing the internal connection of the visual model at *understanding systems*, it becomes easy to see that identifying inequality in systems is dependent upon and connected to engaging with diverse perspectives and voices in the classroom. This process must include the voices of the community partner, which is one path toward building extended, equitable relationships. These relationships can enable a redistribution of power by letting the community partner define the problem and solution. Doing so in turn creates opportunities to engage students in hands-on work that actually addresses systems rather than simply providing direct service. This recognition of systems then feeds back into equipping students to understand and begins to address structural causes of social issues. The act of making visible these interconnections can help faculty create effective critical service-learning projects that are grounded in the literature. When faculty can grasp the connections visually, seeing both the practices and the manner in which they support other outcomes, they can conceptually hold them together to give shape to the project that lies in the center.

Discussion

This model is designed to assist faculty in creating critical service-learning projects by providing a map that has key stops and the routes between them. In the previous section I provided an overview of the outcomes of the model and the practical possibilities under each outcome, as well as the interior connections among practices that reinforce other outcomes. The model is flexible and one can move through it in any direction and from any starting point. Whatever way one moves through the model, it will reveal key linkages and set constraints on the shape of the project. Utilizing the model in this way allows faculty to build a critical service-learning project from any starting point, guiding them from one known outcome to outcomes and practice elsewhere. If you have a relationship with a community partner, you can start there.

If you are focused on a specific system or systemic inequality, you can start there. A dynamic class in which diverse perspectives are brought to the center may lead the faculty and students outward from the classroom. Whatever piece of a project one has, or ingredient in the critical service-learning recipe, the model helps identify the connections to other parts, which will lead to next steps and ultimately the creation of an effective project that is well-grounded in the literature.

Furthermore, the model is adaptable to other projects or interpretations of the five themes or goals for critical service-learning projects. You can keep the same shape along with the outcomes in the outer boxes and devise different practical applications, depending on your discipline or the subject of the class. For example, equitable classrooms could be operationalized as student-led classrooms or professorless classes. The model can be made more specific by drilling down on practical activities under a given outcome. For instance, rather than conceive of understanding systems practically as the work of identifying inequality in a system/institution, you could give detail to the inequality and/or the institution, such as identifying racial inequality in health care. Thus, the model allows for differing interpretations of the key outcome (as long as they are grounded in the literature of a given field) or a more specific and concrete practical application. Either way, it will work the same by highlighting the linkages between the nodes and providing direction for project design.

This paradigm also gives you the freedom not to have all outcomes or applications perfectly involved all the time. For instance, as discussed above, it may in fact be impossible to create authentic relationships between one's students and the community partner (see Fouts, 2020). In fact, even trying to achieve this outcome may be overly burdensome for the community partner and detrimental to the project. However, if the project is taking place in the context of extended and equitable relationships between the faculty person or department and community partner, the existence of such relationships can potentially be an ideal embodiment of the key theme.

Finally, the model can help with assessment, evaluation, and research. In whatever way the key goal is put in action, each node in the model will imply a source for evaluation. In its current form, the activity associated with the theme *equitable classrooms* is diverse, in-class perspectives that can be assessed through student feedback and evaluation as well as the collection of class artifacts. *Understanding systems*, when put in action by identifying inequality in a system/institution, can be assessed using student outcome data, whereas community partner feedback would help evaluate both the nature of the relationship and the distribution of power. Thus, the model illustrates what needs to be evaluated from a critical service-learning perspective and points to the proper unit of analysis. It also allows faculty to think about specific evaluation needs in the project design stage and to be intentional about building effective and informative assessment and evaluation into their projects.

Conclusion

Drawing from Stith et al.'s (2018) Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool, this article provides a visual model for developing critical service-learning projects from theory to practice through assessment. The visual model assists the analysis of critical service-learning projects by grounding them in practice and by linking them to contemporary scholarship and literature. This article is an attempt to share this model with others in the hope of providing a useful framework for designing critical service-learning projects that are grounded in the literature. It is also my hope to encourage critical engagement from readers to move the model forward.

About the Author

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