

# Introduction

## The promise and practice of service learning and engaged scholarship

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### ABSTRACT

Service learning and other engaged scholarship programmes ideally operate in an academic framework to enhance student understanding of citizenship and community engagement. In reality, given the constraints on institutional budgets, such programmes are likely to be underfunded and academically understaffed. Structured as choices on an institutional menu, programmes are routinely touted as transformative though what they transform may be indeterminate. The ways in which such programmes are presented encourage students to interpret transformation as personal experience, valued to the extent that students can do good in the world by acting as agents of progress, solving problems for people imagined to need their expertise, ideally in exotic settings as unlike students' routine lives as possible, while students develop skills and connections useful in their post-college careers. This construction of engaged scholarship readily lends itself to institutional promotional language but can undermine students' effective action in actual projects.

### KEYWORDS

engaged scholarship, global citizenship, higher education, modernity, neoliberalism, promotional discourse, service learning

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The four articles in this issue examine students' experiences of what has become known as 'scholarship of engagement', a philosophy of higher education pedagogy articulated by Ernest Boyer (1996) and others. As Dan Butin explains, engaged scholarship is 'seen to link theory and practice, cognitive and affective learning, and colleges with communities' (Butin 2006: 473). Such scholarship takes the form of 'experiential education, service-learning, undergraduate research, community-based research, the scholarship of teaching and learning movement, or stronger relationships with local



communities' (Butin 2006: 473). The four articles in this special issue examine forms of engaged scholarship combining instruction, community service and student research and development work, with service learning the most central theme. Hickel describes service project experiences modelled after American service-learning projects and marketed to British gap-year students. LaDousa compares perspectives on service learning from a college administrator and from a student narrator, the latter comparing his Alternative Spring Break service with his study-abroad experience. Stewart uses a film made by three students pursuing a public health research/service project in East Africa to assess what model of research or service their project best fits. Cororaton and Handler critically examine a community service project in Mongolia in which Cororaton participated in connection with her concentration in the Global Development Studies programme directed by Handler.<sup>1</sup>

Service learning (according to the National Service Learning Clearing House) is 'a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities'.<sup>2</sup> Service learning is especially well known in the U.S.A. in the form of Alternative Break volunteer work, both domestic and foreign,<sup>3</sup> but also can apply to student development projects pursued during study abroad. Ideally, such engagement enhances classroom learning, facilitating awareness of structural principles shaping social problems. As Jeffrey Bernstein put it (in the 2009 special issue of this journal, 'Perspectives on Citizenship Education'), 'When our students volunteer at a homeless shelter, or participate in community meetings, they are engaging in commendable activity. However, when they fail to connect these activities to larger issues in the political world, we must help them do this ... to understand how the problem came about in the first place ...' (Bernstein 2009: 3). Such social engagement does not happen automatically; it requires focused planning on a local scale as the articles in that special issue show. Realistically, however, not all students want or expect this outcome from such programmes, nor do all students imagine social engagement in the same terms. As we see in these articles, students expect a defining experience, and for many that experience is focused as much on themselves as on what they actually accomplish. Nor do engaged scholarship programmes have the luxury of existing primarily to facilitate social engagement. They exist in the context of larger institutions that compete with each other in an academic marketplace, and they are expected to play their part in such marketing, as can be seen in their heavily promotional website



language. They are expected to justify themselves in terms of positive outcomes for students who are viewed by the job market as entrepreneurial bundles of skills. And they are particularly subject to budget constraints.

Butin (2006) describes the institutional situation of service-learning (and comparable) programmes and the expectations that they can transform the academy. He points out that such programmes might best do so if structured within academic disciplines (as suggested above), but they generally have not been. They are more likely to be enacted as co-curricular practice funded through short-term grants and largely situated in the 'softer' 'applied' disciplines and in academic programmes largely implemented by administrators or non-tenure-track faculty.<sup>4</sup> Such institutional, political and pedagogical limits contribute to 'a fundamental and unbridgeable gap between the rhetoric and reality' (Butin 2006: 474), that is, the gap between their enticingly stated institutional promises and how they are actually carried out or overseen. In particular, the grand transformational qualities frequently ascribed to such programmes encourage students to see (or at least do not discourage them from seeing) their own selves at the centre of what such projects are supposed to do.

