
Service-Learning as a Vehicle for Examining Assumptions about Culture and Education

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SERVICE LEARNING IN ENGLISH EDUCATION

Christopher's parents force him to go to school because it is the law but they pay no attention to his success or failure once he is outside their house, outside their sphere of control. In a way, Christopher Taylor [a pseudonym] is a product of his surroundings. His parents do not care whether or not he succeeds, so neither does he. People look at him and all they see is a black nineteen-year-old male with dreadlocks and a big nose heading nowhere fast, so he too sees himself in that light.

Tatum (2003) writes in her book, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations about Race: A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity*, that "our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us" (p. 53). For example, if a ten-year-old girl is constantly told that she is tall for her age then she will eventually see her above-average height as a part of her identity. Similarly if Chris is continually told, verbally or otherwise, that he will only ever be a nobody in life, then he has no incentive to better himself through education. If he is ceaselessly bombarded with the prototypical image of the young black man as a criminal with no education, then eventually he will see himself as such.

So often one forms one's identity based on a compilation of ideas and images of oneself as seen by other people. Unfortunately these images frequently originate from stereotypes and prejudices. Therefore, Christopher's

lack of motivation might have developed as a result of his self image of worthlessness and a man with an unpromising future as planted in his mind by a prejudiced society.

This observation and insight has come from a teacher candidate enrolled in a service-learning course at the University of Georgia (UGA). The teacher candidate, like most students at her state's namesake institution, has been a highly successful student throughout her education. The state's lottery proceeds provide free college education to students who maintain a B average or better, a move that has helped keep the top students in state universities. As a result, the typical student admitted tends to come from a relatively privileged background and has moved through school in an elite curriculum: honors and Advanced Placement courses, gifted and talented programs, International Baccalaureate curriculum, and other enriched programs. Once on campus, they are again subjected to an admission process in order to enter the teacher education program, which in a typical year can only accept 60–65 percent of its applicants.

UGA thus draws a student population from a fairly exclusive group; the teacher candidates tend to be white, relatively affluent, suburban, female, high achieving, and with an academic bent given their aspiration to teach. Throughout their education, and no doubt throughout their lives, they have had little contact with poor, minority, immigrant, disaffected, or otherwise marginalized students. When they initially consider the prospect of teaching, they tend to envision themselves in a professorial role, discussing the fine points of Shakespeare and Milton with the sorts of students with whom they have shared classrooms over the years.

Yet when UGA graduates begin their teaching careers, they are often assigned classrooms filled with students who are decidedly different from themselves in terms of their orientation to school, given that early career teachers are often assigned to lower-track classes (Kelly, 2009). The course described here was designed to disrupt their exclusive experiences through their work in an alternative school, their reading of books that attend to cultural differences, and their discussion of those books in book club settings. The excerpt from a course final paper that opens this chapter reveals the sorts of new understandings that become available through this cultural exchange.

MUTUAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

The syllabus for the course is available at <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLSyllabus.htm>. The course meets on campus each week for up to three hours and requires an additional hour each week of tutoring and mentoring a student in one of Athens's two alternative schools. The students in this alternative school typically come from a radically different cultural environment from that experienced by our teacher candidates in terms of race, ethnicity, social class, educational aspiration, family situation, and other factors.

The course is designed to develop mutually educational experiences for the teacher candidates and the young people they tutor. The teacher candidates provide service to the community by helping struggling students with their schoolwork as they progress toward graduation and to enter a mentoring relationship that goes beyond academics and into other life issues; and the students being tutored educate the teacher candidates about their perspective on school, the subject of English (the discipline in which the service-learning course is grounded), the value of an education, their short- and long-term goals with their lives, and whatever else emerges from their extended conversations.

The students in the alternative schools meet the profile of the students envisioned in the course design. The alternative school is designated a Performance Learning Center (PLC) and serves students who have had difficulty fitting in with conventional schooling. They represent a range of races but tend to come from lower socioeconomic classes; a number bring their own young children to school with them to take advantage of the school's nursery; some hold hands with same-sex partners, a behavior unlikely in the mainstream schools; and for the most part, they hate school and are forthcoming in their reasons for their antipathy. Thus, they provide the sort of interaction that helps the university students learn about how school may be viewed by students whose life experiences and perspective on education are considerably different from their own.

SUSTAINED MENTORING: WHAT REALLY WORKS

For their course project, each teacher candidate may choose from among three topics (see <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLCourseProjects>

.htm). If it is possible to develop a stable and sustained tutoring and mentoring relationship with a single student at the alternative school, the course paper could be a case study of the student. Many teacher candidates, however, have difficulty establishing such continuity with an alternative school student. The environment is, to say the least, often in flux. Some teacher candidates tutor students who drop out or are dismissed from the school because of excessive absences or violations of rules.

