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Promoting Social Change through Service-Learning in the Curriculum

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Abstract

Service-learning is a high-impact pedagogical strategy embraced by higher education institutions. Direct service based on a charity paradigm tends to be the norm, while little attention is paid to social change-oriented service. This article offers suggestions for incorporating social justice education into courses designed to promote social change through service-learning. The article delineates the characteristics of social justice education, discusses ways to incorporate social justice and service-learning components into appropriate courses, and provides a blueprint for constructing the syllabus.

Keywords: Advocacy, charity paradigm, social justice education, syllabus preparation.

Institutions of higher education embrace service-learning as a high-impact pedagogical strategy designed to enrich the curriculum, foster civic responsibility, and improve communities (Bringle, Hatcher, & McIntosh, 2006; Felten & Clayton, 2011; Kuh, 2008; Meyers, 2009). This strategy may be employed in all disciplines and in a variety of courses, from anthropology to zoology. Service-learning connects community service to course content and translates theory into practice.

Although service-learning also creates an avenue for promoting social change (Kahne & Westheimer, 1999; Lewis, 2004; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Mitchell, 2007), students tend to restrict themselves to direct service within community agencies, based on a charity paradigm (Bringle et al., 2006; Cone, 2003). Students do so perhaps because direct service usually allows them to see immediate outcomes. For their part, some faculty members and administrators place students only in direct service settings because of their own concern that social action/social change situations are too “political” (Maas Weigert, 1998, p. 8).

While acts of charity are desirable and even admirable, participation through political processes seems necessary for social change. Furthermore, service-learning without a focus on social justice “can perpetuate racist, sexist, or classist assumptions about others and reinforce a colonialist mentality or superiority” (O’Grady, 2000, p. 12). Course instructors who never link social justice education to service-learning limit the potential and promise of the pedagogy.

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This article offers suggestions for incorporating social justice education into courses designed to promote social change through service-learning and provides a blueprint for constructing the syllabus. The twofold purpose of the article is to (a) encourage faculty to accept the dual role of social justice educator/service-learning practitioner and (b) assist instructors in developing a feasible, change-oriented service-learning strategy.

First, the concepts of social justice and social change are defined, the characteristics of social justice education are delineated, and the relationship between social justice and service-learning is examined briefly. Next, the essential elements of the syllabus for a course with social justice and service-learning components are outlined. Finally, the practical application of the recommended social justice model is illustrated.

Defining Social Justice and Social Change

Social justice is defined as the movement of society toward greater equality, economic fairness, acceptance of cultural diversity, and participatory democracy (Warren, 1998). Goals of social justice include empowering marginalized communities and changing unjust institutional arrangements (Lewis, 2004). Such outcomes reflect social change, which is the ultimate goal of social justice. Social change implies beneficial advances in society.

Social Justice Education

Promoting social change through service-learning in the curriculum requires attentiveness to social justice education. Instructors who already employ service-learning have an opportunity to incorporate social justice education into their courses and thereby foster students' understanding of the social issues underlying the human needs to which students respond through service. Social justice education involves increasing students' awareness of social inequalities, identifying the roles that individuals and institutions play in maintaining such inequalities, and taking corrective action (Meyers, 2009).

Social justice education is student-centered, experiential, collaborative, intellectual, analytical, multicultural, value-based, and activist (Wade, 2001). These characteristics reflect the interrelated, pedagogical dimensions of social justice education (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004, p. 56):

- *Student-centered and experiential*: Social justice educators recognize and value students' ideas and experiences as part of the curriculum.
- *Collaborative*: Students learn and serve together and work with community members to effect change.
- *Intellectual and analytical*: Instructors ask students to engage in research; students examine multiple perspectives as they analyze the causes of injustice and explore their own roles in relation to social problems.
- *Multicultural and value-based*: Students address issues from diverse perspectives and recognize possible value conflicts; instructors (while respecting students' individual views) encourage students to come up with reasoned opinions and explain how their ideas support social justice.

- *Activist*: Social justice educators encourage students to take action that supports the rights of people who are dominated and deprived.

