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Getting to Transformation with Service-Learning

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In the following five essays, we discuss our classroom-based experiences with service-learning and our efforts to harness the transformative potential of this method of teaching and learning. Collectively, we have considerable experience integrating service learning into our courses and working collaboratively with community partners to enrich the educational experiences of our students. Our disciplinary backgrounds and the courses we teach span the social and physical sciences, the humanities, and education. Yet we share the common purpose of engaging our students with the community in meaningful ways that promote personal and societal transformation, while meeting the self-defined needs of our social justice allies. With these objectives in mind, in the following set of essays, we consider how the application of best practices – reflection, reciprocity, sustainability, public dissemination and advocacy – operate as transformative mechanisms in academic-based, service-learning courses.

In the first essay, Pamela Robert elaborates her GATE model designed to maximize the power and transformational potential of reflection, particularly for students who struggle to make the connections between class content and service experiences. The model is based on engaging the “beginner’s mind,” an attitude of openness to new ideas coupled with an eagerness to explore ambiguity and difference. The second and third essays focus on reciprocity in service-learning partnerships. Elizabeth Meadows discusses how she establishes reciprocal relationships with mentor teachers and schools where her elementary education students do their pre-service teaching. She elaborates the importance of clear communication, flexibility, and site visits for maintaining a sense of reciprocity between all participants in the service-learning experience. Next, Erik Gellman reflects on the power of using oral history as a living tool that makes the lives and truths of ordinary people and their struggles for justice come alive. He views oral history as a reciprocal process that models critical citizenship for students and

subjects alike. In the fourth essay, Robert Seiser describes how his department is renewing the biology and chemistry curricula. This is being accomplished by incorporating service-learning into core courses and by developing a common framework for those courses to be taught in various formats and locations. This approach provides his students with opportunities to bridge the gap between science course content and social and public policy issues, while creating and maintaining sustainable relationships with community partners. In the final essay, Steve Meyers elaborates various ways that students in transformational learning classes can disseminate their knowledge and advocate for greater social equality. By advocating to public officials, voicing their concerns to the media and producing written resources or campus-based events, his students have experienced personal growth and realized that their actions matter. Their stories of transformation, in turn, raise the awareness of others and their willingness to engage in social action.

GETTING TO TRANSFORMATION THROUGH REFLECTION

Pamela M. Robert

Reflection – the process of critically analyzing the service experience for the purpose of making connections between lived experience and theoretical knowledge – has long been considered the gold standard for extracting learning from service (Bingle & Hatch, 1997; Howard, 2001; Porter Honnet & Poulson, 1989; Sigmon, 1979). Without reflection, service and learning often remain separate endeavors. Alternatively, when reflection is continuous, connected, challenging, and conceptualized (the 4Cs), learning from the service experience is enhanced (Eyler, Giles, & Schmieds, 1996).

Yet, even when practitioners of service-learning incorporate the 4 Cs into reflection assignments and activities, most agree that the quality of reflection varies from student to student. For some students, reflection comes easily; these students make insightful connections between theories explored in the classroom and their experiences in the community. For others, reflection is more difficult; these students struggle to connect classroom learning with community work. This raises the pedagogical question of how to maximize the transformational potential of reflection for more students. The answer I suggest can be found in what I call the GATE Model of Transformational Reflection.

The GATE model of reflection distinguishes itself from others in its intent to cultivate reflection that is transformational in that it opens the mind to appreciating difference and spurs action in the interest of social justice. Getting to transformation requires cultivating “beginner’s mind,” an attitude of openness, a suspension of preconceptions, and an eagerness to explore the subject under study as if one were encountering it or learning about it for the first time. Beginner’s mind opens the gate, metaphorically speaking, to new ideas, new perceptions, nuance, and ambiguities, while cultivating empathy for diverse perspectives. While a

full elaboration of the practices that might be employed to engage the beginner's mind is beyond the scope of these proceedings, a brief description of the three steps of the GATE model follow.

Step one: Guided assessment: Opening the gate

Students typically approach learning with background assumptions, including values, beliefs, and perceptions of normativity (VBPNs). But students do not necessarily understand the subjective nature of VBPNs, and, thus frequently treat their own VBPNs as superior to those of people they encounter in the classroom or the community. Professors will find that exploring students' VBPNs is a necessary precondition to cultivating beginner's mind and harnessing the transformative potential of reflection. To this end, the professor may use two forms of guided assessment: (1) a VBPN inventory and (2) an attitudinal inventory related to specific course topics (e.g., homelessness, inequality, etc.).

