Rural Service-Learning on the Blue Bus: A Retrospective in Hopes of Advancing Transformative Civic Engagement in Higher Education
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In this essay, I reflect on my experiences first as a college student more than 40 years ago, and then as a college instructor who spent 25 years teaching at an urban 2-year college. From what I learned in both settings, I offer reflections and questions designed to prompt campus discussions that can lead to the flourishing of high-impact service-learning experiences.

In 1969, when students across the United States were speaking out for an end to the war in Vietnam and were marching for civil rights at home, some were also challenging their own colleges and universities, demanding that their education engage with the social and political issues of the day. At Cornell University, the Human Affairs Program (HAP)—a forerunner of what is now called service-learning—offered students opportunities to apply course-based knowledge and skills while connecting with and giving voice to the needs of poor and working people who lived in the urban and rural areas adjacent to the university campus. The first part of this essay attempts to recreate the author’s life-changing interactions and experiences aboard the Blue Bus, HAP’s rural organizing project, partially funded through local anti-poverty initiatives.

Having subsequently taught for 25 years at an urban two-year college where I also served as a faculty liaison with the Office of Engaged and Service Learning, I next attempt in this essay to “problematize” (Freire, 2000) issues related to purpose and process in the hopes that they will help focus future discussions towards building authentic and transformative partnerships between college/university administrators, committed faculty, and community activists. Indeed,
campus leaders have a key role in raising, facilitating, and providing the intellectual and moral rudder to navigate the path towards high-impact college level service-learning.

By the late 1960s, many college and university students who were speaking out against U.S. engagement in Vietnam, and for racial equality and civil rights at home, were also demanding that their schools (a) offer coursework with greater social relevance, and (b) exhibit institutional behavior that demonstrated greater responsiveness to the communities that surrounded their campuses. At Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, the Human Affairs Program did just that. The Human Affairs Program (HAP) emerged out of two separate efforts that challenged the “town vs. gown” status quo; one was the community anti-war organizing led by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the other was Ithaca Neighborhood College, an unaccredited, not-for-credit, free-to-all “people’s college.” While SDS’ Blue Bus project brought day-to-day assistance along with its anti-war message to Tompkins County’s rural community, the charismatic and community-engaged faculty from Cornell and Ithaca Neighborhood College offered free classes on a wide range of subjects to anyone who wanted to learn and grow.

*Dateline Ithaca* was the community newspaper that reported on all of these activities and Jack Goldman, a Cornell University graduate student and former United Auto Workers (UAW) rank-and-file organizer, was a leader in all three community-focused projects. So, it was to Goldman that Ben Nichols -- a professor of engineering who, as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, would be elected to the office of mayor in 1989 -- turned to develop the vision of a university program that would academically challenge students while working to support, not supplant, community leadership. Students would assist poor and working people in their efforts to understand the institutions that controlled their lives, while rejecting the notion of studying the poor “at the behest of large institutions” (Human Affairs Program, 1972).

But it took a committee to find the funding that would make their vision, the Human Affairs Program, a reality.¹ That committee believed that the university could be an agent for social justice in the wider community and its idea resulted in a Ford Foundation grant.²

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¹ The people central to HAP’s beginnings are: William F. White, professor of Organizational Behavior in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations; John Bryant, a construction worker who, through Tompco Better Housing, was organizing in Ithaca’s African American community to develop and secure worker self-managed, low-income housing construction contracts; and Gary Esolen, a graduate student and leader in Tompco Better Housing.

