Cultivating Critical Consciousness: Service-Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this article, we blend the Piagetian informed understanding of critical thinking with the scholarship of critical theory to analyze service-learning as a pedagogical strategy to promote critically conscious thinking among students in higher education. We draw from our teaching experiences and student reflections in three different courses at two universities. In these courses, service-learning was designed to: promote understandings of societal systems of advantage and disadvantage to develop self-awareness, to promote understanding of sociocultural identity differences, and to instill a sense of responsibility for social change. Recommendations are provided.

Critical thinking is a frequently referenced concept in discussions about teaching and learning in higher education. Despite its prevalence, the concept is rarely explicitly defined, though it can carry nuanced meanings. Common understandings of critical thinking are often linked to Piagetian abstract reasoning and typically involve a student’s “ability to interpret, evaluate, and make informed judgments about the adequacy of arguments, data, and conclusions” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 118). Another understanding draws from critical theory including Paulo Freire’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and critical social science (Fay, 1987), where critical thinking is specifically linked to political and intellectual liberation.

In this article, we blend the Piagetian informed understanding of critical thinking with the scholarship of critical theory to analyze service-learning as a pedagogical strategy to promote critically conscious thinking among students in higher education. In contrast to conventional definitions of critical thinking, critically conscious thinking implies awareness of societal systems of advantage and disadvantage rooted in sociocultural identity differences (e.g., race, social class, gender, disability, sexual identity, religion). Critically conscious thinking is differentiated by its focus on social change. Thus, students who acquire critically conscious thinking skills can analyze, interpret, evaluate, and choose a course of action informed by more sophisticated understandings of social power and its implications.

Critically conscious thinking is important to the goals of education in a democratic society. Indeed, most college and university mission statements articulate the need for students’ “knowledge and capability to make our global society a better place” (Fisher, 1996, p. 227). In this article, we draw upon student experiences to analyze how service-learning may help cultivate critical consciousness. In turn, these students are likely to become more engaged citizens and community members who are actively involved in seeking solutions to societal problems.

Terenzini (in Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002) reports that “changes in students’ critical thinking abilities are shaped, independently, by what happens to them both in and out of the classroom” (p. 236) including contact between students and faculty outside the classroom, interaction among peers, as well as a variety of instructional techniques, including cooperative learning and problem-based learning (Hamrick et al., 2002) which are integral to service-learning approaches. It is from this vantage point that we consider the potential of service-learning to function as a vehicle for developing critical thinking and critical consciousness among students in higher education.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a form of experiential education through which “students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection, linking personal and interpersonal development with academic and cognitive development. Eyler and Giles (1999) note that “students who are in service-learning classes where service and learning are well integrated through classroom focus and reflection are more likely to show an increase in their level of critical thinking” (p. 127).

Service-learning can be characterized as a community centered approach to teaching and learning (Jones & Abes, 2004). As such, service-learning emphasizes the application of knowledge to community problems and the reciprocal application of community experience to the development of knowledge (Eyler & Giles, 1999). In this way, service-learning emphasizes the concept of mutuality: “that service should be a two-way relationship in that both parties receive benefits” (Rosenberger, 2000, p. 27).
Rosenberger, draws on Rhoads' concept of critical community learning,2 to describe how service-learning can support the development of critical consciousness—the acquisition of perspectives that can transform our understanding of the social order and lead to engagement in the larger struggle to improve social conditions. Individuals engaged in critical community learning become conscious of and reflect critically on their own positional power. As Jones and Abes (2004) note, "service-learning courses most characteristically place students in contact with people different from their own (e.g., racial-ethnic groups; religion; sexual orientation; social class)" providing opportunities that "... tend to promote self-reflection, personal awareness, and scrutiny of certain aspects of identity previously taken for granted" (p. 149).

Similarly, Eyler and Giles (1999) write that service-learning programs "place students in contexts where their prejudices, previous experiences, and assumptions about the world are challenged" (p. 17). The increased awareness of one's identity and the opportunity to challenge assumptions related to social power can contribute to cognitive dissonance setting the stage for critical thinking (Rosenberger, 2000).

Action, reflection, and reciprocity are common to service-learning definitions. We build upon Rhoads' (1997) definition of critical community service, combining a theory of service with democratic concerns for social justice and equality. In this article, we describe how each of us worked to promote critical thinking and critical consciousness by designing courses where service-learning was integrated to support course content and achieve learning objectives. Specifically, we offer insights gleaned from a graduate level education course in a College of Education and a first-year seminar course in a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at a research university in the Northeast, and an upper level undergraduate women's studies course in a College of Humanities at a research university in the Midwest.

