Community based service-learning: Partnerships of reciprocal exchange?

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Community based service-learning (CBSL) integrates experiential learning and academic goals with organised service activities designed to meet the objectives of community partners (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Although research remains inconclusive regarding the benefits of student outcomes, CBSL has been endowed with the potential to enhance (1) academic learning, (2) foster civic responsibility, (3) develop life skills and (4) transform student attitudes (Eyler, 2002). However, there is little research to support claims that benefits are mutual amongst host counterparts (Edwards et al., 2001; Ward & Wolf-Wendell, 2000). A lack of empirical research into community partner conceptualisations of best practice approaches, outcomes and impacts, not only reflects a uni-dimensional understanding of the mutuality of programs, but fails to challenge dominant power relations embedded in traditionally uneven partnerships. It remains problematic to engage with service-learning without considering underlying neo-colonialist ideologies that continue to permeate the ways community service, international development, and volunteering are defined and practiced. If CBSL builds upon reciprocity and collaborative partnerships, it follows that research practice should adopt similar principles. Drawing on development discourse and practice, this paper provides a critical review of the CBSL literature. First, this paper will demonstrate how closely intertwined CBSL is with contemporary development agendas; second, bring attention to the absence of partner perspectives and partner involvement within CBSL studies; and third, outline a CBSL research agenda.

Keywords: Community based Service-learning, reciprocity, mutual-benefit, community development, international service-learning, community-based research

Introduction

The institutional enthusiasm surrounding the potential for CBSL to transform both learning and teaching, has seen the expansion of service-learning activities in Higher Education and an increase in community-campus partnerships over the last two decades (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). The increased growth of the service-learning phenomenon mirrors the increased popularity of student volunteerism within the local and global community (Mooney & Edwards, 2001). These two movements have been traced historically through time, however little attention has been given to their intersection within the development arena. This is despite the rise of public participation in social, environmental, economic and community development initiatives.

This paper uses a development lens to reframe service-learning theory and practice as a way to analyse power relations embedded within CBSL partnerships. A development perspective brings to the surface the often hidden, but deeply embedded ideologies that inform service-learning, also evident within community development and international volunteering. This paper focuses on CBSL programs that combine international travel, cultural exchange, academic credit and learning objectives with service activities designed to assist the priorities of community partners1. Such programs are distinguished from other service-learning initiatives by their intentional engagement with issues of social justice, oppression, poverty and inequality (Jones, 2002).

In the context of CBSL the legacy of colonialism pervades any attempt to collaborate, participate and interact. The hierarchies and binaries between the researcher and researched, and community and campus are so evident within the body of CBSL research that it does not reflect the current collaborative practice with which it advocates (Stocker, 2009a). Furthermore, a continuing bias toward research into student-learning goals, to the exclusion of any consideration of community development outcomes, means little is known if programs support community partner interests (Stoecker & Tyron: 2009). As such, this paper will 1) demonstrate how closely intertwined CBSL is with contemporary development agendas; 2) bring attention to the absence of community partner perspectives and involvement within CBSL studies; and 3) outline a CBSL research agenda.

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1 For the purpose of this paper, ‘community partner’ refers to those who are external to the university and are either actively involved with (e.g. as members of community-based NGO’s), or influenced by CBSL activities.
**International service-learning for development**

Combining international travel with voluntary developmental service is by no means a recent concept. Developmental volunteering in its earliest form can be traced back to early missionary movements and the commencement of long-term United States Peace Corp projects in the 1960’s. Only in recent years has it been characterised by the rapid expansion of specifically short-term, organised student/volunteer programs (Enriches, 2000). Government and non-government organisations and more recently university institutions have encouraged public participation in community development programs in areas such as poverty reduction, business development, community work, environmental preservation, and cultural exchange (Lewis, 2005). International service-learning (ISL) programs and international development interventions are intimately connected, not only by the type of work (i.e. construction, education and healthcare) but by their aspiration to intervene and ‘make a difference’ to the lives of others (Crabtree, 2008; Mountz et al., 2008).

In response to the overly Eurocentric nature of top-down economic models to development, and to address concerns of unequal power relations created and sustained through such approaches, current thinking within alternative development has been concerned with participatory and people-centred approaches (Sanderson & Kindon, 2004). Arguments in support of participatory development are numerous and are predicated on the belief that such strategies are more likely to meet the needs of primary beneficiaries by giving them a voice and encouraging empowerment through inclusion (Cook & Kothari, 2001). However, in practice, such an approach has become anything but unproblematic and has come under increased scrutiny in its believed failure to transform and redistribute power relations (Cornwall, 2006).

