Transitioning from High School Service to College Service-Learning in a First-Year Seminar

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This article analyzes the challenges encountered in a first-year service-learning course in which students had high expectations for community involvement and a commitment to social responsibility, yet significant difficulty connecting their service orientation to the intellectual inquiry expected of them at the college level. This conflict between "making a difference" and undertaking complementary academic work was evident in students' reflections, and in our own. As a result of this case study and secondary research, it appears that introductory service-learning courses may need to be reconceptualized for the increasing numbers of students who come to college with prior service experiences and strong orientations toward social action.

From Safe Service to Service-Learning

"American Freshmen Increase Commitment to Social and Civic Responsibility," asserts the headline in a widely-distributed report published by the Higher Education Research Institute (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Lindholm, Korn, & Mahoney, 2005, p. 3). This report goes on to highlight the finding that an all-time high number of incoming college students have previous community service experience, and describes an extremely high expectation among college students that they will continue to participate in community service during college. These increased commitments and enhanced expectations for community involvement cannot help but have ramifications across the higher education spectrum, including for faculty teaching service-learning courses.

This commitment to social and civic responsibility among incoming students may appear to be positive: if students arrive at college with the intent to continue to work in the community, motivating them to do so in the context of a service-learning class should be seamless. Moreover, students already familiar with community service should be able to build upon their prior experiences and move into higher levels of engagement and leadership. The assumption is that high school service-learning experiences "prepare them for a smoother transition to college life and ensure a more successful first-year experience" (Furco, 2002, p. 3). Yet the problem we found was the difficulty these students had in combining service with scholarly work appropriate to the college level. Activist students did not understand how academic knowledge could inform their commitment to social change. They

wanted to act, not read or reflect. This did not result in a "smooth transition;" rather it created conflict and disengagement.

We suggest that these students arrived at college thinking of school and service as separate activities, with their identities rooted in their successes in each. These identities were challenged as the students were asked to unlearn their previous attitudes toward community service and engage with theories concerning social change. We propose that they eventually transitioned from a mindset of "safe service" to one of "reflective service-learning," yet this process was complicated and the difficulties unanticipated.

We develop this perspective through a description and analysis of a first year seminar called "Making a Difference." We explore the non-academic, action-oriented expectations that students brought to the course, and describe the challenges to these expectations that emerged as students realized that the course entailed a significant academic component. Given that they were activists, our students were outspoken when their expectations were not met. Because of our experience with participatory research, we were open to modifying the course and analyzing the issues in "real" time. The conflict and resolution that ensued destabilized both students and instructors, though in the end both groups found that learning outcomes were achieved.

Our data sources include students' weekly reflection journals, our own reflections throughout the semester, students' statements of their 'making a difference' activities, a mid-semester course reflection process, and students' final reflection papers.

Content analysis revealed various themes that we have arranged chronologically, allowing us to assess students' learning at the beginning, middle, and end of the course. While this "Making a Difference" seminar might be considered an extreme case (Yin, 1994), we think our analysis offers generalizable lessons about this generation of college students, their expectations of academic service-learning, and the adaptations needed by faculty and institutions of higher education.

We first describe the course and the context in which it was designed, and then trace the students' reflections over the semester and our responses. Next we summarize the themes revealed in these reflections, and raise questions to assess our experience. We proceed inductively, and use ideas from existing literature on service-learning, the transition to college, and this "millennial" generation to analyze our experience. Finally, we make recommendations for first year service-learning courses.

The "Making the Difference" Seminar

Designing the "Making A Difference" Seminar

We developed this class in response to two dynamics occurring on campus. The first was to help fulfill the university's commitment to offer more first-year seminars. First-year seminars are limited to 16 students and the instructor serves as the academic advisor for the students in the class. The seminars ensure that incoming students receive early a personalized and rigorous academic experience, after which students are expected to be able to read in a disciplined academic fashion; identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments; produce original thought; engage in reasoned academic discourse; and view themselves as active members of an intellectual community.

The second dynamic to which we were responding was a desire to strengthen the "Making a Difference (MAD)" Scholarship Program. The MAD Scholarship is offered to students who made significant social contributions through leadership and engagement in community service activities during high school. Those that receive the scholarship are expected to bring that leadership and involvement to campus by being involved in community service each semester. The Scholars receive a stipend and housing if they conduct a significant community project during the summer. The MAD Seminar was envisioned as a way to provide the Scholarship recipients with a service-learning course and a cohesive group experience.