Transformation is a tricky concept in this literature. The focus of transformation is generally students but sometimes indeterminate, as is evident in the language used in college and university websites. This language treats these programmes and their constitutive activities as inherently transformative, with article and workshop titles such as: 'Service Learning: Connect, Engage, Transform';<sup>5</sup> 'Case Studies in Service-Learning: How to transform challenges into triumphs';<sup>6</sup> 'allowing service learning to transform students from passive learners of information into active learners and community members';<sup>7</sup> 'Can community-based learning transform students'.<sup>8</sup> Its rhetorical appeal is especially evident on such website copy as 'We promote positive social change through transformative learning and community engagement'<sup>9</sup> or 'The tree is service-learning and the fruit it bears is life-transforming experience' (that last from an alumni magazine).<sup>10</sup>

The rhetorical emphasis on a fetishised notion of transformation points to anything but an organised discipline-based approach to engaged scholarship that might enhance student understanding of the social conditions that lead to the problems these programmes send students to ameliorate. The examples of this discourse, cited above, belong to a more general promotional register that institutions are urged to develop,<sup>11</sup> and that their stakeholders, including students, are urged to take at face value. In such discourse,

fetishising transformation can mask organisational muddle and reinforce the potential for students to see this as being ‘all about my experience’. It pretty thoroughly masks the political and historical dimensions of experience, shifting the interpretive focus to the capacity for such programmes to better fit students to the job market, an attractive auxiliary to undergraduate education. Student involvement in such programmes falls within the parameters of that subjectivity which Gershon (2011) describes as neoliberal agency, wherein one treats oneself as a business. This form of agency is unlikely to challenge (let alone transform) the taken-for-granted white Western middle-class perspective that participants start out with, particularly if they are encouraged to see the value of their participation at least in part as a toolkit of skills fitting them up to move flexibly and profitably through the world (Urciuoli 2008). This can be seen in many service-learning websites that offer such outcomes as increased knowledge, skills, understanding of diverse cultures, hands-on experience, network relations, job and internship contacts, and so forth, each listed as a separate and equivalent benefit.<sup>12</sup>

As these articles demonstrate, students tend to see service learning as a transforming experience acting on them as individuals bringing progress to those in need. This is ideally perceived as doing good in the world, solving problems for grateful people as unlike oneself as possible in a foreign setting, preferably in the global South. One is not handicapped by lack of knowledge of the society or language because that is part of the experience. Problem-solving brings marketable skills and perhaps connections that enhance one’s value in the working world, especially salient given the decreasing value accorded liberal arts education (Handler 2013). Given the pressure on colleges and universities to define their market niche (Urciuoli 2009), no institutional brand designer is likely to resist showcasing a relatively cost-effective programme that promises to put students at the centre of a uniquely tailored experience by sending them off somewhere exotic to do good while acquiring skills that make their liberal arts degree marketable. In the branding process, imagery matters as much as specific information and the fact that staffing and resources might be fragile, or the abroad programmes themselves less carefully structured than they should be, are not going to be part of the picture.

These points are woven throughout these articles: Hickel’s examination of the marketing of ‘authentic’ service experience, LaDousa’s student account of ‘successful’ service experience, Stewart’s students’ recasting of project problems as a learning experience, and Cororaton’s and Handler’s



description of the tensions between administrative and academic perspectives on service learning. Throughout we see students wishing to do good in the world by solving problems and enacting change, hopefully acting as agents of progress.

The wish to do good in the world is a sincere and important motivator. Whether a service experience counts as doing good depends on how and for whom it is done. Using promotional material and student narratives, Hickel shows how agencies sell 'real experiences' packaged and marketed as service-learning style projects, to British students for their gap year (prior to university). The most 'real' or 'authentic' (and thus transformative) experience is that in which students work with people of colour in the global south in ways that allows them to showcase their own initiative. Students are encouraged to choose among available, potentially transformative, experience products and to craft an apoliticised self-presentation of 'non-conformist authenticity' minimally anchored in the structural causes of the situations in which they are encouraged to gain such experience. Comparably, LaDousa's American student narrator spells out what counts as personally valuable experience, also drawing from a menu of institutional choices. 'Right choices' – that is, successful experiences – can define and transform but not all experiences are equally successful, the narrator explains. Successful experiences allow the narrator to see himself acting helpfully in a situation outside the 'bubble' of the university or college, defining terms of interaction while engaged in activities that are valuable insofar as they reflect his home institution's values and are valued by those he works with.

