Three Parables
Most people know the parable of the child and the starfish. As it is told, a storm washes up thousands of starfish on the beach. A child, usually gendered as a girl but sometimes as a boy, walks along the beach tossing starfish back into the ocean, eliciting a cynical reaction from some adult proclaiming that the child’s actions can’t possibly make a difference. The child tosses the next starfish back in the water and retorts with some version of, “it made a difference to that one.”

The further our society moves away from the ideals of democracy and justice, the more that story troubles me, especially as a motivation for higher education civic engagement. More and more, I see the story as part of the neoliberal hegemony that we are suffering through. It is the quintessential neoliberal story of the individual giving charity to the individual—as if we are all only isolated individuals and somehow 20 fleeting hours of charity will connect us. This parable also makes sure to simultaneously point out and obscure that we are helping the “deserving victim.” It is, after all, a darling, harmless, and clearly helpless starfish. What if it were a stinging jellyfish? Would that child be so willing to suffer the bodily harm necessary to save it? And would the adults instead rejoice that the “undeserving victims” were actually getting their due? And what if the water is eutrophic—throwing starfish back into such water could kill them. Finally, as the starfish story is told, no one ever asks why so many starfish was hed up on the shore and what might be done to prevent a similar occurrence in the future. No one thinks to ask whether the reefs have been destroyed or the mangroves poisoned. So the real moral of the starfish story is that neoliberalism reigns: we should limit our civic engagement to charity to individuals, and even then, only to those we consider deserving based on collectively maintained, ignorant interpretations of the circumstances separating them from us and the true causes of their distress.

But why blame neoliberalism? Fundamentally, neoliberalism is about creating a political economy that channels wealth and power upward by dismantling all the barriers preventing such an outcome. That means, to start, eliminating the welfare state, and then dismantling forms of collective worker organization such as unions. But when one looks under the hood of those goals, one finds a more heinous philosophical and theoretical foundation. In speaking about Thatcherism in England, one of the earliest and perhaps most powerful expressions of neoliberalism, Hillier (2013) argues that the underlying project was “to break the bonds of social solidarity and create a culture and economy in which every human is an entrepreneur-manager of their own lives. The neoliberal ideal is a transactional world in which human relationships take on the form of buyer-seller exchanges and in which everything and everyone is debased, reduced to a market valuation” (p. 3). Think about our charity approach to higher education service learning. We trade student learning for service hours—it is a transactional relationship. Under neoliberalism, “Ruthless competitive individualism” and “personal responsibility” (Giroux, 2005, p. 9) go hand-in-hand with inequality as desirable social conditions (Davies, 2014). As a result, our service learning charity involves things like tutoring children to achieve in an unjust educational system, rather than organizing them to change it. Also systematic to neoliberalism are manufactured crises, such as the most recent economic collapse (Harvey, 2007; Klein, 2007). So we create concepts like “resilience” to blame the victims if they don’t succeed in a context of crisis.

The practices of fully-engaged democracy, collective action, and deep social critique are the mortal enemy of neoliberalism (Giroux, 2005). Under these conditions, where confrontational collective acts of resistance are hegemonically defined as illegitimate and even illegal, our imaginations become reduced to seeing an individual tossing individual starfish back into the sea as an act of resistance. And this sanitized individual-to-individual charity is the most acceptable and supported form of service learning by students and institutions alike (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Bringle, Hatcher, & MacIntosh, 2006; Kajner, Chovanec, Underwood, & Mian, 2013; Liu &
Consequently, this model embodies the reflection on the services more intellectual. It only makes the academic service learning does not make the service learning is anti-intellectual. It emphasizes individuals serving individuals. Institutionalized service learning is not critical, not engaged with the bigger issues, and lacking any outcomes emphasis other than the performance of brief acts of unformed and unreflective charity.

There is another parable that begins similarly—this time with abandoned babies showing up drifting down the river. The villagers, adopting the classic charity model, organize themselves to save as many of the babies as they can, though they are hopelessly overwhelmed. Eventually some wise villager suggests that maybe they should investigate how all these babies are ending up in the river to begin with. This provides a brief glimpse of hope that someone is moving beyond neoliberal hegemony. In most tellings of this parable, however, the suggestion of finding the cause is met with resistance among the villagers steadfastly rooted to a charity approach. The parable does not end with the villagers marching upstream, finding the cause, fixing it, and everyone consequently living happily ever after. The parable is even used to facilitate debate, as if the anti-knowledge position of not doing anything to find the cause is a legitimate choice. And we still must be careful to note that we are talking about innocent babies and not dark-skinned former prisoners who are much more likely to be defined as guilty rather than innocent.

