



# Critical Service-Learning as Revolutionary Pedagogy: A Project of Student Agency in Action.

Brad J. Porfilio and Heather Hickman  
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Can professionals create a truly revolutionary pedagogy from inside educational institutions shaped by a neoliberal political economy? This question lies at the heart of this collection of engaging essays. The authors—academics and service-learning practitioners—write about their own and others' efforts to create fundamental social change through their teaching and community partnerships, while deeply embedded in the very systems they hope to change. They consider the impact on their efforts of working within a political economy that favors the privatization of state-supported institutions such as schools and hospitals, and replaces the notion of the public good with individual responsibility. Although their use of "revolutionary" to describe their pedagogies must be seen as aspirational, the authors' description of practitioners' struggles and the lessons learned from them is a valuable contribution to scholarship on critical service-learning, and well worth the read for educators with similar priorities.

In their introduction, editors Brad Porfilio and Heather Hickman offer a bracing portrait of the environment in which North American educators attempt to do critical service-learning. This picture includes growing inequality and human suffering, diminishing government funding for education, and “unsafe, unsanitary, dilapidated, racially segregated, and overcrowded institutions where ill-equipped educators implement ‘drill and kill’ methods of instruction” (p. x). Drawing on Freire (2005), they explain their notion of a revolutionary pedagogy as one that develops students’ critical awareness of the causes of current social ills and evokes their desire “to remake the social world” (p. xi).

The editors organize the chapters in the book into Part I and Part II; however, their explanation of what distinguishes the two sections from each other is somewhat vague. The chapters in Part I tend to include more theorizing about critical service-learning, though several also offer rich descriptions of practice. Part II contains all of the chapters focused on critical service-learning in teacher education, though some refer to service-learning in other settings as well, and several chapters make substantial theoretical contributions.

British scholar Mike Cole follows the introduction with an intriguing glimpse into the critical pedagogies in contemporary revolutionary Venezuela in the book’s foreword. Cole relays President Hugo Chavez’s view of Venezuela as a “giant school,” with education as the first of three forms of power in the revolutionary process, followed by political power and economic power. Acknowledging that even in Venezuela, changes to the education system thus far are reforms and not revolution, Cole asserts that the reforms nonetheless lay the groundwork for revolution. He offers advice to educators in the U.S. and U.K. for creating revolutionary pedagogies within our decidedly non-revolutionary capitalist contexts.

Many of the book’s authors rely on the conception of critical service-learning articulated by Mitchell (2008), drawn from her comprehensive review of the service-learning literature. She distinguishes the critical approach from the more traditional form of service-learning by its inclusion of three components: a social change orientation, work to re-distribute power, and authentic relationships. Mitchell defines authentic relationships as associations based on connection and reciprocity from which participants can analyze power, build coalitions, and develop empathy.

A prominent theme in the book, and the focus of several chapters, concerns the relationship component of critical service-learning. How can educators, students, and community members build authentic relationships in the shadow of hierarchical educational institutions with cultural values of individualism and competition, the drive for success, little sense of place, economic disparities, and institutional racism? And, if authentic relationships can be fostered, how do they lead to actual change in oppressive structures and in the material conditions of people’s lives?

The chapter, “Living in Riverhill: A Postcritical Challenge to the Production of a Neoliberal Success Story,” by Allison Daniel Anders and Jessica Nina Lester stands out for the authors’ attention to the inner life of practitioners of critical service-learning, and their relationships

with the Burundian children they tutor in a small city in Appalachia. The authors craft a poignant and piercing challenge to educators who distance themselves from people in their projects, and to university administrators who attempt to frame their work in communities as "success stories." They write,

The longer we stay in relationship, in community, the more we learn to challenge our own and others' desires for whitestream comforts, for success stories that predictably end in rainbow skies far above the earth, miles from the ground upon which we sit and read with children. We have learned, too, to question the notion that the arc of history bends toward justice, as we learn to sit with loss and discomfort. (p. 231)

A moving poem about Lester's relationship with a child she tutors called "Spiderman," reveals the difficulty and power of being with someone who has experienced terrible loss and trauma, not turning away from his suffering and finding connection -- even joy -- with him. The authors struggle with inviting others to "work that does not tell, direct, fix, does not save community, but that is about being with community and knowing that in the 'being with' that the work is always partial, never complete" (p. 239). Drawing on the thinking of critical race theorist Derrick Bell (1992), Anders and Lester "accept the dilemmas of committed confrontation with evils we cannot end" (p. 198, cited in Anders and Lester, p. 240), and along with Bell, "yearn that our civil rights work will be crowned with success, but what we really want — want even more than success — is meaning" (Bell, p. 198, cited on p. 242).