Relationships of power are particularly apparent in debates around the highly problematic concept of participation. Participation can be a mechanism for empowerment, but can also be a mechanism for rendering the ‘poor’ even more powerless by an agenda that was not theirs to begin with (Chambers, 2005). In a colonial context of dominance, invasion and intervention, service-learning could be viewed as a “conscious intervention” that promotes change (or disturbance) within highly complex and potentially vulnerable contexts (Butin, 2010, pp.18–19). Conceptualisations of service-learning are historically intertwined with imperialistic ideology. Cruz (1990, p.322) for example reflects:

…I resist the notion of service learning for U.S. students in the Philippines, my country of origin, because I think it perpetuates a “colonial mentality” among Filipinos and a kind of “manifest destiny” among U.S. students. To my way of thinking, the results of the history of U.S. dominance in the Philippines is so overwhelming that it is almost impossible for a U.S. student doing what is regarded on both sides as “service” not to deliver a message of superiority.

Development practice and international aid can easily, unintentionally, and sometimes unquestionably replicate forms of neo-colonialism (Kahn, 2011). Although, contemporary development practice attempts to distinguish itself from the dominant development archetype by creating ‘bottom-up’ change that is collaborative, responsive and empowering to those who participate, discourses of colonialism remain apparent. However, given the strong intersection between international development, volunteering and ISL activities, it is alarming that an analysis of service-learning within an international context has been relatively ignored (Crabtree, 2008). One exception is Bringle, Hatcher and Jones’ (2011) edited book titled ‘International service-learning’ where only one contribution (see Kahn) focuses on ISL and its interception with neo-colonialist discourse, international aid agendas and dominant development paradigms. Furthermore, little to no attention has been given to international community partner perspectives (notable exceptions being Comacho, 2004; Porter & Monard, 2001). Scant research into ISL fails to recognise that 1) imperialist attitudes remain within the frameworks with which it originated and 2) service-learning still needs to undergo a process of decolonisation (Kahn, 2011). This is especially important considering the dominant and perpetual discourse of Western concepts of development and aid as unidirectional pathways to progress; a model which community engagement as a reciprocal exchange process is attempting to redefine.

**Myth of mutual-benefit**

The term engagement made a prominent appearance in the 1990’s with the renewed vision of ‘service’ as more collaborative and equitable. The term was used to symbolise the two-way exchange process between campus and community (Carnegie, 2006; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). Although much confusion remains centred around how to conceptualise CBSL, most definitions incorporate what Butin (2003) refers to as the four Rs – respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection. The role of reciprocity in the service-learning relationship in particular has received much scholarly attention with many (see Kendall, 1990; Porter & Monard, 2001;
Robinson & Green, 2011; Simons & Clearly, 2006) highlighting mutual benefit as a defining feature of service-learning theory and practice.

However, critics of service-learning, question claims of mutual benefit (see Cruz & Giles, 2000; Stoecker & Tyron, 2009; Butin, 2003; Kendall, 1990; Oldfield, 2008) and of the transformative learning potential of service-learning for both students and community partners (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Recently Oldfield (2008, p.270) restated that much “research proceeds with the assumption that projects can be mutually beneficial, but without an empirical or conceptual analysis of how this mutuality is constituted.” Others (such as Camacho, 2004; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008), challenge the notion of mutuality by suggesting it acts as a way of disguising relations of power, or question whether the concept of engagement is a marketing strategy more “symbolic than substantive” (Weerts & Sandermann, 2008, pp.99-100). Critics also conclude that service-learning programs exploit communities for free education (Eby, 1998); represent dominant charity models which are paternalistic in approach and reinforce the stereotype of communities as helpless (Brown, 2001; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000); and are beset by partnerships with communication issues (Birdshall, 2005; Jones, 2003) and cultural differences (Bacon, 2002; Jones, 2003). Indeed, service-learning may not result in mutually beneficial exchanges, and in some cases might result in adverse affects for community partners.

Against this backdrop, there have been renewed calls to revisit the concept of reciprocity as it is dominantly understood within service-learning (see Henry & Breyfogle, 2006). For example, Porter and Monard (2001, p.1) suggest, rather than viewing reciprocity as a “hand-up” (as opposed to a hand-out), view it as a “hand to” in an attempt to “nurture mutuality by fostering respect and collaboration”. Fox (2002, p.7) even suggests focusing on “learning as a form of service rather than on learning by way of service” to emphasise the importance of reciprocal learning as a key objective, outcome and mode of service exchange. This is a counter response to a service model which sets up undeliverable project outcomes, and in support of the notion that the sharing and exchange of ideas can lead to a level of cultural understanding that bridges current cultural divides (Porter & Monard, 2001). However, if learning is seen as a reciprocal exchange, it is also important to understand what community partners learn, how they learn, and whether there are any transformative impacts for them. This is not to suggest (although perhaps traditionally the case) that all Higher Education institutions adopt the role of expert or charity model that sees them doing for communities, as opposed to a doing with perspective. However, the neglect of academia to recognise the role of ‘community’ fails to shift the paradigm to one that focuses more on community and questions the bigger Western discourse of development and aid as unidirectional (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000; Porter & Monard, 2001).

