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Why I Worry

Summer 2013: I just left a student disciplinary hearing.

I was there to testify on the importance of student involvement in civil disobedience. The students being subjected to the university disciplinary process had been involved with a nascent worker organization in a year-long battle trying to get the university to cancel a contract with a pizza company that had thwarted a worker unionization effort and had engaged in questionable labor practices (Konopacki, 2013; Schneider, 2013a). The university chancellor had rebuffed the students' efforts and ignored a recommendation from a university committee to cancel the contract. Feeling that their requests for a dialogue with the chancellor were being ignored, the students resorted to the only tactic they believed would get the chancellor to meet with them—they occupied his office. But instead of dialogue, the administration responded with swift and forceful police action, busting in the door, unceremoniously removing the students, and bringing them up on student conduct charges.

Then, of course, came the disciplinary hearing.

The experience rubbed raw a worry inside me that had been festering for quite some time. What if the students had done this as part of a course? What if it had been an officially designated service learning course? Could I have put together a service learning course proposal for "students to engage with worker unionization efforts, including acts of civil disobedience focused on the university"? If your reaction is cynical laughter, you are not alone. And if your reaction is shock that I would even suggest such a thing, you are also probably not alone.

The occupying students, from my standpoint, were participating in the most honorable form of engaged learning. At great personal risk and sacrifice, they were supporting a community effort getting at one of the root causes of poverty—the poor pay and treatment of food workers. They had done their homework—on civil disobedience, on labor relations law, on the findings of National Labor Relations Board investigations into the vendor, and on workers' experiences in the workplace. In contrast to typical service learners, who put in their twenty hours (or fewer) and are never heard from again, these students had committed mind, soul, and body to a community cause for the duration of the struggle.

I needed to understand why (beyond, of course, the obvious power analysis) such engagement wouldn't be considered legitimate service learning. It was far more intellectual and far more deeply engaged than practically any example of service learning I can think of. If those students had been part of a course that included readings on food systems, food worker exploitation, and social action, their strategy and actions might have been even more thoughtful and more successful. But I have difficulty believing such a course would have been supported by the university as "valid" service learning.

But I also have a more basic concern. I need to understand why, even when it is promoted by the centers of the supposedly greatest and brightest intellects, service learning seems to focus on being the least intellectual practice in higher education. We seem to have shaped our service learning programs to offer the least we can rather than the most. The largest program at the Morgridge Center for Public Service, at my university, is the volunteer program. That program simply provides a pipeline of students to put in hours with service organizations. It connects to the institution's intellectual resources in only token ways. This program, consequently, is the least we can do, not the best.

I write as a service learning practitioner who is dissatisfied with my own practice as well as the practice I see in the literature and at conferences. I want to figure out a service learning practice that doesn't stop at totaling hours from time sheets, "building relationships," and providing a tick box for the university's community engagement Carnegie classification. I want a practice that becomes part of real social change—that helps to end conditions of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion in society.

So *Liberating Service Learning* is a purposeful double entendre—a dual meaning that defines this book.

Perhaps most obviously, *Liberating Service Learning* is about a form of service learning that "liberates" those who participate in it whether they come from the higher education institution or "the community."

My focus is the United States, where the practice and culture of higher education service learning seem to have become the most established, and the most problematic. In contrast to the European Union, where issues like

"citizen access to science" and science shop models of research service have gained ascendance, or in Canada, where activists and academics have developed methods of community-based knowledge mobilization (though the pressures to reduce higher education civic engagement to a student education program are increasing in both places), here in the United States we seem to have remained stuck in a higher education–focused model of service learning. There is a long history in the United States, some of which we will explore, of using service learning to impact the thinking and attitudes of, that is, to "liberate," students. In fact, we could say that service learning in its contemporary, institutionalized form was founded on a mission of liberating students. Sometimes service learning advocates have based their work on an explicitly experiential pedagogy and other times on a moralistic student development approach. In either case, the goal has been student development.

