Bringing an Ethnographic Sensibility to Service-Learning Assessment

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This paper explores the methodological implications of applying an ethnographic sensibility to evaluation in service-learning. It describes the evolution of such a method over the past 10 years within the Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts, and outlines what we have learned from employing this method, as well as the challenges we face as we move toward institutionalizing this approach.

How do we know if students are learning?

A number of years ago Arthur Keene, co-author of this article, gave a presentation to the UMass-Amherst administration on some new work we were doing in community service learning. He grounded the presentation in the personal stories of students who had embraced their course work and service with great passion, students who had become increasingly reflective and sophisticated and who saw their courses as significant transformative experiences. One case he cited was the story of Seth, an engineering student who, as a sophomore, had wandered into an Alternative Spring Break (ASB) class (Addes & Keene, 2006). Seth was finding his engineering classes increasingly alienating as it became harder for him to link his concerns with social and economic justice to his schoolwork. He was considering changing his major to anthropology. During a trip to a rural community in the South, we were asked if we could build two handicapped ramps for community buildings. Our hosts had no design plans and a very small budget. Seth was one of only two students on the trip with any construction or design experience. He set out to design and supervise the construction of two ramps, soliciting donated materials from local businesses, recycling materials from recent demolitions, and instructing the other students in matters of construction. The ramps are still in use today. Following the trip Seth had an epiphany in which he was able to link his own technical expertise to his capacity to make change[1]. He decided to remain in engineering and is working today in the field of alternative energy.

At one point in Keene's presentation the Provost intervened. "This is all well and good, "she said," but how do you know that your students actually are learning?" Keene thought that the answer was obvious. Enthusiasm, commitment, reflection, insight,

and transformation were all pretty good benchmarks of educational success he reasoned. And he was quite certain that the students' ability to work in partnership with their hosts showed that they were applying what they had learned in anthropology and community development. The Provost, a quantitative sociologist by training, was unimpressed. "Prove it!" she demanded.

Keene reasoned that he had been in the field with these students. He had seen them work, seen them struggle with getting comfortable in a community quite unlike their own. He had seen them bump up against their own ethnocentrism, seen them reflect critically on their own practice and on the applicability of their classroom preparation. And he had seen them grow personally and intellectually. Keene argued that there was ineffable learning going on that was not reducible to conventional academic measurement. He felt certain that there was no exam that would begin to measure their grasp of praxis. And he suspected that many others who had taught or taken a field course or had engaged in service-learning knew this too. He had seen the knowing nods amongst his colleagues when he had shared student stories. So he was a bit vexed that the Provost didn't seem to get it. As an anthropologist he recognized the value that narrative and thick description could have. But how could one quantify these experiences? Was it necessary? Was it even possible? These were the questions that launched him into an exploration of alternative approaches to assessment and into a partnership with Deborah Polin, co-author of this article, who found herself teaching service-learning courses at UMass after working in the field of educational evaluation.

We never learned for certain whether the Provost was pleased with our efforts at alternative assessment (Keene, 2003). But twice Keene heard her talking

about the ASB class in public forums and both times she had shared the story of Seth to illustrate how through service-learning, students found meaning in what they were doing by making the connection between course work and vocation. It was this personal story that made everything we were trying to talk about real for her. She had demanded proof, and in the end, resorted to our kind of proof. This affinity for stories is something that service-learning and anthropology share. So much of the work that we do in anthropology attests to the power of stories (Coles, 1989, 1993; Ganz, 2005; Geertz, 1975; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1999). While ethnography is a complex and rigorous method, at its core, it is about collecting good stories and sharing them across cultural boundaries. The provost demanded "hard data," and it is something we ultimately gave her, but it was the human story that really stuck with her.

We have shared this story to illustrate the value that telling a story can have within assessment. Telling a story is an effective way to communicate a complex set of data in a compelling way, even for those who might align themselves with a quantitative approach. This particular story, even in this abridged version, has the elements of praxis, reflection, self-discovery, and transformation common to most service-learning experiences, and it encapsulates them in a compelling, memorable way. Stories remind us to see the individuals with whom we work in all of their humanity and complexity. But there is more to it than the way we have presented this particular example – stories can enable us to see dimensions that may be lost or diminished in more reductionist assessment methods. The development of a rigorous process to elicit and examine stories has the potential to help us to understand better the complexities of educational environments in a way that is also methodologically sound.

In this paper we present an alternative approach to assessment intended to elicit the kind of rich data that has the power to describe the quality of and the context around student growth and learning in service-learning programs. What we describe is not a new approach but rather a remixing of methods, borrowing heavily from the anthropological, which can be applied to evaluation of service-learning and other educational environments. In this paper we will use a decade of experience in the Citizen Scholars Program (CSP) to examine how incorporating an ethnographic *sensibility* into our assessment approach has helped illuminate the blind spots of conventional assessment, untangle some of the more nuanced and knotty findings, and expand our understanding in a way that complements the existing assessment toolkit.

This paper outlines our method, and as such, does not include a comprehensive analysis of outcomes in the CSP[2].

Assessment and Service-Learning

As service-learning programs strive for institutionalization in an unstable economic climate, they are under increasing pressure to justify that their programs are effective. Conventional approaches to assessment have been almost exclusively quantitative and many administrative mandates require such quantitative reporting. This is true not only for service-learning programs, but across the board in higher education (Apple, 2006; Giroux, 2007). Numbers are efficient, conducive to comparison, and a seemingly objective way to communicate outcomes to a wide variety of audiences. And strong numbers can be impressive. Early on in our efforts we were able to demonstrate that nearly 100% of students who completed our flagship service-learning programs found their experiences to be valuable and transformative and superior to those in their conventional courses. However, when addressing the mandate to demonstrate the efficacy of service-learning, it is important to think about what cannot be captured in these more conventional kinds of assessment approaches.