LaDousa and Hickel demonstrate the degree to which the service project process is set up for, and expected by students to be about, themselves: their experience, their choices, how they evaluate what works for them. Stewart, and Handler and Cororaton, focus on what happens when those experiences and choices go awry. In the context of examining what undergraduate research is, Stewart describes the situation of three undergraduates, unfamiliar with the area and the language, participating in a summer project investigating an infectious disease in a resource-constrained East African setting. One student documents on film their seven-week experience, including an unexpected delay of some weeks in obtaining local permission to distribute research information. The students conclude that despite the problems encountered in trying to do good, what really mattered was what they learned. Stewart asks if such a conclusion justifies the resources that went into this project. Handler and Cororaton describe a problem of fit between, on the

one hand, the liberal arts based global development studies major in which Handler teaches, and on the other, the menu of student research and development projects, set up as problems to be solved and funded from the Provost's office. Cororaton, a student entering the fourth and final year of her bachelor's degree, works on a project in Mongolia in which a greenhouse is to be built from recycled glass. Once on site, she finds that the various partnerships involved have entered the project for different ends, leading to no coherent course of action but also leading Cororaton (the only student author among these papers) to examine critically conditions underlying this outcome.

In each of these papers, doing good is understood as problem-solving, putting the locally served population on the road to progress, thus enacting change. Problem-solving is a defining element of the transformative nature of this experience, since it places students in a position, as they see it, to work one-on-one in egalitarian relations with local people. LaDousa's narrator sees problem-solving as a defining element of a successful choice; it is a principle element in Hickel's 'real experience' industry; Stewart's film-making undergraduates are frustrated because they find in the end they have so little opportunity to make a difference; and Cororaton and Handler make clear the structural challenges of actually doing so. Throughout these papers, we see the organising significance of a 'menu of choices' from which students select problems to solve. These choices fit and reinforce expressions of dominant modes of thinking, setting up terms for subject positions towards which students are nudged to respond. Not all respond to being 'hailed' into a particular subject position (that is, interpellated, as Althusser 1971 puts it), and no one is forced to respond, but a substantial proportion do. Those who do respond to being hailed into certain subject positions by, for example, 'menus of choice' generally do so from a position of neoliberal agency, casting their participation so as to showcase themselves as flexible possessors of desirable social skills, both fitting and reinforcing the institutional rhetoric of service learning. These are the stories most likely to feature on college websites.

The lure of the faraway and unfamiliar is an important part of the interpellation process, but it is not the first consideration. Rather, both in web language and student discourse, cultural contrast is imagined and talked about in terms of problem-solving and change-enactment. Or, to put it more technically, discourses of cultural contrast are organised in ways that suit discourses of progress. Thus, student experience of local culture and notions



of cultural sensitivity are mediated by an organising metadiscourse of progress. For example, Handler (2013) shows how Global Development Studies students tend to think of progress towards a better life as something that happens to individuated actors (individuals or nations imagined as collective individuals). 'Culture' is imagined as a local and non-modern phenomenon which should be respected and to which solutions can be customised. So, for students, the experience of service learning and comparable projects is structured as an intertwining of (their own) modernity and (local) culture, not surprisingly for middle-class, mostly racially unmarked students whose lives have been thoroughly shaped by ideologies of institutional modernity. From their perspective, institutions are acultural. When they engage inhabitants of the non-modern, 'culture' becomes a key element in setting up terms of interaction since non-modern 'others' are primarily intelligible as manifestations of their 'culture' rather than as manifestations of the modern: 'The cultural and the acultural are, thus, mutually constituted and mutually constitutive, and both are implicated together in the workings of institutional power' (Gershon and Taylor 2008: 417).

That contrast gives a particular value to the skills-inculcating and choice-based process of crafting solutions, and gives contact with the exotic the power to transform, even when students know relatively little about the people they plan to work with and even when problems are not actually solved. To that end, as Stewart's students show in the conclusion to their documentary film, knowing little or nothing about local language, history, or practices is less a problem to overcome than an enhancement of the overall experience, and even when the helping process itself breaks down, that breakdown can be recast so as to reinforce the meaning of the total experience. Focus on the experience of cultural otherness can privilege personal transformation as a motive, placing primary emphasis on what students interpret as problems worth solving (as illustrated by Hickel and LaDousa) or even shifting emphasis away from the actual process of problem-solving (as illustrated by Hickel and Stewart). The value of the experience comes to depend on crossing the us/them line dividing the routine sphere of student experience from that of transformative otherness. Addressing what students like his interviewee call 'the bubble', LaDousa draws on the notion of moral geography to demonstrate the perception of service learning as a framework of moral engagement mapped onto territory 'outside' campus in which people are in a position to be helped. To all this, Cororaton's account of her service-learning project in Mongolia stands in sharp contrast. Coming into