A social justice orientation redirects the focus of service-learning from charity to social change and connects awareness to action. Charity involves responses to immediate need, usually requiring repeated actions. The charity paradigm entails the provision of direct, palliative service, such as stacking shelves at a food bank or serving food at a homeless shelter. By contrast, social change involves long-term responses that address the root causes of social problems. The social change paradigm calls for social action (e.g., community organizing and legislative advocacy to address the causes of hunger). Effective action transcends “providing help” – often with a Band-Aid approach – by engaging students in initiatives that contribute to changing conditions that create social exclusion.

Social Justice/Service-Learning Nexus

Service-learning should do more than provide students with multiple “introductions to the community”; it should “help students understand that civic action involves more than direct service and that systemic problems require systemic solutions” (Cone, 2003, p. 15). Through change-oriented service-learning, students seek systemic solutions to issues of concern. They attempt to redistribute resources, empower communities, and create more-equitable institutional structures in the society (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Pursuing an empowerment goal means calling into question the institutional arrangements in the society and refining or reshaping institutions so they can serve all citizens more equitably (Martin, Bray, & Kibler, 2006). This is a daunting task. Students should be cautioned that it is unrealistic to expect social change as an outcome of their work over the course of a semester or even a full academic year.

Social justice education and related service-learning activities allow students to explore the historical, sociological, cultural, and political contexts of the social issues they address in the community. In the process, students develop the civic knowledge and skills that will prepare them for a role as agents of social change.

Advocacy. A curriculum that encompasses social justice education and service-learning generally offers students opportunities to build advocacy skills. Advocacy is “the act of arguing on behalf of a particular issue, idea or person; giving voice to an individual or group whose concerns and interests are not being heard” (Berke, Boyd-Soisson, Voorhees, & Reininga, 2010, p. 28). It involves active, public support of a cause, proposal, or policy. Effective advocacy increases the power of people to make institutions more responsive to human needs, and it influences public policy and decisions regarding the allocation of resources.

Examples of advocacy activities are letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and presentations to legislators, corporations, and funding agencies. As they participate in advocacy projects, students engage in consciousness-raising around the social, political, and economic issues involved in each case being addressed. Further, students learn to present their concerns clearly and precisely, and to suggest viable solutions. They may even be able to ef-

fect solutions through social action, such as voter registration drives in underserved communities or public protests over environmental hazards.

Preparing the Syllabus

A syllabus does more than provide basic information regarding a course (e.g., textbooks and course policies); it also serves to sell the course to students and to welcome them into the learning experience by using positive and encouraging language (Ballard & Elmore, 2009; Thompson, 2007). A well-crafted syllabus shows consistency between course goals and course requirements, and it has a warm tone that encourages positive student outcomes (Slattery & Carlson, 2005; Thompson, 2007). These features are particularly important when the course has a service-learning component, because students may feel overwhelmed by a new instructional approach that requires both classroom- and community-based work. As Thompson recommends, the syllabus should be used to address students' fears and to temper the challenge of service-learning with words of encouragement.

A review of the characteristics of social justice education will help course instructors prepare the syllabus as a curricular tool to support the promotion of social change through service-learning. Instructors who are mindful of the *intellectual and analytical* dimension, for example, may state in the course description that students will discuss the interplay of inequality, marginalization, and powerlessness.

The syllabus should make it clear to students that service-learning is an integral part of the course, with the same academic rigor as lectures, required readings, and course material. Student learning is best documented through critical reflection activities (Bowen, 2008; Felten & Clayton, 2011). Indeed, reflection is the sine qua non of service-learning; therefore, structured reflection activities and a clear description of these activities in the syllabus are especially important (Ballard & Elmore, 2009).

Elements of the Syllabus

What follows is a summary of recommended elements of the syllabus for a course in which social justice and service-learning components are appropriate. There are seven recommended elements: course description, goals and objectives, course content, community-based work, assignments and critical reflection, assessment criteria, and support.

Course description. State the purpose, indicate the design, and summarize the features of the course. Indicate that the course is student-centered and collaborative and that it has an experiential (service-learning) component.

