# Assessing Learning in Community Service Learning: A Social Approach

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*This essay advances a way of thinking about assessment that envelops both process and outcome. We assert that learning in community service learning and the assessment thereof might fruitfully be considered in communication with others (the students, constituents from the community, instructors, etc.). Concepts central to a social approach to learning are identified, and examples of ways to assess those concepts are advanced. Finally, methods of assessing the social dimension of learning are provided, including interviews and focus groups, the analysis of journal assignments, and the observation of videotaped interactions.*

**C**ommunity Service Learning (CSL) pedagogy, programs, and research by their very nature promote the idea of academic-community intervention—an interruption in the way things are that produces some sort of change for social betterment. How to assess both the quality and quantity of change, for whom and for what purposes, remains a central focus of CSL scholarship (see, for example, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Lee, 2000; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Levin, 2000).

In an essay that advances a theoretical and practical framework for conceptualizing the design of CSL research, Astin (2000) uses Wilber's (1995, 1998) four-quadrant model to distinguish the individual and collective as well as the interior and exterior dimensions of social life in terms of individual consciousness, individual actions, institutional culture, and institutional structures. Based on the four quadrants, among the fundamental principles of outcome assessment in CSL, Astin suggests:

1) *Research on service-learning needs to look at both individual and collective organizational/structural outcomes;*

2) *Service-learning research needs to look at program impacts on the exteriors and interiors of the individuals and organizations being studied. p. 99 [original emphasis]*

Astin's use of the model and suggestions for assessment are instructive for their reference to the systemic impact of change processes. Change in any one part of the community "system" impacts the others and thus cannot be studied in isolation. Individual actions are interdependent on those of the collective to produce meaningful outcomes for structures, organizations and institutions, which in turn provide feedback that affects actions and relations on an individual and collective level. For Astin, the implications for assessment are clear: We must evaluate outcomes and change in general in terms of the interdependencies among all parts of the system.

In this essay we extend Astin's (2000) ideas about the systemic relationship among CSL constituencies to the assessment of learning as communication. That is, while we too see the importance of evaluating outcomes in terms of the connections among parts (constituencies) to form a holistic system, our concern for assessment envelops both process and outcome. Learning in CSL and the assessment thereof might fruitfully be argued to be constructed in *communication* with others, thereby complicating the divisions between Astin's version of the internal individual (cognitions, values, beliefs) and the individual's external actions (outcomes) as well as with the institutional culture and structure. That is, actions are always meaningful and meaning is made in (inter)action with others; the process of meaning-making is itself empirical, just as outcomes are social facts.

From this perspective, we see learning not simply as an individual activity but as a communicative process (see, for example, Dewey, 1925; Habermas, 1984) which cannot be separated from the experience of its occurrence. Viewing learning in this manner offers a window (or maybe a lens) into the CSL experience, because so much of what we and our students take away from those experiences in the community seems so rich, complex, and difficult to name, and thus to easily isolate, categorize, and measure. And yet, if learning is located in the ways we, along with others, make meaning of our experiences, how might we understand, much less assess, that learning has occurred?

This difficult question is the focus of our essay, and in what follows we build on the conceptualization of assessment in the service-learning field by introducing and applying an assessment framework that

embeds learning in the context of experience. In so doing, we do not wish to negate the contributions of cognitive and behavioral measures of learning. Rather, we wish to offer a different perspective—one that can complement more traditional approaches by locating learning outcomes in the context of their use. We call this perspective a social approach to learning and differentiate it from assessment procedures that assume learning as an individual act and thus an individual outcome. Both approaches (social and individual-based) lead to different and valid conclusions about the nature of learning and experience, and practitioners can substitute, supplement, complement, or compare the two approaches to assessing their projects. Nonetheless, to accept the concepts advanced in this article, the reader must believe that a more comprehensive evaluation of the process of learning in CSL is possible or desirable.

With a rigorous focus on interaction (defined here as expressed action and interaction between and among individuals, compared with cognition or recall of attitudes, behaviors, etc.), we hope to develop an assessment framework that provides a set of conceptual and methodological tools for the service-learning practitioner. By situating learning in the relational and contextual processes through which people make meaning, we also are able to situate community service learning as engaged practice—a practice that offers learning *in situ* through challenges to notions of power, identities, cultures, community, and change.

Loosely following Gelmon et al.'s (2001) suggested questions for assessment, we begin with a response to their question "What are we looking for?"[1] with a goal to assess learning as a social process, and in particular to apply such an approach to CSL projects. Typically, a CSL assessment program might ask what the academic and (sometimes) civic goals of the project might be and then measure those goals with methods such as surveys (pre and post), reflection papers, or journals and course evaluation forms. Goals might range from being able to identify and apply course concepts in a community setting, to improving university-community relations. Indicators (what is measured) might range from use of vocabulary to frequency of contact between students and community.