These inventories give students an opportunity to clarify their VBPNs and provide the professor with an opportunity to discuss the socially constructed nature of VBPNs. By situating VBPNs in a social constructionist framework, students learn to reflect more deeply on their service experiences and come to understand that VBPNs differ across time and space, depending on an individual's identity and location within the social structure. This approach lessens intolerance to perspectives encountered in the classroom and the community that are different than those held by individual students, and, thus, increases the possibility for transformative reflection. These guided assessment inventories also provide the professor insight into students' VBPNs and how open the mind/gate is to new and critical ways of thinking about salient social justice issues. With this information, the professor can devise effective and more individualized class discussions and exercises.

Step two: Critical incident analysis: Connecting action and critical thought

Getting to transformation through reflection requires linking action with critical thought. Encouraging students to neither act without thinking nor think without acting (Freire, 1972) warrants mantra status in community-based, service-learning classes. Using a variety of reflection exercises and assignments over the course of the semester helps students identify how they have and have not succeeded in connecting acting and critical thinking can be useful. One particularly effective way of making these connections is critical incident analysis.

In community-based, service-learning courses, students typically experience a critical incident that operates as a turning point. These are the "aha," unpredictable moments when action (service) and thoughtful reflection intersect to produce transformation. Turning critical incidents into transformative moments, however, requires skillful facilitation. How they are facilitated can make the difference between students achieving beginner's mind and reinforcing stereotypical perceptions and power imbalances, particularly when students from the dominant group are working with

less privileged groups or with groups from social and cultural backgrounds different than their own.

Indeed, turning points are a double-edge sword that may explain why some studies find that service-learning can either foster or dispel stereotypes (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Kingsley & McPherson, 1995; Reardon, 1994). To be an effective force for transformation, critical incident analysis must identify structural causes of injustice and dispel missionary-based ideologies of helping and charity. Reflection is not critical analysis unless it analyzes the structures, ideologies, and practices that reproduce social injustice. Because uncritical incident analysis overlooks structures, ideologies and practices of the dominant group, they often lead students to express their privilege by naming the "problems" of the oppressed and by offering simplistic "solutions" to what are exceedingly complex social and political issues (Erickson & O'Connor, 2000). Likewise, analyses that stop short of being critical are likely to engender sympathy rather than the beginner's mind necessary to work with organizations and people in the community in ways that lead to their empowerment.

In particular, the critical incident journal provides one of the most fruitful reflection assignments for deconstructing turning points and linking action and thought. (For a description of critical incident and other types of reflection activities, see Bringle & Hatch, 1996.) It focuses on the analysis of a particular event or experience identified by the student as having significance. For this assignment, students describe an incident that created a dilemma, an awkward situation, or uncomfortable feelings for them. Then guided by a set of prompts, they explore their thoughts and reactions to that experience and discuss what, if any, action(s) they took or would consider taking in the future. And, they reflect on why the particular incident was significant for them and what societal or interpersonal issues arose as a consequence of the incident. Next, students devise three alternative actions to the one taken or contemplated, which they share and discuss with the class. And, finally they identify what action(s) they would or would not take if they encountered the same situation again. As students learn to connect their actions and thoughts, the overall quality of service and learning improves, the beginner's mind is cultivated and the potential for personal and social transformation increases.

Step three: Engendering the beginner's mind in the synergistic classroom

While individual reflection exercises are a useful and necessary way to connect service and learning, they frequently are insufficient for getting to transformation. As noted above, some students easily connect theoretical knowledge and practical experience in the community, but many have difficulty doing so. For this later group, reflection may not reach its transformative potential if it remains an individual exercise only. For them, engendering the beginner's mind and with it an openness to new ideas, new perspectives, ambiguities, nuances, and issues of social justice requires engaging in collective reflection and dialogue in what Howard (1998) calls the "synergistic classroom."

In synergistic classrooms, professors facilitate rather than manage collective reflection and dialogue. Multiple and diverse perspectives are welcomed and intentionally cultivated. Students learn about and from each other. Taken together the elements of a synergistic classroom create a learning environment conducive to engendering the beginner's mind. Because the synergistic classroom tolerates and respects students' VBPNs, it affords them the opportunity to move from reactivity to differing perspectives to consideration of them. This does not mean that students necessarily change their VBPNs. But owing to the broad range of ideas and perspectives voiced in a synergistic classroom, students are more likely to develop an open mind toward VBPNs that differ from their own. Ideally, when this beginner's mind is engendered, students independently assess how they arrived at their VBPNs and how well they fit the knowledge they have accrued thus far. If a change in VBPNs occurs, it is because the student autonomously decides that her/his old worldview does not match the new knowledge or realities he or she has discovered. In classes lacking economic and social diversity or when students fall subject to group-think, professors may need to simulate these differences through structured class discussions that introduce perspectives not articulated or that disrupt and counter group-think.

