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Investigating Urban Community Needs: Service Learning from a Social Justice Perspective

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INVESTIGATING URBAN COMMUNITY NEEDS
Service Learning From a Social Justice Perspective

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> The evil that is in the world always comes of ignorance, and good intentions may do as much harm as malevolence, if they lack understanding.
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> —Camus (1972, p. 124)

Homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, hunger, teen pregnancy, youth violence, and marginalization of the disabled are but a few of the complex social issues that continue to plague urban America. They are also issues that attract the attention of student service providers involved in service-learning programs across the country (Education Commission of the States, 1994). However, few of the higher education service-learning courses focus on the investigation of the needs of the *individuals* included in these groups in the urban community, and even fewer build service-learning projects around a model that is accountable for the results of the service experience on the service recipient (Maybach, 1995). The focus of the majority of research on effectiveness of service-learning projects has instead been on the growth of the student. Thus, despite the complexity of the issues of service, students are encouraged to engage in service provision without a clear understanding of how their service is affecting the communities around them. Without an accountability for or an understanding of the needs of the individuals in the urban community, the effects of service-learning projects may indeed be viewed as malevolent by the very individuals whose lives the service was intended to enhance, despite the best of good intentions. This article attempts to offer an alternative model of service learning, designed to enhance the practice through exploration of issues of oppression, individual voice, empowerment, and social justice.

QUESTIONING THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning is commonly defined as a curricular option used to involve students in experiential service projects that are designed to enhance learning outcomes while addressing community needs. But what are the community needs? Who decides what the common good is? How do we know if service is beneficial? Whose needs are focused upon in service-learning projects? Are we equally concerned with the growth of the service provider and the service recipient? If not, why not? What beliefs and values do we want individuals to come away with after the service experience? In short, what is the "service ethic" we strive for in service learning?

These questions are at the heart of critiques brought forth by several researchers who do not necessarily subscribe to the descriptions and principles as outlined by the Johnson Foundation (1989), but who offer alternative paradigms of service learning that are important to consider (Cruz, 1994; Maybach, 1993, 1994; Morton, 1994; Pollock, 1994). If the goals of traditional service-learning projects are to teach students how to be responsible, how to provide services to the community, how to care for people, and how to address their symptoms of need, the goals of alternative models of service learning would stress how to responsibly investigate what the individuals in a community define their needs to be, how to be involved in service in a mutually empowering relationship with a diverse group of people, how to care with and about people, and how to address the root causes as well as the symptoms of need (Maybach, 1993). In addition, alternative models suggest a focus on interactive reflection, engagement in continuing dialogue at the service site, accountability for growth of all individuals in the service relationship, an inclusive approach to the definition of terms, and the removal of the provider/recipient roles (Maybach, 1993). Researchers and practitioners also add to the alternative model the importance of intersecting learning processes (Pollock, 1994), attention to the historical/social context of need, and need for sensitive attention to and accountability for issues of diversity in service-learning practice (Cruz, 1994).

To emphasize the need for an alternative model of service learning, it is important to illuminate aspects of oppression as it relates to current practices. The purpose of highlighting these issues is not to discourage service learning, it is instead to move the practice more toward what Freire (1970) terms *true generosity*:

> True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the

"rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need to be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working transform the world. (p. 27)

REEXAMINING THE SERVICE EXPERIENCE

Pollock (1994) in his article titled "Service-Learning: Exploring the Hyphen's Complexity" offers this quote by Chi (1993) from a former participant in a service-learning project: "Doing service as a college student was such a meaningful experience for me. I hope that my children have the opportunity to work in homeless shelters" (p. 29). Pollock goes on to point out the contradiction inherent in this quotation: As a result of the service experience, the student indirectly supports the perpetuation of the needy situation as a mechanism to provide students with an opportunity to "do good." Although implied, it is not specifically noted that the intention to provide good service was most likely at the heart of this student's comment. Individuals who serve with good intentions, however, without exploring the consequent effects of the service on the service recipient, are perpetuating an oppressive situation in society whether they are cognizant of the oppression or not. Freire (1970) writes:

In order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity," the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this "generosity" which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. (p. 26)

This example points clearly to the need to reexamine the paradigm of service learning currently being used in the majority of service-learning programs in order to understand what messages are being conveyed about providing service. In addition, it is critical that the lens of this reexamination also include the perspective of the service recipients involved in the service-learning experience. Equally important is the need to understand how oppression is manifested in society and how this relates to the service-learning experience. Finally, a praxis needs to emerge that attempts to move service-learning programming away from oppressive practices and toward an empowering experience for all individuals involved in the service-learning experience.