There has also been a long-standing debate about the outcomes of these efforts. Lots of research asserts that service learning has the intended liberating effect on students. Analysts have documented desirable outcomes such as civic consciousness, civic engagement, kinder attitudes towards others, and better learning (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001), but these touted outcomes have typically been small (Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998; J. L. Warren, 2012) and in some cases absent (Reinke, 2003).

Disturbingly, even though students today are more likely than they have been in decades past to engage in community service, they are less likely to be politically engaged. And service learning doesn't seem to be helping matters (Harker, 2014; Koliba, 2004; Reinke, 2003) . According to a 2013 student survey from the Harvard University Institute of Politics, 53 percent of college students perform community service whereas only 11 percent participate in a government or political organization or issue. And while very little research exists on the learning outcomes of student activism, what we do have points unequivocally in the direction of deep benefits (McAdam, 1988; Rosas, 2010).

We also have research that raises questions about the singularly positive message put forth by proponents about the effects of service learning. That research suggests that service learning can also reinforce stereotypes of the poor, oppressed, and excluded (see E. Medina, 2011; Mitchell, 2010). Many service learning promoters are not worried about these less positive findings; they attribute reinforcement of stereotypes, for example, to bad practice, arguing that it can occur under conditions where the student and the community partner do not have shared goals and motivations (Billig & Eyler, 2003, p. 15).

But there may be more at work. Bad practice, and even what service learning proponents consider good practice, may be rooted in bad theory. Morton (1995) describes continuums of service learning that allow both "charity" and "change" practices to have standing in the academy and in society, as if the

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people conform to, and fit into, the existing social system that does not allow them to do more than eke out an unrewarding and unfulfilling survival. And even those who may not share this particular interpretation of the ill effects of institutionalized service learning nonetheless have been unable to document any significant social changes accruing from their efforts.

As someone who practices higher education civic engagement, including institutionalized service learning, I stay awake at night worrying about my own practice. Working with a neighborhood group that wanted to turn a vacant duplex into a community center, my students and I helped the group learn city zoning code, housing code, and accessibility law so they could see what they were up against. We helped them learn about what other community centers did. We helped them gather information from their own community so they could say what they wanted to happen in such a center. But we (and I should really say "I") didn't do nearly as well helping the residents learn lobbying, organizing, and change making, so while they actually got the city to purchase the building, its transformation into a community center was tied up for more than two years in all kinds of bureaucratic red tape and residents did not have the organizing capacity to speed things along. These problems are not just about the theories that we institutionalized service learning practitioners carry around in our heads. It is also about the theories that constituency members carry around in their heads and our role in contributing to theory that people can use to make more sense of their world and act in more collectively liberating ways within it by understanding how to transform it.

The questionable practices and results of the first meaning of *liberating service learning* lead us to the other half of the meaning. So the other way that I mean liberating service learning focuses on institutionalized service learning's lack of accomplishment within the framework of the first meaning, and what we need to do to free the practice from its historical baggage so that it can truly achieve the first meaning not just for students but for everyone. Thus, how do we liberate institutionalized service learning itself and what do we liberate it from?

We need to start by laying bare the taken-for-granted assumptions behind the dominant institutionalized service learning practices. We need to uncover both the manifest theories that drive those assumptions and the latent theories they reflect. It is important for me to emphasize that I'm not talking about a theory of how learning occurs or how students develop (although we will address those topics). Institutionalized service learning is rife with such theories, even in published form. They are theories within a theory. The choice of pedagogical theories as the dominant category of theorizing in institutionalized service learning, for example, unwittingly and unreflectively expresses the deeper theoretical/philosophical assumption that institutionalized service learning is about affecting students, not communities, and it privileges formal

institutionalized education practice above other forms of acting in society. Thus, we will work our way toward a theory that takes into account the total package of how bigger change occurs and how all the pieces and parties involved in institutionalized service learning fit together in such bigger change.