² With that funding, the hiring of invaluable staff—Jinx Dodd and Michael Moch—and talented section leaders began.
The section leaders were both adjunct (many of them grad students) and full-time faculty; they came from Urban Planning, Development Sociology, Human Ecology, and Industrial & Labor Relations. All were hired because of their organizing experience. The HAP-identified course sections were designed with the mission of combining “active learning and concrete involvement with poor and working people of New York’s Southern Tier” (Human Affairs Program, 1972), operationalizing HAP’s three goals: (a) learning through active problem solving, (b) widespread community control of institutions, and (c) an educational practice that involved university students in advocacy, organizing, and the struggle for social justice. Through the pedagogy of service-learning, students were engaged with community through any of the following:

1. Welfare rights organizing through the community-run “Storefront.”
2. Non-legal advocacy for inmates at Elmira Correctional Facility.
4. Participatory research and action in defense of tenant and worker rights.
5. Leadership training for low-income parents fighting for educational parity for their children.
6. Writing about community-based efforts for change in the Tompkins County Bulletin, the newspaper project connected to the HAP-designated section of a course entitled “Community Communications.”

Across all sections and projects it was agreed that students would be provided with academic and experiential learning, which, as described by the program’s brochure, would cause them to:

1. Examine the distribution of political and economic power and the role of large institutions.
2. Consider alternative strategies for social change, distinguishing between those programs that treat only symptoms, and those which get at the root causes.
3. Explore the meaning of advocacy, professionalism, and their relationship to change.
4. Expand the scope of community control, including community control over HAP itself.
5. Increase the effectiveness and self-sufficiency of community groups that seek to redistribute power and resources more equitably.

HAP was a game changer – for students, faculty, and most importantly for campus-community relations. For me it was a life-changer.

At the start of my sophomore year, as a Rural Sociology major and someday, would-be social worker, I signed up for a 6-credit course, “Rural Sociology 303,” one of a half-dozen course sections connected to the Human Affairs Program. What followed was 2 years (1971 to 1973) aboard “The Blue Bus,” an older model GM school bus which each week transported students...
from Cornell University’s ivy-covered halls of formal education to rural communities in Tompkins County, NY. Guided by our adjunct instructor, Sam Salkin - a young visionary (and bus driver) - students engaged in a less formal but far more transformative education; what we now call “service-learning.”

The Blue Bus, as well as the other HAP projects, was made possible through a collaboration between the university administration, which provided office space and infrastructure support for designated course sections; the local Community Action Program (CAP), an anti-poverty organization funded in part by the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, which served as fiscal agent for the project; and the Tompkins County Librarians’ Roundtable for Social Responsibility, which provided grant money to buy and catalog the books that ended up on the bus’s shelving, also paid for by the grant. The operating budget (including money for gasoline) was generated by the students who, starting in the summer of 1970, raised $15,000 through the “Walk for Hunger.”

A “storefront on wheels,” the bus was stocked with art supplies, a wide assortment of rubber balls, and social service forms, pamphlets, and manuals. With these we entered into the poorest and most remote areas of the county. Following a script suggested by our reading of Si Kahn’s *How People Get Power* (1970), we first played with the kids who would run up to the bus to see what this hulking, blue vehicle was all about. They would invariably bring us to meet the adults. Over cups of coffee and hours of talk, we came to learn about their marginalized existence in the hills of Tompkins County and, when the need was there and the time was right, applied our relative privilege and access to information to help them get a measure of control over their lives.

Sam puts it this way:

> The Blue Bus experience was based on a model we referred to as “advocacy organizing.” Advocacy would be based on an understanding and interpretation of the rules and regulations of the institutions that oppress poor people. Organizing, which would follow, was based on analyses of situations and opportunities that could only be confronted through organized community action.

Particular situations were chosen based on an assessment of probable engagement and success, combined with the apparent injustice of the situations. The idea was that well developed analyses, understanding and technical skills (we would have never said “expertise”), associated with the rules, regulations and institutional power of life-defining and confining institutions such as schools, utilities, welfare, health and social service bureaucracies, coupled with information, courage, and advocacy, would both address problems and deepen relationships with individuals in the community. This was the first level of work for the students once they had established a rapport and degree of trust with individuals in the community. This trust was established in many ways: listening to life stories over a cup of coffee, and identifying an individual’s problem or pain that might have an advocacy response.
Advocacy was a means to greater credibility and respect, not an end in itself. The ideological model was to then leverage the credibility gained from engaging in struggle, advocacy and perhaps successful institutional skirmishes, to identify larger community issues that could only be addressed at a community level. Individuals’ advocacy experiences would reflect greater self-confidence and might support and encourage willingness to explore and ultimately act on issues that could only be addressed and challenged by a broader organized community effort.