Like the starfish parable, neoliberalism’s imagination-constraining culture that emphasizes individuals serving individuals limits our interpretation of the babies in the river parable, in this case organizing the helpers similar to how the “collective impact” model organizes the providers rather than the recipients (Kania & Kramer, 2011). It almost confronts the underlying cause, but at the last minute, veers away. But because it at least opens the question, it gives rise to the possibility of reflection on the cause of the problem. And this can lead to what some people call “academic service learning” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Howard, 1998) to combat the claims that typical service learning is anti-intellectual. And, indeed, service learning has been heavily critiqued for the lack of “learning” it supports (Eyler & Giles, 1999). But, and this is a crucial point, academic service learning does not make the service more intellectual. It only makes the reflection on the service more intellectual. Consequently, this model embodies the abstract version of the detour from knowledge in the second parable. The service is connected to knowledge questions but only after the fact and removed from the problem. In other words, students still engage in charity work—still just saving the babies—but now they go back to the classroom and ask why. The problem, and it is a fundamental problem, is that the “why” rarely gets connected back to influence the form of the service.

As the rhetoric around “community outcomes” in higher education civic engagement grows, we need to note that the first two parables are compatible with that rhetoric as it is distorted within the constraints of neoliberalism. Saying that you threw 50 starfish back into the sea, or plucked 50 babies out of the river, is the same as saying you tutored 50 children in math, or doled out 50 meals. So all we have to do to stop feeling guilty about the charge that we are using people who are oppressed, exploited, and excluded for student education is to make sure we provide some countable charity services for a few individuals. But, in this neoliberal form of institutionalized service learning, “community outcomes” are more likely to be what evaluation scholars call “outputs”—the things you do rather than the changes you help cause (Stoecker, Beckman, & Min, 2010).

We academics now work in higher education institutions that have been almost completely transformed by neoliberalism into places where student and corporate customers matter more than knowledge (Canaan & Shumar, 2008; Giroux, 2013; Greenwood, 2012), and thus where professors can lose their jobs for any casual objectionable political statement (Cohen, 2014; Goldberg, 2015; Rossman, 2017; Svrluga, 2016) and even scholarly research that threatens corporate power (Washburn, 2005). In the context of the neoliberal stranglehold that has eliminated academic freedom either by policy, as they have in Wisconsin, or by practice as they pick off individual academics in untenured positions across the country, the only form of service learning that will feel safe enough to practice will be institutionalized service learning that integrates individuals into neoliberalism, and avoids confronting it (Keith, 2005). And it’s not only the oppressed, exploited, and excluded who are integrated into neoliberalism via institutionalized service learning. Institutionalized service learning also integrates the students doing the
service into neoliberalism. We tell students it’s good for their resume, and we even treat service placements as commodities that students can pick and choose according to their individualized desires rather than based on any thoughtful knowledge-based analysis of the greater good (Chovanec et al., 2011).

And, as a consequence, we risk doing more harm than good. Institutionalized service learning, in its integrative function, supports assimilation rather than diversity, and provides safety-valve regulation of the tensions created by oppression, exploitation, and exclusion (Piven & Cloward, 1993). In addition, institutionalized service learning in the form of the first and second parables only affects “the community” in unpredictably and uncontrollably cumulative ways. Sending students (usually without any relevant necessary specialized education) out to tutor kids may help some get better grades that may allow or encourage them to separate from the communities they identify with, leaving the child socially isolated (because, in a racist, sexist, classist, etc. society, that child will only be accepted into the dominant group as a suspect exception) and the “community” worse off by providing a path for those chosen few out of the community while leaving the rest trapped behind with even less social capital. These forms of service learning ultimately maintain the existing systems of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion by providing just enough hope and just enough amelioration to reduce people’s motivation to change the systems causing the problems in the first place.