Objectives. Enumerate specific objectives (e.g., describe three action-oriented strategies for improving child nutrition) – perhaps in addition to general goals, which could be part of the description (e.g., consider the impact of poor nutrition on children's lives). Objectives should cover the social change-related knowledge, skills, and competencies that

students are expected to develop. Some scholars (e.g., Cashman & Seifer, 2008) recommend outlining both service and learning objectives in the syllabus.

Course content. Indicate the breadth and depth of the content of the course by listing the textbooks and required readings on specific issues, social justice/change, and related subject matter.

Community-based work. Explain the nature and process of the community-based work; also explain issue identification and community partner selection or service site placement. In addition, clarify whether students will complete work individually or in groups, and specify the time requirement (i.e., number of service hours).

Assignments and critical reflection. Outline student assignments and reflection activities (e.g., preparing journal entries, writing a research paper, and making a public presentation). It is recommended that the required reflection be structured to include description, analysis, and synthesis.

Assessment. Articulate the criteria, methods, and procedure for assessing student learning. Highlight the use of critical reflection and the products of such reflection (e.g., journals, essays, and exhibits) as part of the assessment.

Support. Encourage enthusiasm and sustained interest among students by describing the resources and support mechanisms as well as the diverse learning opportunities available to them on campus and in the community.

Applying the Social Justice Education Model

Service-learning, as already mentioned, may be employed as a strategy in all disciplines and in a variety of courses. Similarly, a variety of courses may be framed using a social justice education model. Prime candidates for this model are courses that have a sharp focus on social problems/issues. Some common issues are poverty, unemployment, hunger, homelessness, crime, domestic violence, pollution, and racial discrimination.

Appropriate courses are typically in sociology, social work, and the health sciences. The social justice education model is applicable also to courses in psychology, public policy, and religious/theological studies as well as to education courses that prepare teacher candidates for the challenges of addressing multicultural issues. Examples of how components of a social justice-focused service-learning strategy have been, or can be, utilized in the curriculum are presented below.

The first example comes from public health, which has been described as a profession committed to social justice, with an emphasis on eliminating disparities in health status (Cashman & Seifer, 2008). The community partnership was with a local or state health department, where students were placed to work on issues related to a high incidence of low birth weights among newborns. A learning objective was to identify the conditions that contributed to babies being born with low birth weights; the service objective was to

render supportive services to mothers and their newborns through the department's Healthy Start Initiative. Students were required to work with advocates to write a policy statement aimed at ensuring that an adequate and accessible supply of primary prevention and health promotion services was available for women.

For the purposes of reflection, students kept a journal in which they recorded their thoughts and feelings about why women found themselves unable to obtain recommended prenatal care. Students might ponder why a certain array of services was more available in some communities than in others, why some women might distrust the public health establishment, or why certain women entered child-bearing years healthy and fit while others entered with their health status compromised (Cashman & Seifer, 2008). The students engaged in small-group discussions, sharing their perspectives and experiences, and exploring their own values, beliefs, and stereotypes.

Faculty and students were required to assess and comment on the course. In addition, health department personnel and community beneficiaries were invited to give systematic feedback.

The second example is an interdisciplinary program called the Citizen Scholars Program. Focused on social justice/change, this four-semester service-learning program (Mitchell, 2007) consisted of four core courses, an elective, and 60 hours of service in the community each semester. One of the courses, Research as a Tool for Change, included readings and discussion through which students developed a framework for analyzing social problems and the process of social change. Below is the outline of course goals stated in the syllabus.

By the end of this course, you will have:

- Considered how knowledge is a form of power, and explored some of the ethical dilemmas involved in creating and accessing knowledge.
- Generated new knowledge in collaboration with a community organization, to help them address community problems.
- Developed and used skills in community-based research.
- Developed and used skills in working as part of a team.
- Explored social justice theory, and used the theory to analyze your research project, your service experience, and your own social position. (Research as a Tool for Change, n.d.)

In the last two semesters of the program, the students were required to research a community issue in-depth and then implement a plan of action to work for meaningful change. Mitchell (2007) reported that students collaborated on a recycling program for a local elementary school, organized a tutoring workshop to get parents more involved in teaching their young children to read, and worked alongside community housing advocates to create a series of forums designed to raise awareness and encourage action regarding affordable housing.