her research project from an undergraduate concentration of coursework based on critical analysis, and not coming into it from an American background, Cororaton's original account of her project (on which this article is based) foregrounds the disjuncture of academics, institutional processes and field realities. She and Handler spell out in detail the complexities and contradictions of practice obscured by the notion of 'problem-solving', and make clear how impossible it is for the student, however well trained academically, to control what organisations decide to do in the field.

Transformative personal experience, exotic settings, poor people of colour, one-on-one relations and problem-solving are not linked in a chain of causation controllable by well-trained students. They form a discursive association, written and talked about *as if* they fit together. Such associations are characteristic of promotional discourse (Silverstein 2005; Urciuoli 2009) and make evident how much service learning and similar projects are embedded in processes of contemporary capitalism. They are commodities themselves and they are part of the process by which their institutions are commodified. They fit presuppositions about modernity and progress combined with neoliberal subjectivity. The stress on the individual actor with the power to cause change privileges a way of thinking about self as potential employee that works well under conditions of contemporary capitalism, offsetting the supposed impracticality of the cultural capital afforded by a liberal arts education while retaining its social and symbolic capital.

Service learning and affiliated engaged scholarship programmes (the dividing line is blurry) are promised to and seen by students as transformative, a somewhat indeterminate concept. More often than not, given the realities of resource allocation, projects are chosen from an institutional menu. Can academic coursework give students the practical knowledge ('skills') to carry out such programmes? Perhaps with tight faculty oversight, which is rather an institutional luxury. But that still would not guarantee a smooth set of operating connections with community projects, and is even less likely to happen when projects are so heavily framed by non-academic considerations, and when their primary selling point is an 'authentic experience'. In an economic environment in which everything a college or university does is both subject to budget constraint and fodder for institutional marketing, engaged scholarship projects are unlikely to be exempt from either.





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## Notes

1. The question may arise as to how tightly each of these projects may be defined as service learning. LaDousa's narrator did Alternative Spring Break (ASB), a classic service-learning project. The projects described by Hickel are based on ASB projects. Handler characterises Cororaton's project as service learning. Stewart uses her case study to show that while the distinctions between research and service learning may be clear in the abstract, they are not so clear in practice.

2. National Service Learning Clearinghouse, <http://www.servicelearning.org/what-is-service-learning> (accessed 7 September 2013).

3. That is, alternative to vacationing over the break. See for example the University of Maryland page on Alternative Break, nested under 'Service Learning' at [http://thestamp.umd.edu/leadership\\_community\\_service\\_learning/involvement/alternative\\_breaks](http://thestamp.umd.edu/leadership_community_service_learning/involvement/alternative_breaks) (accessed 7 September 2013).

4. Non-tenure-track may include faculty hired for a term of x years; it may also include faculty with contracts renewed on a regular basis. Such positions often combine faculty and administrative duties, belonging not to an academic department but reporting directly to an administrator.

5. Maricopa Community Colleges, <http://mcli.maricopa.edu/events/service-learning-connect-engage> (accessed 7 September 2013).

6. Purdue University, [http://www.purdue.edu/servicelearning/Instructional\\_Development/workshops.html](http://www.purdue.edu/servicelearning/Instructional_Development/workshops.html) (accessed 7 September 2013).

7. Suffolk University, <http://www.suffolk.edu/campuslife/3380.php> (accessed 7 September 2013).

8. Duke University, <http://servicelearning.duke.edu/about/news/news-archive/2012/11/06/connected-knowing-can-community-based-learning-transform-students> (accessed 7 September 2013).

9. University of Maryland, [http://thestamp.umd.edu/leadership\\_community\\_service\\_learning](http://thestamp.umd.edu/leadership_community_service_learning) (accessed 7 September 2013).

10. Indiana University, <http://college.indiana.edu/alumni/office/magazine/s2002/service.html> (accessed 7 September 2013).
11. More technically, are interdiscursive with, see Silverstein (2005).
12. See for example the University of Minnesota (<http://www.servicelearning.umn.edu/info/benefits.html>) service-learning website (accessed 7 September 2013).

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