In investigations of the impacts of service-learning on students, many of the significant studies that have emerged in the field rely on large-scale surveys with little accompanying descriptive content (Eyler, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). These studies have permitted us to gain insight into important aspects of service-learning, such as differences between the influence of general community service and service-learning, the amount of hours students spend in service sites, service-learning's impact on retention, as well as on overall academic success and student perception of their civic commitment (Astin, Vogelsgang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyler, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1994, 1999). However, we know very little about the *context* that surrounds the findings. For example, we know from such studies that students tend to see their service-learning experiences as transformational compared to their more conventional experiences, but what does this mean *in practice*? What does this mean in the lives of the students and to the way they make sense of their lives? What does it mean in terms of the ways they understand the world and act within it? While conventional data are significant, provide an excellent snapshot around student outcomes, and take into consideration a plethora of variables around the amount and type of service in which students are involved, questions remain unanswered. These methods cannot communicate the compelling nature of the quality of students' experiences, illuminate the internal struggles around class and race that students work through, or tell us what students have learned about community entry or reciprocity or about resources and power. Nor do they shed a great deal of

light on the ability of students to turn learning into effective action.

This has not gone unnoticed by scholars in the field. Kahne, Westheimer, and Rogers (2000) claim that there are two common critiques of service-learning research: that it is disconnected from larger discourse in education and other disciplines and that the research is largely centered on trying to prove that service-learning "works" while a problemetization of what is meant by "works" is largely absent. In a call for service-learning research that attempts to meet this challenge, Shumer writes, "if we assume that service-learning is context-driven, and idiosyncratic to the student, the site, and the program, then we need data and analysis that focuses on the details of the people and processes" (2000, p. 79). Eyler, in an exploration of the gaps in service-learning research, writes, "The national survey studies and single program efforts of the past decade have provided a map of service-learning and its impact on students, but it is akin to mapping terrain with a 30,000-foot fly over. We don't have the detailed information that will help design programs that enhance cognitive outcomes" (2000, p. 12).

Expanding investigations with different kinds of assessment has the potential to provide some of this missing detail and there are scholars in the field who have found that mining qualitative data such as student reflections can yield significant results in this regard (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006). Cooks and Scharrer, in their visioning of an alternative approach to assessment in service-learning, explore the use of student journals and reflection papers as data and write that "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" (p. 46).

In their handbook of assessment principles and techniques, Gelmon and colleagues (2001) note the challenges of developing assessments that meet the needs of the plethora of existing service-learning programs, many with divergent goals. The multi-approach resource they provide reflects the notion that there is no "one-size fits all" solution to assessment. The tools we employ necessarily change as the questions that we ask change. Any assessment venture must consider what we need and want to know and why. Understanding where our questions come from requires an understanding of context. Therefore, when thinking about undertaking any assessment, in addition to identifying the individual program's assessment needs and including what is known and not known, it is vital to consider the context in which the research is being conducted.

The importance of context cannot be overstated. Critiques of collecting stories as data, or of using student journals and/or critical incident reports, are that the results are not generalizable or comparable, and that it is difficult to understand the complete context from which these stories are drawn (Gelmon, Holland, Driscoll, Spring, & Kerrigan, 2001). While this could be true for external evaluators who are not immersed in the communities in which they are doing research, or for those who don't know their students well, this is not the case for those of us involved in sustained, developmental, cohort-based programs employing a relational approach to teaching, where practitioners come to know their students' context to a much greater degree than we might otherwise (Mitchell, Visconti, Keene, & Battistoni, in press). In these situations, practitioner evaluators are in a position to immerse themselves as participant observers in the communities in which they are gathering data.

And yet when in need of assessment tools, it is understandable that researchers turn to those that are efficient, well accepted and readily available. Scholars and program practitioners, often serving double duty as program evaluators, are faced with an atmosphere of assessment in higher education that privileges quantitative data that can be collected relatively efficiently and cheaply and that can be compared across programs or to national norms. The culture of a particular kind of assessment, one that foregrounds a normed quantitative approach and positivistic interpretation, has permeated all levels of education for decades, from k-12 through the university, and is in part impelled by the mandates of national education policies such as, more recently, No Child Left Behind and the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Apple, 2006; Hursh, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Others have argued convincingly that when assessment is shaped by these kinds of mandates, such an approach is driven more by the need to audit and manage students, teachers, and administrators than by the need to acquire information that will improve teaching and learning (Apple; Giroux, 2007; Shore & Wright, 2000).

This is not to deny that normed or quantitative assessment can yield valuable insights but rather to suggest that the privileging of such dominant approaches may be tied (consciously or not) to a greater agenda, and that to the degree it is mandated over other forms of assessment, it severely limits our capabilities of answering questions such as "What are our students learning and how?" and "What works and why?" These are the very challenges that we faced as we tried to develop a comprehensive plan for assessment with the Citizen Scholars Program at UMass-Amherst.