Institutionalized service learning is part of the problem, not part of the solution. So we need a third parable. Thankfully, we have one. My favorite parable to inform higher education community/civic engagement is the Parable of the Water Tank by Edward Bellamy (1897). The story begins in a "very dry land" where a group called "capitalists" have gathered up the available water. When the people ask the capitalists to share, the capitalists demand that the people gather the water for the capitalists, who pay them half as much for a bucket of water as they charge for buying the same amount. As the story progresses, the capitalists engage religious leaders and create a police/military force to pacify and control the people during the cyclical oversupply and unemployment crises such a system necessarily requires. But then, in contrast to the other two parables, agitators appear. The agitators cut through the hegemony that misled the people into justifying such an exploitive relationship, support the people in critiquing the system established by the capitalists, and then organize them to dismantle the systematized economic violence the capitalists had perpetrated and replace it with a sharing community which, you may recall, is what the people had asked for to begin with.

This third parable is the only one of the three that moves beyond charity and into analysis, critique, and solution. And service learning informed by the third parable is the only one capable of supporting systemic changes for justice. It is the only form capable of strategically solving problems and consciously directing change. But the third parable requires much more than a minor adjustment from the first two approaches. Instead, it involves starting with a wholly different set of assumptions and theories, and requires substantial re-training for academics. Service learning informed by the third parable cannot be about individuals—neither individual students nor individual recipients. It can only be about collectivities, partnerships of people acting collectively. It cannot be about integrating people into the existing system; it must be about dramatically transforming that system. It’s about asking the radical question “why” and allowing the answer to inform our engagement.

But, of course, service learning informed by the third parable seems wholly impractical.

The Third Parable Model

How do we build this third parable into a model for not just service learning but higher education community/civic engagement in general? The institutionalized service learning exemplified by the first two parables, I argue in my most recent book, *Liberating Service Learning* (Stoecker, 2016), uses four concepts to inform its practice: learning, service, community, and change. The emphasis is first and foremost on student learning. Everything else is subservient to that. And, most importantly, the learning is learning about disciplinary-driven course content, not learning about how to do the service.

Next in the list, and much lower in priority, is service, and that service is almost entirely directed by charity thinking where people with more power and privilege and, presumably, brains and talent, give things to
people who are assumed to have less of all those things. Some of the service is even guilt-driven through the rhetoric of “giving back”—another convolution of neoliberal hegemony. Ask students what they have gotten that they feel a compulsion to “give back” and the word “privilege” will often surface. Ask them whether their service is payment for their privilege and if, once they have put in their 20 hours, they will have paid off their debt and their privilege will now be justified. Or ask them if their service is doing anything to change the system of privilege to prevent them and people like them from continuing to have excess privilege.

Go much further down in the priority list again and you get to the concept of community, a definitional mess that makes it sound more like alienated exchange relationships than a pathway to the good society. For when we talk about working “with the community” what we really mean is “a nonprofit organization” that is usually controlled by people other than the people being served by the nonprofit organization. And our relationship with either of them is not a “use value” community relationship but an “exchange value” alienated relationship (Marx, 1992). We use the rhetoric of “reciprocity” but what we mean by the term is that we are transacting usually unskilled charity service to the nonprofit in exchange for student learning. “Reciprocity” in this context means not that we are engaged collaboratively for a single collective goal but that we are each engaged for separate disconnected goals. That’s not community, it’s an alienated neoliberal economy.

Finally, at the very bottom of the list, and much further down, there is change. Change is mostly a lip-service concept except for its use to describe neoliberal assimilationist changes in individuals. For most, service is about trying to create small, unmeasured changes in individuals at best, and often it is about keeping service recipients at a steady state—fed just enough, clothed just enough, housed just enough. In those exceedingly rare instances where service learning practitioners try to convince us that they are focused on change, it is about raising individual test scores, or helping people get jobs. And yes, of course people need all these things, but what they really need is power, and it’s far more effective to organize them to get both power and jobs than to promote their disempowerment by limiting their role to only being a recipient. And that’s not change at all.

That entire model of institutionalized service learning is destructive. It needs to be dismantled.

What do we replace it with? Think of the third parable. The solution to the people’s problems in the third parable is understanding, and then changing, the causes of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. So, let’s reverse the order of the four concepts and start with change. If any of our higher education civic engagement is going to truly matter, the first and most important priority must be change. Every social, economic, and environmental problem we confront is, at its root, a problem of power. It is the balance of power we must change. If our civic engagement efforts don’t prioritize changing the balance of power, then we may do it by accident, but we are more likely to do the reverse—providing just enough charity service to keep people fed but feeling weak rather than strong. The implications of this go far and wide. Emphasizing change means going up against the existing nonprofit industrial complex (Incite!, 2007), the existing government, the existing economic hierarchy. It also means going up against our own academic power that maintains exclusive knowledge communicated through exclusionary language, and requires us to instead build the knowledge power of those who are oppressed, exploited, and excluded.

