



Epilogue: The Two Futures of Service Learning

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One of the definitions of an epilogue is a speech at the end of a literary work that deals with the future of its characters. Such a definition is fitting for this concluding chapter. Our cast of major characters—students, faculty, service learning administrators and staff, and particularly community organization staff—is actually part of a story whose next chapter could follow two very different timelines. One timeline engages our cast in service learning as it is currently practiced, with not enough attention to community outcomes or the institutional changes needed to make those outcomes useful. The alternate timeline engages our cast in a very different form of service learning where community outcomes are the first priority, not the last, and service learning is structured to maximize community impact.

Which timeline will win out? We don't know. As we have presented this research at conferences and campuses, and sent papers to journals, we have received three reactions. The first reaction has come from nonprofit staff, whose animated nods are followed by hallway conversations that relay yet another story of service learning-as-usual making their lives difficult. In one of these cases, the story actually came from a faculty member at one of the local higher education institutions who was also a board member of a nonprofit organization that works with handicapped individuals. She related her disappointment and resentment

that the service learning project she was involved in had fallen flat. Her nonprofit was looking for someone to design a Web portal for potential clients, and was assured by an eager faculty member that a computer skills class could do something simple in one semester. Trusting in the process, she placed the responsibility in the hands of the class. Not only was the project never delivered, but after numerous phone calls to the professor, who promised to finish the Web site himself but then didn't, the nonprofit had to hire a professional at a considerable cost to do a rush job and get the site online in time for their spring registration deadline. She evinced the opinion that she will never again rely on students to produce anything of such importance to the organization. Instead, she will just give them "busy work" if they are sent to her in the future, no matter how tempting it might be to save the cash resources needed to have the work done professionally.

The second reaction has come from those academic-based service learning proponents who are so unable to accept the possibility that their form of service learning may be doing harm that they walk out on presentations, or express their denial from the shadows through anonymous reviews of journal articles. We have been surprised at the intensity of some of these reactions, which refer to our community organization staff as "a disgruntled minority," express offense at a critique of John Dewey, or respond that community organizations are simply going to need to adapt to the realities of higher education. These are the critics who will point to the superficial satisfaction surveys that show how grateful community organization hosts are for their service learners. It is exactly those satisfaction surveys, however, that illustrate just how much at arm's length so many academics hold their community organization hosts. The question is not whether community organization staff are superficially satisfied, but what they would change if given the opportunity to speak up and be heard. We didn't invite our agency partners to tell us how great we were, but how we could be better. It is in asking how we can do better that we begin the process of developing the strong relationships necessary for the best service learning.

The third reaction, thankfully more common than the second, has come from those academic-based service learning proponents who engage the issues this research raises, and are already searching for alternatives. Randy Stoecker recently organized a day-long workshop devoted exclusively to the question of how to maximize the community

impact of service learning, attended by forty people—three-quarters of them academics. The academics, nearly all from Wisconsin with a small contingent from Iowa, worked tirelessly all day, and practiced their listening skills with the community organization staff in attendance. The group's recommendations appear on the project Web site (Stoecker and Schmidt, 2008b).

We can consequently see the dialectic starting to emerge as outright conflict. More and more community organization staff are becoming increasingly vocal about the shortcomings of service learning. Native communities in particular are refusing to be exploited by academics, by establishing their own institutional review processes and agreements that prevent the unwilling extraction of knowledge from their communities (Government of Canada, 2005). More academics are documenting those shortcomings. And the reactions of those who resist the reality that service learning is imperfect are becoming more intense. So we sense a storm brewing, and we are glad for it. The storm will not only bring with it the winds of change, but the rains to wash away the residue that has built up on the old service learning status quo and nourish the seedlings of new forms of higher education and community partnership to grow stronger communities.

We already have a sense of some of these new seedlings, in the form of project-based service learning and community-based research (CBR), both of which we have explored briefly in this work. Clearly, the CBR project that led to this book is also propelling the critique of service learning, in an infinite-mirror type of reflection. But can CBR by itself pave the way to the alternative? The strength of CBR is that it focuses everyone's efforts on completing an actual project. Three elements are needed in order for the project to be effective, even at a baseline level. Community organization staff need to know what they want the research to do. Faculty need to assure that the research will do what community organization staff want. Students need to effectively carry out the research. But if the CBR project is driven and steered from the academic side of the relationship, as is so often the case, it will be no better than service learning.