About the Community Scholars Program

The Citizen Scholars Program is a two year, scholarship-supported, service-learning based, academic leadership program at the University of Massachusetts that aims to produce a new generation of civic leaders who have the knowledge, skills, and vision to bring about progressive change in their own communities (Citizen Scholars Program Web site; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Mitchell, 2005; Mitchell, Visconti, Keene, & Battistoni, in press). The program was founded 11 years ago by Art Keene and Dave Schimmel to address some of the frustrations they were experiencing in their own start-up service-learning courses. Most notably, Keene and Schimmel discovered that their vision of service-learning did not fit neatly into the artificial 14 week confines of an academic semester. Just about the time that their students were getting comfortable at their service sites, establishing meaningful relationships, and learning to link book work to work in the community, the term was over. The abrupt termination of relationships and learning processes proved frustrating for all stakeholders: community partners, their constituents, students, and faculty. Keene and Schimmel addressed this frustration by combining their two courses into a year-long experience and after a year, and with the support of the new Commonwealth Honors College, expanded the program into a full curriculum that included a required four-course sequence, an elective and a number of co-curricular activities[3]. Students in the program participate in a minimum of 240 hours of community service, ideally with a single community partner. Students and faculty spend four semesters working together, and in the process form an intimate learning community in which everyone, students and faculty alike, is both learner and teacher. The staff of the program share a commitment to critical pedagogy and a relational approach to teaching in which we view intellectual and personal growth as inextricable. Our relationships with students span at least two years, and we become firsthand observers to their growth and development, both inside and outside of the physical classroom. This approach and context have implications for how and why we conduct evaluation.

From its very inception, Citizen Scholars Program staff have been thinking about assessment and we were not immune to the trends and mandates that were driving assessment, both at our university and nationally. This was reflected in our methods, which in the early years were driven primarily by the need to justify the work we were doing, both to the university and beyond. However, we soon realized that the conventional forms of assessment we were employing were not permitting us to reflect on teaching and learning in the way in which we needed. Because assessment is being driven increasingly by agendas often unstated, we want to be explicit about the questions driving our process of evaluation. Once we satisfied ourselves and the Dean that our efforts in service-learning were worthwhile (and this was supported by a massive body of assessment literature for service-learning in general), we began to ask more explicit questions about the efficacy of our efforts – questions that would help reveal the underlying processes of effective teaching and learning. Very early on we formulated a set of desired learning outcomes driving the curriculum and, more recently, assessment efforts. These learning outcomes span three categories: Knowledge for Citizenship, Skills for Citizenship, and Vision for a More Equitable Society. Within each category there are additional sub-categories of knowledge we aim for students to master (see Appendix A).

Early assessment in the CSP consisted of standard instruments such as surveys, an attitude inventory (CASQ) (Moely, Mercer, Ilustre, Miron, & McFarland, 2002), and brief Likert scale pre and post self-assessments. At the same time, the program was collecting a great deal of other "data" in the form of student essays, reflections, and biographies, as well as substantial exit interviews conducted after students completed the program. The problem was that these data were being collected, some of it systematically and some of it haphazardly, but they were not being methodically analyzed. As our assessment goals became more refined and more specific we began to explore ways to use the varied data at hand to respond to them (Mitchell, 2005). Four years ago, we began coding the exit interviews (based on the desired outcomes listed in Appendix A). We then presented the results of this coding to the staff during two half-day focus groups to give the staff the opportunity to share and document examples of student growth and transformation in the program. During these meetings, and several follow-up interviews, the staff told stories that illustrated both the consistencies and gaps evident in the data. These were stories of struggle and triumph as well as of challenges and frustration. And importantly, these stories allowed us to think deeply and more systematically about what was and wasn't working in the program and led to thinking about what changes were needed.

Below is a summary of one of these stories. After we present the story, we provide some examples of how our method allowed us to unpack particular aspects of the story's meaning:

> Miriam began her first year of service by training to be a counselor advocate for survivors of sexual assault. During her initial training she was asked to consider her privilege. Miriam

recalls thinking to herself "OK, I am Dominican, I am female. I don't have privilege." She was challenged by another participant in the training, who asked her if she were heterosexual, and when Miriam said that in fact she was, this participant responded with anger at Miriam's ignorance of this particular privilege. Miriam recalls at first feeling "attacked" and then thrown into a deep introspection, which ultimately led to her shifting her service site in the subsequent semester, and becoming an advocate for the gay marriage initiative in Massachusetts. In the interview, Miriam goes on to talk about coming from a socially conservative family. Her father is a minister, and she recounts that when she asked him if he would marry a gay couple he said no, and he told her that she would go to Hell for believing in this, let alone being an active advocate for the cause. Miriam's friends and family deemed her new direction of work as a passing phase, and told her it was a belief that she would outgrow when she left college. She recounts that some of her friends began to ask if she were gay because she was working on these issues. And yet Miriam remained committed to this cause and became an articulate advocate for it, despite the opposition she had to face from her friends and family. Later on in the interview, Miriam attributes navigating this period of time, of challenging these values she was brought up with and the people who hold them, to the community that she built in the CSP.

Polin encountered this story initially when she was engaged in transcriptions of the exit interviews, and as with other stories she came across during this time, she noted its compelling nature and the potential it offered to unpack outcomes around student learning. But weeks later, during the organized focus groups and interviews with the staff, she heard this story from the co-director of the program because Miriam had shared it with him. And she heard it from an instructor in the program because Miriam had shared it with her. And thus we had the story itself, we had the retelling of the story from multiple community members, and significantly, we had the context in which the story was told. We had captured data about how Miriam chose to present her story; what she viewed as integral to her story at that particular point within the much larger process of her identity development. This context lends additional meaning to what we can learn – we know the individuals to whom she told the story, we know the work in which she was engaged at the time, we know about the formal learning that she brought to this particular set of challenges, and we know how she put her formal learning to work in the service of a civic goal. And we can track how she experienced all of this, and made meaning from it. We can discover the impact that her work had on her

peers and her community partners and vice versa. Including this context in data collection is a key aspect of our method, as is the sharing of stories from multiple stakeholders.