Some of the students from the Performance Learning Center are undependable so that when the teacher candidates make the trip to the campus—something around which they plan their day—their mentee never shows up. On such occasions, they meet with another available student or otherwise try to help with what needs to be done at the school. Because several teacher candidates have such capricious experiences, alternative assignments have been developed so that those who make good-faith efforts to meet the course requirements can also write a course paper outlining what they have learned, even if they need to weave together their experiences with a variety of students with whom they do not have the opportunity to develop a sustained relationship.

An online library of course projects written by university students who provide permission to have their work posted has been assembled at the syllabus website so that future teacher candidates may get some sense of how others have undertaken this task (see <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLCourseProjects.htm>). It also allows anyone interested in the reflections of the teacher candidates to consult this library to see what they have produced, and to see what they have learned through their service to the community.

BOOK CLUBS

Class sessions on campus focus on three areas. Early on, teacher candidates learn how to conduct a tutoring session and are given class time to ask questions about how to develop their course projects. The majority of the class sessions, however, are devoted to book club meetings. Book clubs have become established as a legitimate pedagogy in English education (Daniels, 1994; Faust, Cockrill, Hancock, & Isserstadt, 2005; McMahon, Raphael, Goatley, & Pardo, 1997; O'Donnell-Allen, 2006; Ra-

phael, Pardo, Highfield, & McMahon, 1997). The menu of readings represents a range of issues that might arise in teacher candidates' engagement with high school students of various cultural backgrounds and include attention to socioeconomic class, race, culture, youth culture, urban education, immigration, bilingualism, gender, and related issues (see <http://www.coe.uga.edu/~smago/SL/SLBookClubs.htm>).

The class is structured so that each book club group of three to five teacher candidates discusses three books during the course of the semester. During the first session, they discuss the book however they wish; during the second session, they continue this discussion while also planning for what they will do during the third session. During the third session, they present their book to the class through whatever means they think will be most interesting, informative, and compelling for their classmates. The idea behind this approach is to put both the selection of topics (within the boundaries of the course's goals) and the means of discussion in the hands of the participants. The pedagogy is thus designed to help them see that there are alternatives to the lecture-and-discussion approach to teaching that they have experienced throughout much of their school lives.

This approach also allows the teacher candidates to discuss issues that they might resist exploring without the faculty member's initiating and directing their inquiries. In the Deep South, most students come with conservative political values and often reject professorial attempts to reroute their values to more progressive beliefs. The course is not designed to reeducate them so that they adopt progressive views wholesale, something that research on teacher development suggests will not happen regardless of what professors hope (Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003). Rather, given the value systems and experiences with which they enter the course, they choose books and undertake discussions during which they raise the questions most relevant to their growth as educators.

HOW BOOK CLUBS FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING

The problem is a delicate one for any progressive educator working with students from conservative political backgrounds: how to invite a consideration of issues without trampling on students' prior beliefs. The book club format enables the candidates to express their beliefs honestly and

forthrightly in the company of their classmates without concern for how their professor might interpret them as people in light of what they say.

The intersection of teacher candidates' prior beliefs, their tutoring and mentoring experiences at the alternative school, their engagement with books from the book club menu, and their discussions and class presentations often produce a perplexing dissonance. One group, for instance, selected Kozol's (1992) *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, which contrasts the resources available in one wealthy suburban high school outside Chicago and one deeply impoverished urban school in East St. Louis.

The teacher candidates became deeply vexed over how to resolve their prior beliefs about social problems with the portraits presented by Kozol (1992) of the dramatic differences between the conditions of schooling in the two districts and the potentials afforded students through the resource differential of the two communities. This is the type of comment students frequently made:

Now, I don't buy Obama's socialism, but this situation is unfair. One school has computers in every classroom and in the other, ceiling tiles are falling on kids while they're trying to learn. I don't think we should raise taxes or redistribute wealth, but the kids in the poor school need a better learning environment.

The candidates' raised awareness of this dilemma was the sort of jarring recognition that the course professor hoped to achieve in designing the course. Had he stood before them as a (perceived) Northern liberal (even though having lived most of his life in the South) and explained to them these inequalities and the solution of redistributing wealth to promote equal learning opportunities, they could have more easily rejected his position as an outsider, a liberal, a university pinhead, and other means of dismissal.

Because the book club format required that candidates wrestle with such issues on their own terms, they had greater ownership over their conclusions and thus a greater stake in considering the problem and how to resolve it. Indeed, the student who most frequently invoked "Obama's socialism" as an unacceptable solution was easily the most passionate proselytizer of Kozol's (1992) book, saying that she was making everyone

in her family and wider friendship circles read it to raise their awareness of educational inequities.