Understanding and engaging in change requires understanding and engaging with the people who need to organize to make the change, and that means we next prioritize the concept of community. Contrary to how often we seem to invoke the word, actual relationships of community barely exist, and we can’t transform the balance of power with a bunch of disconnected and isolated strangers. So, we first have to understand that we are not actually working with “the community.” At best, if we are working directly with the people who are oppressed, exploited, and excluded, we are working with a constituency—a group of people in a similar social structural position with a similar experience of oppression, exploitation, or exclusion. The main task, though it is not a task for academics but for community organizers, is to build their relationships enough that they can engage in deliberative collaboration to build their collective power. We next have to understand that the most common “community partners” in service learning are
Many of the actual practices under those labels are still led by academics and serve mainly academic purposes. And so, this leads us finally to the fourth concept—learning. But learning here is not primarily about student learning. It is primarily about the constituency members’ learning which, in turn, allows them to be more effective in transforming the balance of power. Here again, we are contributing something we are hopefully actually skilled at, though those skills might require a lot of refitting to appeal to people who cannot be held hostage by a grade. The most powerful pedagogical practices here are informed by models like popular education (Freire, 1970), and are much more about facilitating people to generate their own knowledge than transferring credentialed expert knowledge to them (Freire, 1974). Of course the academic and the students can learn much in the process, but their learning is not the primary goal. The primary goal around learning is the learning of people in the real world, so we can, together, create a better one rather than the worse one we now have.

**Practicing the Third Parable**

How do we put this third parable model into practice? First, we need to think about what kind of foundation professors need to do this work. That foundation requires changing how we act, and how we think as academics to liberate higher education community/civic engagement from its neoliberal complicity. Whether one is an anthropologist, a zoologist, or anything in between, being an engaged academic requires understanding how change happens and how groups can organize to make change happen.

I have had the privilege of being trained by community organizers and community developers from the time I was a graduate student. As a graduate student, I lived in a neighborhood that may be the best model for effective organizing and radical community-controlled development anywhere. I also learned from them what it meant to be an academic accountable to an organized group. I wrote my dissertation on that neighborhood, with full accountability to my neighborhood-based “peer reviewers.” And since it was my neighborhood too, I had full access to their leadership, training, and mentoring. In my 17 years in Toledo, Ohio, following that, I used my professor position to work as a research support provider with neighborhood development groups across...
the city, learning the craft of community organizing and development in every possible context Toledo had to offer. And I had the incredible thrill of providing research support as part of a full ACORN training program in Toledo and a multi-year ACORN organizing campaign in Chicago. ACORN, as you might know, was this country's premier nation-wide organizing network that was so effective it became the prime target of right-wing smear tactics and federal-level legislative attacks that eventually killed the organization in 2010 (Atlas, 2010).

So I have had three decades of training and practice in community-level social change work. And in every community-engaged project I do, and every community-engaged course I do, I relearn the relevance of all the training and mentoring I have received. I have also learned over the decades that there are ways to get the essential training with less time. The University of Missouri Extension offers three week-long courses on the basics of community development. The Brushy Fork Institute, associated with Berea College, also offers a multi-day track-based training. Citizen Action, in Chicago, offers regular trainings in community organizing, as does Camp Wellstone, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Project South, and many other groups. Sure, it can feel weird to be a Ph.D. in the room with people whose education and expertise comes more from experience than books, and that feeling of discomfort is healthy, reminding us that expertise comes in many forms and disabusing us of the central tenet of institutionalized service learning that is able to maintain a charity culture with the mystified belief that academics are smarter than poor people.

Part of changing how we think and act is about changing how we think about courses. Putting change first does not mean teaching all of our regular course content, and sending out all the students to find their own placements hoping they might change something. It means finding a group organizing on an issue that it has a realistic chance of accomplishing (and you need to have had the appropriate training to assess that—see above), collaboratively choosing a single knowledge project that your entire class can support, collaboratively developing the syllabus, and then doing the knowledge project with the students and with the group. If the professor is not willing to get fully involved with the project, then they shouldn't take it on. Because the groups trying to change the world deserve our best attention. If we treat these projects as training runs, then it's just more privileged academics using the oppressed, exploited, and excluded for their own ends.