So what did we learn from this particular example? A typical service-learning survey might ask about the degree to which Miriam felt she was challenged or changed, but even if she had indicated she had experienced growth to the greatest degree, we never would have felt the poignancy of her story. We wouldn't have been touched in the way that we were after hearing the context, the grit, of her experience. Furthermore, for the staff of the program, the retelling permitted us to move beyond a simple documentation that this student had indeed experienced growth and transformation and begin to explore *how* this occurred. We were able to return to our intended outcomes (see Appendix A) and discover several that were evident in this one anecdote. Miriam demonstrates aspects of cultural competence by being able to enter a community unlike her own as an ally and understanding that cultural assumptions drive different worldviews. She exhibits elements of praxis, through her ability to analyze and question the beliefs, values, and assumptions with which she was raised, while developing an understanding of the beliefs and values of others. She displays conviction, as she has the integrity to remain true to her own ethical vision, despite being challenged by her family and friends. We also learned something about which aspects of the program she attributes to supporting her through this shift – most significantly the development of a close-knit learning community within the CSP.

There is, of course, much more that could be done with Miriam's story, with the other stories she told, and with our own observations of Miriam during her time in the program. Our approach involves mining such narratives for additional insights about our learning objectives. This is a story of one person's experience, and yet as a result of this method we can recognize some aspects as representative of larger trends in the program. For example, Miriam's sense of feeling personally attacked was common among students in their early days in the program as they endeavored to explain long-held beliefs and attitudes that they had not previously questioned. Other aspects of the story are unique to the individual. But all of the accounts that we collect are rich and nuanced and reflect both the complex subjectivities of each member of the program as well as how they are connected to one another. We can use these data to explore how students make sense of and respond to their successes and challenges, and then use our observations to shape the curriculum to better prepare them and us for the work of the program. We have offered but a few examples here but they sug-

gest the depth and breadth of data mining that can occur using an approach grounded in participant observation.

Anthropology and the Evaluation of Service-Learning

Let us take a step back and explore the theoretical underpinnings from which we speak. The method we employ in the CSP draws from a well-researched and well-practiced anthropological method – ethnography. The method of ethnography places a great deal of weight on the context, on the *situatedness*, of research participants and environments (Geertz, 1973; Lassiter, 2005; Marcus & Fisher, 1986; Wolcott, 1999), which lends itself well to our assessment goals.

Ethnography has a long genealogy in education, evident in the well-known work of David Fetterman in the 1980s (Fetterman, 1984) and others' examinations of ethnographic work conducted in educational settings as far back as the 1950s (Zou & Trueba, 2001). The relationship between anthropology and evaluation is also not new; for decades evaluators have employed qualitative methods that include ethnography and anthropologists have lent their skills to evaluations. Mary Odell Butler notes that by the 1970s evaluators were becoming concerned with varying interpretations and representations of evaluation outcomes and "alone or in combination with quantitative methods, ethnographic approaches, culturally competent approaches, 'naturalistic' approaches, and concern with cultural context, began to assume importance in evaluation" (Guba & Lincoln 1989; Stake, 1991; cited in Odell Butler, 2005, p. 19).

More recently, evaluation anthropology has been formally named and explored, and is considered by some to be an emerging subfield, as evidenced by the 2005 issue of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology dedicated to the topic (Odell Butler & Copeland-Carson, 2005).

An ethnographic approach to the evaluation of service-learning, however, is a method that has been relatively unexplored, despite the attention devoted to the idea of a marriage of anthropology and service-learning in general. Anthropology as a field of inquiry provides a framework for exploring much of what service-learning is concerned with, and both anthropologists and service-learning practitioners have recognized what each has to offer, despite the fact that anthropology is still often on the margin of service-learning practice (Chin, 2004; Huber, 2004; Keene & Colligan, 2004). In 2004, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* dedicated an issue to service-learning and anthropology in which

anthropologists describe their experiences practicing and examining service-learning through the lens of anthropological tenets such as reflexivity, community entry, border crossing, culture shock, and a deconstruction of privilege. These issues illuminate the potential for anthropology's ability to uncover some of the more nuanced aspects of a student's service-learning experience. Chin's work, in particular, exemplifies this potential as she draws on the power of narrative storytelling in creating a space for in-depth critical reflection for students engaged in service-learning experiences. Chin draws from fellow anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and reaches across disciplines to scholarly work by educator and theorist Paulo Freire to support the idea of a narrative approach to critical reflection to emphasize the importance of stories or narratives to "more fully understand what is important about a situation from the natives' point of view" and how that understanding can lead to critical reflection that "occupies a central place in most models of intercultural understanding and in consciousness-raising practices" (2004, pp. 59, 62). While Chin examines the use of narrative for teaching critical reflection, she stops short of examining the use of narrative as a formal means of assessment. In fact, none of the authors in this journal issue offer an explicit framework for analyzing narrative as data.

How do we employ an anthropological framework to examine the narratives we have collected in a way that allows us to learn something new and different about students' service-learning experiences? We can do this by concentrating on two broad areas of ethnographic investigation: participant observation and the collection and analysis of story.

