Engaging the Tensions of Service-Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses a service learning project involving a first year composition class and students in an after school program at an urban high school. These students created music programs and web content for a public radio station housed at the high school. Examining the tensions that arose reveals how students and the instructor found it difficult to negotiate the social and pedagogical terrain of this project.

Introduction

Many narratives of service learning highlight their potential for increasing students' social awareness and activism (Mitchell, 2007; Tannenbaum and Brown-Welty, 2006). Such articles emphasize how service-learning can make universities more engaged with its surrounding community and result in positive academic and personal outcomes for students. These pieces have value in a climate which, as Boyer (1990) states, "one is struck by the gap between values in the academy and the needs of the larger world. Service is routinely praised, but accorded little attention—even in programs where it is most appropriate" (p. 22).

Yet in practice, service learning courses can also be frustrating, unsettling, and unpredictable. Difficulties can range from practical details of transportation and scheduling to the thornier issues of race and class that complicate any form of community work. Some scholars have argued, however, that these issues enhance, rather than detract from, the value of service learning courses. Green (2003) notes how racial tensions can open up larger discussions about privilege and power, encouraging instructors to have their students tell the "difficult stories" of race and class. Likewise, Carrick, Himley, and Jacobi (2000) borrow the term ruptura from Freire to describe these moments, calling it "a conflict that forces us to make a decision, to act, to break away from the old and familiar." Like Green, they discourage "tidy answers" and look instead for "an articulation of the tensions that occur when we require that students leave the classroom" (p. 57). Lastly, Chaden and colleagues (2002) focus particularly on the tensions students encounter when writing for multiple audiences, academic and otherwise. By examining how students negotiate these moments of tension, these authors hope students will gain a greater awareness of the discursive practices they must master in any new setting.

This paper continues in this path by discussing a service learning project undertaken in Spring 2007. This project was a collaboration between fifteen college students enrolled in a first year composition class at the University of Minnesota and eight high school students in an after school program at KBEM-FM, a jazz radio station based at North High School in Minneapolis. Over the course of this project, university students expressed three main areas of tension: their feelings about the neighborhood where they worked, their relationship with the high school students at the station, and their thoughts about the service they performed. Working through such issues can be difficult. Yet doing so can uncover the values and assumptions that all participants bring into service-learning projects like this one.

Project background

This project was part of a course named Community Service Writing, one option for the second course in a required two part composition sequence at the University of

Minnesota. In this course, students are expected to complete at least 20 hours of community work as defined by the instructor. Fifteen students completed this section, almost all of them were enrolled in a first-year program designed for students who are labeled as underprepared for university work.

Our service site for this project, North High School, is located in what is considered one of the most dangerous and poverty ridden parts of Minneapolis. KBEM-FM, the main site for our project, is based at North High School and is officially run by Minneapolis Public Schools. The station primarily features jazz music, and allows high school students to act as DJs during most school days. For this project, we worked with eight high school students, mostly sophomores and juniors, involved with an after school program at the station.

There were two major components of this project. At North High, students from both schools worked together in mixed teams to create programs about specific jazz artists. This was part of a program series called Jazz Legends. University students did additional research and writing to create a website about the artist their group had chosen. All students met at North High once a week, meetings that also included myself and two staff from North High. Using Deans' (2000) model of service-learning courses, this project is most accurately characterized as writing with the community, although university students did a significant amount of writing for the station as well as part of the website.