I've been consciously trying to practice how to do this for a number of years now, and what I've learned has informed this new model. The first time I felt really successful mentoring a group of students on a community knowledge project was when I first arrived in Madison in 2005. People took me around to meet community groups in town, because I was known as the service learning guy. As I listened to the groups, it became quite clear they were frustrated with the institutionalized service learning model being foisted upon them by the area higher education institutions. As a result, we got a group of organizations together and created a flash seminar (we met with the groups in November and had the graduate seminar up and running in January) to do a collaborative research project on how community organization staff felt about service learning. What we learned led to a set of community standards for service learning adopted by a number of the local community groups (Tryon & Stoecker, 2007) and to a university press book (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009).

Then there was a lull. Partly because of the shocking truths told by the community organization staff in that research project, I pulled back. I saw that I was doing many of what they saw as bad practices (sending students out without faculty supervision, without a purpose, and without adequate collaboration with community groups, just to name a few). As I started trying to find a new model, I got involved in a few efforts, but they weren't very satisfying.

Then, at the urging of one of my graduate students who had been collaborating on his own with a community-based sustainability organization, I found at least a partial solution—the capstone course. Capstone courses are superb vehicles for the third parable model. First, they aren't constrained by the demand to teach any specific course content. Second, they are small enough to mentor each student through a collective project. So for three years, graduate student Dadit Hidiyat and I taught a succession of capstone courses working with The Natural Step Monona. The first year we (me, Dadit, the students, and TNS Monona members) knocked on nearly all 3000+ doors in the
small city of Monona, distributing a survey on environmental issues, and organizing a community event that brought out 50 residents to hear the results of the survey and take some steps toward action planning. That led to the second-year seminar, where the capstone students developed and presented an education program to community groups across Monona around water issues (which is the issue that rose to the top on the survey) and recruiting them to engage in water-related community projects. The mayor declared that same year as the “Year of Water” in the city; TNS Monona ran a “water challenge” to promote water conservation; and groups across the city did education programs with their members, planted rain gardens, created berms and swales, and a variety of other activities. The third-year capstone documented the results of all this activity (Hidayat, Stoecker, & Gates, 2013). In each case, the capstone was entirely devoted to the project, and moreover, all the course content was developed to support the project.

The trajectory of the next project began for me when I was invited to consult with a neighborhood organizing project in the neighborhoods of southwest Madison—an area of town with mostly middle class white homeowners with dispersed three-block concentrations of poverty rental housing occupied mostly by people of color who were either working poverty wage jobs or, in some cases, unemployed. Conflicts across that race/class divide had raised tensions in the neighborhood to the boiling point when a couple of nurses from the city-county public health department stepped in as part of a unique community engagement program. As they found their success with organizing residents across that divide growing, they brought me in to consult. Why, I don’t know, as they were doing just fine. But in any event, I became part of the process, and after we got an internal university grant to support food and a graduate assistant, we were able to expand the organizing work. Eventually, a cross-race/class group of residents decided they wanted to convert a vacant duplex to a small community center—a lofty goal indeed. I had two capstone courses coming up. The first did research on zoning, building code, and accessibility law (the duplex was a split-level with stairs to the bathrooms), and on the typical activities in small community centers. The second engaged in a creative community survey process where residents organized one of their famous community suppers—something the public health nurses had started—and the students did surveys over dinner, facilitated dot boards, and encouraged residents to fill out half-sheet asset assessments. The semester after the second capstone, residents won a unanimous vote in Madison city council in favor of the community center. But the victory was bittersweet, and even all my training couldn’t prevent it from being so. Whether it was a conspiracy or not is impossible to say, but shortly thereafter the police began engaging in aggressive drug raids, scaring the Black resident leadership out of the neighborhood, getting them evicted, or arresting them. The public health department pulled the nurses out of the neighborhood and ended their community engagement program. Three long years later, the community center was opened, but without any real resident participation in its process, and in a neighborhood as disorganized as it was before the nurses arrived (Stoecker, 2017).

