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Integrating Service Learning and Multicultural Education in Colleges and Universities

Edited by
Carolyn R. O'Grady

Gustavus Adolphus College



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FOREWORD

Sonia Nieto

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Years ago, our younger daughter, Marisa, then about 11 years old, was taking part in an organized walk to raise money for an organization that brings young men from urban areas to attend our local high school. I remember someone saying to me, "Oh, it's great that she's learning to do charity work so young."

At first taken aback by the term, I realized that in a particular frame of reference, "charity work" was exactly what Marisa was doing. But I had not thought of it in this way. The term *charity* has always bothered me because it implies a detached beneficence that comes from privilege. Civic obligation is missing in charity work. Similarly, there is no sense of civic responsibility in some conceptions of community service learning.

Community service: the very phrase conjures up images of doing good deeds in impoverished, disadvantaged (primarily Black and Brown) communities by those (mostly White people) who are wealthier and more privileged. The parenthetical terms are seldom expressly mentioned in community service because they make some professors and students uncomfortable, exposing the inequalities around them too explicitly. There is a feeling of noblesse oblige in community service, of doing something to feel righteous, to "do my part." This book challenges the perception of community service as charity, replacing it with the notion of civic responsibility in a pluralistic but unequal society.

What exactly is community service learning? What is its place in colleges and universities, particularly those in or near communities in need? At the heart of these questions is the issue of difference. One cannot help but notice, for instance, that the primary recipients of community service are those who society has deemed disadvantaged in some way, be it through their social class, race, ethnicity, ability, or any combination of these. Those who do community service at colleges and universities, on the other hand, are generally young people who have

more advantages than those they are serving. This being the case, concerns about racism and other biases, injustice, oppression, and unearned privilege should figure prominently in discussions of community service. Yet, a framework of social justice is missing in much of the work that has up to now been done in community service learning.

I have been waiting for a book like this for a long time. As a multicultural educator, I have been skeptical of service learning for some of the reasons I have already mentioned. For years I have incorporated some aspect of service learning in my courses, and I was one of the first faculty members at my campus to develop a semester-long community service learning course. But I have not fully embraced it because, despite my best efforts, I have found it difficult to dislodge the perception that community service is missionary work. This book has given me a framework with which to approach this predicament, and I know it will do the same for other educators interested in using community service learning with a critical multicultural lens.

The editor and chapter authors of this book have taken on an immense challenge: to integrate community service learning with multicultural education so that together they inform and redefine one another. It is an awesome task. It means diving headlong into turbulent ideological waters concerning such issues as difference, meritocracy, unequal access to power, and the very purpose of education. By embedding community service learning within the discourse of democracy, social justice, and equality, they have dared our society to live up to its lofty but unfulfilled promises.

The learning in community service is taken seriously by the authors in this book. The editor does an admirable job of framing community service learning and multicultural education as potentially transformative processes and philosophical positions. The chapter authors provide numerous poignant examples of their failures and successes, and of the inherent problems in attempting to affect both the academy and their students through community service learning. Not simply content with immersing students in service for its own sake, they are committed as well to upsetting students' taken-for-granted assumptions about society and about the people with whom they interact in their community service experiences. They ask students to identify cultural and political problems that develop during their service experience, and to ponder why this might be so. They force students to think deeply about what it means to live in a democratic society, and about the links among race, class,

gender, and poverty in the United States. The authors in this book help their students mostly White and economically privileged to move beyond their stereotypical notions of difference to an understanding of the

structural and deep-seated inequities in our society. In doing so, they also move community service learning from a human relations approach to a more transformative model of civic conscience. It is this stance that helps shift community service learning from an individual feel-good experience to a social responsibility.

Caring cannot be taught. This is especially true in courses that focus solely on the head, removing social issues to the sphere of intellectual problems. But caring can be modeled, and community service learning is one of the few places in the academy where this is most likely to happen. Unfortunately, even in community service learning courses, the notion of caring is often perceived only as an individual concern for the "unfortunate" and "underprivileged," and this perception does little to confront the institutionalized nature of inequality. But when an ethic of care is modeled within a framework of inquiry about broad-based inequality and oppression, as O'Grady has done in this book, the potential to change hearts as well as heads is enhanced. Given the increasing diversity in our society and the growing economic disparities between the haves and have-nots, this is a particularly important challenge for our nation at the beginning of the 21st century.