In our weekly colloquia we considered different explanations for poverty and its perennial hold on 25 million Americans, according to the President’s Commission on Income Maintenance Programs cited in the 1969 publication, Poverty Amid Plenty: The American Paradox. But it was activist folk singer Si Kahn’s song, “What You Do With What You’ve Got,” that could have been our anthem:

.... It’s not just what you’re born with
It’s what you choose to bear
It’s not how much your share is
But it’s how much you can share
And it’s not the fights you’ve dreamed of
But those you really fought
It’s not just what you’re given
It’s what you do with what you’ve got.

It was immediately apparent that this course would be unlike all others I had ever taken. There was a schedule, but that timetable of goings and comings had to be flexible in order to match up with the chaos of lives lived on the edge. It was also clear that our coursework would be less about earning course credit and less restricted by concerns about institutional liabilities, and much more about individual and institutional conscience.

Over the course of countless trips to Buffalo Road -- a hilly stretch of northern-Appalachia descending into the crossroads community of Caroline Center -- I began to see and eventually understand the systemic, rather than individual, explanations for the existence of what, in 1962, Michael Harrington called “the other America.” Ultimately, the lesson I came away with was that the lives of rural poor folks would not improve thanks to well-meaning helpers such as I intended to become, but through their own political power.

After my time, this ideal came to fruition. Sam tells the story:

The Blue Bus had been visiting a number of mobile home parks over the years. One day a woman living in one of the mobile home parks, who was familiar with our reputation for advocacy and organizing efforts to end class discrimination in the administration of school lunch programs, challenge utility rate increases, and confront the local telephone service provider over quality of service issues, brought us a dilemma she shared with her neighbors.
The owner of the mobile home park had neglected the property and still wanted to raise the rent on the mobile home pads. The driveways were pockmarked; the septic system was overflowing, creating a health hazard, the children’s play area was in disrepair; and exterior light fixtures were broken, making the area feel unsafe after dark. The trailer park owner was unresponsive to complaints.

A short lesson on the institutional challenge: the term mobile home is a misnomer. Mobile homes are mobile the day that they are delivered to the mobile home park. Otherwise, they rarely move. Mobile homes are the only form of housing stock that depreciates over the long run. Old mobile homes have lost most of their original value. Mobile home owners who have set up their mobile home in a mobile home park suffer from a type of schizophrenia: they are buying their home on time (it’s more akin to a car loan payment than a mortgage) and thus have some of the “pride” associated with home ownership. At the same time, they are tenants, renting space (a “pad”) and connections to infrastructure, such as utilities. However, unlike most tenants, it is very difficult and expensive for them to move if the landlord wants a large rent increase, chooses not to renew their rental agreement, or has been neglectful. At the same time, the landlord’s power over the tenant is enormous. A displeased landlord can easily evict a “troublemaker.” It should be clear that the tenant’s very limited mobility often results in accepting the situation, rather than standing up, which has potentially serious negative consequences.

To make a complex vignette shorter, we worked with mobile home park tenants to create “tenants unions.” As word spread from the initial place of our organizing, others sought out our assistance. As the solidarity at the first mobile home park produced results, other tenants’ unions were organized in other mobile home parks. This led to a county-wide alliance of such tenants’ associations. Next, we identified other mobile home park activists in other parts of the state and created a statewide coalition. We developed advocacy tactics for use with individual mobile home park owners and legislative reform agendas at the county and state level.

Advocacy led to organizing, which led to some success, which led to greater individual and group dignity, self-confidence, and empowerment. Those who emerged as leaders experienced life in a new and different way.