When we designed the Making A Difference course we did not see how these objectives could be at odds. To prepare, we interviewed past MAD

Scholars about what they would have liked in an introductory seminar. They seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the course, and suggested we incorporate grant writing, connections with upper-class activists, and information about time management and balancing competing demands. They appreciated the scholarly approach to the subject that we described as being a necessary part of any first-year seminar.

Our course design was influenced by our own backgrounds, too—one of us is a sociologist who studies organizational dynamics and university-community partnerships, the other a professor of community development who focuses on youth involvement in community change. We shared a commitment to community-based learning and student-centered pedagogy. We were both experienced with service-learning and community-based research, and had prior success teaching these topics to graduate students and undergraduates. To us, service-learning connects course objectives, real community needs, and reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). We were familiar with the tenets of well-designed service-learning programs, including challenging community placements and structured reflection (Eyler & Giles, 1999). We were confident we could guide the students to connect their past high school community service experiences with the scholarship on social change and help them navigate the challenges of working in a new community. We knew that a service-learning course was not necessarily advised for first-year students (Zlotkowski, 2002), but because community service was a MAD scholarship requirement, we expected the students would embrace service-learning in the seminar.

The final design of the MAD seminar integrated theory, experiential exercises, community placement, and reflection. We intentionally front-loaded the class with various theories on social change in order to accustom the students to working with academics and arguments, an explicit objective of the first-year seminars. We did not want them engaging in extensive activism during their first month of classes, as they were just beginning to learn about the local community. We aimed to give them experience applying theoretical concepts by having them interview local activists and read biographies of famous social change agents and then write reflective papers on these activities. At mid-semester, we planned to shift the focus to readings on leadership styles and group dynamics so they would develop and/or clarify their own philosophies of making a difference. Finally, we delved into two cases—university-community partnerships and youth-driven social change—to solidify course concepts. Throughout all parts of the

class, we integrated discussions of the readings with role-plays, class debates, local examples, guest speakers, and guided reflection journals. The final products of the class were an extended reflection journal, and a proposal for a "Making a Difference" project. Our overarching objective was to assist them in learning what it really takes to be a scholar who makes a difference.

Putting the MAD Seminar into Action

When we met the enrollees, we became even more optimistic about the class, given their deep and broad experiences with community service. Although the course was designed for MAD Scholars, only six of the 16 students in the course were scholarship recipients. Yet every student in the class had engaged in many high school service activities, including serving food to the elderly and homeless, participating in political protests, and tutoring children. Upon examining short biographies each student wrote about their "making a difference activities," it seemed that most students engaged in service because they liked to help other people, and saw this one-on-one contact as important. For others, it seemed that service, while intrinsically meaningful, was also a quantifiable activity, presumably to help with college admission, *"I graduated from the optional community service "club" offered at my school…meaning, I completed the maximum number of hours—120."*

Several of the biographies indicated that the students had experienced some evolution with their pre-college service—that an early community experience sparked their interest in a particular social issue that motivated them to pursue it through subsequent service activities. Fewer students reflected on how their service impacted them as individuals. Almost none of the students connected their service to larger social problems—their community service was a valued activity, but seemingly unaccompanied by reflection. No one mentioned that service activities had been tied to course work.

One might think this would be the ideal group to have in the MAD seminar. We saw tremendous potential in guiding them to contextualize their service experience, analyze their work and its impact, and expose them to alternative ways to make a difference. We imagined that the students were attracted by the topic, and assumed they understood the first sentence of the course description, "This course will offer a scholarly perspective on 'making a difference.'" Our assumption was wrong, though it took several weeks for us to realize this.

Students' Motivations for Enrolling in the MAD Seminar

The first reflection journal asked students to discuss their hopes and fears for the course. While there was considerable diversity in what students wanted from the course, the results seemed to confirm that there was alignment between course design and student expectations. A common theme throughout the journals was that students wanted to go out in the community and make a difference. They wanted to partner with local organizations, gain leadership skills, and see the results from their actions:

> In the MAD Seminar, I am hoping to form a strong partnership with the community organization that I work with, keep that partnership, and make it stronger during my four years here. I am hoping to learn about the people in/of the Main South community and the people of [the city] who have truly helped to revitalize the area. I hope to create a project—short or long term, which will help bring [the neighborhood] more alive… To me, this seminar is about action. To me, this seminar is not just about sitting around and talking about how we can make a difference, but actually going out there into the Main South area and making that difference.