Methods

There is great diversity in the way scholars define and practice ethnography. In the CSP, we acknowledge that while we have amassed the data that would allow us to write a formal ethnography of the program, that has not been the goal of our assessment efforts to date, and this is the reason why we describe our work as assessment that employs an ethnographic *sensibility* rather than ethnographic *assessment*. We suggest that other service-learning practitioners can aspire to do similar work without formal anthropological training. Our data collection encompasses the following: participant observation; focus groups; collection of autobiographies or "stories of self;" collection of final reflections; open-ended, ethnographic exit interviews; and critical incident analysis. We elaborate on these tools below:

Participant Observation

Participant observation, as employed within

ethnography, requires immersion with the research subjects in the research environment over an extended period of time (Bernard, 2006; Schenshul, Schenshul, & LeCompte, 1999; Spradley, 1980). This is personalistic and relational work in which observer and observed typically establish meaningful and reciprocal relationships. As a result of the multi-term, cohort-based format of the CSP and its commitment to relational teaching, the staff and instructors spend a great deal of time with the students, both in and outside of the classroom. This means we come to know students as individuals, as whole and complex people, certainly as more than the roles they play as students in a traditional classroom. We have the opportunity to observe our students in the classroom, at program retreats, in their public roles on campus, and at program meetings.[4] The CSP staff meet weekly, and sometimes more frequently, to reflect on these observations and on all aspects of the program. Some of these meetings include student representatives.[5] Ultimately most of the decisions made in the CSP result from insight gained from these meetings in which stories are shared, student voices are heard, and programmatic improvements are conceived, negotiated, and sometimes implemented.

Focus Groups

How do we synthesize our observations into a meaningful body of data? Early on we realized that the informal participant observation described above positioned us to bring an ethnographic sensibility to our work. The problem was that typically, in the course of doing ethnography, days (and sometimes nights) are spent in observations requiring a comparable amount of time writing up field notes (Emmerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). While we initially pledged to each other that we all would keep journals, writing notes and reflections on our teaching on a weekly if not a daily basis, we quickly found it to be in contradiction with the realities of our workloads. We recognized the potential treasure trove of data that was in the heads of the staff every time we met; however, the challenge was how to get at it. Polin confronted the impasse by proposing that we organize focus groups (Morgan, 1993) at which staff could share their observations from the field and reflect on them. Polin designed the focus group protocols, the first of which involved asking staff to share stories illustrating student experiences in terms of both successes and challenges in meeting the program's learning objectives. Polin then probed both tellers and listeners to share their understanding of and responses to these stories. A second focus group was organized to explore the transcripts from student exit interviews. Polin facilitated both focus group sessions and recorded and transcribed the conversa-

tions, adding them to an "ethnographic record" of the program. In effect, she became a temporary staff ethnographer. However, while the staff have continued to meet tri-annually for staff retreats, the same work load impediments precluding keeping personal journals also has interfered with institutionalizing focus groups as part of our ongoing assessment practice. While this component of our assessment program is still a work in progress, the data and insight gained from the focus groups we have conducted thus far has reignited staff conversations around finding a realistic way to build them into our program calendar and work plan.

Stories of Self

Our students compose, share, and document their "stories of self" at least five times throughout the course of the program. In these stories, students consistently examine why it is that they are engaged in work toward social change. These stories evolve and shift depending on the context, and as students improve as storytellers. For example, in the first course of the program, students compose their "political autobiography," an exercise we developed in collaboration with Marshall Ganz,[6] in which they attempt, in 10 to 15 minutes, to describe the values and forces that shaped their current political selves. In the final class, students learn how to tell their personal stories as a tool for motivation and recruitment in community organizing, and in addition they are asked to reflect on their use of this tool in practice. After two years we have a collection of autobiographical stories that allows us to chart students' personal development around both an understanding of the values that drive them and how they are putting those values into practice as engaged citizens. These stories are far more than stand-alone self-assessments as the rich narratives offer us an opportunity to seek patterns in the events and trajectories as we juxtapose our own readings and experiences with the students against the students' representations.

Final Reflections

Our students write guided final reflections in each of the four required courses. These reflections include scholarly analysis, personal examinations, and an explicit attempt to link the theory and case studies they are studying in class with their community engagement and life experiences. These reflections provide rich bodies of text (some of which reflect self-assessment and some reflect applied learning) charting student work over the course of two years that we can code and evaluate in terms of our desired outcomes. As is the case with our biographical work, because we are in relationship with students, we can make sense of their transformations

in ways that we could not if we were evaluating the work of people who were, for all intents and purposes, strangers.

Open-ended, Ethnographic Exit Interviews

Upon completion of the program, we conduct extensive exit interviews with students. In these interviews, we ask students to reflect first on what it was like to be in the program, to tell us about their experience within the three broad outcome areas of the program, and to tell stories that illustrate those experiences. We ultimately code these interviews according to the desired program outcomes and bring the results back to the staff for focus groups and more storytelling, which serves as an additional layer of inter-rater reliability.

Critical Incident Analysis

When faced with a crisis or pedagogical challenge or conflict within the community in the CSP, the staff meet to review the incident and problem solve. During this process the staff review previous experiences and trends that have emerged over the course of the program. This allows us to respond to a particular set of circumstances in a way that is not isolated, but rather draws on a history of collected stories. Thus, modifications in program practice are informed by the program's collective memory, or its ethnographic record.

Method Recommendations

Implicit in all of these activities is the notion that stories are data, and that they drive us to action (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Emmerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Ganz, 2005). The stories we have collected paint the kind of picture we need, internally for our own growth and learning in the program as well as to communicate findings to external audiences. We all turn to story when we want to make a point that is poignant and memorable. Many of us engaged in service-learning have used the parable of "Babies in the River" or Keith Morton's "Starfish Hurling and Community Service" (2000) to illustrate to students the difference between charity and justice. The UMass Provost (referred to above) used story to make a compelling point, despite her commitment to "hard data."

We note that each assessment tool we use could tell a different and sometimes a conflicting story (Keene, 2003). And why shouldn't they? This data gathering method is commensurate with the complexity of human beings – by evaluating students as complex subjects we learn how to prepare them to work effectively within messy and sometimes unpredictable environments (Schön, 1987). This approach enables us to be more sensitive to issues of change

and development. We see profound change in most of our students over the course of two years and yet we appreciate that this doesn't begin to tell their story because we know that many of the impacts of our program are developmental and will manifest years after graduation. The beauty of this multi-pronged method is that it forces us to explore the conflicts, ambiguities, and nuances in the stories that each of our tools yields, giving us a far more accurate picture of what is going on with students, where our pedagogy works, and where we need to do a better job.