Route 76 took us from the campus in Ithaca to Slaterville Springs. As each mile of highway passed under our wheels, the distance to gainful employment with one of the city’s five major employers (Cornell University, Ithaca College, National Cash Register, Ithaca Gun, and Morse Chain) increased, and so did the poverty.

Forty years later I can still see the old frame houses that lined Route 76 (or “Slaterville Road,” as this short stretch of a central New York State highway is called by those who live along it). There was the Red & White grocery store standing at the start of the two-block town, its glass windows hollow and staring; the white clapboard Post Office and Town Hall where the town’s
power brokers, the Community Association, held its meetings. Next came the Trading Post – one of those wood-floored, low-ceilinged, all-purpose general stores that catches every nickel and dime from either side of it simply because the nearest shopping center is 12-15 miles away. Its one-story structure stood apart from the other two-story buildings, separated by a gravel parking lot and a couple of gas pumps. In the store, arranged on crowded shelves or hanging from ceiling-hooks, one could find the bare necessities of life: food, tobacco, soap, hunting licenses, ammo, kerosene, small toys for the first of the month, canned pork and beans for the last of it.

I can still feel the jerk of the bus as we rounded the corner where Slaterville Road meets Buffalo Road, Sam putting every muscle he could muster into turning the steering wheel and righting our path. He'd jerk the gearshift, double clutch, and then, in low gear, start the bus's awkward hulk up the narrow road while the bus's contents (including us humans) shifted and sometimes crashed against the sides of the gutted interior. As the smooth asphalt of the state highway turned into gravel my stomach would turn over, wondering what new emergency laid ahead, what spirit would need temporary fixing. I quickly learned how economic necessity and physical isolation combine to make life precarious, liable to change with one accident, one illness, one argument, one stroke of an official pen.

Ahead of the cluster of homes at the base of the hill, the housing grew sparser, human hardship denser. I came to understand that poverty, which was as endemic to this hill as the maple and beech trees that covered it, was not a product of lethargy (as many would effortlessly and incuriously explain), but of a hard-to-till land and hard-to-find jobs, and living conditions which constantly challenged wellness of body and spirit. Taking an edge off their want might be a handed-down home, land on which to spread out, and generations of family living together lending physical and emotional comfort, sharing sporadic incomes. If the wheels were left on a trailer (or parked school bus) there would be no taxes to pay and the price of a hunting license or some garden seeds could usually be well returned in spurts of meat and vegetables. What’s more, the sky above is blue and the backyards are acres deep. Ownership had little to do with deed holding.

At our first stop, a five-room trailer alongside a creek, the youngest daughter would clamber onto the bus and then onto my lap, like a feather landing. Her thick-lashed cow-eyes looked out at the world through glasses that were forever slipping down her little nose; she always trembled. Suzy lived there with her three sisters, mother and father. One rainy night the creek almost flooded them out. We headed out to help with the evacuation after getting a panicked phone call: Ed was sitting in his chair, intransigent, unwilling to leave everything they owned. He was surrounded by hastily tied-up bundles, pleading children, a menagerie of animals, and his wife. Betty, who had an angular, sunken-cheeked look, faced this calamity shrilly defiant, well practiced in the art of standing up to what one can’t control. I remember looking about and thinking of all the times we had sat there in the narrow living room of their mobile home, figuring out their Home Relief budget over cups of coffee or planning our confrontation with school officials who had devised a system that illegally identified the kids eligible for free or
reduced lunch. Then there were the times when they’d asked us to just hang around while a county case worker came to call, serving as extra ears and preparing, if necessary, to be advocates.