As teachers guide and model service provision for their students, what forms the basis of their reasoning to care about others? What serves as their

justification for service provision? A rigorous examination of the causes and effects of caring can lead one to have a more thorough understanding and definition of one's own service ethic. With this knowledge and insight, one's agenda behind the service experience may become clear, helping to prepare the individual to engage in discussion, reflection, and praxis based on an in-depth understanding of what it means to care. Consequently, it is important to examine the service-learning paradigm to explore what is being taught through the current pedagogical methodology, and to examine the individual and societal implications of service, to understand the intricacies of the caring being encouraged.

The assumption behind the traditional service-learning programs involved in direct service provision is that students are engaged in community projects that help people in need, while simultaneously enhancing their own learning as it relates to academic objectives. Although this process appears to address the needs of the service recipient, in reality, the current paradigm of service learning is focused almost exclusively on the growth of the individual student service provider: The needs and voice of the student are continually addressed. A case in point is the description of service learning provided by the Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS). The student-only focus appears in the CNCS goals for involvement, contract for service, process of reflection, supervision of the program, evaluation of the outcome, research on effectiveness, and publicity of the project. In the current service-learning paradigm the school does not solely speak for the collective needs of the student; the students' needs are individually determined. Yet, for the service recipient described in the majority of service-learning literature, the agency identifies the collective need of the clients; their individual needs are not specifically accounted for in the establishment of goals, contracts, outcomes, reflection, evaluation, or research. Thus, as a group, their needs appear to be well documented, but as individuals, their voices are very rarely recognized. Without their voice, a system cannot be accountable for or even responsive to their individual needs. Noddings (1992) writes, "Children—or any human beings—ought not to be used merely as a means. Further, the people we are supposedly helping are rarely consulted about the means chosen" (p. 68).

Students are often taught the value of providing service to one's community, with focus on the cause for intervention. The effects of the service provided, however, are very rarely researched. The ubiquitous call for serving others in the service ethic has denied the implications and results of service for so long that we have come to describe worthy projects with terms such as *a good cause*. What about *good effects*? We have ignored the effects and voice of the service recipient to the point where we determine our involve-

ment on the basis of the cause for intervention rather than really examining the effects of our service.

This silencing of the individual service recipient is also evident in the current service relationship, which designates that one entity is a service provider and the other a service recipient. A degree of domination exists in this service scenario, as one entity is clearly in a subordinate position. This subordinate individual is placed in a position of need: He or she receives the assistance of the service provider because it has been determined that meeting the needs of the group to which an individual belongs is for the common good. If the representation of these groups in society primarily emphasizes their needs, the strengths of these same individuals become minimized. Furthermore, if these groups remain in the service *recipient* role, without having the opportunity to be an equal partner in *providing* service, a strong possibility exists that these individuals, as well as society, will associate these groups with their needs rather than their strengths, and thus further marginalize them from the mainstream.

> So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (Freire, 1970, p. 45)

In a few maverick service-learning programs, the service recipient and provider roles are reversed: Those who traditionally receive service are engaged in projects where they do the serving. For example, programs that involve at-risk youth as the service providers have shown remarkable results in the growth of the youth as a result of their service-learning experience. The significant success of these programs for the "new" service providers particularly points to the power inherent in the role of the provider. It reflects the need to allow individuals the opportunity to exercise their strengths not just to be identified by the weaknesses so often alluded to by society's interpretation of these groups' needs. These maverick programs bring us one step closer to a service ethic that redefines what is needed by marginalized individuals in society: opportunities to serve, not just to be served.

This phenomena is illustrated when, time after time, programs described in literature identify the service recipients in service learning as the disabled, the elderly, the homeless, individuals of low socioeconomic status, and/or at-risk youth. Do these groups have needs? Certainly they do, every group has needs; however, these groups have been singled out again and again as the primary recipients of service. Is it because their needs are significantly greater than *most other individuals in our society*? Traditionally, we would answer an unequivocal "Yes!" to this question: People need to have food,

shelter, health care, clothing—the basic necessities of life. If they do not have these necessities and others do, their needs as a group appear definitely greater. Should we, as a society, help to meet these needs? Should we give food, shelter, and so forth to those who need it? Absolutely. But we should not view the giving of these necessities as the answer to these individuals' long-term needs.