Overview

Next, we offer a brief synopsis of each of these courses to provide a context for our discussion of service-learning as a pedagogical strategy for promoting critical consciousness.

LAS100: Majoring in Liberal Arts and Sciences

The first course, LAS100: Majoring in Liberal Arts and Sciences, is a one-credit college-orientation seminar for new students. Beginning in 2003, LAS100 was offered as an elective course for new students entering the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.3 The shift from a required course with a homogeneous enrollment (sections delineated by major) to an elective course with a heterogeneous group (some students with declared majors combined with undeclared students) provided an opportunity for curricular redesign. The overarching objective of LAS100 is to orient first-year students to campus resources, to emphasize the values of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, including curiosity, openness to new ideas and respect for differing points of view and to promote evolving personal aspirations.

A service-learning component was incorporated into two sections of LAS100 requiring students to complete a minimum of ten hours of service, assessing and/or meeting community needs, with "community" meaning the campus community. The aim was to help students establish connections with the (their) campus, and provide an adequate context for thinking about social issues and values, which would serve them as citizens in college and after graduation.

Students in LAS100 were given a list of service site options and asked to rank their preferences. The instructor then matched students with sites, to ensure an even distribution of students across the sites available. All students were assigned to one of their top three choices. Students' motivations for their site selection varied: some chose sites that related to their major (e.g. a political science student who worked with the Bureau of Labor Education), others chose what they perceived as low-risk sites (e.g. an undeclared student who selected Substance Abuse Services), and some chose an area that linked to previous experiences (e.g. a student who conducted missionary work in Hungary worked with the Office of International Programs). One student, who self-identified as Franco-American, worked with the Franco-American newspaper, Le Forum. As a new student, he was hopeful this experience would help him make new friends on campus, further explore/understand his heritage, and enable him to explore a career possibility.

Students enrolled in LAS100 were challenged to use their academic disciplines as lenses through which to view their experiences. All students had an academic or career interest, and most had declared majors: political science, pre-law, computer science, sports management, sociology, and psychology. The majority of the students were male. While all students in the class initially self-identified as White, one student later disclosed his Native American heritage.

HED562: Impact of College on Students

Service-learning was also integrated into HED562: Impact of College on Students, one of the core requirements for students enrolled in the Master's degree program in Student Development in Higher Education. A mini-grant through the University's Center for Teaching Excellence was awarded to develop a service component for this course. The goal was to place students with campus agencies devoted to serving historically disadvantaged populations (i.e. Disability Services, Multicultural
Programs, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered Allies Council). In the second year of instruction, the site options were narrowed to complement some other changes in course design. Students selected one of two projects: serving as a mentor for undeclared first-year students experiencing personal and/or academic challenges, or assisting with the planning of a campus program dedicated to community service.

Rather than accepting unexamined ideologies, students were challenged to reflect on their assumptions about the social context in which U.S. postsecondary education is situated and apply theory to practice through their service-learning experiences. For instance, one student was eager to start his project with the Admissions Office, planning and implementing the Spring Preview Weekend for admitted ALANA (African, Latino, Asian, and Native American) students. A proud ambassador for the institution, he wanted to help these students with their transition. This student quickly learned he had as much, if not more to learn as he had to offer, and that by approaching ALANA students as needing, even requiring help, he ran the risk of further marginalizing them. This dynamic was analyzed in class when students read and reflected upon course readings including Johnson (2001) who notes, "[T]he act of helping – or being able to help – can reaffirm the social distance between two groups and heighten everyone’s awareness of it" (p. 78).

Students enrolled in HED562 viewed their service experiences from a variety of perspectives. While they were all graduate students in the same program, they represented a wide range of undergraduate disciplines: history, English, sociology, business, communications, music, psychology, and economics. Two individuals were international students, though the students who were U.S. born comprised the majority. Students, both male and female, also represented diverse identity statuses in terms of age, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

WST 494: Theory and Practice of Teaching Women’s Studies

WST 494 is an upper level undergraduate women’s studies course commonly called “Peer Power!” by students and faculty affiliated with the course. In this course, undergraduate students drew upon perspectives from feminist and gender theories to analyze the social world and develop critical thinking skills needed to understand sociopolitical issues including: gender identity, homophobia, body image, multiculturalism, media images, and sexual violence. Students in the course designed learning modules related to selected topics and were then invited to serve as guest teachers for middle and high school classrooms in communities neighboring the university.