Summary

In sum, the GATE model proposes a three-pronged approach to maximize the transformative potential of reflection by cultivating and nurturing beginner's mind. While effective generally, the model was originally constructed to ameliorate the challenges of connecting theoretical knowledge to service experiences, which some students do more easily than others. The model involves three interrelated processes: (1) doing guided assessment aimed at uncovering VBPNs and their socially constructed nature; (2) using critical incident analysis as a way to connect action and critical thought; and (3) engendering the beginner's mind through collective reflection and dialogue in the synergistic classroom. By harnessing the transformative potential of reflection, the GATE model enhances students' understanding of social justice issues and enlivens their desire to become agents of social change.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Elizabeth Meadows

The importance of reciprocal relationships in service-learning experiences has been emphasized in the literature. Jacoby writes, "Reciprocity suggests that every individual, organization, and entity involved in the service-learning functions as both a teacher and a learner. Participants are perceived as colleagues, not as servers and clients" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 36). In what follows, I describe the pre-student

teaching course, a service-learning course, and factors that seem to help promote these reciprocal relationships.

Undergraduate, elementary education students take this course during the semester before their student teaching, which is their last course before graduating and being certified as elementary school teachers. The overall course objective is to prepare students for student teaching. Each pre-student teacher spends one day a week in a certified, elementary school teacher's classroom and then attends a seminar with me. Roosevelt University students learn from their mentor teachers how to apply and practice their learning from previous courses (such as methods of teaching science, social studies, math, and reading) by assisting the classroom teacher in teaching the elementary school students. In the seminar, Roosevelt students reflect about their experiences and consider how they would like to teach in their own classrooms.

As I begin to establish a partnership with a prospective school for this course, I work to communicate what is meant by reciprocal relationships to the school principal and teachers. I tell them that there are two main goals for this course: (1) that the experiences that Roosevelt students have will contribute to their learning how to teach and how to do all that a teacher needs to do in a public elementary school; and (2) that the experiences that Roosevelt students have will contribute to the learning of the elementary students in the classroom as determined by the classroom teacher who is responsible to school, district, state and national standards, tests, and other directives.

Reciprocity is evident as Roosevelt students learn how to teach as they help the classroom teachers teach elementary school students. Roosevelt students provide much needed services for teachers and students. For example, often some elementary school students need one-on-one teaching that a classroom teacher, who is responsible for 25-30 students, does not always have time to give.

Clear communication among the instructor, Roosevelt students, and mentor teachers is paramount to establishing these reciprocal relationships. To help with this, I have written a guide about what Roosevelt students are expected to do that I talk over with prospective principals and teachers as we work to establish the partnership. This guide explains specific course assignments, which include working one-on-one with elementary students, working with small groups, teaching lessons developed by the classroom teacher, and finally, creating and teaching a unit plan of four, sequential and interrelated lessons. I speak directly with each mentor teacher and with students in this course early in the semester about these requirements. At this time, I listen, answer questions, and let mentor teachers and students know that I am flexible as to how these requirements are met. I tell them that whatever works to achieve the two main goals noted above, while providing Roosevelt students with opportunities to teach in the range of ways described in the guide, works for me. Recently, a mentor teacher told me that she liked how flexible and open Roosevelt was because she had found other universities to have more exacting requirements that

were not as open to the challenging realities that teachers face nor to what would work best for the mentor teacher and her or his elementary students. This guide facilitates communication throughout the semester among the pre-service student teachers, the mentor teachers, and myself.

I also work to establish clear communication by visiting each classroom at least once during the semester before formally observing each student teach. During these visits, I ask the mentor teacher and Roosevelt student how things are going and take time to listen. I also encourage students to establish clear communication with their mentors, and I help with this when asked and/or needed.

This example of how I work to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships among Roosevelt students, mentor teachers and myself as the instructor of this pre-student teaching course highlights the importance of clear expectations, flexibility in meeting these expectations, and regular and open communication among myself, mentor teachers, and Roosevelt students. These factors seem to have helped all involved learn with and from one another.

ORAL HISTORY AND TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Erik Gellman

How have ordinary people struggled for social justice? And how do they integrate past experiences into an ethical framework to inform their present lives? These and other questions seem pertinent to the idea of transformational learning through service learning. And although oral history may not be the key component to service-learning curricula, it has potential to become a component for transformational learning by making oral history into a living tool.