We do not suggest that our overall approach to assessment is necessarily generalizable to all other service-learning situations. We would rather see it as the opening of a conversation, intended for practitioners and scholars who want to understand the deeper impact of service-learning on students. However, we are committed to the notion that what is generalizable is the incorporation of an ethnographic sensibility into data collection, even in service-learning programs that differ greatly from our own. One does not need to be an anthropologist or be part of a multi-semester program or work with a teaching team to bring this sensibility to one's work. There is an opportunity to turn teaching into participant observation whenever we begin to challenge the traditional boundaries of the conventional classroom (hooks, 1994; Zlotkowski, Longo, & Williams, 2006), or engage in service alongside students[7] (e.g. Camacho, 2004; Simonelli, Earle, & Story, 2004). We can move toward an ethnographic sensibility by framing the questions that drive assessment in a way that recognizes students as complex social actors and allows for the exploration of their lived experiences and sense making. We do believe there are some minimal actions necessary to achieve an ethnographic sensibility for evaluative data gathering. These are:

1. Taking regular field notes. Practitioners need to model the reflection they ask their students to do, and we can use our own regular observations and reflections as a source of data. We have built this component into staff meetings and have added tri-annual retreats to facilitate this process, but any effort on the part of teaching staff to reflect on observations and experiences is useful.

2. Taking notes on oral reflection that occurs in program or staff meetings. This reflection can also be used as data and can be facilitated by someone taking on the role of staff ethnographer.

3. Meeting students where they are. This approach attempts to understand how students are situated in and make sense of their world. This requires making an effort to understand who

students are and how they differ from us and from previous generations of students. It means asking ourselves what we know about the people who populate our classrooms and being intentional about filling in the blanks. This can be done by exploring existing scholarship (e.g., Clydesdale, 2006; Howe & Strauss, 2003; Keene, 2009; Mitchell, 2005) but also simply by carefully listening to students, by trying to see the world through their eyes, by creating sufficient space so that their voice can be heard (hooks, 1994), and by bringing an ethnographic sensibility to our interactions.

4. Involving students in storytelling and discussion, i.e., teaching them the craft of telling their own story and hearing the stories of others, and engaging them as collectors and producers of stories.

5. Encouraging students to adopt an ethnographic perspective at their service sites by emphasizing anthropological tenets such as participant observation, cultural reflexivity, relativism, perspective taking and patience, and teaching them how to do this.

6. Linking data production to the curriculum. Much of the "data" our students produce derives from assignments woven into the curriculum throughout the two years (e.g., stories of self and final reflections). These assignments build on one another and address similar aspects of student growth and development that can be tracked over time.

7. Adopting a more open-ended interview process. We see an ethnographic sensibility in the work of colleagues like Battistoni (2008) and Hildreth (2006) who have relied on a phenomenological approach to interviewing a small number of program participants, with very little leading, to recover a rich and textured story that conveys the students' lived experiences and the ways that they make sense of them.

What Have We Learned and Have Yet to Learn from this Method?

The approach described in this paper is time consuming, and requires a shared pedagogical philosophy among the staff and a mutual commitment to ongoing evaluation. Nevertheless, it has been worth it. We have gained invaluable insight about our students and the CSP that would have been impossible had we employed solely traditional means of assessment.

We have learned a great deal about what does and does not work in the CSP (and perhaps in service-

learning in general) by employing this method. For example, we have learned that in the CSP, students' perceptions about their greatest learning are inextricably linked to the deep sense of community that they have built within the program. We are quite intentional about building this learning community, and our success is evident across the board within students' reflections, their stories of self, and the way they privilege the concept of community within their exit interviews. The community that we build gives students a support system to step outside of cultural norms, and a challenging but safe environment to examine difference, take risks, and explore dimensions of their social identities. We have found that our students enter the program craving community and the social solidarity that it brings, but they have little idea of how to build or sustain it. This changes profoundly over the course of two years. And we have found that the community they do build ultimately creates a rich environment for examining student outcomes in the way we have described.

As a result of using this method, we have learned that we have not been as successful in supporting students to develop a well-defined concept of citizenship. If we were to measure our students' understanding of citizenship through more standard assessments, we would likely find that our students leave with a set body of knowledge and skills necessary to be effective citizens. However, we know that while they effectively put that body of knowledge and skills to work in their lives both within and outside the university, they leave the program, in spite of our concerted efforts, with an underdeveloped sense of citizenship and the connection between citizenship and effective democracy. Most do not conceptualize what they do as citizenship and most do not seem to connect their proximate work to the larger goals of building a diverse democracy or building its necessary civic foundations. This is not to say that the students leave without a sense of civic responsibility. But their indifference to the concept and theory of citizenship is a source of consternation for us and a challenge to our curricular development. In the past year we have made efforts to address this more systematically in the curriculum.

We still want to learn about long-term student outcomes and we need to gather additional longitudinal data from alumni of the program.[8] We recognize that meaningful assessment must include the longitudinal; we know that many important impacts are developmental and realized long after the class is over. We also are aware there is significant interest in and a perceived need for expanding this area, as noted by scholars in the field (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Denson, Vogelgesang, & Saenz, 2005; Eyler, 2000; Kiely, 2005).