WHY SERVICE LEARNING CAN BE INNOVATIVE AND A VEHICLE FOR EXAMINING ASSUMPTIONS

This course is heading toward institutionalization in candidates' preservice teaching experiences. The critical reflection available through the book club discussion is a key component of the teacher candidates' engagement with students in the alternative schools. Students' educational experiences, including teacher education, serve largely to perpetuate schooling as historically conducted: Students spend twelve or more years in apprenticeships of observation in authoritarian school systems, take general education courses in large lecture halls, engage with their content area in courses typically dominated by professors' soliloquies, and are steeped in school-based field experiences that replicate top-down educational processes. In addition, teacher candidates often take one semester of courses in education that might critique these practices but that the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is attempting to eliminate in place of yet more field experiences in authoritarian school settings, and then take jobs in which their teaching is evaluated according to its proximity to the status quo (Smagorinsky, 2010).

This service-learning course provides one means of interrupting this extensive socialization to traditional school norms. The teacher candidates engage with high school students who hate school and refuse to play by its authoritarian rules; the book club setting and accompanying readings provide both an alternative pedagogy in which the university students control the content and process of their discussions, and a set of challenges to their assumptions about culture and education. Because a multicultural perspective is engaged with on their own terms, whatever concept change they experience (see Smagorinsky et al., 2003) is one over which they have complete ownership, and thus presumably is one that will be more durable than any changes in perspective that would follow from hortatory efforts for them to teach more inclusively.

CONCLUSION

The course thus helps to challenge norms of schooling and white-collar assumptions about families from outside the circles of privilege in which most of students at this university have lived their lives. The following conclusion to one teacher candidate's course paper perhaps captures the sorts of insights produced through the interrelated experiences provided through the class:

Throughout the Book Club readings this semester, every group has recognized the multitude of issues among conventional schools as well as those that resemble the PLC, but the books have left the solutions open-ended. In *Jocks and Burnouts*, Eckert [1989] primarily focuses on the differences that exist among students and how they view high school through different lenses. For the jocks, or students who value education, a desire to contribute to the school resonates, and so they actively participate in academics and extracurricular activities. The burnouts, on the other hand, tend to slack off, frequently miss school, as well as carry themselves with a defiant attitude. Students are very easily categorized as a burnout, because so few students correlate perfectly with the ideal student model that is set by schools. In reality, high school solely opens up opportunities for college bound students. But most burnouts do not see themselves as college material, and they will more than likely partake in a blue collar vocational job—so high school loses practicality for many students. It is very unlikely for burnouts and students like John to better fit the conventional model of school, so schools should consider better adapting to these students who need a push.

All of our book clubs and class discussions have raised compelling arguments and problems with conventional schools. Some students believe that schools like the Performance Learning Center is a successful answer to our problems, and others see it as a way out for kids who refuse to cooperate with conventional schools. I believe the PLC is a magnificent thing and I am absolutely blown away by this transformation. Students are given a chance to prove themselves and are treated with respect, as their slates are wiped clean when they enroll at the school. John is a PLC success story and with his pending high school diploma, he is ready to continue his success in college. I believe the one key to inspiring the unmotivated student lies in respect. If a teacher is flexible, encouraging, and respectful—he or she is bound for success in the classroom. I hate that the burnout students have

such a stigma placed with them and that the bad reputation follows them throughout high school. With each passing year, semester, or even within the separate classes—each child should be given the opportunity to succeed, a fair chance for a clean slate. I could almost guarantee a student is more likely to fulfill a teacher's expectations if they are given the chance. I am positive that there are more students like John than there are like me in public schools, and sometimes a second, third, or even a fourth chance is all that those kids need to regain the self-confidence that is required to succeed.

As this candidate's reflection shows, the course allowed the participating preservice teachers considerable latitude in how they made sense of their school experiences, their readings, and their book club discussions. By selecting books that were relevant to the sorts of students they were meeting, they were able to customize their reading to their teaching and mentoring. Their leading of a class discussion then enabled each group to share insights with their classmates, expanding the range of issues explored through the course to the experiences of each class member at the PLC in conjunction with the different texts discussed by each book group. The following remarks on an end-of-course evaluation are representative of how many students responded to the class:

I believe this class has helped me more for my career as an educator than any other education class I've taken at the University. Most of the classes have a service component, but it's not very long nor gets much attention in the classroom. Since the service portion is the largest part of the class and dominates the classroom discussion of how to operate a classroom, what to expect from students, as well as how to motivate a student—I was encouraged and learned more about my future classroom than any other class.

Candidate satisfaction tended to follow from the control that they were given over the success of the class. The innovative component of this project was a direct result of the cultural exchange and the opportunities for the teacher candidates to take control over their own learning. The course gave future teachers opportunities to take charge of their own learning by providing services to students who greatly appreciated them, as well as through reading and discussing books that raised issues that provoked them to new levels of understanding.

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