Other instrumental assessment measures are found in the correlations between course concepts and the skills learned. Although the evaluation of practices comes closer to analyzing learning as situated in context, the identified skills or competencies are rarely analyzed in the context of their use and their assessment is confined to the individual.[2] Assessing changes in identities or practices from this perspective assumes learning as the modification of an exist-

ing attitude or mental disposition within the self or the other person's mind, or the display or performance of a specific behavior or course of action. The preset definition of skills to be learned limits the possibilities of the other in interaction to contribute to what those skills mean in and to the interaction, their usefulness in coordinating meaning, and the moral outcome of the conversation. In CSL courses, in the case of shifting teaching, learning, and helping relationships between classroom and community, the relationships between social and cultural identity, skills, and moral outcome can be problematic.

Still, skills in and of themselves are important tools for assessment; our objective here is not to do away with them as measures of learning, but to note their traditional grounding in a self-contained predetermined "objective" outcome. Skills can be resituated as part of mutual rule constructions that keep people connected and working toward mutually desired outcomes in and for the community. Thus, while the individual or instrumental perspective is popular, valued, and often needed, we believe that other perspectives can open doors to other ways of knowing, learning, and evaluating that learning.

The rest of the essay is divided into concepts, indicators, examples, and methods of assessment. We first review the CSL literature on assessment for key terms and concepts with an eye toward how these concepts might be measured from a social approach. Next, from the conceptual bases for learning and communication identified in social constructionist and pragmatist scholarship, we identify concepts central to a social approach to assessment and methods for locating these concepts in CSL and classroom activities.

## Literature Review

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a thorough review of all the ways in which student learning and community impact in CSL have been assessed, we begin with a brief review of the key concepts that have emerged to measure learning in the research to date. We can conclude from this brief review that great strides have been made to discover the myriad ways that learning in CSL is both similar to and different from learning in other educative experiences. Yet, we join a small group of others, also reviewed briefly here, who attempt to further push the boundaries of what is considered learning and how it can be assessed.

One key concept that has emerged in past research uses improved academic performance in the classroom and, more generally, academic engagement to indicate that learning has occurred through CSL (e.g., Astin et al., 2000; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hepburn, Niemi, & Chapman, 2000;

Hunter & Brisbin, 2000; Steinke & Buresh, 2002). Another key concept in the CSL literature on assessment is civic engagement, as evident by such indicators as attitudes about and interest in social problems or volunteering (e.g., Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002; Perry & Katula, 2001; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1998). A third key concept is respect and tolerance for diversity or a self-reported connection with others (e.g., Boyle-Baise, 1998; Gallini & Moely, 2003; Giles & Eyler, 1994; Hepburn, Niemi, & Chapman, 2000). Finally, past researchers have identified the development of skills, such as writing and speaking abilities, stemming from the experiential nature of CSL (e.g., Dubinksy, 2002; Tucker, McCarthy, Hoxmeier, & Lenk, 1998). We agree that each of these concepts is important in establishing whether and how individuals have learned or changed through a CSL experience. Yet, we also argue in this paper that despite the impressive array of outcomes of CSL explored in the literature to date, a social and contextual approach to learning in CSL can further illuminate the unique opportunities for learning that CSL invites.

In the current paper, one (among several) of the means of evaluation that we use to further the application of the social approach to assessment in CSL introduced here is a close and careful analysis of the open-ended, written responses of college student CSL participants. It is important to establish that such an approach has a number of precedents in the literature (e.g., Cameron et al., 2001; Ikeda, 2000; Litke, 2002; Valdez, 2001). Although some might dismiss such data as "purely anecdotal," we agree with these and other scholars that reflection papers and journal entries provide valid and important evidence of learning—especially as it is embedded in social experience. Indeed, employing thematic analysis of such rich and detailed data to study both the overt elements of students' experiences and observations as stated in their own words, as well as the underlying assumptions about or orientations toward identity, relationship, and community, should be considered among the techniques used to measure learning.

Next, we identify a number of contributions to the literature on assessment in CSL that places interaction between and among individuals as integral to learning, as we do here. Robert Coles, for instance, in his important work *The Call of Service* (1993), argues that moral character is developed when students think about themselves in relation to others, and such thoughts are enriched by interacting with others in CSL. Thus, the process of social interaction opens up opportunities for an individual's development that wouldn't otherwise be explored. Coles suggests that considering those around us and our obligations to

them is essential in CSL, and in this paper, we propose a model for assessing this type of learning.

