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*Service-learning courses can be powerful instruments for cognitive, affective, and moral transformation. This chapter examines the strengths and weaknesses of service-learning as an agent for cognitive, moral, and interpersonal development and its ability to promote civic or social engagement.*

## Pedagogy and Practice: Service-Learning and Students' Moral Development

*Charles R. Strain*

A monk asked Dong-shan: "Is there a practice for people to follow?" Dong-shan answered: "When you become a real person, there is such a practice."

—Gary Snyder, 1990, p. 185

There is a heady ferment in the scholarship on the pedagogy of service-learning. Researchers agree that service-learning courses can be powerful instruments for cognitive, affective, and moral transformation (Eyler and Giles, 1999). We are beginning to define best practices in the pedagogy of service-learning, most particularly around the role of reflective exercises in achieving the interlocking goals of such courses. Developmental theorists like Anne Colby argue that "Experiential learning, including service-learning, centrally acknowledges the context specificity of learning, providing educational settings that are less artificial than the classroom and much closer to the contexts in which students will later perform. When these settings are explicitly civic, as they are in service-learning . . . , they provide stronger support for moral and civic development than most lectures or seminars can" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003, p. 139).

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Careful studies are beginning to show, on the one hand, how service-learning works, and when, on the other hand, it can reinforce frozen attitudes and negative stereotypes (Eyler and Giles, 1999). The key, all agree, is using oral and written reflective exercises to connect cognitive inquiry with the experience of service in order to propel a lasting transformation on multiple levels. Defining reflection as the “intentional consideration of an experience in light of particular learning objectives,” Julie Hatcher and associates (Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah, 2004, p. 38) weigh the empirical evidence for what kinds of reflective exercises work. “Specifically, reflection

in relation to more fundamental principles of justice” (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003, pp. 103–104).

For obvious reasons Kohlberg’s emphasis on the cognitive component in moral development has been very attractive to educators. As Colby puts it, it is “impossible to divide moral and civic development sharply from intellectual or academic development because much of moral and civic development *is* intellectual” (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003, p. 105; emphasis in the original). However, many scholars over the past quarter of

the relationships developed in order for it to be heard. A person can kick, scream, and march all around, but it is not until they actually work to formulate the relationships and build their credibility amongst a network, that people will be more likely to listen and want to help bring about change. Therefore, empowering others is essentially empowering the relationship. . . . I know what gets me going, and it is the people themselves, not the policy that we learned. I would rather get to know the people on the interpersonal level, and then, from there, make decisions on how to help. On the other hand there are people out there who do enjoy the policies and creating rules and regulations to help the people. By working together, people can effectively be heard, and change can occur.

4. Moral *character* (persisting in a moral task . . .) [Rest, Narváez, Bebeau, and Thoma, 1999, p. 101; see also pp. 100–103 and Narváez and Rest, 1995]

As soon as we think of each of these components as a process, our view of moral development changes. Perhaps we should think of moral development as growing complexity and integration along multiple vectors rather than as a unilinear movement through fixed stages.

**M a S e t t .** In one of my recent service-learning classes, Josh McCarty chose to volunteer at the Chicago Religious Leadership Network (CRLN), an organization that supports human rights workers and advocates for social justice in Latin America. CRLN has devised an ingenious way of putting college students to work. It gives them case files of imprisoned or endangered human rights workers, asks them to research the case, and then write a letter in support of this actual person to heads of government, CEOs of multinational corporations, and others who have the power to alter the situation. DePaul students sign their own name to the letter with the title “Human Rights Assistant” underneath. At the first class session, Josh allowed that the proximity of CRLN’s office to his apartment and the opportunity to improve his writing skills were his primary motivations in his choice of a service placement. To be sure, this was not atypical of our pragmatic students and, in fact, I always stress that service-learning can be an important means to enhance career skills.

At our second class session, Josh came back with a different story. It was as if a light bulb in a dark room had been switched on. As he studied his first case file, he became aware that an actual human person’s life hung in the balance. This was not an opportunity to pursue his self-interest, but rather the person herself morally obligated Josh to write the best letter that he could whether or not it would alter the situation. Josh exhibited not only a keen moral sensitivity but combined it with a sense of moral seriousness. He moved from a utilitarian calculation to an internalization of his designated role as human rights advocate. In my experience, the situations themselves that we place students in when we teach service-learning classes have the power to evoke moral sensitivity and seriousness far better than concocting moral dilemmas or than my raising questions based on even the best readings.