Further up the hill, just below the crest of it, were three small houses in a row – mixed media, pieced-together homes that groaned with the effort that had gone into their construction. Two of the homes -- along with the school bus permanently parked across the road – made a family compound of sorts: father, son, and cousins. Larry, a stocky strawberry-blond-haired man who could have been 20 or 40, had a demolition business along with his dad. They worked when a successful bid coincided with the truck and their backs being in working order. In-between times they collected and sold scrap metal. Beside them lived another couple with their 4 children and elderly aunts. Len was descended from a prominent local family, had gone to war, and then married Ruby, a woman whose ancestry reached back to a Canadian first-nation community. So much could have been theirs, but life had turned out differently.

Part of me wishes to insert some evidence that provides a quantitative or qualitative explanation for the poverty endured on this hillside. But then I remember what Ruby once said to me: “The facts don’t always tell the truth.” She was trying to teach me what I would eventually come to understand despite my having been schooled to think otherwise.

The other side of Buffalo Road led down to Caroline Center and its dozen or so homes. Two or three of these buildings stood out because of their relative level of upkeep; the others were in varying stages of chronic disrepair. Once in a while a car would drive through. Most of the Center’s traffic, however, was not automotive but human, full of the discourse and discord of neighbors who know too much of each others’ stories and share too much of the same thing – time. In the triangle formed by Buffalo Road and the lower lying “Old 76 Road” sat a country tavern or “gin mill” as it was called locally. Tommy was its intermittent owner and bartender. The jukebox would play one of his country tunes, picked out of his guitar without the help of a finger he had lost to butchering years back. When the business dried up, Kate, his wife, and their six kids moved into an enormous canvas tent that stayed heated during the winter with the help of a wood-burning stove. With the tent flaps down, a bluish smoke would fill the place, only occasionally cut by someone’s frosty breath. It was Kate’s spirit that kept hope for a log cabin alive. Whatever else was going on, come spring she would plant a small window box full of flowers. “We’ve got to have the beautiful in life,” she reminded me -- and herself. Often citing her Irish mother, she was a philosopher by nature. Her voice shook when she spoke about justice, and her smile broadened when she was able to give something of herself to another.

When I visited Buffalo Road some 10 years after leaving it, I found her son, Billy, living in the cabin that had finally been built where the tent had stood. He had become a father with children of his own, married to Ruby’s eldest daughter, Mary. He had been an impish boy, always climbing to the roof of the bus, taunting others with his full-lipped smile. Now his smile
was reserved; lines of worry cut into his face and his hands were swollen and hardened by work. He hunched up against the window that looked out on the hill and the valley behind it while we caught up a bit. Billy was working at cutting wood and putting up hay. “That’s about all there is to do around here.” And, with the price of gas so high, it didn’t pay to drive into Ithaca for a job. Moving closer to town would have meant paying rent; life in the log cabin wasn’t luxury, but it was free.

Mary had landed a childcare job through the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA), enacted by Congress in 1973, which was designed to assist economically disadvantaged, unemployed, or underemployed persons through job training. She had hoped to attend licensing classes at the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), New York State’s system of shared educational programs and services to school districts since 1948. But when the funding was cut, she lost her job and her hopes of becoming licensed. Additionally, her son could no longer benefit from the pre-school education that would have been paid for through CETA. “I almost had a breakdown, but I was lucky. I got help ... They just don’t care about poor people,” she said hesitating to describe herself this way. “But,” Billy chimed in from his window, sounding every bit like his mother, “they can go and build all these bombs and missiles.”

There were differences between us, to be sure. I was going to leave and return to my job in the city; they were going to stay there, in the place they had always known. They would keep trying, just as their parents had. But on these points and on some deeper human level we were connected. It was something that had started years back when I was a student, when they and their parents were my teachers; when I learned a lot while serving a little.

As students aboard the Blue Bus, on our way to life-changing learning on Buffalo Hill and in Caroline Center, our objectives -- clearly and audaciously articulated by HAP’s leadership -- guided our interactions with the community. The reflective practice imbedded in our coursework and discussions challenged us to consider the lived experiences of community members as equally valid as anything we read in one of our required texts. While credits were awarded by the semester, it was clear that our involvement with community had no such time limits. As Si Kahn taught us, trust, learning, and change all take time.

