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Justice-Learning: Service-Learning as Justice-Oriented Education

Dan W. Butin

"Justice-learning" lies at the intersection of service-learning and social justice education. Specifically, I argue for a distinctive form of community-based learning ("antifoundational service-learning") that fosters a justice-oriented framework ("anti-anti-social justice") that makes possible the questioning and disruption of unexamined and all too often oppressive binaries of how we view the struggle toward equity in education. The linkage of service-learning and social justice education in this manner offers a "weak overcoming" that strengthens experiential learning toward justice while avoiding the dilution and radicalization faced by both movements. I, thus, trace the linkages between service-learning and social justice education; explicate the potential of antifoundational service-learning as a form of anti-anti-social justice; and draw out the potential and implication of this linkage for both service-learning and social justice education.

John Dewey (1938) famously began his *Experience and Education* with the observation, "Mankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of *Either-Ors*, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities" (p. 17). This is all too clearly on display in current debates surrounding the teaching of and for social justice within K-16 education. Social justice, it appears, is something one is either "for" or "against"; and the "against" side appears to be winning (Westheimer & Kahne, 2007). So there is a deeply humbling irony that while many of today's social and economic conditions (e.g., poverty rates, demographics of our incarcerated population, stratification of access to affordable health care) bespeak the dire need for greater equity and equality across historically marginalized populations, the frontline institutions of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools are moving ever further away from grappling with such fundamental social and civic dilemmas.

This compilation of work was conceived exactly to engage this quandary.¹ Service-learning and social justice education, two distinctive pedagogical and philosophical movements, appear immediately and intuitively to do exactly such work: to broadly link the personal to the social and the classroom to the community. They appear, in this time of regressive absolutes, to connect and bridge

what we learn in the textbook to the "real world" in order to make a substantive and sustained difference.

It was time, my thinking went, to more formally connect these two traditions and the scholars who work within these intersections. Specifically, deep and sustained service-learning (what I term "antifoundational service-learning") offers genuine venues within which social justice education can be experienced and experimented. Such service-learning, moreover, fosters a justice-oriented framework (what I term "anti-anti-social justice") that makes possible the questioning and disruption of unexamined and all too often oppressive binaries of how we view the struggle toward equity in education. This "justice-learning," for me, is the goal that lies at the intersection of service-learning and social justice education.

Service-learning—the linkage of academic work with community-based engagement within a framework of respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Butin, 2003; Morton, 1995; MJCSL, 2001)—has become an extremely popular form of active pedagogy and civic(s) education across the K-16 educational landscape. Over one-third of all K-12 schools use some form of service-learning and more than 1000 postsecondary institutions are members of Campus Compact, a national organization committed to community engagement and service-learning in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; Campus Compact, 2006). At its best, service-learning is seen as an embodiment of Boyer's (1990) "scholarship of engagement"

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that tightly links research, teaching, and activism to foster individual, institutional, and community change (Harkavy, 2006).

Social justice education—grounded in the civil rights era and aligned with similar projects within intergroup and multicultural education, feminist pedagogy, and anti-oppressive education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Banks, 1996; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2004)—positions education as a key tool for understanding and overturning oppressive conditions and practices in schools and society. Bell (1997) argues that social justice education is both a process and goal in that “it begins with people’s lived experience and works to foster a critical perspective and action directed toward social change” (p. 14). Justice-oriented education does so by reversing implied deficits into positions of strength (e.g., how culturally relevant teaching views students’ culture [Ladson-Bilings, 2005]), and by contextualizing seemingly individual oppression within societal and cultural hegemonic structures (Young, 1990).²

Yet for all of seeming compatibilities of service-learning and social justice education—both flowering within the Civil Rights Movement, both committed to engaged empowerment, both cognizant of unequal distributions of power, privilege, and knowledge—the actual overlapping has been minimal. I thus outline the current barriers within and across both traditions; offer a theoretical reframing that fosters “justice-learning”; and expand upon the resulting pedagogical and theoretical opportunities of more closely linking and aligning such service-learning and social justice education.

CONTEXTUALIZING JUSTICE-LEARNING

There is immense potential for stronger linkages between service-learning and social justice education, given that community-based practices are critical and natural spaces within which students learn to become active and engaged citizens. In Sonia Nieto’s (1995) terminology, K-16 schooling that carefully and critically links the classroom and community is an exemplary model of a “democratic apprenticeship.” The question, of course, is what kind of democracy are we being apprenticed into? For as Westheimer and Kahne (2004) point out, different curricula and pedagogy shape very differently the way we view and interact with the world; from individualistic personal responsibility to participatory to justice-oriented forms of citizenship.