Marchel (2003), in an exploration of the development of altruism in association with CSL, shows that varying expressions of and opportunities for altruism change with changing contexts and social interactions in the CSL experience. She suggests that the "path to altruism" is not necessarily linear and unproblematic. Rather, and similar to what we argue in this paper, she shows that the issue is complex and qualitative research methods reveal that the development of altruism is closely tied to the context in which it is experienced and measured.

In what is perhaps the closest parallel to the approach taken in the current paper, Artz (2001) advances the importance of the concept of dialogue between students and community members in CSL. The dialogue that occurs between students and community members in CSL has the potential to be transformative, Artz argues, and can exemplify practical, effective approaches to taking on abstract issues of social justice. Artz draws in part from previous work in which the importance of praxis in university curricula is presented (Frey, Artz, Pollack, & Pearce, 1996). Frey and colleagues (1996) assert that

> knowledge always is specific, contextual, and inextricably embedded in the flux of experience, rather than eternal, universal, and necessary. That is, we come to our knowledge about communication via our examination of particulars, via an effort to develop knowledge of how communication works in particular contexts, situations, and so forth, rather than through abstract reflection, distanced hypothesis testing, etc. (pp. 82-83)

We adopt a similar view of learning occurring in particular social interactions, in communication with others.

Finally, it should be noted that, although many studies have been conducted to assess the effectiveness of CSL for college students, relatively few have researched the community members involved in CSL (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). When data are drawn from community members, they are typically confined to community members' assessments of the *value* of the CSL initiative (e.g., Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Driscoll, et al., 1996) rather than pre- and post-CSL measures of the *actual impact*[3] of the initiative on the community. Admittedly, community impact is difficult to examine without community input into the measurement. When needs and goals are clear, however, multiple levels of analysis can be employed—as evidenced in our own past research (2003, 2004, in press) that examines the impact of a project-based CSL initia-

tive on both the students involved and the community addressed (and assess the relationship between the two). In the current essay, although data are drawn primarily from students involved in CSL, those data pertain to interactions with community members, rather than measuring what changes occurred within the students themselves.

Looking again at the many concepts identified in the CSL assessment literature—improved academic performance, academic engagement, civic engagement, values and moral character, altruism, dialog, and context—one can see that the attention to assessment of learning has focused primarily on students. Yet, even if we were interested primarily in the learning outcomes associated with student participation in a CSL course, as mentioned earlier, it is imperative that we assess those outcomes in the contexts of their use. In other words, in assessing outcomes we need to be reflexive about our actions, where reflexivity is a kind of looking back at the meaning given to a particular action, to assess its implications for future interactions. For example, if we were to assess commitment to service, we should begin by looking at the stories of commitment and change as they emerge in interactions between and within the various constituencies associated with a CSL partnership. Here we might focus on the development of new skills and abilities gained in interaction in novel situations—or in accounting for what one did in a particular interaction after the fact. This does not mean that we can *only* assess learning as it happens in conversation, but that we can and should use interaction as the basis for how people make meaning of their world, and thus learn from it. In the current paper, we offer a conceptual framework and a means of assessment that view learning as embedded in the contexts of social interaction.

## Theory: Assessment in Context

Assessing learning from a social approach differs from other assessment approaches in that our learning goals are based on concepts that situate learning as *acting into* experience (Dewey, 1922) and *within* bounded social and cultural relationships. Although we will discuss the concepts in depth later in this paper, it is important to note the ways the CSL process exemplifies the contextual nature of social, cultural, and civic learning. Thus, the goals for assessment could range from acquisition and application of course concepts to an understanding of where and how cultural abilities, understanding of identities, and civic agency occurs.

To assess the latter, our framework looks at learning as a form of coordinated social action (Habermas, 1984; Pearce & Cronen, 1980). Our approach to learning and assessment may be derived from social constructionist (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Harré & Secord,

1972; Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Wittgenstein, 2001) and pragmatist (Dewey, 1922; Habermas, 1984) philosophy and scholarship. Central to this perspective is Dewey's pragmatic philosophy in which he asserts that ideas about the self, culture, education, etc. are formed through communication. Dewey (1922) equates learning with experience, which can only happen in and through social action. He works to describe learning not in terms of ends[4], which imply a start and stop to meaning, but in terms of "ends in view." In fact, Cronen (1995) asserts that "[e]nds in view are not prior to communication; rather they are constructed and reconstructed in communication" (p. 221). Learning happens through experiences communicating with others which are ongoing, situated, and allow for adaptation in new social scenes. For our purposes, this means that our notions of what changes occur through CSL intervention as well as how to assess those changes should be seen not as outcomes that start and stop with a particular CSL project but as processes through which evaluation is understood in the context of its interpretation.