Not always, however. In another service-learning class a premed student assigned to work as a teacher’s aide in an after-school program in an inner-city elementary school exploded in disgust after her first experience with her public school teacher: “She doesn’t even know what a femur is.” (You can imagine my instant panic as I furiously tried to dredge up memories of my high school biology.) It took most of the semester—and primarily the public school teacher’s active intervention to get her children and my student home safely when a gang battle loomed in the neighborhood—to get this student to broaden her grasp of another’s moral strengths. Because I involve students in weekly *oral* reflection sessions as part of the course, I

can also count on other students to challenge the morally insensitive rather than my assuming the pulpit of moral authority.

One clear danger in the development of moral sensitivity is that it will also inculcate a sense of moral superiority. We can imagine an all-knowing premed student saying something like, "The Chicago Public School system really does enforce a 'savage inequality.' Thank God I know what a femur is and am committed to making a difference." Here the student defines herself as morally superior not only to the teacher, but to an entire school system and to her fellow premed majors who are not out there helping the poor, neglected children. So, in class we always do two kinds of exercises at various stages. First, we discuss what we are learning from the community leaders and the people we serve. In what concrete ways are we deeply indebted to them? Second, we counteract the tendency always to do a deficit analysis of the communities that we serve by spending one whole reflection session doing an asset-based analysis, in which we discuss nothing but the strengths of the communities and the people we serve.

**M a J d e t.** Christina Ferrantelli's family had a long history of involvement with the Salvation Army, so when she asked to do her service as a volunteer on a Salvation Army food truck, I readily agreed. Here is what Christina had to say in one of her reflection essays about her experience:

We handed out sandwiches and apples and juice to *anyone* who came up to the van. We fed prostitutes, pimps, kids, mechanics, moms, grandmas, homeless guys, crack addicts, and drug dealers. . . . After 4+ hours, I was exhausted and found myself looking forward to getting home. . . .

I don't know about this. I don't think I like this type of community service. It didn't feel good. Well, it felt good to give the kids food knowing that they probably don't have food at home. But no one's life was changed. No one's situation was changed. Perhaps, our feeding program helps people to not change their situation. . . . I also feel distinctly separate from the people that come to the van. *They* come to *our* van and we give *them* food. Then *they* go away and we go away. We've all got a sense of *us* and *them* and I don't know how to even begin to go about breaking that down. Sometimes there was casual conversation between us. Sometimes there was hostile conversation. But there was never meaningful conversation. . . .

At first, I thought any changes that will take place on the south side must come from public policy. . . . There is a new [program] underway I just learned about from my public policy friend. He told me the area where the feeding program runs has been labeled an official empowerment zone. This means that millions of dollars will be poured into the south side and community members and business owners in the community decide where it will go and what it will be used for. I was skeptical when I heard this because so many similar programs have failed, precisely because they do not attack the real issue, which I believe is racism. I'm seeing its effects first hand. And expe-

our van as a crack addict. But, it looks to me like crack addiction on the south side is just another branch of the racism tree.

in younger adults whose identity is still under formation requires both an act of moral imagination and a sense of personal agency.

The right moral action may seem like simply connecting the dots, but leaping from a series of points to a line is a qualitative transformation. Ben Nowicki performed that leap for the entire class of students who had studied the social conditions of third-world poverty on the border of Mexico and Arizona with three DePaul professors. While on the border, we had visited a Fair Trade coffee cooperative in Agua Prieta, Sonora, called Just Coffee. The cooperative linked farmers in Chiapas growing coffee with their fellow villagers who had traveled north in search of work. In Agua Prieta the immigrants grind and roast the coffee beans on buyers' demand and ship the coffee ultra-fresh to customers in the United States. Ben envisioned how students in Chicago could become another link in the chain. He and virtually the entire class researched the literature on Fair Trade and developed their own marketing materials, formed a connection with a local distributor of Fair Trade coffee, segmented the Chicago area, and fanned out in groups to reach every coffee shop in the city.