In a 2007 course on the history of Chicago, I required students to intern at neighborhood historical or community-based institutions. Their final paper combined classroom learning with field experiences, and many students chose to conduct oral histories as a way to bridge these two components of the course. Through the process of listening to how activists told their narratives, students got a better sense of how social justice works on a day-to-day level and how ordinary people have made extraordinary impacts on local, national, and even global structures of power.

This past year, we lost one of the most prolific and path-breaking practitioners of oral history: Studs Terkel. In his collection on the Great Depression, *Hard Times*, Studs reminded the reader that “this is a memory book, rather than one of hard fact and precise statistic.” And furthermore, in his subjects’ “rememberings” of “triumphs, honors and humiliations” are “their truths.” These “truths,” Studs implied, mattered because they represented the complexity and contradictions of life.

Because of its subjective and imprecise nature, oral history can become a way of learning. Oral history allows for

people to construct their own past narratives to fit with a larger narrative. Therefore, *how* the story unfolds remains as important as the details of the narrative. As subjective history, stories become alive as an open set of interpretations and questions to better understand the present by thinking about the past. Thus, silences and contradictory tales of past experiences may reveal Studs’ version of “truths” as much as precise explanations of past events.

By interviewing people about the triumphs and disappointments of struggles for social justice, students gain knowledge through a process of reciprocity. Often, community organizers have busy schedules that lead them to concentrate on the urgent present more than the distant past; sitting down with students to discuss their lives provided an angle of repose, a time to reflect, and a space to communicate facts and feelings.

At its best, the process of oral history can result in dialogue that models critical citizenship for the student and subject alike. And thinking about the past as a living tool for the present has applications in any academic field. Thus, oral history becomes transformative, showing students the beautiful, chaotic, yet rewarding process of past experience filtered through present circumstances.

RENEWING THE BIOLOGY AND CHEMISTRY CURRICULA WITH TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Robert Seiser

Drawing on the Roosevelt mission of social justice and the ideals of scientific citizenship, the members of my department have identified new goals for student success in our majors and science education in general. These goals are based on a recognized need to explicitly bridge science course content to societal and public policy issues. One challenge to meeting long-term goals for transformational learning is the issue of *sustainability*: the idea that informative and effective service-learning activities will become an integral part of the student experience. Evidence of sustainability may be found in the higher number of faculty members who adopt alternative pedagogies, in the formation of a lasting community partnership, or simply by retaining the “spirit” of a service-learning course in the light of time, multiple instructors, and changing community needs.

Our approach to renewing the biology and chemistry curricula has thus involved several components:

- Target core courses first. Encourage both majors and non-majors to have multiple service-learning experiences, not just as a “bonus” in upper-level majors courses.
- Empower faculty to create their own transformational learning activities. Acknowledge that one size does not fit all and leave the number, type and scope of alternative pedagogies to the discretion of the instructor.

- Build on a common framework. Design course models that can be used in various formats by multiple instructors, especially those who have little prior experience with transformational learning.

One example of this approach may be found in Biology 113 – *The Nature of Science*, a new non-majors course based on the Biology 150 course for majors. BIOL 113 is offered online and on both campuses, has been taught by three different instructors, and enrolls students at all levels from across the university. Rather than take a broad survey of biological science or focus on a single theme, BIOL 113 deals with the process of scientific inquiry and the ever-changing frontier of scientific discovery. There are specific course objectives for BIOL 113, but these are focused on student learning outcomes (which are assessed using standardized online instruments) rather than extensive content mastery.

The course design addresses the need for sustainability in various ways. Instructors make extensive use of online resources – the Blackboard system, newspaper and journal articles, videos – that are updated on a regular basis. Students suggest topics and lead in-class discussions using the language of science. The key service-learning activity of BIOL 113 is a student-designed investigation that employs a standard method of scientific inquiry. The topics under investigation must have some relevance for a community or target population of the students’ choosing. In this sense, the students find their own community partners, based on their own interests. Regardless of instructor, format or location, the course can be taught with the same emphasis on process and then tap into a steady stream of new content. Thus, students gain direct experience with pre-disciplinary critical thinking, data analysis and the connections between science and society. They also provide real and meaningful research results that can be beneficial both to the student and to a wider community over the long term.

CAN STUDENTS SPEAK OUT FOR CHANGE? ADVOCACY AND DISSEMINATION WITH TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Steven A. Meyers

Transformational learning combines the insights that students derive from community-based service-learning with principles of social justice. Students not only learn about societal inequalities when professors use this approach to teaching, but students also use lessons learned in the course and field to become agents of change.