For the practitioner, this approach means that different abilities, competencies, and constraints emerge as students and community members move between ideas about their own identity and agency, negotiation over mutual meaning, and the social structures that define similarities and differences. Thus, assessment becomes an evaluation of the ability to create and coordinate ideas about identity, engagement, social/cultural roles, abilities and limits on agency, and resistance. Although it is conceivable that this perspective on assessment would allow us to look generally for meanings salient to members of the community in terms of the abilities above, we feel that it is useful and practical to construct a framework with a narrower focus on learning. In what follows, we have thus identified four concepts that we feel are particular to CSL courses that include interaction in the community context as part of the experience. After each concept we have included questions to prompt ideas about and focus on what to measure. We label these questions indicators, although they are not indicators in the sense of quantitative research design but a constellation of questions that generate complex layers of meaning about the concepts as they relate to learning. After these questions we provide examples from CSL courses with which we have used this assessment. Included in the examples are the methods we have used to gather data for each assessment concept.

### Engaging Resistance

Although the terms "engagement" and "resistance" are generally understood in opposition, linking them together illustrates the connections between

learning and resistance and provides a basis to create new or different meanings for experience. Learning does not stop with resistance; rather resistance can be a sign of engagement, of an application to context and experience that tests the usefulness of concepts and theories. Engaging resistance implies an opening up to alternative knowledges/epistemologies, experiences, and locations from which course content or social experience is understood.

Engaging resistance as part of assessment can occur both through analysis of the process (the enactment and performance of resistance) as well as the incorporation of resistance as part of program design and evaluation (seen as neither positive nor negative but as part of the process of learning and growth for the program and participants). If we view and respond to resistance for its potential as critical engagement, we tap into learning as social activity that does not necessarily end if or when a student or community member resists the course concept, theory, or service-learning experience. While certainly resistance can be used to cover apathy or a lack of preparation, its depth and saliency for those involved can be important indicators of its usefulness. The use of this concept allows us to evaluate the *different* work of learning in the context of CSL and its possibilities for creating engaged citizens.

*Indicators: How do we measure the ways resistance is engaged?* The following questions can help to focus assessment on the enactment of resistance, and its uses and consequences for learning:

- Where does resistance emerge? How does resistance emerge? Is it resistance prompted by experiences or ideas that are "outside the box" and therefore don't fit the concepts? Is resistance enacted through silence, dismissal, or a determination that academic concepts have no meaning or bearing for those who are distanced based on background or cultural identities?

- Assessment measures can look for moments or episodes where resistance is met with flexibility and openness to the possibilities for new meanings to emerge. How/do students, faculty instructors, and community members use clarifying questions to investigate the resistance? If they do, how do these conversational moves relate back to the goals for learning?

- Do students, faculty, and community members push themselves to locate their opposition in relation to the service and/or course? Does the interaction change as a result? Where are stories about resistance located in relation to the dominant narratives about learning?

- Are there ways of reconciling different systems

of "making sense" of what is going on? Is there discussion of the possibilities and limits for agency in these situations?

*Assessment example.* In a graduate-level CSL course taught by the first author, students worked on a variety of research projects for local agencies. Research questions for each agency had been worked out beforehand and the agency representative came to the class to provide information and a context for each of their questions. One well regarded and established local agency for families in transition wanted students to assess the parenting skills of their clientele to provide more effective in-house parenting programs. The students involved in the project worked to get to know the parents and discuss what they felt were their strengths and weaknesses as parents, as well as what information or programs they would like the agency to provide. The graduate students found that the parents (who were from a different culture and class than the majority of agency workers) were not unhappy with their parenting skills and resisted what they felt was further intrusion into an already uncomfortable situation. The configuration of space (with very little privacy) in the house meant that families were on display for each other and the staff.

The graduate students initially resisted completing the project because they felt that it unfairly targeted cultural differences as substandard and harmful to children. As well, they felt that the parents' resistance to programs which taught them parenting skills when their primary concern was self-sufficiency (and moving out) was justified, and so they could not provide the data requested by the agency. After their first visits with the families and the staff at the agency, the students asked if they might do an alternative (non-community-based) assignment. Instead, the instructor (first author) proposed that they think creatively about how they might serve both the agency and the clients' needs by creating some awareness of the (differing) stories about good parenting and their connections both to the agency's and the parents' stories of identity. Far from a failed project, the research provided an opportunity for the clients of the agency to express their frustrations to a third party, for the graduate students to learn about the many experiences of disconnection in the social services system, and to provide the agency with detailed feedback that indicated the prevalence of concerns other than those they had identified.