**Promoting collaborative inquiry**

The lack of research to support claims that programs result in mutually beneficial learning and engagement, and actively contribute to 'positive' social change can be attributed to the under-representation of community partner perspectives within academic research. In 2000, Cruz and Giles (2000, p.28) warned that service-learning literature was “almost devoid of research that looks at the community either as a dependant or independent variable”, and over a decade later the field remains largely the same. This trend has been attributed to the ongoing and contentious debate around what constitutes ‘community’ (Cruz & Giles, 2000; Sandy & Holland, 2006). Although an important question, it appears the lack of research on, and more importantly from, community perspectives has been deduced to the theoretical and methodological challenges that surround the notion and nature of community.

The empirical research that does examine community partner impacts and perceptions refer, in most cases, to the directors, supervisors, and other related staff of community partner organisations, but do not include wider ‘community’ members who may also be influenced by service-learning programs. Furthermore, the majority of such studies use survey tools and follow-up interviews on partner (i.e. supervisor) satisfaction with students, community-campus partnerships and overall service performance, and conclude that community partners are relatively satisfied with service-learning programs and with the students that participate in them (see Edwards et al., 2001; Ferarri &Worrall, 2000; Ward & Vernon, 1999). Of particular significance, however, is the absence of community participation in formulating study measures and survey instruments. It remains unclear whether criteria used to measure responses are appropriate to assess CBSL if they have not been involved in their formulation (Reardon: 1998).

Host communities are increasingly seen as co-educators, but are yet to be recognised as collaborators of inquiry. If the practice of service-learning is to be built upon the foundations of reciprocity and collaborative partnerships, it follows that research practice should adopt similar underlying principles. In response, some commentators (Crabtree, 2008; Mountz et al., 2008; Reardon, 1998; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker, 2009a,
2009b; Stoecker et al., 2010; Tyron and Stoecker, 2008) have sought wider influence from post colonial, feminist and participatory action based approaches to inform alternative community-based research (CBR) methodologies that engage community partners as partners in the research and CBSL process.

CBR is an umbrella term for a diverse range of methodologies that centre around three concepts as outlined by Minkler (2005): 1) participation; 2) research; and 3) action. Alternative approaches to research, such as CBR, participatory action research, feminist community research, and post colonial research, all attempt to bring the forefront the voices of those often excluded in knowledge production and decision making. Stoecker et al. (2010) and Tyron and Stoecker (2008) highlight the importance of community consultation in social research, and in representing the diverse priorities of participants. These examples demonstrate how research participants can be involved throughout the research process, from question formulation, research design and data generation, through to data analysis, interpretation and the delivery of project outcomes. Crabtree (2008, p.26) suggests:

These alternative paradigms can inform ISL with a set of values, a language of critique, principles, and guidelines for appropriate collaboration and participation, and the shared goals of reciprocity, mutual empowerment, and social change.

This approach to research is most likely to effectively address questions regarding community involvement as it supports the action oriented aspect of research that not only seeks to understand and represent diverse perspectives, but use partner recommendations to inform and strengthen Higher Education service-learning practice (Stoecker, 2009a).

Conclusion

Viewing CBSL through a development lens offers a way of reframing some of the issues identified within service-learning theory, bringing to the forefront new ways of thinking, understanding, and researching service-learning practice. To decolonise service-learning, academics and practitioners need to recognise the modernist ideologies underpinning the conceptualisation of service-learning. This involves re-imaging service-learning in a way that incorporates the historically unheard voices of community partners whose engagement with students allow the enterprise to function (Camacho, 2004; Stoecker & Tyron, 2009).

Claims of mutuality, reciprocity and joint participation are not enough to fill gaps in the current literature and lack of community partner involvement in the research process. Despite service-learning being defined as collaboratively oriented, as a method of enquiry, CBR methodologies have not been adopted by service-learning as a way of strengthening relationships between the community and campus. This is particularly perplexing considering the increased call for universities and communities to share and create knowledge that contributes not only towards developing socially and environmentally conscious students, but the overall well-being of people and the planet.

Colonial histories continue to shape research practice, relationships of power, the production, control and ownership of knowledge, ideas of truth, and the representation of others (Frisby & Creese, 2011). Existing studies that examine service-learning from a uni-dimensional perspective, fail to address the potential lack of community impact, knowledge transfer and empowerment. Current research needs to move beyond assumptions that community participants are involved in an equally beneficial and reciprocal exchange process with students and Higher Educational institutions and start reflecting this within research and practice. Without the voices of community partners, research cannot sufficiently address ‘how’ the practice of service-learning can result in mutually beneficial exchange for all those involved. As a result, service-learning should continue to be critiqued for its politically contentious nature, especially considering it attempts to challenge power inequality and positions of privilege with no acknowledgment of its deep historical entrenchment. Only then can community-based service-learning become considered a partnership of reciprocal exchange.

References


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