Service-learning has all too often been associated with an individualistic “charity” orientation, while social justice education is linked to activism. Yet I want to suggest that one of the major impediments for the fruitful intersections between and advancement of both traditions is the common fracturing to the extremes: Service-learning and social justice education are both hampered by di-

lution and radicalization. I want to highlight these two features to make visible unacknowledged presumptions within both traditions that all too often undercut the articulated and hoped-for goals. Specifically, I argue that the dilution and radicalization within both service-learning and social justice education, as contradictory pressures, have created an empty center that cannot be filled except by a reframing of how we talk about both service-learning and justice-oriented education. My theoretical framework is situated within feminist poststructuralism in education (e.g., Elizabeth Ellsworth [1989], Jennifer Gore [1993], Alison Jones, [2001], Patti Lather [1991, 1998]), which agitates for social justice while distinctly aware of and attendant to the micro-politics and micro-practices of grand narratives (e.g., “freedom,” “equality”) that may harbor unacknowledged and oppressive racial, classist, and heterosexual norms.

Both service-learning and social justice education have found themselves appropriated (and misappropriated) by ever-larger constituencies. For service-learning, the dilution is prompted by its rapid rise and acceptance across K-16 education and linked to the influx of major federal funding through Learn and Serve America (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2007). The top-down nature of such knowledge production and dissemination supports a perspective of service-learning first and foremost as a “technical” practice of (simply) an effective pedagogical practice without the attendant complexity or controversy (Butin, 2003, 2005a). Likewise, social justice education—through the less-threatening discourses of “diversity,” “multiculturalism,” and “fairness”—has come to signify a stance available to all concerned with education. Yet Cross (2005) suggests:

The program rhetoric about diversity and multiculturalism... assures little to no meaningful discussions of racism, power, and whiteness and how the privileges and benefits that accrue from these systems thwart the very efforts underway to truly produce a teaching force equipped for diverse classrooms. (p. 265)

Dilution thus serves, within both service-learning and social justice education, as a way to make initially difficult practices amenable to all with the consequence of undercutting and avoiding the very difficulty originally meant to be engaged.

Alternatively, the radicalization of service-learning and social justice education has come from mounting pressure from deliberate neo-conservative strategies (deMarrais, 2006) to link notions of “social justice” with partisan liberal activism. This is clearly seen in attacks on “dispositions” in teacher education and more broadly in efforts to document and overturn the “liberal bias” in higher education (Horowitz, n.d.; Klein & Stern, 2005; Rothman, Lichter, & Nevitte, 2005). In K-12 education

such pressure takes the more implicit form of a focus on “highly qualified teachers” and accountability through No Child Left Behind (2002) legislative requirements that, in effect, undercut and marginalize dialogue and action around issues of diversity, equity, and social justice (Butin, 2005b; Wade, 2007). As such, the service-learning movement finds itself with a rhetoric-reality gap to the extent that social justice goals are rarely or easily institutionalized (Butin, 2006; Cuban & Anderson, 2007); and social justice education has found that “teaching for social justice” has become tightly linked to the Ward Churchill phenomenon (University of Colorado, 2006) that legitimate conservative policy analyses that claim, for example, that “the extremist rhetoric and tendentious opinion for which Churchill is infamous can be found on campuses across America . . . In course after course, department after department, and institution after institution, indoctrination is replacing education” (American Council of Trustees & Alumni, 2006, p. 3).

Such drifting to the extremes has left barren the pragmatic center of actual justice-oriented practices, policies, and structures meant to foster productive habits of mind and acts of engagement. It is here that a robust notion of justice-learning must be situated. Specifically, what is needed is a pedagogically- and philosophically-sound model that avoids the either/or binary thinking that closes off (rather than opens up) a space for discussion, debate, and action.

I am here referencing feminist poststructuralists’ critique of critical pedagogy as potentially reinscribing (rather than overturning) the very practices originally meant to be overcome. Ellsworth (1989) notes, “I cannot unproblematically bring subjugated knowledges to light when I am not free of my own learned racism, fat oppression, classism, ableism, or sexism. No teacher is free of these learned and internalized oppressions” (p. 89). If we are never free of such internalized oppressions, a paramount question is: How does justice-oriented education interrupt them? As North (2007) has shown, powerful anti-oppressive pedagogical strategies must first and foremost help students “unlearn” their oppressive assumptions before any other justice-centered work can be done.