In addition to reading assignments, students enrolled in the course were required to maintain an analytic and reflective journal and work in groups to design a presentation series on a particular topic (e.g., the topic Difference included: race, sexuality/homophobia, social class, disability and other identity categories). The service component of the course required students to lead three classroom presentations, serve as an observer, and provide feedback for one additional classroom presentation given by another group. Over a two-semester time frame, the students enrolled in the course provided over 75 presentations at 25 different schools or youth agencies in the urban and suburban communities of this university.

Students enrolled in WST 494/Peer Power! brought a diversity of perspectives and academic lenses to this course and course content was informed by interdisciplinary scholarship related to gender, education, sociocultural identities, and social change. Students enrolled in the course represented a wide range of disciplines including: history, psychology, astronomy, marketing, English, sociology, Black studies, biology, animal science, management information systems, and women’s studies. The majority of students enrolled in the course were female. Students represented diverse identity statuses in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual identity.

Service-learning and Critical Consciousness

In this article, we work to illustrate, through our discussion of these courses and student reflections on their experiences, the potential of service-learning for developing students’ abilities to think critically about social problems and solutions to those problems. As instructors, our service-learning efforts sought to disrupt what King (1991) calls the “dysconscious”—engaging in “an uncritical habit of mind in which ethical judgments about the world and the way it works are made without attention to how the social order is constructed and maintained” (in Gomez, 1999, p. 84). Instead, we worked with students, and pushed ourselves, toward what Friere (1970) termed “conscientization”—meaning, to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and awaken critical consciousness (p. 36).

Students used their service experiences as a touchstone for discussion with classmates throughout the semester culminating in a final reflective/integrative paper. In-class discussion and reflective writing helped students to gain new perspectives on themselves, others, and to make sense of complex issues and experiences. The reflective component of service-learning may be what makes this approach well suited to the development of critical thinking. As Tsui (2000) writes, “the most potent way to foster students’ intellectual growth is to create conditions that require students to reflect upon their experience” (p. 431). We intentionally structured course
assignments to incorporate both written and oral reflection on course concepts and service experiences.

In addition to reflection, Rhoads (1997) identifies mutuality and personalization as essential components of structuring service-learning. Rebecca, a first-year student in LAS100, provides evidence of such personalization when describing her involvement with the planning and implementation of Culturefest!, a one-day celebration of international student culture. At the end of the semester, she reflected on personal gains: “working with Culturefest! ... allowed me to work with people from other countries...[and] become more cultured;” and linked her experience to her Political Science major: “this experience gave me a different point of view of a country other than the professor’s.” Finally, Rebecca made broader societal connections, noting that since September 11, 2001 “many Americans began to view other cultures as ‘terrorists’ without even attempting to learn more about them.” Rebecca added that participation in Culturefest! “allows the lines of diversity to be crossed and stereotypes to be erased.” Students involved in service-learning use reflective processes to “assess their learning and development, and contemplate the meaning of social responsibility” (Fisher, 1996, p. 208).

We have drawn upon student reflections like this to illuminate key themes that characterize service-learning as a potential strategy for enhancing critical thinking across a range of academic fields and levels of study. Specifically, in the following sections, we describe how service-learning played a role in helping students to: 1) challenge assumptions about the social world; 2) develop self-awareness; 3) promote understandings of sociocultural identity differences, and 4) draw upon their learning to advance social change.

Challenging Assumptions

Some students approached their service experiences with skepticism, and even resistance. “Why do we have to do this stuff? I have enough to do without volunteering,” said David, citing his demanding workload in other courses, cramming for tests, and struggling with time management. “I was still quite uncertain what service-learning was or why it was being assigned as part of a course on The Impact of College on Students” (Elle). “At first I had no idea what service-learning was, what it entailed, and how I was going to fit it into my job and the class... how much time is this going to take?” (Ruth).

Yet, by the end of the semester, students indicated surprise at their satisfaction with the experience and with shifts in their thinking. David, whose service involved assisting with a conference on masculinity, reflected on his experience at the end of the semester and indicated he had been exposed to views and perspectives he had never considered before, and that these experiences had prompted him to think differently about his interactions with women, and other men. As another student succinctly stated at the end of the semester, “I didn’t think we were going to learn as much as we did.” Others echoed this sentiment:

My assumptions were challenged throughout this project... I thought I would be working with students who did not have it together and would need a lot of help. This was ... not the case... I learned a lot about myself as a person. I had a chance to challenge [my] assumptions and realize that they are incorrect (Amanda).

As I look back, the ten hours spent seems trivial to what I received. ... Participating in [this project] if nothing else certainly has raised my consciousness of this university, its mission, the community, and the cultural values it represents (Ruth).

