

Service-Learning is Dangerous  
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## INTRODUCTION

Service-learning is dangerous.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, service-learning is dangerous for higher education students and faculty. And that is a good thing. For service-learning has the potential to be a dynamic pedagogy in classrooms and communities. It has the potential to be a powerful theoretical orientation for the visions and missions of higher education. But in order for it to succeed, I argue, it has to be dangerous. Which is why the biggest danger of all is that service-learning becomes tamed. The biggest danger for the future of service-learning is that it is no longer dangerous.

This might seem nonsensical since service-learning is already deeply embedded in higher education: Almost one thousand post-secondary institutions are members of Campus Compact, the national coalition of college and university presidents committed to the civic purpose of higher education; over a million college students engage in community service or service-learning each and every year. Moreover, service-learning appears to be about opportunities rather than dangers for it is ideally

situated to make an impact in the classroom and in the world. Combining theory with practice, classrooms with communities, the cognitive with the ethical, service-learning seemingly breaches the bifurcation of lofty academics with the lived reality of everyday life.

But in this seeming success, in this rapid appropriation across higher education, in this process of institutionalization, the dangers of service-learning are becoming muted. And that is a bad thing. Let me explain.

## THE DANGERS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning is dangerous, I suggest, in four distinctive ways: pragmatically, politically, existentially, and pedagogically.

It is extremely difficult to *pragmatically* implement a powerful service-learning program. It takes foresight, time, organizational capabilities, creativity, networking skills, tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to cede sole control of classroom learning, and an acceptance of long-term rather than

immediate increments of progress. It takes convincing – oneself and others – that the boundaries of academic disciplines, classroom walls, and institutional structures are socially constructed and thus changeable.

Service-learning is also *politically* dangerous for individual faculty. It is a practice that might not be rewarded by traditional tenure and promotion guidelines, that questions (either implicitly or explicitly) colleagues’ pedagogical practices, and that has the potential to turn out badly in a very public and glaring way. Given the high-stakes nature of the tenure review process, engaging in a non-traditional methodology is a disheartening proposition for new and junior faculty.

Even more daunting is that service-learning, when deeply done, is an *existentially* dangerous endeavor that subverts some of our most foundational assumptions of our sense of identity as higher education faculty. We must reconsider the belief that academic knowledge comes directly from us, in a classroom, based on a written text, and assessed objectively. We must acknowledge our students as active, reflective, and resistant agents in their own educational processes. We must come to terms with the reality that our particular expertise may have very little currency (or even relevance) in the messy and complex world outside our classroom walls.

Finally, and for me most importantly, service-learning is *pedagogically* dangerous because it is a paradigmatic example of a destabilizing and decentering mode of teaching. My job in the social foundations of education, much like in many courses across the humanities and social sciences, is to promote students’ grappling with socially consequential and politically volatile content knowledge – e.g., individual and institutional racism, and historical and contemporary structural inequities in our schools and society.

This “contested knowledge” is not easily taught or learned; in fact, research has long documented the massive covert and overt student resistance to social justice issues taught across the academy, from anthropology to women’s studies (Butin, 2005). Yet service-learning, if done well, sidesteps such resistance. It promotes the rethinking and reenactment of who we are and what we do through immersive, consequential, and sustained practices of engagement with individuals and communities different from ourselves.

Service-learning is thus dangerous because it is a teaching and thinking “against the grain” of traditional higher education practices. It is an “acting out” – outside of traditional departments, outside of physical classroom walls, outside of the proximity and “safety” of the academic campus. It is also an

“acting up” – up against the downward transference of knowledge from teachers to students, up against the downward push of institutional inertia, up against the downward gaze of privilege. I should be clear here that I do not mean “danger” as associated with coming into contact with some “exotic” or “threatening” Other outside of the bounds of the normal. Such a belief is grounded in the colonialist and racist mythologizing of those “below” as equivalent to the “primitive savage.” I mean that service-learning is dangerous because it makes us confront the limits and possibilities of teaching for social justice; it makes us confront the limits and possibilities of who we are and want to be as students and faculty in higher education.

#### DANGEROUS MODELS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Let me offer but two examples of dangerous service-learning models. The first example comes from the field of criminal justice. Lori Pompa (2005) developed the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program over a decade ago at Temple University (see <http://www.temple.edu/inside-out/>). Pompa 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 focusing on issues

such as the criminal justice system, deviancy, restorative justice, and ethics. This pedagogy of working *with*, rather than working *for*, offers the incarcerated men and the undergraduates authentic and intentional learning opportunities that delve into the larger real-life and theoretical contexts of prisons, crime, and punishment. Pompa deliberately modified her initial course from monthly visits to a fully-immersive experience. This may be highly disturbing to undergraduates used to either passively absorbing knowledge or, in the case of traditional social activism strategies, being the “givers” or “servers.” Yet for Pompa (2005), this is exactly the point: “Having class inside a prison is compelling – an experience that’s hard to shake. And that is one reason we do it. I don’t want my students to shake these encounters easily; in fact, I want the students to be shaken *by* them” (p. 173).

A second example comes from political science. Susan Dicklitch (2005) developed a course at Franklin & Marshall College entitled “Human Rights-Human Wrongs” that explored issues of human rights in general and the United States asylum policies in particular. Students serve as researchers for community partner organizations on asylum seekers’ cases at York County Prison (PA), the second largest detention center in the United States for asylum cases to be decided by the Bureau of

Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Department of Homeland Security. Through interviews with the detainees (who come primarily from sub-Saharan Africa and Central America) and intensive research on immigration policies, human rights theory, case law and the specific situations of each asylum seeker's story and country of origin, students create culminating immigration court-ready documents and legal briefs for the detainees.

Dicklitch's students were oftentimes detainees' sole link to any form of legal representation (most detainees cannot afford a lawyer, have limited English proficiency, and no knowledge of U.S. immigration laws). As such, Dicklitch (2005) notes, "Students did not have to be pushed and prodded to do their work...students knew that if they did not put in the time to properly research their asylum seeker's story, case law, and find evidence in human rights reports to substantiate the claims, their asylum seeker would most likely get deported. And, if in fact the asylum seeker was telling the truth about his/her human rights abuse, deportation could mean further torture, abuse, or even death. Other human beings, from different cultures, speaking different languages, living completely different realities were depending on my students to make sure that their story got heard" (p. 132).

## CONCLUSION

These two examples position service-learning in its most dangerous form: they suggest that service-learning be thought of *as the course*, rather than as an add-on to a course. Put otherwise, no service-learning, no course. This is dangerous in that it forces us to think of teaching and learning as something more than a time-constrained, textbook-driven, teacher-centered, theory-laden, and boundary-bound interaction with academic content knowledge. Teaching and learning become deeply lived and forcefully felt encounters that allow us to confront who we are and want to be as teachers and learners. Teaching and learning through service-learning in this way has no choice but to make a difference.

I am not suggesting that all service-learning in higher education can or should be modeled after these two examples. Postsecondary institutions differ in their historical, educational, and socio-political contexts and goals. What I am suggesting, though, is that it is all too easy to domesticate service-learning as something all too normal. But the power and transformative potential of service-learning lies exactly in its' ability to subvert and decenter what is "normal" about teaching and learning in higher education. As such, I want to support service-learning practices and theories that put into danger and into

doubt my sense of normalcy. For this is actually less dangerous than being tamed.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from the preface of my edited book *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Critical Issues and Directions* (2005, Palgrave).