Most students explicitly wrote about wanting to go further than they had in the past to strengthen their skills:

> For me, social change is a very important aspect of my life. Knowing that the course is largely focused on social change, specifically in my life, on campus, and in Worcester, I am very hopeful about what the course has to offer. Additionally, I am looking forward to exploring the other themes of the course, more specifically personal growth and leadership. During the past four years I have had many wonderful opportunities in leadership positions and have experienced a lot of personal growth. However, I hope that while I am a student in the Making a Difference course and a Making a Difference scholar, that my personal growth is able to continue and flourish and that I can become a stronger leader.

In this context of excitement about taking action, we also sensed that many students were a bit overwhelmed about starting college and had concerns about going outside their service "comfort zone."

> Additionally, I am a little nervous about going beyond my "bubble of service." By "bubble of service" I mean that I have mostly participated in civic service and little political voice service and no electoral service. However, as part of

this course I am fully aware that going beyond one's comfort zone is important. But for the most part, my fears for this course lay in my general "overwhelmedness" and my personal anxieties.

In all honesty though, I am slightly worried about not having the experiences and background to adequately serve the community around me. Growing up in a white, privileged community has had its advantages, but the diversity and experiences are lacking in my every day life. I'm hoping to get out into the community and gain an insight into a world previously unknown to me.

We expected the students' activist orientation and worries about the transition to college. However, we were struck that some students seemed to want to become more effective at what they already were doing, rather than develop new perspectives on social change. We also became aware students might be disappointed that they had to wait to get involved in the community. We discussed these issues in our weekly class planning session but decided to keep to our belief that students needed to have a stronger conceptual understanding of social change and to reflect on what it meant to be a change-maker before going out and trying to "make a difference." These beliefs were rooted in a desire to protect the community from inexperienced students, as well as the hope that first-year jitters would abate as the semester progressed. As we soon learned, the students did not share our perspective.

Student Disengagement from the Seminar

During the third week of the semester, we started to sense students' disengagement from the class. At first, we attributed this to the end of the honeymoon phase of being new college students. It was also apparent that many of our students were getting sick. In their adjustment to college, they had to learn how to take care of themselves—when to eat, sleep, study, and exercise. Given the range of illnesses they were experiencing, and the other concerns they shared with us as advisors, we knew that many of them were struggling to take charge of their own lives. These personal challenges clearly had begun to affect their academic work as well.

Their disengagement from the course manifested itself in several ways. The first sign was their resistance to reflection. We were very explicit, both verbally and in writing, about the importance, role, and process for writing analytical reflection journals (as summarized in Weisskirch, 2003). Although a few students produced exceptional reflection assignments, the majority of the students' work was inconsistent in terms of quality, engagement with the literature, and even in completion. In response, we did not cajole or scold, given our desire to encourage personal responsibility. We made it clear that their grades would be affected, and encouraged them to discuss the assignment with us. We speculated about their resistance, and wondered if it was the course content. One of our reflections stated:

The students are impatient with the scholarly traditions. I think there are two reasons: they have a bias towards action and are not all that interested in the academic foundations, and two, the nature of the academic ideas is very unsettling: they don't want their good heartedness to be problematized, they don't want to think that there are no perfect solutions, and that we won't teach them the "right" way to make social change.

The second sign of disengagement—which was quite surprising to us given their eagerness for action—was their reluctance to take on a community placement. Early in the semester, the University organized a Volunteer Fair, which we encouraged the students to attend. We invited staff from the University's Center for Community Engagement and Volunteerism to class to let the students know about volunteer opportunities. We used our personal connections with community agencies to help with placements. Part of their grade was dependent on the placements. Yet, in spite of these attempts to connect and motivate the students, most were very slow to make contacts and start their placements. Only two obtained the required contracts with their community agencies. Half completed the expected number of hours. While we had hoped that the MAD Scholars would serve as role models in completing the service component for those not in the scholarship program, this did not happen. We empathized with the difficulty the students had with their community placements, but again we did not want to solve the problem for them or relieve them of the assignment, since such frustrations are endemic to community work.