First tension: The neighborhood
Students' relationship with the north Minneapolis community was the first significant tension in this project. University students voiced very little familiarity with north Minneapolis, and most came from demographically different neighborhoods. Their written reflections voiced initial discomfort at the idea of spending time in this neighborhood, primarily due to warnings from acquaintances or their own perception of violent crime in the neighborhood. However, traveling to North High each week dispelled many of their preconceptions. For example, one student wrote,

> After about the fifth week of volunteering at North, I began to realize how foolish I was to believe or even listen to some of the things about North that some of my friends and family had told me prior to volunteering there. I had never once questioned where my friends and family were getting such stories from[....]I learned that you need to go and experience life and learn from your own experiences to make judgments of your own, based on one's personal experience and not that of others. (N. Barton, written reflection, April 24, 2007).[1]

While most students wrote that their view of north Minneapolis changed dramatically, some shared difficult experiences traveling to and from the school. Most commonly, these were acts of "disrespect," such as walking on the street instead of the sidewalk or cars stopping in the street for a minute or more while their drivers talked with pedestrian friends. Just as Lewis (2004) describes her sociology students readily reverting to stereotypical attitudes while serving, these students also sometimes relied on stereotypes, interpreting what could simply be cultural differences as signs of moral deficiency. Of course, not all of these acts were morally ambiguous. One group of women witnessed police breaking up a heated fight in the street.

Of these two themes, the first was easiest for students to talk about. Perhaps this story was the one they entered the course prepared to tell; most wanted to be changed by their service experience. They may have also been the stories students thought I wanted them

99

to tell. Moments of conflict in the neighborhood were more difficult for students to describe. Many of these involved a cultural awareness that was elusive for many of them. For instance, walking in the street was automatically interpreted as disrespect; students did not consider other more practical reasons for these behaviors, such as poor sidewalk conditions.

What should my role as instructor be in helping students work through these tensions? In this course, I tried to tell my own stories as someone who has lived in the neighborhood for four years. I grew up in an affluent suburban area, and so I identified with many students' initial discomfort with the neighborhood. I could tell them of my own difficulties with the neighborhood as well as what I have enjoyed about living there. Telling such stories may affirm that ambivalence is acceptable, that students do not have to condense what they have learned into a tidy narrative. At the same time, I struggled with how to help them think through the culturally biased assumptions behind their reactions.

Second tension: Relationships with North High students
One goal of this project was to allow both university and North High students the chance to develop significant friendships with one another. Many of the university students did feel a sense of connection with the high school students. One group benefited from the expertise their student had gained by working at the station: "I believe that James taught us a lot more than we taught him. He was our teacher and we were his students. Even though I feel like we did not teach him a lot, I think the biggest gift we gave to him was letting him express himself. I think toward the end of the semester, he was very comfortable around us" (J. Dunn, written reflection, April 24, 2007) Another student talked about how he and the student in his group had several conversations about their lives outside of school, a kind of mentoring relationship.

Yet many groups did not tell such a positive story. One group included two African-American college women partnered with two African-American high school men. One of the women in that group, Keisha, described that relationship this way:

> These boys made a strong connection with us. Sometimes I thought the connection was a little too strong, which was not good for working on a project. I was forced to move to another part of the room because mainly Laron[...]would get way to close and make me feel uncomfortable. They would ask me to sit on their laps, or constantly give them hugs, hold hands, and want me to hang out with them outside of the project. (K. Davis, written reflection, April 24, 2007).

While this student felt uncomfortable, she also affirmed these students affection for her as a sign of the project's value. Why was she uncomfortable? Were these unwanted advances? She stated that this affection was a problem primarily because it slowed work on the project, not because she felt it was inappropriate. On the one hand, Keisha is of a similar age and cultural background with these students, in some ways their peer. Yet she has other roles as well, academic coach, mentor, and project teammate. Her responses show she was unsure of how to navigate all these roles successfully.

This also raised uncomfortable questions about my role. I had noticed these interactions, but did not say anything directly about them. I have plenty of practice talking with students about their writing or even their life as students, but less about their personal relationships with other students. My solution was to let Keisha and her teammate negotiate this relationship, which also allowed me to stay safely in my role as academic instructor. Was this the best choice? My assumption was that she may

ultimately know how to resolve this tension better than I. In addition, I as a white man felt somewhat uncomfortable bringing up this issue with a group of black students. As Green (2003) states, the complications brought up by racial barriers can be difficult to discuss. Encouraging students to speak more openly about race (and doing so myself) may help future classes work through such tensions more smoothly. For other groups, the difficulty was in engaging with students at all. Since this was an after-school program, attendance from the North High students was inconsistent. Of the eight students initially involved, only three attended regularly. As I explain in the following section, this had a large effect on the way students in these groups came to understand their service.