The challenge, we believe, is for CBR to make every effort to distinguish itself from service learning. And, at this point, we go further than even the recommendations of the community voices contained in this volume. In our view, too much CBR is biased toward academic

rather than community interests. Instead, we need to develop service learning and CBR from a community development model (Stoecker, 2005). Such a model engages a process of organizing a community—not just its service providers but also its people—to define an issue. The issue can be the lack of places for kids to play, an absence of decent jobs, an excess of crime, or any other issue that the people of the community want to tackle. To address the issue effectively, it must be deeply understood—or diagnosed—by everyone involved. Doing that requires gathering information and engaging students, faculty, service providers, and residents in codesigning and carrying out the process. And then, of course, there must be a strategy—or prescription—for dealing with that issue. Developing a truly effective strategy also requires thoughtful consideration of the community context and the array of options, and carefully comparing each option to the context. Here again, an alliance of faculty, students, service providers, and residents can be a powerful change agent indeed.

This, of course, will help put the project into motion—the implementation. At this stage, we can practice something that looks more like typical service learning. The difference is that, rather than superficial make-work, now the service is part of a larger project, well-informed by thorough diagnostic and prescription processes and designed to tackle a community-defined issue. There are even more roles for everyone in evaluating whether the project is having the desired impacts, ending the historical neglect of the question of community impact.

Such a model, however, does not mesh with higher education as we know it. A community development process cannot operate on a semester or quarter system; it requires an ongoing long-term commitment and it necessitates the intimate engagement of higher education faculty and staff. That is a tall order, given what our research has shown about the current state of service learning. The ideal will not be achieved through a tweak here and an adjustment there. But the payoff can be rich indeed, if we do the advance preparation to ensure that engagement involves community input from the get-go. Learning will be more authentic because it will reflect what's really going on in the community in real time. The student objectives will be met at a deeper level and students will be better prepared to go out into the world with real-world problem-solving skills.

As the housing bubble bursts, the economy declines, energy prices see-saw, the climate changes, and global conflict seems as intractable as ever, perhaps we can begin to feel a bit more urgency than in days past, perhaps to the point where people in both the community and the academy will work more diligently to negotiate differences in language and culture and implement such a community development approach. If institutions of higher education do their best to work together with the communities that support them with students and other assets, they will be setting the example that society needs. It will take legions of ethical thinkers and actors to help human society step away from the brink of irreversible damage to the earth's environment, stop waging war and other injustices on each other, and get to the business of regeneration and social justice with our eye toward those who will come seven generations after us—the time-honored standard of future thinking promoted by Native American leaders such as Oren Lyons (1991). Even if service learning is regarded at its highest level as only a piece of that puzzle, it deserves to be done in good faith and as intelligently as possible to help create, first and foremost, powerful communities and college graduates that are thoughtful and informed world citizens who already have had some experience with community work. This may seem like a lofty goal, but there's no harm in striving for it and its myriad benefits, even if we only attain it in part.

So, which future are we capable of creating—service learning that is still driven mainly by the academy's wishes, or service learning that transforms all of which it is a part? The worst possible outcome would be for faculty, students, and service learning administrators to read these findings and decide to stop partnering with the smallest and most grassroots organizations, worried that they can't meet the standards described in these chapters. But that is a real risk. Higher education institutions, even though they try to operate as sites of knowledge innovation, are still beset by amazingly intense inertia. And their members—students, faculty, and administration—seem at times to be resist to change; sometimes for good reason, given the distrust that often exists between these groups. It would be a lot easier for those who control access to service learning to only serve the safe sites that don't ask for changes in the university calendar, for better preparation of students, or for increased commitment of faculty.

But now that community organizations are raising their voices through works such as ours, it may be too difficult to pull back. Already we are hearing from activist groups who believe they have long been unfairly denied access to higher education resources and services. And it is important to remember that, even though service learning may result in a net loss of productivity for many small- and medium-size nonprofits, and the current practice is far from the ideal that organization staff can imagine, they all are ready to keep trying to improve it.

We don't see any magic bullets that will bring about instantaneous reform, but hope that our project, along with other new research emerging, will be a small part of motivating the hard work to shift the balance of power to a more community-involved practice of community engagement by colleges and universities.