Looking back at the evolution of our assessment program, we can say that our initial efforts were driven by a desire to address the concerns of our campus administrators. As we became confident in the value of our work, and as it came to be embraced by the campus, we designed a comprehensive set of learning objectives and turned our attention to evaluating how well we were fulfilling them. Our questions were increasingly driven from inside rather than outside of the program. We now know that we are achieving most of our desired outcomes and we continue to work on those areas of the curriculum that are not working to our satisfaction. The next stage of our evolution will draw our attention more to the questions: how do things work (or not) and why do they work (or not)? The ethnographic approach that we employ allows us to unpack these questions in all of their complexity.

For example, we know that when students enter our program, most, as is characteristic of their generation (Clydesdale, 2006; Keene, 2009) tend to approach social problems as issues of individual choice and motivation. At the start of the program, they tend to see the challenge of making the world better as one of getting other individuals to change their behavior. Our program endeavors to move students from an ethos of help to one of change, and to see the causes of the social problems they wish to address as rooted, not in the atomized actions of individuals, but in institutions and culture. The story of Miriam and others like it, when fully unpacked and examined in conjunction with the other data we have collected from students, would reveal not only this shift from the desire to help to the desire to make change but also the shift to embracing a social analysis that motivates them to intervene at the level of social institutions. For Miriam this led to political involvement to enact civil rights legislation. The how and why of this development can be mined from the details of the lived experiences of Miriam and her fellow students. And such mining will yield an understanding of how social institutions, personal history, curriculum, pedagogy, engagement, and culture interweave to produce specific student trajectories. And we know we can be more effective in our work as teachers, mentors, and citizens if we can reveal that which is not revealed in more conventional assessment.

We know from the studies of Colby and her colleagues (2007) that classes promoting political engagement have all manner of positive benefits and students tend to define this work as transformative. And so, it struck us paradoxical that their findings suggest that such classes seem to have little impact on the political values of the students who enroll in them. That is, Colby et al. conclude that students tend to come out of such classes or programs with values that they went in with and leaning toward the same political affiliations. Our own assessment work seems to confirm this, up to a point. Indeed our own students self-report when they leave the program that their political values remain pretty much the same as when they entered. But the reporting is far more nuanced when we begin to explore what students think about their political work, what this work means to them, and how this impacts their actions. One of the things students acquire in our program is a clearer understanding of the machinery of poverty. Many students enter the program with a rudimentary understanding of how the world works and without a working understanding of the fundamentals of capitalism, globalization, or history. The students are hardly blank slates when they begin the program. Most have internalized the foundational myths of neo-liberalism that often conflates capitalism with democracy, efficiency with social gain, and free markets with political freedom (Giroux, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Keene, 2009). While our program does not promote one particular political orientation, it does promote developing the skills of social and political analysis that would open the door to a critique of hegemonic neoliberal thinking. It is inevitable that as students begin to ask questions about why some people are poor or hungry, how resources are distributed in society, how their own lifestyles and choices impact the lives of others, or how and why the planet is in peril, that these questions, in conjunction with service and course work, lead them to challenge some of their originally held foundational beliefs. To put this simply, students may begin and end the program with a strong belief in democracy, liberty, economic opportunity, or justice. But the democracy they embrace at the end may bear little resemblance to the vision with which they entered. And it behooves us to understand how and why these conceptions of the world have changed and what learning interventions may have facilitated the change(s). Our ethnographic approach is helping us to construct this more complicated and detailed story about our students' intellectual, social, and moral development.

Anthropologists speak of ethnography as both a method and the story that results from applying the method. Ethnography (the method) first produces tales of individual actors in specific cultural contexts, but these individual stories are then woven into a comprehensive ethnography – a story of a society or a cultural process. The full ethnography of the Citizen Scholars Program and the citizens that emerge from it remains to be written. But we are confident that the tools described in this paper will yield the larger story we seek.

Notes

The Citizen Scholars Program is an intimate community of civic and scholarly practice and our work is deeply interwoven with that of the other members. We are grateful to the students and staff of the Citizen Scholars Program for their good work and inspiration and support they provide. We also thank Martha Stassen, Director of Assessment and Evaluation at UMass-Amherst, for her unwavering support of our efforts to devise new ways to evaluate our work.

[1] As a result of this realization, Seth decided to join the Citizen Scholars Program the following term.

[2] We are currently working on a companion piece, which presents the data we have synthesized from employing our approach, as well as the challenges and successes we have experienced along the way.

[3] See UMass Amherst Citizen Scholars Program, online at: http://www.comcol.umass.edu/academics/csl/students/citizenScholars.html

[4] CSP staff members do not observe students at their service sites. Instead, we work with students to develop an ethnographic sensibility of their own and become participant observers at their sites. When the students submit journals of their experiences at their sites, we are able to glean a sort of second-hand ethnographic record of their observations and reflections.

[5] Some meetings include student representatives who are currently in the program, but there are also student representatives who are program alumni who are serving as members of the teaching team in various courses. (A student may serve as a course assistant in a program course once they have completed the course. Some students do this while in their second year in the program; some do it after completing the program). The insight gained from students who are both student-participants and student-instructors provides an additional bridge between faculty and student voice – these students offer a perspective that faculty might overlook, and are often essential to understanding the nuance of a particular situation.

[6] The political autobiography assignment was based on a similar assignment designed by Marshall Ganz and used in his community organizing course at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. We are indebted to Ganz for his advice and support of the CSP.

[7] CSP staff members typically do not engage in service alongside students, though we recognize that this is desirable and we admire other programs where this is done (e.g., Addes & Keene, 2006). An ethnography of the service itself would be a substantial addition to our data base and to our understanding. We are able to gain some ethnographic insight into the service experiences of our students through their reflections on their service. Our efforts to convey to them an "ethnographic sensibility" by exposing them to ethnographic concepts and writings in the program's first course helps them to bring this to their observations and writing.