Through consistently remaining connected to the sources of and reasons for resistance, both the research process and the report (which was also presented to the umbrella agency) became catalysts for change. Data for assessing the students' and community members' experiences of the project were collected via audiotaped interviews, research and reflec-

tion journals, and diaries kept over a week period. From this data, resistance was identified as a social, rather than an individually-based phenomenon. The resistance expressed by the parents became an intervention into the stories of who they were—as clients and families—which in turn impacted the students' stories of who they were (as "good" students) and what constituted "good" service in that context. Learning here was not a matter simply of application of course concepts to the placement, but emerged through the productive use of resistance. This conceptualization of resistance as a tool for teaching and learning owes much to the work of Paulo Friere. Friere (1998) notes that "critical resistance" in both teaching and learning creates an attitude of openness toward the word and the world, "a methodical mistrust that prevents me from becoming absolutely certain of being right...Openness to approaching and being approached, to questioning and being questioned, to agreeing and disagreeing" (p. 119).

### Role and Rule Negotiation

Roles may be examined for their structural, formal qualities (e.g., Goffman, 1959, discusses roles as on stage versus off stage performances) or for their negotiation within enacted scenes (e.g., when students configure their roles in relation to their own and others' interpretations of social rules for acting in that situation). A role emphasizes the relationship between certain rules and an individual (as a representative of a social group). Rules can be associated with a category of individuals according to their social position or function (e.g., manners, attire, and vocabulary appropriate to one's class or vocation) and form the basis of a social role. Rule following, according to Wittgenstein (2001), requires knowledge of the rule's existence and content. Rules tell us how to "go on" in conversation; how to respond to one another in ways that are coherent. Most often when we enter into a community or cultural setting that differs from what we are accustomed to, we learn about new rules and roles through our violation of expectations for patterns of communication and social practices.

Assessing roles and rules as they are negotiated in conversation provide the basis for understanding the various structures that our society and culture impose as well as the ways we connect to and use these structures in performance as students and citizens (among other roles, of course). Roles and rules are not merely instrumental for achieving desired goals, but rather are both creative and reflective of speaking and acting (Habermas, 1984).

An understanding of the negotiation of roles and rules in a CSL project is central to assessment from a social perspective because it provides us with an understanding of how instructors, students, and community members communicate and negotiate the bases of their social knowledge. Learning occurs in the taking on of a role (as children learn to step in and out of a "self" in play) as well as in the gaps in between expectations and enactment. In CSL, role and rule negotiation is particularly important in building a repertoire for activism as well as in breaking down stereotypes and biases that link roles and rules to certain social scenes.

*Indicators: How do we measure the ways rules and roles are negotiated in CSL?* The status of a social role is assigned to the repetitive and regular elements present in the interactions. Rules structure a given episode, and although those structures are often tacit they can be identified through the smoothness and flow or a conversation or the assumption of violation.

- How is status recognized in interactions between students engaging in CSL and community members or among students?

- Is status assumed, negotiated, deflected, opposed, or denied?

- How do students and community members work out what is obligatory, prohibited, or possible to say or do in interaction?

- Do students and community members work to adjust or change their performances based on a desire to balance power in the interaction? Are rules and roles adjusted in interaction based on new possibilities? Assessment should look for recurrent patterns and adaptation to these patterns.

*Assessment example.* In a CSL project associated with a course on intercultural communication, college students were assigned to "mentor" at-risk middle school students. Data for assessment purposes was gathered through journal writing, posting on the class Web log, and interviews and focus groups conducted at the end of the semester.

Initial interactions between mentor and mentee were difficult as each tried to figure out whether such a relationship should be formal and authoritative (e.g., where rules are based on the appropriate enactment of teacher and student), or as friends (where rules are based on the choices of each to interact as equals). While for several of the college students the assumed role was that of "friend," the younger students assumed that the college student would enact the appropriate "role model" of the more educated, wiser adult. As each acted on the assumed rules for their role, "mentoring" existed not in their own expectations or assumptions but in the coordination that developed in the process of negotiating the meanings that each held for what *should* occur.

In one example of this negotiation, an undergradu-

ate mentor decided to ask his younger mentee what he was hoping would happen in the after-school program. The youngster said that he had hoped to learn more about his own Puerto Rican history, a history that was not part of his school's curriculum. Since the mentor himself was Puerto Rican, and knew a great deal about the island culture as well as some history about the local Puerto Rican community, he immediately felt more confident and excited about what he might offer in this particular role. That session he taught the child how to draw the Puerto Rican flag. Learning to recognize differences in assumptions about roles, to strive for flexibility in adjusting to the demands of the situation and of the other to accomplish relational and project goals is important to the CSL process and, thus, to assessment.

### Terms for Identity and Practice

Assessments of learning about oneself and others typically rely on self-reflection. When self-reflection occurs, however, identities are viewed, in this case, as fully formed, autonomous individuals, and people exist and understand themselves apart from one another and from the interaction that has occurred with others (this line of thought owes much to Descartes).