The third sign of their disengagement was a general low-energy level in the classroom. Most of the students were not well prepared for discussions and attendance declined. The students' disengagement led to our own retreat from the class. During our weekly preparation meetings, we tried to figure out the problem with the course, and inadvertently entered into a reactive mode of instruction. From our reflections:

Lots of resistance about scholarly traditions and doing academics as opposed to hands on work. Disconcerting on one level, since we

wanted them to love the class… but also entirely predictable. I knew the first week that we had a group of activists who did not necessarily think they needed to learn anything … also completely confirming our hunch that they are not ready to make a difference in a community setting. This is why we wanted to have the class!! They make too many assumptions, don't listen, don't ask questions. This is understandable, since they are only freshmen, but difficult since there is clearly a great variety among the group.

This situation came to a head when a student approached one of the professors expressing that she had serious problems with the class and a strong desire to drop out. The student suggested that she was not alone in her disappointment. In processing her concerns, the professor conveyed that in a class called Making a Difference, the professors and students should be able to talk about problems and jointly develop solutions. The professor asked the student to wait to drop, and said that she would work with the other professor to develop a way to discuss the challenges students were experiencing.

Mid-Term Review: A Structured Opportunity to Reconcile Multiple Misperceptions

Given our backgrounds in organizational development and participatory action research, we knew we had to address the problems directly with the students, and we had to involve them in the solution. We structured a three-part mid-term evaluation to take place over two class sessions. The first part asked students to write answers to five questions about teaching and learning in the course. The second part involved them giving us verbal feedback on those topics, where we listened to them and responded minimally. The third part, taking place on the following class session consisted of us responding to their concerns, reviewing the course overview and objectives, and getting their feedback on how to present the class so that students would get a clear sense of our plan for the course. This modeled several of the tenets of "making a difference" that we were trying to teach: gather information from those affected by the problem, then come up with collaborative solutions; that is, act with, not on the people you are trying to assist. From this process, we learned that students' concerns fell into four main categories:

1. They wanted hands-on experience, but felt they were "stuck in the classroom."

   I thought we were going to be making a difference. I feel like we are reading about other people that have made a difference, which helps us learn how to make a difference, but I feel like it should be more hands on.

   I thought this class would make me become more involved within the community through practice, not theory. I thought that we would grow together as a group of leaders as opposed to theoretical individuals. I thought it was going to be more hands on and less blah, blah, blah.

2. They wanted to gain practical skills, but felt that they were getting "book learning."

   Less talk of scholarly traditions, I feel like there is absolutely no point to it. More talk about us and our activism. I had expected this class to be about actually hands on making a difference. Starting new programs. Most of the reading is redundant. We don't need to know about others' definitions of leadership. We should be coming up with our own.

   I thought we would do more things like study non-profits, etc.…. Also, grant writing for us to learn how to start making a bigger difference. More field trips to non-profits, volunteer places, more speakers, etc. of real activists.

3. They wanted to learn about current thinking on the topic, but felt they were only being exposed to "older theories."

   I honestly expected greater focus on modern methods of activism and social change rather than a concentration on older theories.

4. They wanted to work as a whole group on projects, but felt they were forced into individual field placements.

   I expected to be more involved in the community as a class, rather than so independent, the community work aspect almost feels separate.

We realized that some of the tension had to do with students' definitions of making a difference and social change: they wanted it to be straightforward and uncomplicated. They wanted to learn how to conduct a letter campaign, or a sit-in, or how to run a food bank. They wanted to learn from each other and not the literature. They did not want to think about how to construct social problems in a way to devise appropriate strategies. They wanted to act and see the results of their efforts. Only one of the students articulated a sense of the bigger picture of the class, and saw that the theoretical work was setting a foundation for later, more practical work. Another student noted his disappointment, but acknowledged the type of learning he was experiencing:

To some degree, I expected the class to be more hands-on, perhaps more practical. Actually, I learned more about how to think, not only being committed to making a difference, but knowing how to.

All in all, this was a difficult process for us. While we were both committed to the idea of engaged inquiry and community-based research, we were against the idea of placing the students into the community before they had developed the skills to reflect on their role and impact. We were also puzzled about why they thought there was going to be an exclusive emphasis on action, when the first line of the course description clearly stated, "This course will offer a scholarly perspective on 'making a difference.'"