The third example is offered as a suggestion to environmental science course instructors. Service-learning can be effective in stimulating students' concern about environmental injustice. In designing such courses, instructors could use elements of the United States Environmental Protection Agency's (2008) Collaborative Problem-Solving (CPS) model. The CPS model is composed of the following elements: (1) Issue Identification, Community Vision, and Strategic Goal Setting; (2) Community Capacity-Building and Leadership Development; (3) Consensus Building and Dispute Resolution; (4) Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships and Leveraging of Resources; (5) Constructive Engagement by Relevant Stakeholders; (6) Sound Management and Implementation; and (7) Evaluation, Lessons Learned, and Replication of Best Practices.

Ideally, these elements are treated as interdependent and are utilized in a strategic, iterative manner, especially when dealing with complex factors that could compound environmental justice issues. However, specific elements may be used in specific situations. For example, in a service-learning course that addresses environmental pollution, the instructor could consider the fifth element. Accordingly, constructive engagement by relevant stakeholders could encompass research and issue analysis by students, awareness raising and community mobilization by civic organizations (community partners), technical support from industry or business, and policy changes by the government.

The Model as Applied in Sociology

An undergraduate sociology course entitled Social Problems, Social Justice, and Social Change (developed recently by the author) illustrates the social justice education model. In essence, the course is an analysis of social problems, exploration of social justice, and evaluation of strategies for social change.

As stated in the syllabus (see Appendix), students are expected to identify the causes and consequences of social problems; explore their own values, attitudes, and behaviors in the context of a diverse, multicultural society; and recommend possible solutions to social injustices. Further, students discuss readings and presentations and also engage collaboratively in a service-learning project geared to producing social change. This description indicates that the course encompasses social justice education with its various features – intellectual and analytical (e.g., understanding of concepts, analysis of social problems), multicultural and value-based (exploration of personal values in a multicultural context), and student-centered and experiential (student engagement in service-learning).

One of the goals of the course is the assessment of the work of social justice/change advocates and activists. Assessing activism prepares students for an activist role.

Topics outlined in the syllabus cover particularly the multicultural, intellectual and analytical, and activist features of the social justice education model. Among the topics are marginalization and oppression in a multicultural American society. A video focuses on contemporary issues that raise philosophical questions about individual rights and responsibilities; and, through a case study, students consider the perennial problem of hunger.

The community-based work (or service-learning project) is student-centered, collaborative, and experiential. The group reflection assignment also is collaborative; students are assigned to five-member teams. Students engage in intellectual and analytical work through inquiry/research; they are encouraged to critique the status quo or question prevailing practices. The individual assignment demonstrates student-centeredness as well – students make connections between course work and the community-based assignment, and they make meaning of the overall experience.

An assessment of the outcomes of this course is beyond the scope of this article. The purpose of this article, as stated above, is to offer suggestions for incorporating social justice education into courses designed to promote social change through service-learning.

Conclusion

This article offers guidance to course instructors interested in developing and implementing an effective, change-oriented service-learning strategy. Surely, not every course is well-suited for service-learning that engages students in social change activities. Instructors are advised to consider such factors as the limitations of time and curriculum resources, student preparedness, intended course outcomes, and community partner priorities. Moreover, they should be cognizant that social change, as evidenced by genuine community empowerment, for example, is not guaranteed.

Course instructors nevertheless have a responsibility to facilitate meaningful social justice experiences through students' service-learning participation. By paying attention to the essential elements of the syllabus and the fundamental features of social justice education, instructors equip themselves for the dual role of social justice educator/service-learning practitioner, shifting students' focus from feel-good charity to effective social change.

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Appendix

Sample Syllabus*

SOC 323: Social Problems, Social Justice, and Social Change

Course Description

An analysis of social problems, exploration of social justice, and evaluation of strategies for social change.

The course includes a review of concepts germane to the systematic study of social relationships, with emphasis on social stratification, social institutions, and collective behavior. Students will identify the causes and consequences of social problems; explore their own values, attitudes, and behaviors in the context of a diverse, multicultural society; and recommend possible solutions to social injustices. Students will discuss readings and presentations and will also engage collaboratively in a service-learning project geared to producing social change.

Goals and Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will be able to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and competencies as outlined below.