Service-learning has helped me understand that the social issues are not black and white, but there are many perspectives and challenges. This understanding created a desire in me to take a position on issues pertaining to precollege experience and social class perpetuation, and the reflective aspect has helped me link the classroom learning to my community and personal and professional life (Carol).

Students expressed how developing critical consciousness through the service-learning component of the course provided an educational experience that was unique to their academic journey. For example, in WST 494, Patty wrote, “Never has a single class so influenced or inspired me,” and Trish described how her choice to become involved in the course “changed the way I thought about the learning experience and how that could be incorporated in every aspect of your life, and not just the classroom.” Jason explained,

What had been missing in most classes I had ever taken was a curriculum and style of teaching that exposed me to multiple perspectives and that encouraged me to examine and interrogate what I was being taught, rather than just learn it and move on.

Service-learning appears to create “a state of readiness” (Walker, in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 177) for students’ moral development; it affords an opportunity for perspective taking: “the ability to put oneself in another person’s place and to understand what he or she is thinking” (Evans, et al, 1998, p. 177). David, a student in LAS100 who assisted with the planning and implementation of the conference on masculinity, was “shocked” and “amazed” by what he learned about gender socialization and stereotyping. He wrote of his experience, “I realized how much of a problem simply heckling a young female really is.”

“Cognitive dissonance” spurs individual movement from simplistic to more complex forms of thinking, which structure how individuals reflect on their experiences and
Studies of college courses interact with the world around them (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, pp. 130-1). Students' moral reasoning when they are engaged in work not consonant with their own existing moral structures and worldview and dissonance facilitates or precipitates movement toward more principled thinking (Gorman, Duffy & Heffernan, 1994). David, making broader connections to his political science major, reflected an issue he brought up in a [political] debate... Women voters are starting to stray from the democratic party and embracing this issue [sexual violence] would more than likely regain some of that lost electorate" (David).

Reflective writing indicated that some students had "disorienting dilemmas" (Eyler & Giles, 1999, p. 141) that challenged personal values, stereotypes, created dissonance, and presented situations that surprised them. Consider, for instance, Laura who completed a service project with Disability Services.

My service-learning project produced a map for people with disabilities on campus so that they might be able to locate where the entrance is located, find an accessible bathroom..., or attend a classroom with greater ease. Maps for able-bodied people are already available...Being privileged [able-bodied], I do not think about what map to use, where to go to the bathroom. [T]his new knowledge allows me to take risks to attack this oppression. I need to be more vocal about the societal inequity of access.

Two other students from HED562 worked with the Rape Awareness Committee to organize educational programming during Rape Awareness Month. One woman's assumptions about rape were challenged when she noted that the framing of rape as a "women's issue" may have the unintentional effect of excluding men from programming and may contribute to the invisibility of rape as a societal issue. Another woman, Natalie, who shared these views, took it upon herself to organize a panel discussion, entitled What Do Guys Really Think? The purpose of the program was to "give a voice to an underrepresented population [men] when dealing with the prevention, education, and response to sexual violence" (Natalie). She added,

As one individual I set out to make a difference and open lines of communication to promote education and through that change. While I am not naive about one individual’s ability to change the world I have not only changed my life but other’s along the way.... My service-learning project gave me the ability to experience a perspective that I never have (Natalie).

As students’ assumptions are challenged, accommodation may occur—the process of modifying assumptions or creating new ways of thinking (Evans, et al., 1998). As David noted of his LAS100 project, it "opened up a large world of views that had never been presented to me before." Reflection is critical to helping students as they struggle through dissonance to accommodate new information. Service-learning experiences challenge students to engage in a critical assessment of their assumptions and to change how they engage with others: a process that is central to perspective transformation (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Self-Awareness and Sociocultural Identity Differences

As students’ previous assumptions and ways of thinking about the world were challenged, students described how engagement in service-learning helped expand awareness of how their sense of self was shaped within a broader social context.

This project [in HED562] provided me with my first opportunity to truly look at my own path in life so far, how I came to be a college student in the first place, what my privileges were in terms of race, socioeconomic status, and more, and what similarities and differences I might have with the other students involved in this project. ...I know that it was successful in changing me as an individual (Emma).

Through my service-learning I have begun to realize I have carried a ‘helping them’ arrogance and stereotypes in my business... I am beginning to realize that I assume what students want and that they all can be molded into my work [pre-college counseling] (Carol).

Another student (Laura) worked with the Office of Disability Services to gather building accessibility information that would be used to develop an accessibility map. “I did not understand [the need for] a campus accessibility map at first. I thought the Disability Service office was too busy to help me understand what it is like for the disabled population on this campus so they gave me something to do just to keep me busy” (Laura). Upon reflection Laura noted she just didn’t get it, adding “I could have actually reinforced negative stereotypes and assumptions by focusing on the disability and not the person.”