Resolution of Course Misperceptions

We did not want to be defensive with the students, yet we needed to clarify the structure and intent of the course. We reviewed the course overview and syllabus with them. The students showed us the areas which suggested action would dominate the class. We acknowledged how it could be interpreted that way, but conveyed our intentions and walked them through the second half of the course that covered topics such as leadership and group dynamics, proposal and grant writing, community organizing, and other active strategies of engaging with neighborhoods.

The students seemed relieved to air their frustrations and to see that the course was heading in the direction they wanted. Because we were beginning a more applied section, we did not make any adjustments to the course but we did make a greater commitment to using hands-on activities in the classroom as a way to engage with the readings. The discontented student did not drop the class—and in fact enjoyed the second half of the course. Yet, the reflections, placements, and class engagement of most of the students remained inconsistent. We were discouraged, puzzled, and felt compelled to understand. One instructor's journal reflections stated:

> One realization is that I really don't understand these students. What motivates them? …I need to think more about their assets than their deficiencies, just as we taught them in class. Another realization is that, except for the MAD scholars, their sense of self-efficacy is low. Thus, they can't imagine figuring out how to make a difference, go into the community, or learn in a way that requires so much personal responsibility. I suspect self-efficacy takes a dip for any incoming college students, since they are faced with such a different environment and a range of new expectations.

All was not lost, however. Surprisingly, the students' final reflection papers demonstrated that the key learning objectives of the course for the most part were achieved, as demonstrated in the following five themes we drew from these final papers.

1. The course challenged the students' previous notions of themselves as change makers.

> This course pushed us, as a class and individuals, to take responsibility and grow. As much as we talked about readings in class, it was up to us to reflect on our own…I was challenged to take initiative and grow as a student and change maker. I was pushed out of my comfort zone by Jane Addams' criticism of the 'charitable outsider' and inspired by [speaker in class] honesty and empathy.

> Each element of the course has asked me to do this [to get outside of my comfort zone] in different ways, reinforcing my belief that personal risk is necessary for change to occur and challenging my belief that making a difference is easy.

2. Students became aware of the challenges and benefits of being a change-maker with an "outsider" status.

> Nearing the end of my first college semester, my passion has not wavered, if anything it has grown stronger, but my own outlook on making a difference has been slightly altered as I have learned more about activism and experienced the challenges of being an outsider first hand.

> …I have learned to be very aware of who I am and what my goals are when I am involved in a community activity. I need to be conscious of my presence as an insider or an outsider and how that will affect my approach to the task.

3. Students became aware of the complexity and diverse forms of making a difference.

> The ideas I learned in this class brought me out of my element. I had never thought about most of the topics brought up in the readings. These ideas pulled me into a new frame of mind. I had never thought about the complications within community involvement or the various types of community service.

4. Field placements and interviews with local activists helped students see that patience, passion, and building relationships are needed to make a difference.

> I was very happy that I got the chance to interview one particular individual activist and change-maker. Talking with [him] was both an

exciting and mind boggling experience. Through our conversation I got to learn about [him], his life and his passion for community service. He told us that change does not happen over night; rather, activism takes time and patience, a concept that we learned and discussed in class. I've decided to take this maxim to heart. Being an activist and change-maker myself, I am always eager to see the end results of my service. However I have learned that this way of thinking is not very practical. Sometimes the end results of making a difference activities cannot be seen until a good amount of time after the project has been completed.

5. Students conveyed that the theoretical and conceptual readings helped them understand that certain strategies are appropriate in certain contexts. Some students demonstrated a shift in understanding of social change from a needs and service provision orientation to an assets and structural change perspective.

At the start of the MAD course, I saw activism through eyes similar to those of Jane Addams, who spoke of activism in terms of "benefactors and beneficiaries." To me, making a difference was about volunteer work, charity, leadership, and giving back to my community. I love working with people and was eager to help and connect with others however I could… I knew I wanted to teach and work with children in the future, but I did not yet see leadership as a relational process or education as a tool for advancement or social change. This course has since introduced me to the world of activism and relational leadership through education and empowerment.

This course has been a very enlightening one to me in several aspects. I have learned about the way activists have been able to make change, the values and morals that lie behind them, how group and leadership dynamics work, the importance of relationships, and how to carry out one's ideas through organizations and writing. I can now use what I've learned as tools to help me on my own path in making a difference. More importantly, through reflection, I have learned about myself and challenged myself in terms of why, how, and what I want to do.