Service and giving must respond not only to the short-term needs of survival, as important as they are. Service and giving must also respond in a way that actually works to remove the barriers that keep these individuals in the margins of society. Freire (1970) refers to the need to address the long-term issues of marginalized individuals in his definition of true generosity quoted earlier in this article. Thus, not only must the symptoms of need be addressed in service, so too must the root cause of the need be focused upon in service situations. Furthermore, to fully understand these root causes, the voices of the individuals being served must be heard and responded to. Without their voice, service providers are operating on assumptions that their service is valuable to the group, without truly understanding if it is also viewed by the service recipients as beneficial in helping to empower them to break through societal barriers that label them as "needy" and that further sequester them to the periphery. Freire states:

> Who are better than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressed society? Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the need for liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through praxis of their quest for it. (p. 27)

As one examines the current paradigm of service-learning models, one must then ask, If in the process of service learning, we are not hearing the individual service recipients' voices and are not addressing their long-term needs, whose voices and needs are of utmost concern? The overemphasis on the students' growth at the expense of the service recipients' would suggest that the current service-learning paradigm seems more adept at empowering the student than at empowering the individual being served. Freire (1970) notes, "Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression" (p. 36).

What, then, are we encouraging in service learning? What values are we representing by embracing a service ethic? Do we want people to leave service projects with an ethic that says the server's growth is the most

important or that service is beneficial as long as it makes the server feel good? What kind of service is that? Whose needs are truly being served? Does not a danger exist that provider/recipient service may act as a form of social reproduction perpetuating the levels of class structure? Freire (1970) writes:

> Indeed the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing consciousness of the oppressed," not the situation that oppresses them; for the more oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. (p. 55)

From a critical theorists' perspective, this overemphasis on the server and underemphasis on the remediation of the root causes of need would translate to a form of oppression. This oppression would also be identified in the way that the majority of service-learning programs working with direct service focus on the symptoms of need, which work to pacify the oppressed rather than work to empower them. In other words, the unspoken agenda behind a symptom-only focus may be to "help the needy, but not enough to threaten the status quo." Freire (1970) writes:

> Any situation in which "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. (p. 37)
>
> Hence—the radical treatment—both for the individual who discovers himself or herself to be an oppressor and for the oppressed—that the concrete situation that begets oppression must be transformed. (p. 32)

It is crucial to understand that the majority of servers most likely do not intend to oppress in the process of service; they do not intentionally set out to exploit others for the purpose of their own growth. Oppression can be manifested in both passive and active forms. The passive aspects of oppression can be identified in this case as well-intentioned servers operating within a paradigm of service in which the design, process, and effectiveness of the service is determined solely by the individuals who are doing the serving, while silencing the voices of the individuals who are actually receiving the service. Without critically reflecting on this situation, the server may very well believe he or she is only creating positive outcomes consistent with the notion of the common good. However, the inequity in the relationships are symptoms of systemic oppression in society. The oppression is inherent in the current interpretation of the service relationship whether or not the server is cognizant of it.

Thus the epitome of a service ethic should not stop with concern for the server's need to serve but should include an informed concern for all individuals, an avenue for all voices to be heard, a vehicle for shared understanding of individual perspectives and reciprocal encouragement of each individual's strengths. Ultimately, the service ethic should focus on praxis that embraces mutual empowerment of people in the process of addressing the root causes of need, to lead to a more just society. The service ethic needs to embrace programs in which serving is engaged in mutually, so that individuals are not merely cared *for*, they are also cared *with*, and cared *about*:

> The pedagogy of the oppressed [is a] a pedagogy that must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed (whether individuals, or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. (Freire, 1970, p. 30)
>
> Educational projects . . . should be carried out *with* the oppressed in the process of organizing them. (p. 36)

TOWARD A MORE EQUITABLE PARADIGM OF SERVICE LEARNING

One starting point in a paradigm shift is attention to the nomenclature and roles in service relationship. The terms *service provider* and *service recipient* are problematic in that they perpetuate the hegemonic, one-sided view of service provision. The paradigm shift must begin by recognizing that direct service provision with a server and a served is not the ultimate end to which society should be committed. To truly move from the margins of society, service learning must also embrace projects that involve a cooperative relationship between students sponsored by the school (previously known as service providers) and individuals sponsored by an agency (previously known as service recipients), in which all the participants are engaged in a common project in the community. The term *partners in service* should be used, not just as a politically correct term but to denote an actual change in the service relationship: emphasizing mutual respect for individual strengths and weaknesses each partner can bring to the service relationship, underscoring the give and take of the cooperation, supporting the equal role each should play in the service design and accomplishment of the community project they are engaged in, and reinforcing the equal concern for positive outcomes in both service partners (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
An Alternative Model of Service Learning