As students reflected on their assumptions, they became increasingly aware of the complexities of identity; that individuals can be both privileged and disadvantaged simultaneously. For instance, a white woman can experience identity privilege by virtue of her race, but if she is a lesbian, she can also experience disadvantage due to her sexual identity. Students also considered the role of power in sustaining divides between those who have been historically disadvantaged and those who have been historically privileged by their membership in particular identity categories. For example, Elena, an international graduate student from Bulgaria, was interested in
supporting other students’ cultural adjustment to the university. She proposed working with the ALANA Spring Preview Weekend, a program coordinated by the Admissions Office and Multicultural Student Programs to showcase the campus for minority students admitted to the university. Elena quickly became frustrated by what she perceived as the institution’s (over)emphasis on racial diversity as the only form of diversity. Increasing “racial diversity is used as a ‘silver bullet’ ...in response to campus crises around issues of diversity...[The university] is engaging in one-time shots in the dark as part of its ‘strategic plan on diversity’ ...hoping these measures will resolve deep structural problems” (Elena).

Another student (Ruth), who was part of a committee to plan a one-day service event on campus, realized that students with disabilities were being left out, most likely unintentionally. The event was for all students, but Ruth questioned who is represented in “all?” She explained, “[A]lthough I may ‘feel’ like I do not discriminate against [students with disabilities] in an overt way, I may be doing it in subtle ways...” (Ruth). Ruth arranged for a van to be available for students with disabilities to attend the BBQ and/or participate in activities, but continued to query how individuals (truly) become members of a campus community and how higher education administrators determine if a campus is inclusive. “Because I am [able-bodied] I don’t stop to think about how [physically challenged] students negotiate this campus. For instance, if [the walkways] are level or not, the buildings accessible or not, the parking convenient or not. These are things I take for granted” (Ruth).

As a pedagogical tool, service-learning offers the potential to empower through action combined with reflection. Inherent in this process, however, is the risk of perpetuating the status quo of identity privilege, with service-providers “doing good” for the “have nots” (Jones, 2002; Rosenberger, 2000). Intentionally structured reflection may help minimize these risks (Langseth, 2000). One student in HED562 wrote that she had a theoretical understanding of privilege prior to her service project, but “without having someone of another race to compare experiences with, I remained at a superficial understanding of white privilege.” This white graduate student (Kim) served as a mentor for a Black first-year student, and was surprised to hear her mentee speak of feeling responsible for educating others about her race, and being called upon to speak on behalf of her race. Kim noted she had never had to educate anyone about her experience, adding that she has taken “comfort in knowing that my story will resonate with and be reflected back by those who surround me.”

While Kim’s engagement with her mentee illuminated, it also “confused” her understanding or assumptions about privilege. Her mentee, as stated above, is a Black female and is socioeconomically advantaged. Kim was challenged in her thinking about identity. Her service experience challenged her either-or assumptions; Kim realized that individuals could be both privileged and disadvantaged at once. “You cannot just consider the different forms of privilege and disadvantage in neat, separate boxes; they are all interconnected” (Kim). In WST 494, Patty reflected on her own identity status in light of course concepts and service experiences,

In my background I have a mixed heritage of African American and American Indian ethnicity. I was raised in an impoverished area in a mid-sized city of Ohio and in a single parent home. Arriving at college, my experience was that I felt there were few people with whom I could relate... By investigating how people were different from me, and each other, [service-learning] equipped me with pragmatic and theoretical frameworks to understand what I already observed about human social behavior.

Characterizing their intellectual development in light of service-learning, students in WST 494 described how the experience also influenced their personal growth in the context of community:

Through Peer Power! I have evolved as a student and member of this University. It has meant a great deal to me to be able to reach local high school students with an introduction to gender-related issues. The ideas that I am able to share and discuss with these young people before they enter college or the workforce have been extremely important to my life personally. Never have my eyes been so open to the community or the lives of its young people (Liz).

While students expressed the sense of accomplishment and gratification they experienced from the service of sharing their learning with others who had not been exposed to these ways of thinking about their place in reality, they were also challenged to use their newly acquired lenses to understand and appreciate the reciprocity at the heart of critical service-learning. Students were often surprised when their experience helped them uncover the assumption that service or teaching was simply about giving or helping “others” without the privilege of their level of education. For example, Liz described, ...though I envisioned going out into the schools only in terms of the good it would do for those who were touched or encouraged by the material I had come to share, I have found that I have left the schools every bit as touched and encouraged.