A similar critique can be made of service-learning. Himley (2004), for example, clearly and devastatingly details how service-learning committed to social justice may perpetuate oppressive conditions and assumptions: the “goodness” of proximity to the “stranger” becomes transformed as a reflection of one’s own “good citizen” status; the “helping” of the server masks a deeper need since “the [college] students need to meet their twenty-four hour requirement, need stories to tell about the kids, need the site and its documents to write about . . . They also need something big to happen for their final papers” (p. 424); that so-called “border crossings” are more often than not “border inspections;” that students’ epis-

odic privilege comes not from who they are but through their authorized institutional role (as “college students in a course”); and, finally, that the very act of writing (i.e., representation) positions students as the ones who control the tropes within which privilege, identity, and power are defined or obscured. And yet Himley (2004) concludes:

I don’t intend to give up on community service learning (or debates about the “right” way to do it) because it is one of the few places where we encounter one another in ways that may disrupt the production of the stranger. In the contemporary world, with its brutal geography of the increasing inequality, it has become too easy to know others by watching a film, reading a book, sitting next to them on the subway, wearing another’s style of clothes, vacationing in [a] foreign country, or taking on an alternative identity in an online chat room. Community service is an embodied encounter, noisy and “morally ambiguous”—a noisy encounter that often does and should agitate us, teachers and students alike. (pp. 433–434)

Service-learning, for Himley, provides a space where students are confronted with the ambiguity, noise, and disruption of their way of thinking about and engaging with the world. This disruption, in turn, forces a reconsideration of the taken-for-granted quality of the structures and practices that, beforehand, seemed all too normal. Such service-learning becomes, to be precise, the condition of possibility for justice-oriented education.

I want to now put specific terminology onto these practices. Namely, I want to suggest that it is antifoundational service-learning that undercuts implicit and binary modes of thinking and being. I term this mode of justice-oriented education “anti-anti-social justice.”

The “antifoundational” in antifoundational service-learning references the philosophical movement of pragmatist antifoundationalism articulated by, among others, Richard Rorty (1989) and Stanley Fish (1985, 1999). This position argues that there is no neutral, objective, or content-less “foundation” by which we can ever know the “truth” unmediated by our particular condition. Fish (1985) argues:

[Antifoundationalism] is always historicist; that is, its strategy is always . . . to demonstrate that the norms and standards and rules that foundationalist theory would oppose to history, convention, and local practice are in every instance a function or extension of history, convention, and local practice. (p. 112)

Antifoundationalism makes us aware of the always contingent character of our presumptions and truths; there is, in Rorty’s terminology, no “god’s eye view” by which to adjudicate “the truth.” Rather, truths

are local, contingent, and inter-subjective. Antifoundational service-learning is thus not directed toward some specific and predetermined end goal (such as better comprehension of micro-economics or openness to diversity). It is instead committed to denying us the (seeming) firmness of our commonsensical assumptions. It is, in Dewey's (1910) evocative phrasing, about the need for individuals to "endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching... to sustain and protract [a] state of doubt" (p. 14, 16) in order to become thoughtful and educated citizens.

Put otherwise, the end-goal of antifoundational service-learning is to avoid an all too easily achieved end goal, such as the closing off of an idea or discussion. I term this justice-oriented perspective "anti-anti-social justice." I take the "anti-anti-" turn of phrase from Clifford Geertz's (2000) argument for an "anti-anti-relativism" with regard to the 1980s debates surrounding relativism. At the height of academic worries about the seemingly nihilistic implications of a radical relativism without secure foundations, Geertz argued that this was not a duel between relativist and anti-relativist theorizing, but rather a debate concerning "how to live with" the "odd actualities" that different cultures had drastically different practices and beliefs (p. 45). This, for Geertz, was not about defending "relativism," since the term had been drained of any meaning by being inextricably linked to a theoretically-vacuous "anything goes" paradigm. Nor, given the inconvenient facts of the immense diversity of the world's cultures, could an "anti-relativist" stance hold either. Rather, Geertz argued that all that anthropology could do (and do well), was to undercut the familiar and keep "the world off balance" (p. 64). This, for Geertz, was "anti-anti-relativism."