In contrast, our approach views identities as never fully formed apart from interaction. Terms for identities change and shift in various social scenes; stories told of the self are altered and influenced by the audience for such performances (for similar lines of thought see Burr, 1995; Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Stories about identity are also related to stories about relationships to others (Pearce & Cronen, 1980). For example, a community member may feel that s/he cannot complain directly about the services offered by a particular agency to the agency personnel because s/he must be a good client (often described as "playing the game") to receive services. Yet, s/he may "vent" and/or offer solutions to CSL students working in the agency to establish her/his identity as "outside of" or distanced from the "game" and its established rules. Thus, identities shift along with different practices in which the individual engages. That is, thoughts about who we are and what we do—while seemingly permanent—are always changing and in flux. Drawing attention to these processes as learning brings to the surface those activities that help motivate students toward change on an individual and collective level.

*Indicators: How do we measure shifting terms for identity and practice?*

Assessment can be based in descriptions of oneself and others, as well as expectations for one's own and others' behavior.

• How is/not identity linked with specific behav-

iors? Here, assessors can look for contradictions between reported or expected practices and identities and those enacted in social scenes (e.g., as video recorded in the CSL classroom or at CSL sites).

• What are the effects of a story about identity on a pattern of interaction and vice versa? How do stories about identity affect relationships and vice versa? Assessing these stories allows us to rearrange and make foreign what otherwise might go unnoticed, or seem like commonsense so that we might recognize the force of our stories to change our identities, relationships, organizations, and ways of acting in the world.

*Assessment example.* In an introductory graduate-level CSL course on methods, several international graduate students were in the United States for the first time. Non-native English speakers were paired with U.S. native speakers on projects dealing with homelessness and people in transitional housing. Students tape recorded their interactions and kept research journals for the final report to the agencies and personal journals for their reflections on learning; all were used for the assessment purposes discussed here. For the students, several remarkable interactions occurred between the members of the team as their previously constructed identities as native or non-native speakers were transformed by the agency clients as cultural insiders or outsiders. That is, some of the clients of the agency related strongly to the international students as cultural outsiders where they felt like outsiders themselves. In one transitional home, the men interviewed each told stories of their loneliness, of finding it difficult and uncomfortable to approach new people and initiate interactions. At the same time they felt depressed over the lack of companionship in their lives. Those U.S. students who more closely identified as part of the dominant culture felt and were distanced from the clients through the cultural practices that coded and controlled expectations for the identities of each (as graduate student and "transient" respectively). Several of the non-native speakers, however had no preformed expectations for the identities and practices of homelessness and could relate to the sense of loneliness that the men described. In their (international graduate students') own countries and cultures, similar issues were either not recognized or discussed; thus, their terms for describing the identities and practices of homelessness were based in interactions in which the clients defined their identity and agency through their stories. They found flexibility and overlap in their own stories of identity and agency with those of the clients they worked with

and interviewed that were not present in the stories of the students from the U.S. The learning that can happen when identities are viewed in-relation-to others rather than as already fully formed was demonstrated in the stories of the students and the clients.

*Emergent Abilities and Constraints*

The focus of this concept is on knowledge as not merely knowing (as in obtaining an education on received concepts) or knowing how (as in technical or instrumental knowledge) but as knowing from within—knowledge that emerges in the joint construction of social reality. In the CSL context, this means that useful knowledges are those that emerge in the context of experience, in interaction with others—that inform us as to how to go on, to coordinate our meanings to accomplish something. When people construct reality through conversation they create new possibilities for agency and also are constrained in their actions by social structures and cultural narratives. It is in the movement between action and structure that abilities and constraints emerge: in the different stories about identities and competencies available to interactants. Drawing from Bourdieu (1977), these stories have an exchange value and this value is defined by the position of the speaker relative to the other in conversation and by his or her relationship to social institutions.

Assessing abilities and constraints as they are performed in interaction again allows a perspective on learning that draws attention both to the social structures which position us and the actions in conversation that verify agency or constrain identity based on possibilities for action. The importance of this concept for learning lies in how to go forward with the constraints and possibilities of our roles, as teachers, students, and community members. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1980) discusses *thinking forward* as "the affirmative moment of the development of conscious struggle and organization" (1980, p. 72) against the determinate conditions of structural and cultural institutions. Likewise, Giroux and Giroux (2004) discuss thinking forward as a pedagogical act centered in "social responsibility and public intervention" (p.107). In concrete terms, and for assessment purposes, this means situating learning in those moments when students and community members recognize social and cultural boundaries for identities (e.g., white, middle class, educated student) and their position within societal institutions (e.g., school, governmental social programs, community agencies), and work to become allies for each other toward mutually beneficial social action.