She elaborated,

All too often we are confined to interactions with people who are more similar to us than we realize...Peer Power! has given me the opportunity to apply and discuss what I have learned with young people who I would otherwise have never had the opportunity to meet and begin to understand (Liz).
Liz's comments illuminate how the mutuality and reciprocity of service-learning does not (and should not) result in the elimination of difference. Liz, along with most of the students in our courses, discovered she had as much to learn as she had to give. Fostering this awareness, through discussion and reflection, minimizes the risk of reinscribing patriarchal relationships between the “doer” and the “done to” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 136-7; Langseth, 2000). This sense of reciprocity also creates a feeling of responsibility for making change.

Making a Difference

I started this service-learning project with a negative viewpoint and now I actually want to make a societal change... (Laura).

Conscientization insists that we understand ourselves as agents of change, “as people who have the capacity to effect inequities and unjust practices in society” (Rosenberger, 2000, p. 36). Through their service-learning, students came to recognize and identify themselves and others as stakeholders. As such, they internalized a sense of responsibility to dismantle causes of inequality, and along the way, this would likely involve questioning values that have gone unquestioned (Rosenberger, 2000).

The challenge, noted by a number of students at the end of the semester, was what to do with this new knowledge and awareness; what steps does one take to address systems of privilege and disadvantage, and disrupt the structures that maintain them? For instance, Kim concluded in her final reflection paper,

“This knowledge, though, does not come without a price and I am newly responsible for trying to facilitate similar revelations and perspective transformations in others...I can slowly and persistently work to bring about change by pushing students to engage with and consider the topic of privilege.

Students often ended the semester by identifying their role in a larger struggle to improve social conditions. As Johnson (2001) points out, those who become critically conscious thinkers “...become part of the long tradition of people who have dared to make a difference – to look at things as they are, to imagine something better, and to plant seeds of change in themselves, in others, and in the world” (Johnson, 2001, p. 171). This theme is echoed in Natalie’s reflection at the end of the semester.

My service-learning project gave me the ability to experience a perspective that I never have: the male perspective. ...My life has been changed because of this experience. I will no longer leave men out of a discussion on sexual violence nor allow others to. I will not negatively ask why a male is crying because I have learned that for a man to cry is a true strength. ...While I am only one person, this project gave me the platform to help a number of people. I feel good about my work and plan on continuing with it in the future (Natalie).

Reflecting on the limited availability of scholarships for economically disadvantaged students, Carol wrote, “prior to this class I would have accepted that there were no scholarships [and] continued with my daily activities.” Now she plans to “take action to change the situation.” Ruth, who assisted with the planning of a one-day service event on campus, was dismayed and frustrated to learn two days before the event that the university president announced a faculty retreat and requested the presence of “those who care about UMaine to attend.” Ruth did something “I never would’ve done before;” she wrote an email to the president expressing her disappointment. She shared at the end of the semester, “I felt I had a voice...[This] speaks volumes about how much I have gained and how far I have come from this experience” (Ruth).

Students shared perspectives that reinforced the power of critical service-learning as a vehicle for working toward Friere’s concept of “conscientization.” As Rosenberger (2000) explains, this is “a twofold process of gaining increasingly critical levels of consciousness” by “...perceiving, first, one’s place in reality and, secondly, one’s capability as an agent of change” (p. 35). Students articulated how they had become inspired to share their learning with others in an effort to advance social change.

Working with students in middle and high school is extremely rewarding as I feel we are helping them think more critically about things they don’t usually stop to question...I feel like I’m accomplishing something at the same time receiving an education I can be proud of (Kathy).

Peer Power! has given many other students and me the amazing opportunity of sharing new ways of thinking...For me...empowering students to be “critical thinkers” instead of “passive learners” is the main goal I strive for when I talk to local middle and high school classes (Jason).

Elaborating his thoughts, Jason makes the connection between critical thinking and social change.

What Peer Power! can do and is doing, is to expose students to the concepts of multiple perspectives and to empower students to think critically and be active participants in their own education. Affirming to students who may feel ignored or discouraged that they do count, that they have the right to succeed and that they have the power to be active critical thinkers is an important goal of our work.

Another student echoed similar sentiments explaining that the course had helped fill a gap in her prior education that had not “challenged students to critically think for themselves or given them skills to relate to each other over the chasm of difference” (Trish).

Service-learning provides opportunities “to engage in reflection processes that facilitate [students’] learning about the larger social issues behind the individual and
community needs they address” (Fisher, 1996, p. 208). Linked with their awareness of how their sense of self had been shaped within a broader social context is a commitment to social change and living socially responsible lives (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fisher, 1996; Rhoads, 1997).