The third and most recent project was with the Urban Community Arts Network (UCAN—“you can”), a grassroots group in Madison dedicated to ending the discrimination practiced by Madison music venues against Hip-Hop music. This was the fruit of a relationship developed through a previous project that didn’t really succeed (it didn’t really fail either—it just kind of sat there), and showing that not succeeding, while embarrassing, need not be the end of the relationships you build through the project. UCAN had long been hoping to get and analyze data on actual police calls to find out whether Hip-Hop shows in Madison attracted more violence, as local venue owners and public officials seemed to believe. So my capstone class got all the police calls for all the venues with liquor and entertainment licenses in the city of Madison for an eight-year period. The students then searched out whether there was a performance at the time of a police call and what the genre of the performance was. At the end of the capstone class, it became clear we had only scratched the surface, and five of the students plus an intern provided by the UW Morgridge Center for Public Service agreed to continue through the next semester. By the time we were done, we had a first-of-its-kind data set, a set of research findings showing that Hip-Hop wasn’t any more dangerous than other genres like country or karaoke, and UCAN had gotten the Madison City Council
to establish an entertainment equity task force. My capstone class this year is continuing the work, this time analyzing local news articles about Hip-Hop.

What do these three examples illustrate about the third parable model? First, all three groups were focused on social change rather than service. TNS Monona was trying to create a more sustainable community, by organizing and educating residents. The initial community survey we did with them allowed them to develop a new campaign focused on water, which we also supported by developing educational materials, and then documenting the outcomes. The southwest Madison residents chose a campaign to get a new community center, for which we provided a variety of support research, and also ended up at least temporarily building real influence with the Madison City Council. UCAN was engaged in a campaign to get venue owners to book Hip-Hop shows, and to get the City of Madison to establish non-discriminatory policies for music performers. Our research brought visibility to UCAN, with significant press coverage, and helped dispel some of the stereotypes of Hip-Hop. This year, bookings are up and the new entertainment equity task force just had its first meeting.

All three groups were also focused on building community as part of their social change work. TNS Monona used community education methods that connected residents to each other—our initial community survey concluded with a community event as part of that process. Southwest Madison residents, through the organizing skill of the public health nurses, were building relationships across race and class as they organized for a variety of community improvements. UCAN was building relationships between venue owners, producers, booking agents, and Hip-Hop artists.

The “service” that I and my students provided to all of these groups focused on knowledge projects. We brought our greatest expertise—knowledge creation and amplification—to each group. Surveys, background research, data analysis—all the things that higher education institutions can be most proud of—were our contribution. And we didn’t bring little dribs and drabs, expecting one or two students to go out on their own and do major research projects. Instead we worked as a team, knocking on 3,000 doors, or providing a whole portfolio of background research, or gathering performance data for more than 4,000 police calls. Those are only things that a well-organized team with substantial time and effort can do. But, importantly, neither I nor my capstone students can take credit for the social change outcomes these groups achieved. We provided support, not leadership, and that is how it should be.

Finally, there is learning. TNS Monona learned detailed information about residents’ perspectives on environmental issues. Southwest Madison residents learned how to lobby a new community center through the committees of city council, and learned the details they needed to sound smart—zoning, building code, accessibility law, program options. And, sadly, they relearned the brutalities of hierarchical power. UCAN learned the ins and outs of imperfect data so they could defend the findings of such a massive and complex research project. What did I learn? I, too, relearned the realities of power—that it is brutal and uncaring. I learned the model I have presented in this paper. I learned that an old white guy like me can grow to understand and appreciate Hip-Hop. And I learned that what the students can most learn through this new model is not substantive concepts, but process skills—how to manage projects, how to work in teams, how to facilitate groups, how to communicate across difference, how to collect, manage, and analyze data. Those things are now part of the reading, training, and mentoring I provide as part of a capstone course.

So, in the end, what we do is find a constituency and work with them to identify knowledge gaps that, if filled, will directly affect their ability to pursue a change campaign. One of the effects we should want is for the group to grow in size, unity, and power—building community. Our job is to find the resources to fill the knowledge gaps, which may mean locating grants, or students, or fellow faculty, or constituency-based expertise. And we can facilitate the knowledge process by doing the research, participating in delivering the education, or providing other knowledge support functions. The important point is that the group we are working with knows how they are going to use the knowledge we collaborate with them to create and/or deliver, and that they actually use it.