While several students ended the course holding onto simplistic notions about making change, it appeared that most of them did undergo a shift in their thinking about themselves as change-makers and the field of social change. As experienced educators, we recognized that discomfort and even identity destabilization on the part of teachers and students is a sign that real learning is taking place.

Yet, we were left with lingering questions about whether the experience was more challenging and painful than it had to be, particularly given the important role first year seminars played in the University's overarching academic plan. What should we have done differently in our quest to help them become scholars who make a difference?

Service-Learning and *These* First-Year Students

At the end of the semester, we reflected on this question and the themes we identified through analyzing the students' work, and decided to investigate further. We returned to the literatures on service-learning and adjustment to college, which provided a preliminary set of explanations. In the course of our reading, we discovered research on this generation of students that had yet to be integrated into the literature on service-learning. We use these ideas to further explore our experience in the Making A Difference Seminar, and to craft suggestions for change.

First-Year Students: Challenges of Emerging Adulthood

First-year college students are considered difficult to teach and reach, more so than sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Erickson and Strommer (1991) describe the necessity of adapting to higher work loads, particularly outside of class; more stringent grading standards; expectations of theoretical and analytical thinking, and less personalized student-teacher relationships. Personal responsibility for scheduling and work planning is especially challenging. As a result, self-confidence can decrease, and students become disengaged and disempowered (Boyer, 1987). Our students struggled with all of these, and acknowledged they felt overwhelmed.

With regard to the academic adjustment, their high school teachers probably warned them about difficult course work, but we think that they had little idea as to the more challenging expectations at the college level, particularly in a seminar setting. The students' resistance to the scholarly traditions could partially be explained by their limited exposure to theoretical and analytical thinking, and difficulty completing the weekly reflection journals could have been the result of the amount of work required and our supportive but critical feedback on their writing. So, by selecting a class that purportedly addressed action and activism, the MAD students erroneously assumed academics would take a subordinate role, thereby easing their academic adjustment. When they found this was not the case, they became frustrated and disengaged.

Further, we hypothesize that their service orientation *exacerbated* their difficulty with the academic transition, in ways that were unanticipated. Primarily, as shown earlier in the article, they wanted action, not academics. They had enjoyed and succeeded with community service in high school, and thought it would be the same at the college level. Community service was a part of their identity, and ideally it could continue to help them navigate this stage of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Weisskirch, 2003). Yet initially they were not prepared for us to complexify service, nor to conceptualize it as service-learning. To them, service and school were separate activities, and they were discomforted by the idea that these activities were being combined in the MAD seminar.

This is an important realization because both service-learning and first-year seminars are thought to counter college student disengagement, despite little research on the subject of the relationship between service-learning and the transition to college (Furco, 2002). In one exception, Duckenfield (2002) recognizes the growth in service-learning and volunteerism at the primary and secondary levels and speculates about its potential impact on college students and college course designs. She reports from a pilot study that students who have prior experience with service-learning are more likely to be motivated to do service as part of their college coursework and to have chosen career paths, asserting that, "Consequently their academic work becomes more relevant to them, and they already know the answer to "why do I have to learn this" (Duckenfield, 2002, p. 47)? She also does not see any difficulty in adapting to a more rigorous academic environment, writing, "And very importantly, these students truly understand how real learning happens. They have experienced a variety of pedagogies during their years in public school, and service-learning is the one that puts excitement into their whole being when they talk about it…."

(p. 48). According to this perspective, college students will embrace service-learning because they enjoy it and find it relevant. This was not our experience; the service was embraced but service-learning was not understood.

A key characteristic of new college students is intolerance for ambiguity (Whitfield, 2005). Whitfield writes, "Today's students may have encountered service during the K-12 process, but many are accustomed to the basic lecture and test style class. Turning them loose on an experiential assignment that is filled with ambiguity strikes fear in the highest degree" (p. 249). In retrospect, it is clear that our students had trouble with the ambiguity of both the seminar-type class and the community placement expectation. What Whitfield describes as fear, we experienced as disengagement—silent refusal to complete assignments and difficulty in explaining why. We had given them the support we thought they needed: community contacts, models of effective reflection, extra time to complete and revise assignments, and careful review of scholarly concepts. Yet at midterm, they were discouraged, and had seemingly lost the confidence and passion with which they had begun the semester. Zlotkowski (2002) asserts, "servicelearning in any introductory course must be designed in ways that stretch but do not break the first-year students' sense of competence" (p. 34). We had apparently asked them to stretch too far.

