

## From Critical Community Service to Critical Service Learning and the Futures We Must (Still) Imagine

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### ABSTRACT

This reflection offers an introduction of a survey of the theories, practices, and critiques of critical service learning. In doing so, the authors connect the historical lineage of community engagement to current and future practices of critical service learning as well as the need to continually imagine new and as yet unthought possibilities.

*Keywords:* critical community engagement, critical service learning, futurity

Critical service learning as a philosophy, pedagogy, and practice owes a debt of gratitude to Robert Rhoads<sup>1</sup> who introduced the field to critical community service in his book *Community Service and Higher Learning: Explorations of the Caring Self*. His eight principles for moving community service to critical community service where “we can come together in solidarity as part of the struggle for social change and justice” (Rhoads, 1997, p. 220) was an early challenge to the field to work towards a community engagement strategy that advocated for more just and equitable communities. Troubled by her own practice and encouraged by Rhoads’s challenge, Cynthia Rosenberger (2000) conceptualized a critical service learning pedagogy through a Freirian approach “to generate a practice that seeks to transcend the status quo and promote justice and equality” (Rosenberger, 2000, p. 24).

Service learning and community engagement strategies in higher education have weathered criticism while simultaneously gaining praise. Chastising it as “forced volunteerism” and a “punishing pedagogy,” Forbes, Garber, Kensinger, and Trapp Slagter (1999, p. 158) questioned the practice, Eby (1998) claimed it was “bad,” while Butin (2006) warned “service-learning may ultimately come to be viewed as the ‘Whitest of the White’ enclave of postsecondary education” (p. 482). More recently, Darder (2018) has criticized higher education for its complicity in “culturally invasive programming” (p. xiii) and Stoecker (2016) suggested that service learning “helps people conform to, and fit into, the existing social system that does not allow them to do more than eke out an unrewarding and unfulfilling survival” (pp. 6-7). Kortney Hernandez (2018) argued that ignoring the “historical legacy” of the communities oft

<sup>1</sup>Professor Robert Rhoads passed away in October of 2018. We extend our gratitude to him for his pioneering work and dedicate this special issue to his memory.

targeted for service learning, as well as the “history of privilege of those who establish, direct, and control the movement” results “in the continuing colonization of the mind and body” (Hernandez, 2018, p. 17).

As community engagement enters a new decade of practice, the field is still being asked to employ the action reflection dynamic central to its pedagogy in ways that prioritize equity and justice, that acknowledges and reconfigures imbalances of power, and that “moves beyond the work of taking care of immediate needs to community action that frees people from those needs” (Rosenberger, 2000, p. 31). While critical service learning, as operationalized by Mitchell (2008), gave name to a community engagement practice committed to and acting for a more just world, the community engagement field continues to grapple with how the practice must change to advance the goals of social justice.

The works presented within this special issue capture a shift currently taking place within critical service learning. As more scholars situate their work within a critical framework, focus is moving away from defining critical service learning and toward the exploration of a more evolved understanding of its enactment. The authors represented in this issue showcase a field that is engaged in critiquing the critical; developing nuanced understandings of terms, concepts, and assumptions; and seeking new and interdisciplinary traditions to better orient our work.

The selections in this special issue reflect an increasingly sophisticated understanding of critical service learning and offer perspectives developed through the challenging array of questions and concerns that emerge through attentive practice. In this sense, the work contained here succeeds in doing what we hoped it would do: convey a status report of the ways in which critical service learning has evolved; provide a survey of the ways in which critical service learning has been informed through theory and practice; and generate a mosaic of sorts of the

ways in which critical service learning has or has not attended to social change, encouraged the development of authentic relationships, or worked toward the redistribution of power (Mitchell, 2008).

As we take stock in this survey, we feel it necessary to orient ourselves toward the periphery of what remains just beyond our grasp of understanding—not to remain satisfied with what we have come to understand but to attempt to imagine what we have yet to imagine. After all, pedagogy and curriculum are the spaces in which we tinker to build the world we hope to see, the means through which we labor to “inspire and to foster a collective imagination about how to make the world a more human dwelling place” (Ginwright, 2008, p. 14). It seems fair to ask how the practices of critical service learning and critical community engagement fuel this imagination. To that end, the works within this special issue chart a path toward nuanced and more complicated, perhaps even non-teleological (Tuck & Yang, 2011), ways of understanding and imagining critical service learning.

This special issue includes insights, case studies, and empirical research in an attempt to complicate and question understandings related to critical service learning as part of a desire to make good on its aspiration to produce social change, to develop authentic relationships, and to continue the long struggle of the redistribution of power. In this sense, these works look toward the horizon of what might be possible while also attending to the ways that critical service learning is called upon as a pedagogical response to historical and current injustices. This tension between the demands and urgency of the present moment and the hopes and desires of future possibilities forms a significant center of gravity within this special issue. The authors tease out the complexities related to critical service learning as a way to begin to consider what it might mean if we move closer to accomplishing its goals.

While several underlying themes run throughout this issue, one that seems especially crucial for us to begin to consider is how (or if) critical service learning should be concerned with *futurity*, the “ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures” (Goodyear-Ka’opua, 2012, p. 86). If there is to be a social change, a more “human dwelling place,” as the desired outcome of critical service learning, what might this change look like? Which changes will be produced and which futures might these changes produce? What might the outcomes of authentic relationships be? When power is redistributed, what new terrains and features will this redistribution produce? Our continued refinement of understandings and questions related to critical service learning—brought about through decades of work, conversation, and partnership—have brought us to the edge of just beginning to ask these questions.

It often seems as if critical service learning is a response to or in reaction to something, that its use is primarily an intervention within the present-day conditions that necessitate and warrant attempts to disrupt them. While we may feel compelled to use critical service learning as a response to the here and now, we should not lose sight of the future we hope to build. There are many good reasons to use pedagogy as a way to address social issues (as many of the works within this issue document), but we believe the field of critical service learning must also someday begin to approach this work through a lens of futurity. For that to happen, the field must continue to critique and examine its assumptions and understandings with the same critical perspectives that are applied within this collection. The works here respond to Rhoads’s (1997) challenge, contributing to “the larger struggle to create a more liberatory form of education” (p. 228).

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