*Indicators: How do we measure emergent abilities and constraints?*

• Do students make connections between class-

room concepts and theories and abilities to make a difference toward change in the community? How are these connections enacted? Specifically, are there observable patterns in the conversations/interactions that allow for new abilities and agency with regard to course concepts and content as well as social and cultural abilities to act?

• Regarding emergent constraints, are there indications in the interactions among students and community that recognize the limitations on agency imposed by social/cultural structures and institutions? If so, is effort made toward acknowledging limitations as a starting point for further collaborative action?

Emergent abilities can be observed as well in responses to unexpected questions, in moments or experiences not discussed as possibilities in the classroom which produce new or unintended applications. This concept is important to assessment in CSL in that emergent abilities differ from skills or competencies in that they are identified as part of interaction—as a mutual negotiation of meaning that allows or constrains action or agency among people.

*Assessment example.* Looking again at the CSL project described above, we found that in the interactions between the student teams in the methods course and the clients using the shelters and transition services, new abilities and constraints emerged in surprising ways in the context of the interviews and focus groups with the clients. For the international students who previously had felt handicapped in their language abilities there emerged a connection with the clients through an ability to coordinate meanings around marginalization. Several of the interviewees expressed their concern that social services did not address the emotional needs of people in transition; although they felt lonely and isolated there were few activities or social events designed to connect them with each other or other community members. Their social isolation was reinforced through services that targeted only their physical needs. The graduate students, new to this country felt similarly lonely and disconnected and their stories of feeling marginalized, although with other important privileges, allowed for a connection in these interactions. In contradiction, several of the native student speakers felt a distance in these same conversations and found them somewhat problematic, as they reinforced the distinction in their societal/cultural roles. In this instance, and in the same conversation, new abilities and constraints can emerge that allow for learning about our own positions and possibilities for social action. Equally important here, and following from Astin's (2000) systemic assessment presented at

the beginning of the paper, is the acknowledgement of the ways structural/institutional as well as personal, social, and cultural others' stories about who we are and what we are capable of can constrain our abilities for personal and social change.

The concepts, indicators, and examples cited above help to illustrate the various ways the framework for a social approach to assessment might be used by the CSL practitioner. In the next section, we identify several methods we have found particularly useful for gathering and analyzing data.

## Methods of Analysis and Assessment

The conceptual framework of a social approach to learning lends itself to qualitative methods of data analysis, although other methods such as closed-ended surveys could be designed as complementary measures of the meaning-in-use of terms relevant to the project by the various parties involved. Methods we have used for assessment have varied according to the nature of the project: projects which involved frequent interaction among constituencies and the permission and ability to record the process were amenable to *video recordings* of the various conversations that took place inside and outside of the classroom and among the various constituencies. These recordings provide documentation of both the verbal and nonverbal ways that people construct meaning in interaction. For instance, in one project focused on assessing "critical thinking" as a learning goal we utilized our video recordings to focus on the ways students and community members made use of the term in particular contexts, what roles (e.g., teacher, student) they took when utilizing the term, and how they constructed their identity in relation to the term (e.g., I am/not a critical thinker).

We have used semi-structured *journal assignments* for college students, asking them to respond to questions regarding with whom they interacted in their group and in the school sessions, what they noticed/observed about their interactions, what they learned, and what did/did not go well. For the reflection papers, college students were asked to describe certain salient episodes of interaction with community members or faculty and the ways they constructed their relationships to others in those interactions. What role(s) did they play? Was this role consistent with other performances in similar roles? In what ways did it differ? How did the interaction relate to other stories they tell about who they are?

*Interviews and focus groups* are another method of gathering contextual data. From a systemic perspective, interviews and/or focus groups with all constituencies involved is an ideal, if often impracticable, goal. When focus groups can be formed to include a cross section of each group (e.g., students,

community members, administrators, faculty) the negotiation over roles and rules almost certainly emerges. In our experience, students often volunteer information and experiences that reveal struggles with roles and rules regardless of whether they are grouped with community members or faculty in a focus group.

*Process assessment* can be conducted with the college students in an ongoing fashion over the course of the semester. In one project we accomplished this through weekly one-on-one meetings with the students, while in another we used the time in our seminar to reflect on video recordings of earlier stages of the project. The students (and instructors/authors) would comment on what went well and offer suggestions for the next visit. The multiple layers of performance and reflection contribute to an assessment of the process as it involves multiple groups in interaction and addresses each of the key assessment concepts discussed above. It is important, however, to note that from a social assessment perspective, the focus of analysis with each method should be on learning as it is constructed in the report of learning, rather than on the report in and of itself.