We knew when we designed the course that the literature suggests that college students be introduced to service-learning in a developmental manner, that is, with gradually increasing expectations of time, complexity, and responsibility (Zlotkowski, 2002). The typical introductory service-learning experience is limited in scope, i.e., a one-time off-campus activity that does not require much technical competency or conceptual sophistication. This is especially important from the community perspective, because novices can do more harm than good, until they are well-prepared. According to Zlotkowski, "For this reason, first-year service projects may require more detailed guidelines and monitoring than would otherwise be the case" (p. 34). Yet we discounted part of this advice in planning our course, for reasons both philosophical and practical. First, a key learning objective was that making a difference required patience, relationships, and familiarity with the community, and we believed that a one-time project would not support this lesson. Second, we knew that most students would have had extensive prior community service experience, and thus assumed they would be ready for greater complexity and longer duration. Third, a year-long service placement was a requirement for the MAD scholarship recipients, and, as described above, we designed the course as a way to support them in this. Fourth, we believed that students would prefer choice in fulfilling their community service requirement. And we were right— students wanted to decide for themselves, and subsequently took more time than we had anticipated finding an acceptable placement, if they did so at all. More importantly, we hesitated to impose top-down assignments because we were trying to model a participatory and inclusive approach to social change and leadership. Obviously, we should have designed the service component differently. But what is developmentally appropriate for students with experience in activism and volunteerism, many of whom have been rewarded for their prior service? We need to

know more about this generation of first-year students before answering this question.

Millennials in the Classroom and the Community

Students now entering college can be considered representative of the "millennial generation," that is, those born during or after 1982 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Other labels used to describe them are the Internet Generation, Echo Boomers, Boomlet, Nexters, Generation Y, Nintendo Generation, and Digital Generation (Raines, 2002). These labels highlight the obvious effect of information technology on this generation, as well as their relationship to the preceding cohorts, but they share characteristics beyond technology. Millennials, particularly the more affluent segment, have been influenced by such trends as a societal focus on children and the family; scheduled, sheltered, and structured lives; multiculturalism, terrorism, heroism, and patriotism; parent advocacy; and globalization. Consequently, these youth are thought to be sociable, optimistic, talented, well-educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, achievement-oriented (Raines, 2002) and civic minded (Pryor et al., 2005). They are also risk averse, and characterized as having "zero tolerance for delays" and a preference for "doing rather than knowing" (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil, 2004).

Millennials' learning styles include a preference for teamwork, technology, structure, entertainment and excitement, experiential activities, flexibility, goals, challenging assignments, and respect for their ideas and input (Howe & Strauss, 2003; Oblinger, 2003). Millennial students do best with the concrete, the practical, and the immediate (Schroeder, 1993), and thus content and coverage should not be the focus of introductory courses, as previously assumed (summarized in Zlotkowski, 2002).

With respect to community service in general, Howe, Matson, and Strauss (2000) describe the Millennial generation as one that is intent on making the world a better place and creating a future full of hope. Nonetheless, Millennials are disaffected by politics even as they are motivated by community service (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). "When asked why they chose to participate in these efforts, but backed away from political involvement, many said that they felt they could make more of a difference in their communities … showing disgust and disillusionment with the political system." (Sandfort & Haworth, 2002).

This Millennial profile very much described our students. As the reflections summarized above showed:

- They wanted action, not academics.
- They wanted quick, hassle-free processes for gaining access to community leaders and placements.
- They wanted familiar social problems and tried-and-true community settings
- They wanted group work, not individual projects.

From this we conclude that students came to the Making A Difference seminar with the desire to participate in what we will call "safe service"— that is, they wanted their community service placements to be structured in such a way that they could show up and serve with their classmates in a familiar, easy manner. They were very interested in learning about making a difference, but did not expect this learning to be particularly challenging, nor did they imagine that change-making was so complex. Their orientation to social change was decidedly through community service (rather than politics). For the most part they were non-reflective, and did not think deeply about their community work. In short, they wanted to repeat what they had done successfully in high school, albeit in a new setting. Service had been integral to their identities, and given all the other identity challenges they were facing as new college students, they held fast to what was familiar and safe.