Service-learning in this vein, with such justice-oriented goals, is about disrupting the unacknowledged binaries that guide much of our day-to-day thinking and acting. This is an argument for a "weak overcoming" to the extent that social justice education can never lead directly and simply into social justice (Butin, 2002). Rather, what antifoundational service-learning does is open up the possibility that how we originally viewed the world and ourselves may be too simplistic and stereotypical. This condition of possibility for rethinking our taken-for-granted world is what the educational philosopher Gert Biesta (1998) argues is a "radical undecidability" that cannot simply default into an either/or binary. More forcefully, this is a powerful model of justice-oriented education exactly because simplistic and unexamined belief systems, no matter how well-intentioned, are ultimately corrosive to the democratic project of education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2003). Framed in this light, justice-learning allows us to focus as much on the process of undercutting dualistic ways of thinking as on the product of deliberative and sustainable transformational change.

The Potential and Implications of Justice-Learning

I read much of this compilation as engaging with the potential for and engagement with justice-learning. Bell, Horn, and Roxas (2007), for example, provide a quantifiable empirical example whereby a more multifaceted form of service-learning (which they term a "mentoring" rather than "tutoring" experience) helped pre-service teachers better grapple with complex knowledge around issues of diversity and social justice. Wade (2007), Boyle-Baise, Bridgwaters, Brinson, Hiestand, Johnson, and Wilson (2007), and Cuban and Anderson (2007) all demonstrate how service-learning serves as the occasion for highly diverse groups (elementary students, a group of community members, and college faculty, respectively) to come to terms with "fragile boundaries" (Cuban and Anderson's term); that is, that while the hoped-for social justice goals may not have been fully achieved, the service-learning practice served as an occasion by which to deepen one's understanding of and commitment to future justice-oriented endeavors.

The obvious, yet profound, implication is that social justice is neither a simple nor ever-finished task to complete. It is, to return to Bell's (1997) point, both a process and a goal. And it is in this light that Mitchell's (2007) case study of the Citizen Scholar Program is a truly rewarding one. Mitchell shows that it takes multiple semesters for a self-selected group of college students already predisposed to engaging issues of social justice to realize the limits and possibilities of their deeds and ideas; something, as one student noted, that helps to "put the pieces together" (p. 101). And this is at the heart of Schultz's (2007) exemplary depiction of his fifth grade classroom. His students' quest for a new school building did not, ultimately, come to fruition; yet, for them, social justice was not simply impossible or ephemeral. As one student phrased it, the classroom Shultz created allowed them a genuine "way to learn how the government works and ways to work the government" (p. 166). Both the college students in the Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the fifth-graders at the Byrd Community Academy in inner-city Chicago came to see that the lack of a decisive conclusion did not in and of itself signal the inadequacy of the process. To "endure suspense and to undergo the trouble of searching" (Dewey, 1910, p. 14) offered, in both cases, the condition of possibility for meaningfully engaging with issues of social justice.

Let me offer one more example of the potential for a justice-learning that, in this case, explicitly fosters doubt and ambiguity for students as the "grounding" by which to support the continued reconstruction of how to make sense of the way we create the world. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program was developed over a decade ago at Temple University (Pompa, 2005). This program

brings together undergraduates (the “outside” students) and incarcerated men (the “inside” students) at a maximum security prison within the context of a semester-long academic course. Both groups work together on texts concerning, for example, the criminal justice system, deviancy, restorative justice, and ethics. This working *with*, rather than working *for*, the incarcerated men offers undergraduates authentic and intentional pedagogical encounters that force students to make explicit and analyze their assumptions on prisons, crime, and punishment. It also offers the incarcerated men the opportunity to further their education and begin to better understand their particular situations within a larger theoretical context.

Pompa (2005) deliberately modified her initial course from monthly visits to the prison to a fully-immersive experience: “Having class inside a prison is compelling—an experience that’s hard to shake. And that is one reason we do it. I do not want my students to shake these encounters easily; in fact, I want the students to be shaken *by them*” (p. 173). Central to the experience is that the inside and outside students, once together, encounter each other as equal dialogue partners concerning the specific issues and texts of the day. This type of experience is highly disturbing to undergraduates used to either passively absorbing knowledge or, in the case of traditional social activism strategies, being the “givers” or “servers.” Pompa states, “In taking class together as equals, borders disintegrate and barriers recede. What emerges is the possibility of considering the subject matter from a new context—that of those living within that context” (p. 175).