The lack of an explicit theory guiding service learning practice, I will show, allows it to drift without rudder or paddle on the currents of dominant neoliberal theories about class, race, gender, ability and power in this country. And because the dominant theories are constrained in the narrow swath of liberal-conservative thinking within neoliberalism, the lack of an alternative explicit theory that can provide such direction has led to a consequently system-maintaining practice. Thus, *liberating* service learning is about making its current theory explicit, deconstructing it, and then building a new theory that can lead to new practice to produce better results.

Toward that end, this book has three parts. Part I, where you are now, through Chapter 3, paints a historical and theoretical context for the rest of the book. The real work comes in the next two parts. I organize the rest of the book, Parts II and III, around the four concepts of *learning*, *service*, *community*, and *change*. But Parts II and III take very different perspectives on those concepts. Part II—Chapters 4 through 7—focuses on understanding the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of institutionalized service learning. We explore *learning*, *service*, *community*, and *change* in that order because that appears to be the order in which they are emphasized in current institutionalized service learning practice. Each chapter presents and deconstructs the dominant theories explicitly promoted or implicitly expressed by institutionalized service learning. For me, Part II is depressing reading and contrasts starkly with the usual self-celebratory presentation you may be used to.

Part III—Chapters 8 through 11—is, for me, the energizing alternative, where we switch our perspective from the current theories of institutionalized service learning to a different set of theories that provide a foundation for liberating service learning. Once again we explore the four main concepts— learning, service, community, and change. But this time we reverse the order because the first difference between institutionalized service learning and liberating service learning is the relative emphasis the perspectives place on each of the four concepts. In liberating service learning, *change* is the most important, followed by *community*, then *service*, and then *learning*. Chapter 8 thus begins by focusing on change and allowing a theory of change to drive our thinking about the other three concepts. Next we cover community as the main locus of our efforts. That helps us to think about strategies of "service" and in fact entirely rethink the concept of service. We end with learning, and we dramatically shift the target and strategy of learning and reimagine the process through the discussions of change, community, and service. As a consequence, we see just how different our practice can be and how our

higher education institutions will have to change to support it. Chapter 12 then explores what the future may hold and what challenges we may face in attempting to create a better future for all.

You might ask at this point whether I really mean this book to be just about "service learning." What about higher education community engagement or higher education civic engagement or community-based research or community-university partnerships? And what about academic service learning or community-engaged learning or . . . or . . . ? We discuss this issue again in Chapters 2 and 3, but I want to make clear that I mean to talk about all of these things. Like our "community partners," I don't see a lot of difference between these labels in practice. And there may not even be much difference in theory. Even Battistoni's (2002) work trying to distinguish higher education civic engagement from service learning ends up defining civic engagement as basically involving community placements, reflections, and reciprocity—just like institutionalized service learning. I am talking about any attempt by any part of any higher education institution to encourage or force students to engage in labor or research with any off-campus constituency or organization.

Finally, here are a few short notes on usage:

- You will notice that I am forgoing the usual accepted practice of using some variation of "he or she" in favor of variations of "they" or "them." As meanings of gender change with lightning speed, "he" and "she" are no longer inclusive of the rainbow of genders out there. And I like the rainbow.

- It seems that every day a new term pops up to describe how higher education people interact with community people. But none of the terms relate to any distinctions in on-the-ground practice. You will sometimes see me using the generic "service learning" or "community engagement" or "civic engagement." I tend to like "civic engagement," but the Carnegie Foundation uses "community engagement" and the variability in practice, for me, makes the labels interchangeable. So whenever I use any of these three terms, it is just as a generic catchall.

- Many people make much of whether and when there should be a hyphen between "service" and "learning." I do not because I do not subscribe to the argument, as you will see, that "service" actually modifies the "learning." In fact, I argue that the focus on *learning* constrains and contorts *service*. To me, service learning is simply a concept, like auto maintenance or dental hygiene. But if you need hyphens, please feel free to add them in on your own personal, hopefully locally owned store-bought copy. :-)