Over the past couple of years I’ve been promoting this model, I’ve confronted numerous objections. There is the objection that colleges and universities are for educating students, not promoting social change. Fine, if you don’t want to engage in
social change, then keep your students in the classroom. There's nothing wrong (and a lot that's right) with classroom learning—that's where students can make mistakes with the least important consequences. Because if you send your students out to do “service” you are still intervening in the world, and probably in a way that will keep things worse rather than make things better. Universities and colleges are, and should be, about knowledge, not forcing students to go out and “volunteer” their untrained services. Universities and colleges are not volunteer centers. They are knowledge centers.

There is the objection that people need food, clothing and shelter, and change takes too long for people with immediate needs. Fine, everyone should volunteer to help people meet their immediate needs. But it's a cop-out for universities and colleges to pat themselves on the backs for limiting themselves to being an unskilled volunteer pipeline rather than focusing their resources and energies on being a repository of knowledge, skill, and substance that can support real change to end oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. And let's not fool ourselves that dividing the world into givers and getters does anything other than maintain the systems of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion we now have. Let's organize people for collective self-help rather than limit them to disempowering recipient status.

There is another objection that it's OK to do charity work because it's all just on a continuum (Morton, 1995)—that it's a big tent, and I'm being exclusionary. But if what you are doing is helping to keep the existing oppressive, exploitative, exclusionary system in place by providing system-maintaining charity rather than supporting people to organize for change that will reduce the need for charity, then you and I are definitely not on a continuum. Furthermore, there are a bunch of people in power, in many states and at the national level, running around with torches setting fire to all our tents, and they must be stopped.

There is the objection that students don't want to get involved in "political" stuff. That's part of the anti-intellectualism of service learning. Charity is deeply political, because it engages in supporting the existing system while mystifying the fact that it is supporting the existing system. It's time we exposed and analyzed its neoliberal politics. And let's engage students directly in the kind of politics that expands democracy with those excluded from participation. My hopeful belief is that the kind of politics that students hate is the anti-democratic neoliberal politics that surrounds them on all sides, limiting their imagination of anything different. The groups I have been working with show them just how different and inclusive politics can be. And the students don't seem to be objecting.

And then there is fear. In my own desperation to try and overcome my sense of vulnerability as a professor whose tenure protection was eliminated (along with all other public institution faculty) by the State of Wisconsin, I started applying for higher education administrative positions couched in the rhetoric of community engagement anyplace I could find them. Yes, I was risking becoming part of the problem, which has now been reinforced so many times I've given up on the notion. In two of those interviews I was asked, point-blank, how I would do outreach to industry—yes, industry is now “community” just like corporations are “people.” My administrator interviewers in two of those positions openly voiced their fear (though I bet they would deny that emotion if confronted) of not devoting their institutional energies to serving their neoliberal capitalist masters. That fear, of course, then torrents down to faculty, who see their own vulnerability and consequently self-censor their research and their teaching.

The fear is real. It is important to understand that academics are getting fired not just for speaking thoughts unacceptable to those in power. They are getting fired also because they are speaking their thoughts from within a neoliberal box. They are asserting their individualism the same as any good neoliberal would. And they don't recognize that one of the central tenets of neoliberalism is the maintenance of social structural conditions that maximize the uncertainty and vulnerability of individuals. We academics need to recognize that, if we speak out as individuals, we will get picked off as individuals. Our greatest threat—in contrast to disciplines like sociology that now allow individuals to add “public” in front of their disciplinary name, unreflectively assuming that simply lecturing louder and broader will matter—is the work we do backstage. It is the work we do in collaboration with those organizing for justice to gather knowledge for use in their social change work.

We don't just live in difficult times. We live in traumatically abusive and deadly times, and of course the abuse and death
become more real the more one occupies societally-defined categories of oppression, exploitation, and exclusion. Our democracy is being systematically dismantled and the iceberg of fascism is rapidly approaching while we rearrange the deck chairs on the societal Titanic for service learning credit. This is not the time to be politely patient, privileging our academic interests and disciplinary canons under the guise of community engagement that keeps things worse rather than makes things better.

**Conclusion**

The warnings are all around us. We can stick our heads in the sand but, before we do, we should know that not even ostriches stick their heads in the sand. And if we continue down the neoliberal path we’re currently on I fear we’ll all end up with the starfish.

**References**


Goldberg, M. (2015, July). This professor was fired for saying ‘fuck no’ in class. *The Nation*. Retrieved from https://www.thenation.com/article/this-professor-was-fired-for-saying-fuck-no-in-class/