## Summary and Implications

The framework discussed above is designed as a guide for evaluating learning as meaning-in-use. Building on the systemic approach to assessment advocated by Astin (2000), each of the assessment concepts are present in each of the constituencies involved in CSL and negotiated in their interaction with the other. In the conceptual examples outlined above, our focus was primarily on the interactions between students and community members-this resonated particularly with the projects discussed and the various methods used to gather data. Nonetheless, we imagine that those who generally focus on project outcomes will find the complexities of this approach do not lead to simple measures of success. Thus, the effectiveness and validity of the approach will no doubt be questioned. We answer these queries with our own concern that a new approach to validity be developed that better reflects the multiple "truths" of social and cultural experience.

Those who engage in CSL, as teachers, scholars, students, participants, and even stakeholders somewhat outside the process, all recognize that it is often messy, complex, and rarely predictable. Yet, most believe that it is valuable in spite, and perhaps because, of this messiness. We do not eschew the value that quantitative and more simply designed qualitative assessments can provide, but we do strongly advocate an additional approach that encourages a view of learning and of process that moves beyond individual measurement of predicted

outcomes. In the last section of this paper, we further examine the implications of this approach to assessment of CSL.

The social approach discussed in this paper raises several implications for practitioners, teachers, and scholars interested in developing and implementing a dynamic and interactive approach to learning and change processes. First, Dewey's (1922) notion of "ends-in-view" implies a view of learning as punctuated moments in an ongoing process of experience. For CSL, this raises the possibility of moving beyond a conception of education in terms of the acquisition of skill sets to think about how people co-create situations of *usefulness* for particular ideas and ways of being/doing. Thus, in the examples above, conflict resolution and social change developed and were made meaningful through their resourcefulness for interpretation with/in *social* situations.

Second, building on the previous point, an approach to assessment-in-context views the assessment concepts of *engaging resistance, role and rule negotiation, terms for identity and practice*, and *emergent abilities and constraints* as necessary parts of determining the usefulness of concepts such as critical thinking or social justice in specific social scenes. In this manner, assessment becomes another way of struggling over position with regard to conversation, or over the meaning of the conversation itself. For CSL practitioners, this means looking reflexively at our own stories and interactions and the ways we orient toward particular subject positions, as well as the ways resistance on the part of others may be resistance to an object position in the narrative.

Third, we hope that we have shown ways in which both individual and social assessments of learning can complement one another and provide a check on assumptions about learning as individual, linear, or acontextual. Through our own use of multi-method approaches to design and assessment, we have been able to complicate our view of the effectiveness or success of our program and work toward making changes and celebrating successes we might otherwise not have envisioned. We have found this approach to assessment to be a teaching and learning tool in and of itself. We hope that this perspective will prompt others involved in CSL to explore the ways they frame change processes in their projects and how those frames reflect back on and construct their assessments of CSL.

## Conclusion

Assessment is generally defined as the process of documenting, usually in measurable terms, the value of something (see, for example, dictionary.com, 2006), and in the context of CSL, this has often meant the acquistion of knowledge and skills, or the chang-

ing of attitudes and beliefs. In this paper we have argued for a different approach to assessment as well as a redefinition of the term to include evaluations beyond the measurement of individual cognition. Some may contend, nonetheless, that *learning* happens in social contexts but that *assessment* does not. In this paper, we have provided a conceptual framework that describes assessment as the evaluation of the *effectiveness* of social contexts in CSL for "rearranging what we have always known" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 109) to illuminate social processes. Through this rearranging, Wittgenstein meant for us to see an opening for doing things differently. He was interested not only in the assumptions embedded in our "common sense," but in the ways we go about *making* sense in conversation with others. Thus, it is not only the social order but the ordering of the social that we assess for the purposes of making social change (in the concrete forms of roles, rules, identity practices, abilities, and constraints).

CSL provides a unique and important context for teaching and learning—indeed, for citizenship—for all involved. Although we posit that traditional assessment measures in CSL are useful, sometimes the depth and richness of the experience of CSL gets lost in a focus on outcomes. Our goal has been to complicate the analysis of community service learning through individual assessment measures by moving toward an analysis of learning as it was constructed in social scenes. We hope the social approach is useful in determining the ways movement in and through the CSL process is negotiated—that is, in what terms and experiences are taken up, given further expression, and/or left behind.

## Notes

[1]   Gelmon, S. Holland, B., Driscoll, A., Spring, A, & Kerringan, S. (2001) provide several questions for assessing any CSL project or partnership: What will we look for? What will we measure? How will it be measured? And, who will provide the information?

[2]   In contrast to, for example, Astin's (2000) systemic focus.

[3]   Actual impact here is defined in terms of the change that students and community members report and demonstrate in their interactions with each other.

[4]   Dewey felt that social action goals such as liberation or freedom implied ends which never could be fully realized.

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