Our course countered this "safe service" expectation, made evident in the students' reflections and resistance to course requirements. When faced with difficulties in the community and in the classroom, they did not rise to the challenge—rather, they lost confidence, became stressed, and disengaged. Perhaps we should have expected this. As Arnett (2000) observes, "Although the identity explorations of emerging adulthood make it an especially full and intense time of life for many people, these explorations are not always experienced as enjoyable" (p. 474). Yet experience and reflection eventually allowed growth and change. Weisskirch writes, "From a developmental perspective, service-learning serves as a facilitative process in continuing introspection and identity formation for college students." (2003, p. 142). As the final journal entries revealed, many desired outcomes were achieved, and the majority of the students had moved away from the desire for safety, and were able to understand the value of "reflective service." These final reflections showed growth, but in a manner that might be described as unique to Millennials committed to social responsibility. They had to unlearn what they had known about service and school, and this was not easy.

In sum, the generational literature suggests that Millennial students will come to college wanting to make a difference, though because they are disen-

chanted with the political system, the idea of structural change will not be easily embraced. These students also expect immediate feedback and do not like ambiguity or risk, characteristics that might direct them toward short-term, feel-good volunteerism as opposed to the longer term efforts needed to address problems and contribute to social change. Additionally, they want structured experiences and use of technology, because this is what they have always known. They will find scheduling difficult because community contacts are not necessarily Internet-oriented. They like to work in groups of peers, but will have to learn explicit collaboration skills to work successfully with those who are not their peers. Their bias toward doing rather than knowing can be addressed by community service and other experiential activities; though because "knowing" is less valued, the integration of service with academic learning will not be enthusiastically accepted. Significantly, because their lives have been structured and protected by parents, they are not initially capable of taking responsibility for managing a community placement.

Transforming "Safe Service" to Reflective Service-Learning for Millennial Students

Reflecting on what finally activated engagement among our students and considering the characteristics of the Millennial generation, we make the following recommendations. First, recognize that community service placements must be structured (though not necessarily limited to the one time service project previously suggested for introductory service-learning courses). Because practice-to-theory is the way most of these students learn, instructors should structure community service placements in a way that reflects Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle. This cycle involves four stages toward genuine learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Service-learning courses informed by Kolb would begin with a time-limited "safe service" project at a community organization, designed to gain familiarity with the setting and particular social issue. Given these students' preference for group work, small groups should reflect together, rather than requiring individual reflections. Scholarly literature then would be introduced. The instructors would model effective reflection and literature integration on this single experience. Finally, this process would be followed with a semester long commitment to the same organization in a structured service activity, such as homework help or meal delivery. Connections to the academic aspects of the course would continue to be made to the placement, but instructors may experience student resistance to both academics and reflection for (at least) part of the course.

Second, build on students' dual preference for doing rather than knowing, and learning from others rather than learning from books, by having them interview local activists. In our course, the activist interviews proved to be an important catalyst for students to gain a deeper understanding about what it takes to make a sustained difference. Following a similar cycle as discussed above, the students would be assisted by the instructor in setting up the interviews and developing interview questions. In groups, students would process the interviews, and then relate the interview findings to scholarly literature. This cycle would end with students prepared to experiment responsibly with different forms of activism.

Third, broach the importance of political engagement during the latter half of the course, once students have experienced the limitations of community service. Like Colby and colleagues, we believe that preparation for active citizenship must include systemic, policy-related understandings (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stevens, 2003). Yet, most students in our seminar openly admitted being confused and put off by the political system. We addressed this in our course, bringing in a panel of people who operate at different levels of the political process—a local city councilor, a state senator, and a political activist. Again, providing students with an opportunity to learn from others allowed them to see the advantages of a structural approach versus service that is individual and short term.

Conclusion

The service-learning field must continue to clarify and define its pedagogy to adapt to the expectations and learning styles of the Millennial Generation. In this vein, we support Furco's (2002) assertion that more research is needed on how K-12 service experiences affect students' college adjustment. These students may come to college having experienced what they think of as "service-learning" but too often this is actually community service (albeit for credit) without connection to the curriculum. When students encounter rigorous service-learning courses in which service is combined with academic learning, they may not be prepared and as a result experience identity destabilization and disengagement. By understanding that this is a new generation of students, respecting at the outset their perceptions of themselves as change-makers, and utilizing a developmental approach to community engagement, first-year service-learning seminars can help to integrate these students' identities as activist academics and ease their college transition.

Note

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