[8] We are currently engaged in plans to undertake a comprehensive retrospective look at the CSP that will include interviews and focus groups with students who graduated at least five years ago.

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Appendix A

This appendix represents an edited version of the original document. It is presented here to inform readers of the CSP learning objectives and not as a representation of program results.

Intended Outcomes for the Citizen Scholars Program
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Citizen Scholars Program Mission: *The Citizen Scholars Program is a leadership development program that integrates theory and practice to help students develop the knowledge, skills, and vision they need to build community, be effective citizens, and advocate for social justice.*

Learning Category: Knowledge for Citizenship

1) Political Knowledge for Democratic Citizenship
   • Elementary conceptions of the functions of government and the roles of citizens in a democracy
   • Ways citizens can influence the status and actions of government

2) Service-Learning
   • An understanding of service that locates it within a broader framework of civic engagement recognizing political action as a related and parallel form of engagement
   • A comprehensive understanding of different models of service, contrasting approaches of charity and justice
   • Service grounded in mutual and reciprocal relationships

3) Social Theory, Social Analysis, and Social Justice
   • A basic introduction to social theory
   • An understanding of why social analysis is necessary, a fundamental understanding of power relations and of manifestations of social injustice in America and beyond
   • A basic understanding of different conceptual models of justice (e.g., distributive justice)
   • A sophisticated understanding of the root causes of at least one major social problem and an elementary understanding of several others
   • Knowledge about the diverse communities in which students serve; knowledge of communities/societies/or institutions that operate on assumptions different from students' own
   • Elementary theoretical and cognitive foundations for understanding and negotiating difference (e.g. understanding of the concepts of culture, relativism, ethnocentrism, culture shock, privilege, etc.)
   • Each student has explored his or her own values, beliefs, assumptions, and life goals within a civic context. Each student understands her or his own social/cultural identities including the relative privilege or marginalization that such identities entail. Students can locate themselves within a larger set of communities. Students can answer the question: who am I and what do I stand for?

4) Tools for Change
   • An understanding of leadership
   • A basic knowledge of many of the tools that an engaged citizenry can use to work for structural change including, but not limited to the following: policy analysis and advocacy, grassroots organizing, group and organizational dynamics, oral and written communication, and contemplative practice
   • An understanding of how these tools for change work and how and when each might be effectively used

5) Communities and Community Organizations
   • Knowledge of diverse communities
   • Detailed knowledge of how at least one community organization addresses community problems

Learning Category: Skills of Citizenship

1) Critical Thinking /Reading
   The ability to:
   • construct/define problems in a complex way
   • read across many texts, synthesize arguments, and find connections
   • engage the ideas of others with one's own original ideas
   • engage in dialogical analysis
   • look at local community problems and connect them with their root causes

2) Ethical Thinking and Reasoning
   The ability to:
   • assess alternative actions in relation to one's core values, and select the alternative that best aligns with those values

3) Inquiry and Scholarship
   The ability to:
   • place issues and interests in a context of scholarship, to recognize that useful ideas, information, and models may already have been formulated by others, and to look in appropriate places to join conversations about the issues of concern
   • frame and pursue significant questions about community needs and aspirations and about public policy and citizen action, using appropriate research methods effectively (using library and internet sources and working directly with people)

4) Communication
   The ability to:
   • communicate complex ideas clearly, both verbally and in writing
   • write for many audiences
   • switch codes and to know when this is appropriate (i.e. to engage in formal academic or legislative discourse and popular or community discourse)

5) Cultural Competence
   The ability to:
   • hear, consider, and engage points of view that are different from our own
   • work within a community that is different from our own
   • recognize and appreciate cultural difference
   • make strides toward seeing the world through the eyes of people who live according to cultural assumptions that differ from our own
   • enter a community (unlike one's own) as an effective ally
   • enter and exit a community in ways that do not reinforce ethnocentrism or systemic injustice
   • competently participate in work defined as valuable by the community

6) Leadership and Teamwork
   The ability to:
   • take responsible initiative
   • deal with power: sources, kinds, what forms are useful; prescribed vs. self-initiated
   • vision – to see beyond what you know to be true
   • work with others using principles of reciprocity, collaboration, negotiation, compromise, building consensus, and working in teams in the absence of consensus
   • facilitate group discussion and deliberation
   • take on leadership roles (formal and informal) and also to follow the leadership of others
   • decide when to compromise and when not to compromise
   • create solutions that are not simply compromises between positions and don't require compromise

7) Praxis
   The ability to:
   • translate thought into action (demonstrated by successfully deepening one's work at a service site and by implementing an organizing project)
   • engage in reflective practice
   • analyze and question one's own beliefs, values and assumptions while developing an understanding of the beliefs and values of others'
   • design and implement public policy and community organizing projects grounded in collaboration with community stakeholders
   • use political skills, to recognize, acquire, maintain, and use political power

8) Social Analysis and Systems Thinking
   The ability to:
   • link social problems to their root causes
   • see social problems as complex and the product of multiple and interrelated causes
   • understand complex strategies for addressing social problems

Learning Category: Vision of a More Equitable Society

1) Commitment and Accountability
   • passion for social justice or for civic engagement, for the present and for the course of one's life beyond the University
   • Willingness to take responsibility for following through on one's commitments

2) Compassion and Empathy
   • a sense of compassion for and connection to the world beyond one's self and one's family
   • a desire and capacity to take the perspectives of others, to stretch oneself to the experiences of others

3) Conviction
   • the belief in one's ability to make a difference; intention to live with integrity and act in accordance with one's ethical vision