There were risks. The first risk one might say, was boarding the bus. Yet, we never thought of that, not even when our bodies went crashing against the bus’ insides, not even when we found ourselves out on dark, country roads long after sundown. One time I was there to keep a mother company as she watched over her teenage son who, after running away from the county’s juvenile detention facility, had come home to finish off the contents of the medicine cabinet. Another time it was to silently referee the crossfire between a warring, slightly drunken, husband and wife whose greatest beef was with the poverty that imprisoned them and strained whatever spark of love had brought them together. Then there was the middle-of-the-night evacuation when the creek threatened our friends Ed and Betty. Family celebrations and community meetings were other reasons to make the 20-mile trip. One time I
was asked to be the bridesmaid at the makeshift wedding of two 18 year olds! Over time we learned to shed our self-protective skins, immersing ourselves in whatever was needed. We earned the trust we were shown, and that trust in turn opened the doors to even more learning and eventually some swipes at institutions that, because of the visceral reactions we had developed after so many kitchen conversations, we challenged alongside our friends who lived in the community. We didn’t flinch. We became a part of the community and were expected to show up.

I contrast this formative experience of mine with the context in which I taught many years later in an urban, multi-ethnic, racially diverse two-year college. My students were from the same inner-city community that is the focus of the college’s service-learning activities, but just like Mary and Billy, they feel first-hand the capriciousness of economic and political forces, marginalized not just because of their inability to participate fully in the economy, but because of structural racism and how it distances them from the multiple and interlocking seats of power that affect their lives, leaving them to live in internal colonies where they are dependent, isolated and “other” in the public eye.

Colleges and universities not only produce the corporate and political leaders that become the controllers of “others,” but they are also directly connected to power centers through their boards of directors, lobbyists, and funding streams (as well as the informal structures that really make wheels turn). They can choose either to carry on with institution-building without regard to the impact they have on lives beyond the scope of their vision or they can reach out and become partners with the community-building aspirations of their neighbors, recognizing, as Saltmarsh, Hartley and Clayton assert in their Democratic Engagement White Paper, that the college is located within an “ecosystem” in which reciprocity should be a given (2009, p. 10). If a college or university chooses on behalf of the latter, there may be immediate costs of time and money, possibly political cache, but in a more reciprocal relationship with the community lies the fulfillment of higher education’s promise of involving “individuals in the community not just as consumers of knowledge and services but as participants in the larger public culture of democracy” (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p. 10). If colleges and universities look to their faculty and student bodies as resources in that campus-community partnership and regard community members and leaders as sources of knowledge and expertise, teaching and learning can be transformed. Embracing this missional/visial self-concept of “community ally” means having to engage in discussions of purpose and process.

For two-year, publicly funded colleges, realizing this imperative is particularly paradoxical. On the one hand, they are situated physically within the communities that support them politically and financially and from which their student bodies are drawn, suggesting a close symbiotic relationship that could easily lead to collaborative, high-impact civic engagement. On the other hand, competing agendas (including the necessary, seemingly constant, defense against eroding public dollars) tend to sideline non-integral “extras” -- like service-learning -- that are not viewed as a way of addressing the narrower mandate of readying students for employment and individual economic advancement. The public expects students to be trained well and
graduated quickly. As a result, while experiential learning (such as internships, apprenticeships, clinical and field work) is integral to the proscribed program curricula, the time and deliberation required by service-based, community-engaged learning that is co-created with community and democratic in nature is regarded as a distraction from the main event. In other words, while they owe their existence to the progressive tradition articulated by John Dewey in his powerful little book *Experience and Education* (1997/1938), they fail to live up to its transformative potential.