1. Define concepts related to social justice
2. List major social problems and describe their causes and consequences
3. Explain the principal roles of nonprofit/social service and government agencies in addressing social problems
4. Assess the work of social justice/change advocates and activists
5. Analyze policies and programs to determine whether, and to what extent, they support or inhibit social justice/change
6. Recommend strategies and programs for social change

Course Content

Textbook:

Corey Dolgon, C., & Baker, C. (2010). *Social problems: A service learning approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Readings:

1. Addams, J. (1899, February). The subtle problems of charity.
2. Eliasoph, N. (1998). *Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (Selected chapters)
3. Mosle, S. (2000, July 2). The vanity of volunteerism. *The New York Times Magazine*.

* Only portions of the syllabus are included here. These excerpts show the major elements of the service-learning syllabus and illustrate the components of social justice education.

4. National Anti-Hunger Organizations (2008). A blueprint to end hunger.
<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/86184265/A-BLUEPRINT-TO-END-HUNGER>.

Reflection Workbook:

Bowen, G. A. (2007). *Reflection methods and activities for service learning: A student manual and workbook*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Video:

Michael Sandel's *Justice* (Excerpts) – Focusing on contemporary issues that raise philosophical questions about individual rights and the claims of community, equality/inequality, morality, and law.

Topics:

- Approaches to social problems: Charity vs. social change/empowerment approach
- Issues of privilege and power, prejudice and discrimination, marginalization and oppression in a multicultural American society
- Role of research in understanding the needs of marginalized and oppressed populations
- Social programs and services provided by government agencies, corporations, and non-profit/social service organizations; civil society role/voluntary action/citizen involvement
- Advocates and activists, including civil rights leaders
- Example/Case study: Addressing the problem of hunger
- Relationship between policy development and program implementation

Community-Based Work

This course requires 15 hours of community-based work as part of the service-learning component. Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with course work and critical reflection to enrich the learning experience, foster civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

Students will work in five-member teams to conduct research in local community settings (see details under Assignments).

Assignments and Critical Reflection

1. Individual Assignment: Describe an incident in which you were the victim of prejudice or discrimination and one in which you were the perpetrator. Explain your feelings, attitudes, and behaviors.
or
Describe the assumptions you made about a population with whom you are/were not familiar. The population could be based on race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, or social situation (e.g., affected by hunger, homelessness). If you became familiar with that population, how did your assumptions match or differ from reality?
2. Group Assignment—Research and Presentation: The class will be divided into five-member teams. Each team will conduct research; identify a major social problem to be addressed;

analyze relevant policies, programs, and services; and prepare a social change strategy. Research focusing on policies, programs, and services should be done primarily through interviews with representatives of two social service agencies and at least two community residents as well as through document reviews.

- Problem identification — Identify a major social problem – its nature, causes, and consequences, including its relationship to social injustice.
 - Analysis — Analyze current responses to the problem – specifically, social policies, programs, and services. Specify programs and services provided by the two agencies. Consider: What is the American sentiment towards this policy? Are the existing policies/programs/services appropriate for addressing the problem identified? If so, how do they address the causes and consequences of the problem?
 - Strategy Development — Develop a social change strategy to address the problem. Include information sharing, consciousness raising, advocacy, and social action in the strategy.
 - Presentation — Make a 40-minute, in-class presentation of the strategy before classmates, agency representatives, community members, and other invitees.
3. Individual Assignment — Reflection Paper: Prepare a 10-page paper reflecting on the development of the social change strategy (i.e., the group assignment). Describe your possible role in promoting and implementing the strategy. The paper should be prepared in accordance with the R3A3 (Report, React, Reflect, Analyze, Assess, Apply) Processing System (see Service-Learning Workbook).

Assessment

Grading Scale

Requirements	Percentage of Final Grade
Attendance and Participation	10
Quizzes (2 x 15%)	30
Research and Presentation	35
Reflection Paper	25

Support

Barry University's Center for Community Service Initiatives (CCSI), www.barry.edu/service, offers a comprehensive collection of resources on social justice/change in relation to service-learning. CCSI staff members are available to assist in identifying relevant resources. A Directory of Community Partners is accessible at the Center's Web site.