For Cara Joyce the act of imagination was also an act of self-empowerment. The new possibilities for action and being were brought home to her through her service with an advocacy group that is committed to a Freirean style of popular education (Freire, 1971):

Of all of the ideas for social change that I was exposed to . . . I think that I have learned the most about what is possible and what is within anyone's grasp at the Interfaith Worker Rights Center. They use the model of popular education to help workers create their own unions, demand benefits and fair wages, and improve their own skill set and attractiveness to employers in their own community. . . . I have only been at the center for a few weeks and feel like I'm just scratching the surface of what their ambitions are and what they get done, but the idea of linking one's personal experience with the larger social systems through education is an amazing tool. . . . If this experience did empower me in any way, I am glad that it showed me that my limits are not as hard-wired and concrete as I thought they were, and that some of my preconceived notions of a good job and a good life need some more examination.

A sense of agency, then, is also critical for the transition to action. Again, the Oliners state it directly: "Rescuers felt that they could control events and shape their own destinies. . . . Rather than regarding themselves as mere pawns . . . , they . . . perceived themselves as actors, capable of making and implementing plans and willing to accept the consequences" (1988, p. 177). It is often the case, as it was for Cara, that the people whom our students serve who are part of active community organizations manage to communicate to students that they too can be agents of change (see, for example, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003, pp. 122–123).

To assist in this process, we do several kinds of reflective exercises in my service-learning classes. “Taking Stock” is one exercise that we do at midterm. Students answer frankly what their most important learning experiences have been and where they are still struggling conceptually. They discuss what kinds of brick walls they have encountered in their service context. I post these without names attached on our electronic discussion board and ask students to assist one another. Developing a sense of community, I have found, enhances the sense of individual agency.

M a C a a c t e . Moral development along this fourth vector in service-learning classes for younger adults lacks one essential component—time. Character is formed over decades, not months. It is important to be modest about one’s expectations for a single service-learning class. If liberal education along the entire span of a college career, including various oppor-

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uniform visions of the good or to a linear moral development. While their visions of social ills and social justice and the levers of social change may overlap, the students that I have quoted have begun to form their own distinct social perspectives and characters. Andrea, grounded in her self-understanding, sees networked communities built on strong personal relationships as the key to social change. Josh, stemming in part from his human rights work, argues for a counterculture of resistance. Ben, influenced by socially engaged Buddhism, wants to create a “culture of radical awakening” in which “the process of uncovering myself is directly linked to understanding the reality of life for others.” Christina probes the roots of racism. And Cara calls for a Freirean form of education exercised inside the campus walls but also in solidarity with struggling workers and migrants. Linear moral development toward a preconceived end simply is not an option in a multiply diverse college classroom even were it a desired goal.

### P a     a     A     C a     a B

From a longtime antipoverty worker, Anne Colby draws a metaphor for the kind of civic engagement that service learning hopes to catalyze. This activist “compared himself to the cathedral builders, chipping away at social problems the way stone masons of the Middle Ages inched along in building cathedrals, knowing that the massive churches would not be finished for three or four hundred years” (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003, p. 123). This is a very difficult understanding to convey to students. Students do grasp intuitively that to become good at anything requires time and practice, practice, practice. However, there is an expanded, moral definition of a practice implicit in this metaphor of cathedral builders. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) presents the classic definition of such a practice: “By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goals involved are systematically extended” (p. 175).

Stated more simply in terms relevant to our discussion, a practice is the engine of a process that leads from a moral identity to a moral character. A practice, I believe, is also a process that unifies the four components of a moral life.

In a genuine practice one’s own core self is always at stake. If we set MacIntyre’s definition against the Buddhist epigraph that opened this chapter, we came face-to-face with a paradox: one needs to become a real person, a person of moral integrity and commitment, to find a practice, but a practice is the means by which the internal goods of any activity are reached and the internal good of the self as distinct from its instrumental objectives is generated.

There are many ways in which a service-learning course can instigate a practice. For Josh, writing human rights letters became a practice virtu-

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