There are many ways in which students in transformational learning classes can disseminate their knowledge or advocate for policies to create greater equality for people who are often disenfranchised. Importantly, students’ firsthand interactions at their community sites provide them with a potent tool – individual stories – that can promote change.

Advocating to elected officials

Service-learning frequently involves students assisting people on a one-on-one basis. However, transformational learning focuses students’ attention not only on the individual, but also on broader social and political forces that are relevant at their site. In addition to providing direct assistance, students can also help the people whom they serve by advocating for legislation, policies, and programs that address overarching inequalities.

This advocacy process initially involves students locating their federal, state, and local elected officials. They then can write letters in which they identify themselves as constituents, explain the reason why they are writing, and request that the legislator support a particular issue or specific bill. One essential element in these letters is a personal story to support the points that they are making. Service-learning provides students with poignant and personal anecdotes to explain how policies impact actual individuals in the legislator’s community. Students can expand this advocacy work by meeting face-to-face with their legislators in their district offices to further share the stories and experiences of the people whom students serve at their service-learning sites. (See faculty.roosevelt.edu/meyers/outreach.html for related resources.)

Reaching out to popular media

Another venue for advocacy and dissemination of transformational learning is media, such as newspapers and blogs. Students can highlight social inequities evident at their sites and raise public awareness by writing letters to the editor or op-ed pieces to local newspapers. These are typically brief, provocative, and closely related to recent news stories. Many newspapers have online editions in which a section for readers’ comments follows articles; students may post responses in this forum using stories and knowledge gained from their service learning as well.

Students can also construct a blog (see www.blogger.com, for example) to showcase work from their service-learning placement to publicize the plight of those who are disenfranchised to raise awareness and inspire action. After taking appropriate cautions to obtain the relevant permissions or to de-identify information, blogs allow students to share photos, sound files, and written stories in moving ways.

Campus-based events

Transformational learning can make the boundary between the classroom and community more porous. Instructors who use service-learning are aware that their students have the opportunity to interact with members of the community, but these connections also provide a conduit through which community members can come to the university to speak with broader audiences. Campus lectures and workshops, enhanced by the stories of community members, can heighten awareness university-wide. Students involved in transformational learning may also inspire their peers to engage in social action consistent with their fieldwork by participating in relevant co-curricular activities, organizing

campus demonstrations, developing voter registration or petition drives, or even coordinating a community event (such as a boycott) that involves other students.

Developing resources for public informing or action

As a complement to organizing an event or speaking out for change, professors can use transformational learning to prompt students to generate written products that encourage social or political action. For example, students can expand their letter writing to elected officials by also developing policy briefs. When writing a policy brief, students present research pertinent to a social issue identified in their fieldwork, and incorporate stories and anecdotes to personalize the presentation and make it more compelling. In some disciplines, students can inform others by creating visual art forms, performances, or displays.

Concluding thoughts

Transformational learning not only allows students an opportunity for personal growth, but it also asks them to become engaged citizens who ameliorate social injustice. Advocating and disseminating knowledge gained from service-learning creates ripple effects well beyond an individual student or class. By virtue of their fieldwork, students are able to put a face on and “humanize” broader societal problems. These poignant stories also become vital tools to increase legislators’ and others’ awareness. Transformational learning ultimately empowers students; they often learn that their convictions and actions can matter.

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An International Faculty-Led Program to Guatemala: Infusing Multiculturalism and Social Justice through Cultural Immersion

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Multiculturalism has become a powerful component in counseling, psychology and education programs that emphasize helping students conceptualize distinctive characteristics of underrepresented groups and convoluted social systems, in addition to human differences and commonalities. According to Pedersen (1999, 2002), multicultural counseling has become a “fourth force” in counseling after psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and humanism. Preparing counselors to provide better services to diverse, multicultural populations is an instrumental part of counseling training programs regardless of the counseling specialty (Abreu, Gim, & Atkinson, 2000; Arredondo & Arciniega, 2001; Bradley & Ladany, 2001; Clemente & Collison, 2000; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2001). Since Wrenn wrote the “Culturally Encapsulated Counselor” in 1962, a variety of multicultural counseling research studies that address the importance of including multicultural coursework in the curriculum have been published.

Historically, counseling, psychology, and education programs have put more emphasis on knowledge, information, and normative-historical data regarding multicultural issues. We realize that a traditional course in this area does not necessarily target personal beliefs, attitudes, and biases that students bring with them into their respective programs.

WHY STUDY ABROAD-IMMERSION COURSES?

Before my appointment at Roosevelt University, I (Roberto Clemente, associate professor) had traveled to Peninsula del