PREFACE

Attention in higher education to the fields of service learning and multicultural education has exploded since the late 1980s, with more colleges and universities requiring graduation requirements focusing on diversity issues, or on community service, or on both. However, little has been done by theorists or practitioners in either field to make explicit connections between the two pedagogies, a surprising lack for two approaches that share so many fundamental perspectives on education and society. This book is an attempt to forge a dialogue among practitioners of service learning and of multicultural education, and points the way toward promising means of integrating the best of each.

The changes in our nation's demographics as well as the ongoing debate about educational reform make a dialogue about service learning and multicultural education especially important at this time. Although there is no panacea for the troubles that beset our society and our schools, the stronger the coalitions that are forged among those working for educational change, the more effective and long-lasting that change will be. This book offers one avenue for creating connections between multicultural education and service learning practitioners who are at the forefront of educational change efforts. Higher education faculty, administrators, or staff who are involved with or interested in service learning, community-school partnerships, multicultural education, and/or diversity initiatives will find this book particularly valuable in providing theoretical underpinnings for the integration of service learning and multicultural education, with practical approaches for this integration.

The impetus for this book stems from my commitment to multicultural education for social justice. This approach is described in more detail in chapter 1 and is marked not only by cognitive learning, but also incorporates an activist component that I believe is best met through service learning. This approach provides not only a better educational experience for all students, but also builds their capacity for active citizenship to change the world for the better.

Academic study alone reveals only a surface understanding of the complexity of another culture (Berry, 1990). However, practical community-based experience alone is also insufficient, allowing for easy dismissal of a culture

by those who focus only on perceived weak-

nesses rather than on strengths of diverse communities and who attempt to "fix" a "needy" community. Service learning without a focused attention to the complexity of racial and cultural difference can reinforce dominant hegemonic cultural ideology, but academic work that seeks to deconstruct these norms regarding race and culture without providing a community-based touchstone isolates students and schools from the realities of the larger communities of which they are a part. The argument of this book is that academic study in multicultural education must be combined with community-based service experiences that explicitly reinforce this critical approach. This fusion provides the most compelling learning experiences for students and, ultimately, the most potential for creating evolutionary social change.

Lest I sound hopelessly naive and optimistic, let me stress that I believe this kind of change happens slowly and incrementally. Often the seeds that are sown to create change take more than a lifetime to mature. Welch (1990) pointed out that it is typical of White, middle-class change agents to expect change to happen quickly. Many of us become easily discouraged when our vision of how things could be seems far from actualized. This loss of hope is debilitating and creates a sense of powerlessness and apolitical apathy. The result is despair, and withdrawal from any attempt at trying to make a difference. The challenge to work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and unrelenting social crises means we must sustain hope, even when there is no convincing guarantee that change will occur.

Such a situation calls for an ethic of risk, an ethic that begins with the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes in the near future or even in our lifetime. The ethic of risk is propelled by the equally vital recognition that to stop resisting, even when success is unimaginable, is to die. (Welch, 1990, p. 20)

This commitment to "making the effort" is what is called for in a multicultural education approach that is integrated with the activism of service learning. Such an approach includes enabling all students (not only those who are "culturally different") to see the world through a variety of perspectives. The academic rigor of multicultural education in tandem with service learning requires students to examine taken-for-granted assumptions and to think critically and comprehensively about human issues that are basic to the quality of human life. The complexity of human existence requires the ability

to view the world from multiple perspectives. Rhoads (1997) points out that higher education should prepare people for their life's work, but even more, it should develop people who "are willing to seek understanding

about others within their communities, their country, and around the world" (p. 208).

The chapters that follow provide varied perspectives into the benefits and challenges of integrating multicultural education and service learning. Although each of the authors included in this text approach service learning and multicultural education from slightly different perspectives, they all are committed to a vision of education that synthesizes both action and reflection. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the fields of service learning and multicultural education and a rationale for their integration in higher education. This chapter introduces several themes with which practitioners of service learning and multicultural education must grapple, including the meaning of "community" within the context of a social justice service learning pedagogy, the politics of service learning and multicultural education, the implications of these approaches in a democratic nation, and the moral imperative of educating for social justice. In chapters 2 through 6, the authors expand on these themes in order to lay the theoretical groundwork for the specific models described in Part II. Chapters 7 through 13 present reports from the field, actual ways in which the integration of service learning and multicultural education has or has not been successful. These chapters provide rich material for considering both the strengths and challenges of multicultural service learning in education. Finally, in Part III, chapters 14 and 15 consider from two perspectives the imperative need for the integration of service learning and multicultural education.