Uncertainties

Despite our overall satisfaction with service-learning as a pedagogical tool to enhance cognitive complexity and critically conscious thinking, we remain tentative about a few aspects of our experiences. The following uncertainties bear mentioning as they fuel our continued analyses of service-learning in our teaching: (a) depth of student analysis, (b) providing appropriate levels of structure and choice for students.

Written reflections on service-learning experiences reveal that students did challenge prior assumptions about social problems. However, not all students pushed their thinking further to consider and analyze underlying causes of these problems. For other students, their awareness of privilege and social problems remained theoretical; their site/project failed to illuminate social inequities and their place within these social relations. As Lou noted “my work ... is guilt free. I am not dealing with people in need.” This same student believed that time was the limitation: “There was not enough time to provide in-depth understanding of the ...social implications of the project” (Lou). Frustrated by what he viewed as volunteerism rather than service-learning, Lou suggested that students in the future should work with a community agency on “real” social issues, like homelessness, or with AIDS patients, or board work with the NAACP. While site selection is crucial, even the most careful planning does not guarantee students will identify larger social issues and be able to link them with learning objectives of the course.

Another course design variable operating in service-learning courses is determining appropriate levels of structure and choice involved with selecting the service site and choosing service activities. While students were assigned a site for service, they were expected, in concert with site supervisors, to develop their own work plan. Some site supervisors had clear plans at the outset, while others encouraged students to articulate their plan or intentions for the project. This left some struggling, yearning for clear direction, while others who desired more involvement failed to become invested in the project. As one HED562 student wrote, she remained distant from the experience, unable to make connections to course readings, and unable to get over “the feeling of not being able to contribute” (Alice). In her final reflection, Alice indicated “I didn’t allow myself to learn.”

Instructor control over the course design variables outlined here range from high to low. As with any new pedagogical tool, there is a certain degree of risk involved in its implementation—especially in those areas where instructor control is low. In our continued work with service-learning, we will focus our efforts on refining aspects of the process where we have a greater degree of instructor control (e.g., site selection, communication with site supervisors, and student assignments).

Summary and Recommendations

In this article, we have illustrated the potential of service-learning to enhance critical thinking among college students. In the three courses we have described, service-learning activities were designed to promote understandings of course content related to sociocultural identity differences, societal systems of advantage and disadvantage, and to prepare “self-reflective, culturally aware, and responsive community participants through reciprocal service and learning” (Alexander et al., 1998 in Rice & Pollack, 2000, p. 115). Our pedagogical experiences have led us to offer some recommendations for promoting critically conscious thinking through service-learning.

1. Incorporate both individual and group reflection into service-learning course design. As delineated earlier, structured reflection is essential for establishing the habit of interrogating one’s experience in courses where service-learning is employed (Eyler & Giles, 1999; O’Grady, 2000; Rhoads, 1997). In addition to large and small group discussion, instructors can design small group activities (assigning students specific roles, such as critic, interpreter, and analyst) and provide opportunities for other forms of collaborative group work. According to Bensimon and Neumann (1993), team thinking builds cognitive complexity: students can “stretch each others’ minds,” stimulating individuals to see and understand experiences (life) in different ways (pp. 76-7). For instance, in addition to an individual reflective journal, students could be assigned to maintain a collaborative journal. Students would write an individual reflection and then circulate it within their group. Each reader would be expected to further develop the ideas presented, enhance individual knowledge, and identify emerging issues. This group process can be coached by the instructor in order to stimulate divergent forms of thinking.

2. Know the students. Students bring a diversity of perspectives and academic lenses to their service-learning experiences. As described earlier, students enrolled in our courses represented a range of disciplinary areas in terms of their academic majors. The students also represented diverse identity statuses in terms of age, race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. These identity statuses are not static or discrete categories; an array of privileges and disadvantages frame and shape students’ views and
learning. One student, reflecting on assumptions early in the semester, before she met her peer advisees, wrote:

I just realized that I have pictured all of my female students as a mirror-image of me: heterosexual, white, and with strong family bonds. I have not considered the possibility, until this moment, that I may work with an African-American or Hispanic student. ...I have not considered how I would react or treat students who reveal to me that they have a different sexual orientation than mine. I will acknowledge it but would I really treat them the same way... Does that mean I am prejudiced? Or have a hard time dealing with those issues, even though I have been actively reflecting on them [as a graduate student] for the past year?