Component	Current Service-Learning Paradigm	New Service-Learning Paradigm
Service relationship:	Provider/receiver	Partners in service
Goals for:	Student only	Both partners
Outcomes for:	Student only	Both partners
Research on:	Students' progress	Both partners' progress
Accomplishments publicly acknowledged for:	Student only	Service accomplished by both partners
Reflection done by:	Student alone or shared with professor or other students	Interactive reflection done by both partners engaging in written and verbal dialogue with each other
Focus of service:	Generally to remediate symptoms of need	Addresses both symptoms and root cause of need
Service designed by:	Service providers	Both partners
Terms defined by:	Service providers	Both partners
Evaluation of results of service experience:	Generally of students' experiences, sometimes of agency's, very rarely of recipients'	Not only of students' and agency's experiences but also of the other service partners' experiences
Follow-up done on:	This is rarely done in the vast majority of service-learning experiences, but in programs that have included follow-up, it has generally been centered on students' growth and later involvement in service	Focuses follow-up on the growth and empowerment of both partners in service

This change in the model particularly addresses the potential for empowerment in the role previously reserved for the service recipient. Ellsworth (1992) describes empowerment as the process of "expanding the range of possible social identities people may become" (p. 99). By providing an opportunity for the service recipients to see themselves as providers, a role they are generally not able to realize within society, they, and society, may be able to envision themselves in a new possible social identity and, therefore,

may be able to begin the process of empowerment by acting out their vision of their "new self." Given an opportunity to try on a new role, individuals may be able to "believe in their ability to shape events in their own lives, if given the chance," as Cohen (1989, p. 507) defines empowerment. This opportunity to be seen in a new role provides a vehicle to "increase the individual's understanding of their personal strengths and potential, of changes they are capable of initiating for themselves and with others," as Fabricant (1988, p. 50) articulates the essence of empowerment. Solomon (1976) states that a crucial aspect of empowerment is "reducing the power-lessness stemming from the experience of discrimination because the client belongs to a stigmatized collective" (p. 29). The proposed role changes in the model provide an opportunity to move the recipient out of the category of always needing care, thus speaking to Solomon's definition by blurring this stigmatizing distinction.

Next in the new paradigm is the inclusion of goals, outcomes, research, and public acknowledgement for the service provided by both partners in service. This accountability for all individuals in the service relationship speaks to the value and worth of the individuals involved, letting them know that supporting their growth is a worthwhile endeavor. This support can in turn encourage the service partners to begin to envision themselves in a new social role, thus creating conditions for the opportunity for enhanced empowerment.

The definition of service and terms used in the service experience need to have equal input from both partners in service to truly acknowledge the voices in the relationship. Particularly when designing service to alleviate an op-pressing situation, the oppressed need to play a vital role in planning how the oppression could be eliminated.

The new paradigm would also include reflection as an interactive process carried on between the partners in service for the duration of the service experience. Interactive journaling would not only provide a vehicle for the partners to check each other's interpretations, it could ultimately lead to increased cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, it is a way for service-learning organizers to ensure that there is an equal opportunity for voices to be heard.

As illustrated by LeCompte & deMarrais (1992), empowerment and oppression need to be dealt with on both micro and macro levels in society. Thus the focus of service in the new paradigm would not only emphasize the equalization of individuals but would also investigate and confront the systemic causes of oppression in society that lead to the disempowering (or

needy) situation. Thus, in a model that emphasizes social change, the focus of the service would include a heavy emphasis on addressing the root causes of the needy situation rather than exclusively addressing symptoms of need in which service is reduced to stop-gap measures that only temporarily alleviate the needs of those oppressed.

Finally, evaluation needs to focus not only on the student's and agency's experience, it needs to evaluate both partners in service. The results of the service experience need to be understood from all perspectives. Ignoring any voices yields an incomplete perspective in this process and constitutes a silencing, oppressive, disempowering scenario that does not value the ideas and beliefs of the individuals involved.