None of the authors in this book pretend to have all the answers for what this integration should look like, nor do they believe that today's social problems are easily ameliorated through education. Rather, these authors share theories, practices, failures, and triumphs in order to further our conversation about the importance of aligning what educators *say* about the world with how we *act* in and on it. These authors share the view that multicultural education is truly transformative for students only when it includes a community action component, and likewise, service learning is truly a catalyst for change only when it is done from a multicultural and socially just perspective. It is our hope that the ideas explored in this book will further the work of those who share a commitment to the integration of action and reflection.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to the individuals who contributed to this book, both for engaging in this conversation with me on a public front, and for their commitment to enacting their vision for education against all the odds. Special thanks go to friends and colleagues who encouraged this pro-

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CAROLYN O'GRADY

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Integrating Service Learning and Multicultural Education: An Overview

Carolyn O'Grady
Gustavus Adolphus College

I first heard the term *multicultural education* in 1986 when I signed up for a graduate course in what would become the winding road toward a doctorate in that field. By the time I took this course, my understanding of "culture" had expanded considerably beyond where it had been when I grew up in Idaho in the 1950s. I had lived for several years in New York City, and not long before taking the class, I had returned from more than 15 months of travel outside the United States. By 1986, I had learned through experience that there were a lot of different kinds of people in the world, and that my White, middle-class upbringing was not the "norm" for everyone. I had also begun to realize that some of the attitudes I had toward others whom I perceived as different from myself were based on prejudices I had absorbed growing up or had believed without examination (O'Grady, 1999). From the beginning, the theory and practice of multicultural education helped me make sense of the life experiences I had had, and reflect more critically on how my schooling had educated and miseducated me about the world.

In my very first multicultural education class, we participated as a group in an antiapartheid rally. This was the first time I had ever been asked to take my learning outside the classroom and apply it in some community-based context. I have forgotten much of the reading we did in that class, but I will never forget the experiential component. I did not realize it at the time, but my participation in the rally bore similarities to more intentional service learning activities.

I first heard the term *service learning* in 1990 when I became friends with a teacher who was very involved in implementing service learning practices in education. Despite my positive reaction to the more experiential component of my multicultural education class, however, I initially dismissed the concept of service learning. Quite frankly, at the time it struck me as a nice way for well-intentioned White people to feel good about "helping" others. I had a hard time at first distinguishing the concept of service learning from that of volunteerism, and I knew nothing of the relevance service has historically had for many cultural groups. When I came to the college where I now teach, I was challenged by our then service learning director to view service learning as a vehicle for social justice. In collaboration with her, I began to research service learning and to implement it in my own classroom teaching. The results were mixed (O'Grady & Chappell, 1999), but the outcome was that I began to see the ways in which service learning and multicultural education had powerful theories and methods to offer each other.

My own experience in integrating service learning and multicultural education has led me to understand some of the challenges involved, but also how imperative it is for each approach to incorporate aspects of the other. To teach about multicultural issues from a theoretical perspective *without* incorporating a service learning component only widens the theory-practice split articulated by Gay (1995). However, this integration is problematic without both an understanding of the fundamental theories in each field and an analysis of the significant issues raised by such an integration. Points of convergence, as well as points of tension, are explored in this chapter as well as in those that follow.

Education as Contested Territory

Before continuing, it is necessary to pause and remind ourselves of the contested nature of education. Education has always been "contested territory," with conflicting and divergent interests competing for dominance. The history of public education in the United States is filled with conflicting demands over what should be taught, how, and by whom. Nieto (1996) described schooling as "a dynamic process in which competing interests and values are at work every day in complex and often contradictory ways" (p. 8). A key difference between service learning and multicultural education is that the latter grew out of an explicitly political movement for civil rights and is often accused of having a political agenda. This does not mean, however, that