The stories of successful relationships could be seen as proof that students made significant connections through this project. Yet that is not true to the narratives students present. At times, I distrusted these success narratives as students simply projecting what I wanted to hear from them, especially when I knew their group experience was more complicated than they reported. These students may have been ignoring the tensions within their groups because of their assumption that the most important stories, the ones I expected, are the ones with a clear and happy ending. As students like Keisha illustrate, this is not always the case.

Third Tension: Defining Service

Finally, a significant source of tension in this project was the notion of service itself. Many students expressed some degree of dissatisfaction with their service. Some of this stemmed from the fact that the students they were serving were so inconsistent with their attendance and participation. The lack of relationship with a high school student made it difficult to define their work as service. One student expressed her frustration at the end of the semester in this way: "I do not feel as though I made an impact in the community or in an individual[....]This project was all about putting together a radio show, but what impact was made, and who did it help? Years later will North High students honestly remember this, will they feel lucky to have been involved?" (S. Neilson, written reflection, April 24, 2007). This student assumes something, of course: that the North High students should feel "lucky" and that the project should be a memorable experience. When the high school students failed to live up to these expectations, the entire value of our project was thrown into question. This assumption is rooted in the notion that high school students should play the part of deserving recipients. It also hides other, more indirect ways that these university students served through this project, by supporting the station and creating work that could act as a model for future students from both schools. Carrick, Himley, and Jacobi (2009) state that an expectation of intimacy can actually be inappropriate, since students share only a handful of weeks together. It may be that proactively lowering expectations about such relationships would be more realistic and healthier for future students.

Several students also expressed that because this service was required, it was not truly community service. Some used "volunteering" in a way synonymous with service, showing that for them the two were closely linked. Consider this student's description of her attitude early in the project: "I really did not feel like I was [volunteering]. I felt like I was just there because I had to be there, to get my grade and to hopefully pass the class with a C+ or higher. I was not motivated or excited because I felt as though I was going to make little or no change whatsoever" (B. Johnson, written reflection, April 24, 2007). In this case, the ideal of purely altruistic service with well-defined givers and recipients needed to be revised as they went. Most students did eventually describe a sense of engagement and ownership with this project.

Early in the semester, these students read Ross and Thomas's (2002) chapter "Understanding Service" and talked about their motivations for serving. Many students voiced agreement with the chapter's endorsement of "giving back" as a strategy and how most service ends up being reciprocal in nature. From the comments above, however, students clearly held largely unconscious notions of service coming into this project, defining it as selfless giving of time and

101

energy toward improving the lives of others. This is certainly a commendable idea, but one also associated with notions of power, as Ross and Thomas address. To be fair, many students did state that their understanding of service broadened as a result of this project, and that they found themselves benefiting personally. However, these tensions were difficult for many students to resolve.

Conclusion

Over the course of this project, I and my students found ourselves faced with several unexpected tensions. We tried to navigate these with varying degrees of success. These tensions, especially acute in service learning projects, can make teaching such courses frustrating at times, even unappealing. Yet as Freire (1972) argued, these tensions can be part of a critical education, part of the larger process of praxis. As students and teachers reflect on the difficulties they face, they come to a better understanding of how their economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds shape their interactions with one another, their reasons for service, or even their understanding of education as an institution. As Chaden and colleagues (2002) note, paying attention to these tensions allows students to grow in self-awareness and become more fluent at the many cultural discourses they will face in their future. Additionally, as noted here, it also pushes instructors to think more critically about their own position within the classroom. This is by no means an easy or quick process, nor is it comfortable. Yet as this article illustrates, it can be an immensely valuable one.

Endnotes
[1] All students' names have been changed to protect anonymity.

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