Above all, it is important to note that the most important feature of the new paradigm of service learning is that for the result of the service to be empowering, the individuals involved in the service experience need to be striving for a nonoppressive relationship. Partners in service must come to understand what it means to operate from a "thick" understanding of service that involves an enlightened concept of what constitutes oppression. Noddings (1992) wrote, "Caring is a way of being in a relation, not a specific set of behaviors" (p. 17). The same, too, could be said about empowerment in the context of service learning. Empowerment does not take place merely by putting a particular model in place; actors in the model must operate from a rich understanding of how to serve in a nonoppressive and liberating manner throughout the duration of a service-learning experience. Empowering is a way of being in a relation.

UNDERSTANDING A CONTINUUM OF CARING

Mutual respect, understanding, and empowerment are the goals of the new service learning, but these are not easily achieved. Growth must be built on a continuum that moves beyond rejection of other individuals' ideas, moves past the sole needs and perceptions of the server, moves beyond patronizing individuals, and finally moves toward the embracement of another person's viewpoint, the acknowledgment of individual strengths and weaknesses, the appreciation of human dignity, and the identification and rejection of oppressive practices. The culmination in the service relationship continuum would be a service ethic that embraces pluralism from a perspective that links people of varying backgrounds and abilities together in service projects that work to

build upon the strengths and talents of both partners in service. In this relationship, cross-cultural understanding can take place that may lead to shared understandings of some of life's great questions: What does it mean to care or to have compassion? How is need manifested? What is helpful or empowering? What is oppressive? How is oppression manifested in society? In me? What is good service? What is the common good? How can we reach a common good cooperatively?

It takes a great deal of time, structured experience, attention to social and emotional growth, and incremental skill building to arrive at this type of enlightened relationship with individuals. The behaviors described in the culmination of the continuum cannot be expected to be immediately exhibited in individuals with no preparation. It takes an informed vision, careful scaffolding, and an encouraging, supportive milieu to nurture these abilities in individuals—abilities that allow individuals to grow, work, and live in a society that cooperates and strives to support and include all its members. As Noddings (1992) points out, we have to start young, building on an individual's perceptions of him- or herself as well as on his or her acknowledgment of others' perspectives. "Caring is a capacity (or set of capacities) that requires cultivation. It takes time" (p. 114). What is imperative is that the school and agency coordinators are clear about what the service ethic means to them and that they understand their own biases and agendas so that they, in turn, understand how they are influencing students and community members in the process of service learning.

Research agendas need to concentrate on interpretations of the service ethic and how this vision guides the operationalization of service-learning projects. Longitudinal studies on a community's and service learner's perception of marginalized groups examined before and after a service-learning intervention would also be beneficial. Possibly even more important and certainly long overdue is interpretive and critical research on the effects of service on those previously or currently in service-recipient roles. This research could then be compared to research on service projects in which both partners have equal opportunities for service provision.

Service learning cannot turn society into a caring, loving world. But fueled with a new vision of service through cooperation rather than domination, educators and agency coordinators have a powerful tool with the potential to help all members of society realize their own strengths and weaknesses as well as identify the abilities of others. That, to me, sounds like a project for the common good.

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CAN URBAN SCHOOL REFORM AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BE JOINED?
The Potential of Community Schools

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Reeling from the effects of what C. B. MacPherson termed *possessive individualism* and Robert Bellah, *utilitarian individualism,* Americans are searching for new ways of being with one another and for new or altered institutions to reflect these changes. The search is significant because it is carried by a series of long-term trends, not fads. Factors propelling this self-examination include the shifting structure of global economics and politics (we may have to pull together to improve our collective competitiveness, or, we should pool our resources and do with less), the reemergence, globally and nationally, of spiritual and religious worldviews, the growth of diversity, and increasing calls for its recognition (e.g., see Falk, 1992; Reich, 1988).

This search is leading toward a redefinition of citizenship and a reexamination of the prospects for community. *Service, cooperation,* and *social responsibility* are the watchwords of the new ethos being promoted from the pulpits of government, business, educational establishments, and professional and community organizations. The words are such trusted truisms that the baggage that follows them may go unobserved: Who, after all, could question social responsibility? In fact, such concepts lend themselves to a variety of interpretations and applications; dressed in the garb of the universal common good, they are the carriers of particular interests and points of view. The point is not that such concerns are a sham, but that they can only be promoted if diverse perspectives are included in the conversation, rather than ignored or silenced.

This article examines how the concepts of service and community might be made to serve the interests of those who are (or should be) the heart of