What is needed to realize this potential is for civic engagement to become a defining characteristic of colleges and universities, “not [with] more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction” (Saltmarsh et.al, 2009, p. 6). Ultimately, what is needed is courageous leadership and committed faculty who know that community-engaged teaching bolsters student achievement and governing boards and administrators who understand and support its broader purposes. This mission/vision commitment is the foundation for developing campus-community collaborations based on trust, communication, reciprocity, inclusivity, reflective evaluation, and power sharing which are the cornerstones of sustainable partnerships (Curwood et al., 2011). Within a context guided by these principles, practitioners committed to service-learning can confidently go about disrupting the classroom “borderland” between college and community, taking their students to places of new understandings derived from authentic experiences and critical dialogue while opening the college doors to its surrounding community (Ross, 2012).

What follows is a brief reflection on a basic writing course I taught for incoming first year students. Some of the questions that have arisen during my attempts to connect students to their community through service-learning are then offered in hopes that they can guide the critical conversations needed to move towards reaching the goals expressive above.

In the fall of 2008, with the certainty that veterans returning from Iraq would soon begin to fill classroom seats, I decided that my Basic Writing course should be a place where non-veterans could develop greater understanding and empathy for veterans’ war experiences. As a committed service-learning practitioner, I decided to begin my preparation for the semester by contacting Vets’ Place Central, a community-based multi-function organization, founded by members of the National Association of Black Veterans. I wanted to find out how students could support their work in helping veterans transition back into the community. The response was immediate, positive, and very simple -- too simple, I thought at the time -- but perfect for trust-building, I realize in retrospect. The plan was to enlist students’ help with the Annual Halloween Party put on by the vets for the kids of the surrounding inner-city community.

With that settled, I began to select readings and writing assignments that would allow my students to approach their service-learning with some knowledge, enthusiasm, and respect. Students who had never read a book, read and journaled about Tim O’Brien’s (1990 ), *The Things They Carried*, giving them opportunities to understand word choice and diction as
elements of writing. They read and responded to issues raised in excerpts from Erich Maria Remarque’s (1982/1929), *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s (1986/1977), *Ceremony*, practicing exemplification and description as modes of writing. At the same time, the students developed a questionnaire that they used as they traveled through the campus talking with other students who identified themselves as veterans; their purpose was to understand what student vets needed in the way of support from the college. These findings were ultimately summarized (another writing task) and presented to a college committee that was coming together around veterans’ issues. Additionally, students wrote letters of introduction to Vets’ Place Central and wrote up interviews with men and women they met on their day of service – a cold October Sunday. Final writing assignments had students develop a bibliography of sources on PTSD and write a persuasive essay in which they had to take a position on the question of Mandatory National Service.

Their take-away from all of this was that volunteering in the community (something most had never done before) not only benefited the community, but also enriched them. Some also appreciated the reading assignments. My conclusions were perhaps equally predictable: (a) students, given meaningful assignments, will engage willingly – even on a Sunday and even with a whole novel, and (b) trust begins simply, but transformative learning is complex and takes time. We disregarded class day and time schedules to meet the veterans where they were. But at the end of the semester, students moved on, I was assigned to other classes, and since the partnership had not been embraced institutionally whereby students could further develop it through other courses and disciplines,¹ the relationship with Vets’ Place Central that was just starting, ended. Attempts to bring its coordinator into the campus committee on veterans’ issues did not succeed due to a failure to understand how this relationship, begun in a service-learning class, could be an asset to the college as a whole.

To summarize, service-learning is not just an applied learning pedagogy that produces better student academic outcomes. It is a walk taken by teachers and their students from the classroom into the community that must, if it is to realize its democratic and transformative potential, be supported by college leadership who (a) recognize that students are the college’s representatives in the community and that the community can be their classroom; (b) elevate service-learning to more than one of many approaches to teaching and learning and instead allow its practice to define the college and its relationship with its neighbors; (c) provide time and other resources needed to ensure sustained and reciprocal partnerships; and (d) solicit community partners’ expertise to inform college initiatives, recognizing that, “Excessive homage to a narrow disciplinary guild and the presumption of neutrality has robbed the academy of its ability to effectively challenge society and seek change” (Saltmarsh et al., 2009, p.5).