Pompa’s program offers a truly decentering pedagogy, an antifoundational service-learning. It accomplishes this through an immersive, consequential, and sustained activity that fosters doubt about categories initially deemed all too stable. The act of walking into a maximum security prison and conversing with individuals incarcerated for life draws forth questions—for example, “Who are prisoners?” “What is crime?” “When is justice served?” “What is freedom?”—with no definitive end point. This is not to suggest that there is no distinction between the “outside” and the “inside” students; nor is it to suggest that it all “just depends” on what is evil and what is not. Rather, it is no longer clear that those on one side of the fence are solely “good” while those on the other side are just “evil”; nor is it possible to maintain that there is such a singular and static thing as a “criminal.” Ultimately, of course, the outside students may walk away from the course with their beliefs about the criminal justice system reinforced or mitigated or undercut. But they cannot walk away unchanged (even if their beliefs remain the “same”) because the experience created tensions and dilemmas that had to be reflected upon and resolved.

Exactly because of this sowing of doubt, I argue that the Inside-Out Program is an exemplary model of justice-oriented education. It is justice-oriented because it opens up, rather than closes off, a discussion of complex and contested knowledge. In this antifoundational model, service-learning serves as the opening occasion for such dialogue and action rather than the concluding event. Justice-learning is thus, I want to suggest, an extremely powerful pedagogical and philosophical model exactly because it is a “weak overcoming”: it avoids the either/or of dilution and radicalization; it embraces the lived complexity of the service-learning experience; and it fosters the criticality necessary for engaging the complexities of social justice issues.

Justice-learning is concerned most prominently with making visible the contingency of our present situations; that we are always-in-the-making of our beliefs, practices, and structures. This is radical undecidability in that all conditions are open to contestation and reconstruction. This leaving open of conversations—for instance, about race, about equity, about justice—short-circuits any attempt at dilution for the sake of simple (and simplistic) answers. It also avoids radicalization exactly because discussion and debate are by their very nature inclusive of alternative perspectives and the opportunity for rethinking and changing one’s mind.

This openness is prompted by the inherent potential of the service-learning experience. By escaping the covers of the textbook and the walls of the classroom, the service-learning experience offers (if we open ourselves to it) an ambiguous and open-ended situation (be it tutoring local youth, doing community-based research, or working in a soup kitchen). Answers are no longer found at the end of the chapter, or delivered by the expert lecturer, or assumed to be static and universal. Rather, the sheer complexity of social reality—when carefully and systematically examined and reflected upon—yields opportunities for the realization that justice (or the lack thereof) is contingent upon our engagement with the world.

Finally, such experiential learning toward justice makes visible the complexities of both the process and the goals being striven for. Swaminathan’s (2007) case study of a high school’s service-learning program demonstrates how the seeming neutrality of the community site functioned according to a hidden curriculum that in many respects undercut the social justice goals of the teachers and the community-based program. The students’ experiences in their sites were shown to be neither neutral nor transparent; moreover, their experiences diverged drastically across racial and ethnic lines. Swaminathan’s exposure of this complexity suggests the necessity for ever-more dialogue and collaboration and ever-closer inspection of our seemingly “natural” practices toward social justice.

Justice-learning thus works, I argue, to fill the pragmatic center of education focused on social justice. It offers specific experiential strategies centered in the community that carefully and critically engage complex and contested issues. It does so, moreover, with the goal of prompting, rather than closing, discussion and debate. Such an intersection of service-learning and social justice education offers a vision of how K-16 schooling can foster a "democratic apprenticeship" worthy of the name. We have begun to map this terrain in order to support exactly such an openness to further engagement and examination. It is, I hope, a model of the justice-learning it is itself describing.

NOTES

1. This essay was greatly strengthened by feedback from Maurianne Adams, Gitte Werna Butin, Margaret Himley, Brian Schultz, and Joel Westheimer. Moreover, Maurianne Adams' commitment to the idea for this theme issue is greatly appreciated. Finally, this compilation of work could not have happened without Elaine Whitlock's careful and superb editorial guidance.

2. I use the terms "social justice education" and "justice-oriented education" interchangeably throughout this article even though the two refer to two distinctive foci. The former refers to focused programmatic interventions (e.g., specific curricular content and pedagogical processes) whereas the latter refers to paradigmatic orientations. Nevertheless, most justice-oriented education makes use of specific curricular interventions; and all social justice education is guided by specific justice-oriented paradigms. Thus since social justice education is both a process and a goal, I find the interchangeability legitimate if not exact.

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