A student of color, with extensive undergraduate involvement with the ALANA Center, approached her role as a peer advisor with some angst. She wondered if she would be assigned to advise a student of her race. She wondered if she would be assigned to advise a student of her race, speculating the site supervisor would think she could “connect better.” She added:

How am I going to connect with white students who may have preconceived stereotypes? ... I’m slightly uncomfortable with the idea of being a peer mentor to a white student (Barbara).

Thus, it is important for instructors to recognize how identity statuses can play a formative role in the service-learning experience. A tree, a symbol of growth, could serve as a metaphor for this. The roots represent the histories we bring to the classroom; the trunk — the coming together of individuals and experiences with the course content; and the branches — the many and divergent ways (no one more right than the other) we make meaning of these experiences, and leave the course as changed individuals.

3. Assess readiness. Students encounter and engage with service-learning experiences in different ways. Students do not enter courses (or college) with comparable life experiences; they bring a range of learning styles and levels of cognitive complexity to every classroom. Bloom’s taxonomy (1956) can serve as a useful framework for understanding student learning and cultivating critical thinking. The cognitive domain of Bloom’s Taxonomy emphasizes intellectual outcomes and is divided into five ascending categories of thinking: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Exposure to higher-stage thinking contributes to higher levels of cognitive development (Evans, et al., 1998).

Instructors who are aware of students’ “developmental readiness” (Jones, 2002) to engage in service-learning can design their courses in ways that cultivate greater maturity in students’ critical thinking. Conversely, failure to assess students’ readiness can lead to student (and instructor) frustration. Iverson learned quickly during her first year teaching HED562 that some reading assignments, as well as writing and discussion prompts, were soliciting the use of reasoning above the thinking exhibited by the students. Consequently, more advanced reasoning was not within reach, many students struggled and were frustrated. Therefore, it is important to carefully design courses and experiences in order to provide a balance of challenge and support; particular service experiences “may be more developmentally challenging for some students, who will require additional supports” (McEwen, 1996, p. 87). An awareness of students’ readiness, as well as intentionally structuring and sequencing discussions and activities, is necessary to promote “plus-one” reasoning (Evans, et al., 1998).

4. Know yourself. Brookfield (1995) recommends using our autobiographies as one of three “lenses through which to view our teaching” (p. 29). Greater self-knowledge gives us more options for responding in thoughtful ways, especially when cognitive conflict arises (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 1957). Such self-knowledge is developed when we “look critically at [our] own assumptions and biases” (Bell et al, 1997, p. 305; Jones, 2002; Rhoads, 1997). Some of the tools we use in our classrooms could be useful for instructors to reflect on their own assumptions and to identify potential barriers that might impede their facilitation of student learning. For instance, it might be helpful to maintain a journal to reflect on one’s teaching experiences, note decisions made to shape course design, classroom structure, interaction with students, and service-learning experiences, and analyze how these decisions may reflect our own assumptions and biases. It is also helpful to organize/participate in discussions with colleagues, either in one’s discipline or across disciplines (with others instructing service-learning courses, for example). Structured opportunities for collective thinking help to facilitate opportunities to view our teaching through multiple perspectives and to engage/interrogate the assumptions that undergird how we work.

Our experiences and analysis of student reflections on their learning in these courses imply an association between service-learning and the development of critically conscious thinking. While we can not claim to know the extent to which service-learning may enhance critical thinking, the observations and analyses of classroom data presented here can serve as a platform for further thinking about the possibilities of developing critically conscious thinking through service-learning. Carefully designed studies are needed to provide a more precise depiction of the nature and extent of any relationship between service-learning and critical thinking.

Students involved with critical service-learning in our courses drew upon the integration of course concepts and service experiences to challenge assumptions about the social world, develop self-awareness, understand sociocultural identity differences, and recognize a
responsibility for participating in social change. As such, we believe service-learning can serve as a pedagogical strategy for enhancing student understanding of course content while also promoting critically conscious thinking. In turn, we are hopeful that such an approach contributes to building cognitive complexity while also promoting community engagement and civic responsibility among both faculty and students.

References


Notes
1. Authors’ note of disclosure: The quotes and stories we share from students were given to us with permission from each individual. When names are provided, they are pseudonyms.

2. Rhoads (1997) uses the term community rather than service to emphasize not only the relationship between the servers and those served but also to focus on larger social issues and social responsibility (see also Kendall, 1990).

3. Formerly LAS100 was a required course for new students with sections for academic majors taught by department faculty, and separate sections for students who haven’t declared their major (about 40% of entering students) instructed by adjuncts.

4. Jacoby (1996) describes a Service Learning Model, which delineates five phases of student development in relation to service-learning, and cites numerous examples of approaches that provide the appropriate challenge and support for students in all phases.

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