A basic tenet of service-learning as we speak of it today is that student learning objectives and community impact objectives can both be met through well designed projects. So, we must ask:
1. How will service-learning projects be co-created by all partners so that both student learning and community advancement objectives will be met?

1. How should community interests be present in conversations concerning faculty and student presence in the community?

2. Are community representatives advisors or collaborating decision-makers?

3. How will faculty and students tap into the community’s knowledge about itself?

4. How should competing interests and issues be dealt with?

Another principle fundamental to the practice of service-learning is that knowledge of the community/community agency and its goals must come first when designing any project. Understanding the community, its people, its assets, its gaps, its competing interests and issues -- past as well as present -- is where the conceptualizing of specific activities begins.

1. What knowledge and skills will students need in order to understand how to think systemically, how to be effective contributors?

2. How will they be prepared to participate in service-learning activities that follow a “do-with” as opposed to “do-for” model?

3. What culturally and/or historically embedded processes (theirs and those of the community) should they be made aware of?

Clarifying purpose, roles, and resources is another necessary substantive discussion.

1. How should students and college resources be used to positively impact community?

2. What are the expectations each has of the other?

3. What is the limit of service/service-learning projects?

4. What are the means by which communities can sustain community-building?

5. How should students be engaged in community agency/community efforts to gain political power?

Among the “non-cognitive” learning outcomes which can and should be derived from service-learning are resilience, problem solving, adaptability and “grit,” a term used to speak of the self-efficacious attitude that leads to persistence (Jackson, 2012). The development of all of these life-skills involves risk-taking; not irresponsible risk-taking, but the kind that allows for students to fully immerse themselves in their learning context. When the community is the context, certain risks come with the territory. In the case of the Blue Bus, it was assumed that as college students, we were adults who could make informed decisions about how and where we wished to be educated. Today this respect is abrogated by college attorneys and insurance policies that act as barriers between the campus and the community, between intention and impact, between students and true experiential learning. Can’t other protections be conceived so that prudence does not end up preventing true partnership?

1. If college students’ other often risky behaviors are not monitored, much less disallowed by colleges, by what ‘in loco parentis’ thinking are they kept from achieving their own ostensible purpose for college – education?
2. If colleges provide students with complete and understandable course information (including the community engaged learning components), what part of informed consent have they failed at?

3. How should students be prepared to enter the community not just with eyes open, but with open hearts and hands as well?

Service-learning that connects university and college students with communities and their people begins with trust. In this regard faculty leadership is critical.

1. How should faculty be prepared in order to guide their students not just through the content of their course but into the community in which that content will hopefully come alive and even take on a new life?

2. What should be expected of faculty as college representatives and as researchers in terms of reporting, publishing?

3. How should engaged faculty be compensated for revising courses guided by the pedagogy of service-learning, for attending off-campus meetings?

4. Should their work be recognized towards tenure?

5. Should they be rewarded with release time, salary differentials?

In settings which are unfamiliar to students because of geography or demography, trust and negotiating difference takes time -- a lot of listening, setting aside of assumptions, and guidance. It is inhibited by the structures, schedules, and fears of universities and colleges and their insurance providers, all of which fail to acknowledge the real-time of life as it exists in the communities with which they propose to connect student learning. The development of community trust and student efficacy both take time, the kind of time that can not be delimited by an academic semester.

1. How can student continuity within a community/community agency be supported by course offerings that span semesters or across disciplines?

2. How can faculty interested in this community-focused curriculum design be supported by their departments and administrators?

Leaders are needed to ask these provocative questions and provide the intellectual and moral rudder in the discussions that ensue; discussions which are ultimately about institutional purpose and philosophy. Boldness will be required. All voices should be included. Where we’ve been can inform the steps we take moving forward. The future of service-learning must be founded on an audacious commitment to doing “what we can with what we’ve got.”

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References