Though I was impressed and moved by Anders' and Lester's account of personal transformation and committed relationships with people in their community, a troubling question arose for me: how does personal transformation and meaning translate into changes in the material conditions in the lives of people? Put differently, how does personal transformation translate into social transformation?

Susan Hermann offers insight into these questions in her chapter, "Holding on to Transformation: Reflections on Global Service Learning." She identifies the need for "communities of care" to help students make meaning of transformative experiences in their global service-learning in Vietnam. Former students "reported that the challenge to 'holding on to transformation' is . . . a result of becoming anesthetized by consumer-driven, individually oriented goal seeking and forgetting the face of human suffering" (p. 289). Given students' sense of isolation upon re-entry to the U.S., she asserts that they need to reconnect with other sojourners to make meaning of their experiences, and translate them into ongoing work for social justice.

Staying with the relationship theme, the chapter by the late Adam Renner, to whom the book is dedicated, offers a lyrical reflection on his students' service-learning in Jamaica, and a persuasive argument that the project there "can only be the opening salvo in what must be longer term change projects *if service learning is actually to have any revolutionary potential*" (p. 110). Renner advocates "insurgent educators," critical of capitalism, forming partnerships of solidarity with communities. However, he stops short of exploring *how* educators and students

can work with people in partner communities to take up their own power to create change in their material conditions.

By contrast, Brian Charles Charest, in "Toward a Theory and Practice of Radical Pragmatism," makes the move from developing authentic relationships to taking action. Charest argues that "service can be a powerful learning and movement building tool" (p. 301), and that schools can be legitimate sites for public action. Drawing on the thinking of Jane Adams, leader of the settlement house movement, and Saul Alinsky, the founder of IAF, the national community organizing network, Charest asserts that educators can become stakeholders in schools and communities that are not their own by working alongside partners taking action on issues affecting their members' lives. The chapter would have benefitted from reference to the substantial literature on community organizing in schools, for example, work by Warren and Mapp (2011), and Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister (2009).

Another important theme cutting across several chapters examines the problematic assumption that students engaged in critical service-learning come only from privileged backgrounds. These chapters address the need to make service-learning available and relevant to working class and economically poor students of all races. Kaylan Schwarz's chapter, "Distant or Direct: Students' Interactions with Service Recipients while Completing Ontario's Community Involvement Requirement," and David Zyngier's chapter, "Education, Critical Service-Learning, and Social Justice: The Australian Experience of Doing Thick Democracy in the Classroom," offer useful insights into the experiences of working class and economically poor students engaged in critical service-learning. Kecia Hayes' excellent chapter, "Critical Service Learning and the Black Freedom Movement," draws from the rich history of the Highlander Folk School, the Citizenship Schools, and the Black Freedom schools, to challenge practitioners of critical service-learning to develop pedagogies that rely on vulnerable youths' "indigenous knowledges as a point of entry to critically participate in civil society . . ." (p. 67). Hayes' analysis would have been enriched by drawing on the text, *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition* (Payne & Strickland, 2008), which includes many historical and contemporary examples of schools guided by principles and practices of the Black Freedom movement.

Though the chapters on teacher education and critical service-learning in Part II of the book offer useful insights, they tend to be prescriptive, focused on mandates and rubrics, and missing a sense of place in the descriptions of service-learning projects. These distancing qualities may reflect the particular challenges and constraints of the bureaucratic context of the authors' discipline.

In closing, the book stimulates thinking and raises important questions about educators' efforts to create pedagogies to accomplish social change. To what extent is success measured by the quality of relationships educators and students build with communities, and to what extent is it measured by concrete changes in oppressive structures and in the material conditions of peoples' lives? Another way of posing this question would be to ask who is

benefitting from critical service-learning pedagogies and in what ways. And finally, what is the bridge the authors have to cross to live up to their own revolutionary ideals — that all of us have to cross, constrained as we are by working from within institutions that are part of the global neoliberal political economy? The authors serve well as a sort of “community of care” for service-learning practitioners grappling with these questions, and seeking to create conditions for personal and social transformation for our students, community partners, and ourselves.

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