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Designing Service-Learning to Enhance Social Justice Commitments: A Critical Reflection Tool

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Designing Service-Learning to Enhance Social Justice Commitments: A Critical Reflection Tool

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The interlocking crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing state violence—both of which disproportionately affect Black Americans and people of color—have intensified questioning of how higher education can contribute to dismantling systemic injustices. Practitioner-scholars continue to assert that commitments to democratic citizenship and social justice should more deeply inform higher education (e.g., Delbanco, 2012; Harkavy, 2006; Thompson, 2014) and experiential education (e.g., Warren, 2019). For the purpose of this article, we define social justice as the equitable distribution of economic, political, and social rights, opportunities, and power. To support practitioner-scholars who seek to promote social justice, we introduce an action-oriented critical reflection design tool; while this tool was developed for service-learning in particular, we believe it is relevant to other forms of experiential education as well.

Although specific definitions vary, there is broad consensus that service-learning engages students, community members, staff, and instructors in co-creating strategies that integrate academic material, community-engaged activities, and critical reflection to advance both learning and social change (Bringle & Clayton, 2021; Furco & Norvell, 2019; Jacoby, 2015). Service-learning is one experiential pedagogy among many—including internships, field research, clinical placements, and practice teaching—that integrate

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active reflection on lived experience to facilitate knowledge construction and skill development. Although more explicitly framed in terms of education for democracy than for social justice per se, Dewey’s (1937, 2010) critique of didactic teaching called educators to engage students as actors, not audience, in their education. Dewey emphasized that students need not only to participate in but also to exercise power in teaching and learning, and his analysis gave rise to a suite of experiential education pedagogies. This early framing of experiential education—grounded in and committed to shared power—supports the current movement to deepen service-learning’s enactment of social justice.

Like in experiential learning, contemporary calls for an explicit social justice focus within service-learning (e.g., Augustine et al., 2017) build on a long, albeit inconsistent, presence of such commitments among practitioner-scholars. According to some of the pioneers of service-learning, social justice was one of the pedagogy’s intended outcomes since its founding (Shumer, 2017; Stanton et al., 1999). In the decades prior to the establishment of service-learning as a pedagogy within higher education, African American women and educators actualized community service agendas to influence social change and provided philosophical precursors for the pedagogy (Stevens, 2003). The growth of service-learning also builds on historic interest among

college students in social movements and civic action, with their promise of equitable engagement, intentional examination of power, and reciprocal impact (Kendall & Associates, 1990). Service-learning's early connections to servant leadership emphasized mutual growth through transformational relationships (Greenleaf, 1970; Sigmon, 1979). Freirean thought and other forms of reflexive and dialectic theory brought to the pedagogy the understanding that to surmount oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes (Deans, 1999; Freire, 1990).

It has been suggested, however, that in service-learning's founding texts, "people of color enter the historical narrative as either largely absent (if the focus is on scholars, practitioners, and students) or as the recipients of service" (Bocci, 2015, p. 10). According to Kowal (2020), despite naming a commitment to social justice, the pioneers of service-learning "fail to associate the challenges that racial division, political unrest, and systemic poverty played in the formation of the field" (p. 164). Enactment of social justice within service-learning is complicated because it has not been a universal aspiration or intended outcome among practitioner-scholars. Morton (1995) established that working toward systems change was only one of three primary paradigms of service-learning (the others being acts of charity and collaborative service projects). Whether due to conflicting ideological underpinnings or inadequate implementation in practice, service-learning has long been criticized for perpetuating inequitable social hierarchies, teaching simplistic understandings of solutions to social problems, and failing to equip students with the social change skills they need to advance social justice (Eby, 1998; Mitchell & Latta, 2020; Stewart & Webster, 2010). Many of these critiques of service-learning are echoed by scholars about other forms of experiential education as a privileged set of pedagogies that maintain the status quo and reproduce dominant power relations (Browne et al., 2019; Rose & Paisley, 2012).

In response to these critiques, "critical service-learning" orients service-learning toward developing critical consciousness and dismantling structures of inequality. Through analysis, dialogue, and discussion, participants in well-designed critical service-learning experiences "question and problematize the status quo" and collaborate to "bring society closer to justice" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 56, 62). Mitchell's critical service-learning framework specifically calls for redistributing power among students, instructors, and community members; nurturing authentic relationships; and incorporating a deliberate orientation toward social change with the goal "to deconstruct systems

of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled" (p. 50).

Given these purposes, designing educational experiences that speak to historic and contemporary social justice issues can be a significant challenge. To aid in the design process, our team created a reflection-based tool on aligning service-learning and experiential education practices with social justice. In the next section, *Line of Inquiry*, we articulate and briefly explore the key underlying question: "What actionable steps can service-learning practitioners take to more effectively orient service-learning toward social justice?" In *Description of the Practice*, we introduce readers to the reflection tool by summarizing and illustrating how it employs action-oriented statements to help align design of service-learning with social justice and critical service-learning principles. The *Productive Tensions* section that follows examines tensions that arose within our working group as we co-developed the tool and co-authored this article—illuminating some of the challenges associated with walking the talk of enacting shared commitments to justice. The tensions we experienced offer a microcosm that reflects the ongoing evolution of service-learning, of experiential education, and of work to advance social justice more broadly. Therefore, we frame them as questions for reflection and future inquiry. The purpose of this article and of the reflection tool itself is to contribute to the ongoing development of service-learning and experiential education principles and practices in ways that explicitly encourage critical consciousness and the redistribution of power towards more life-giving and liberatory futures.

Line of Inquiry

Conscious planning and effort are required to align service-learning with social justice and lead students—indeed, all collaborators in the process—to examine their political agency and social justice commitments (Clifford, 2017). In our work with service-learning faculty and staff at several institutions, instructors have reported that despite their interest in critical service-learning, they struggle with the choices and trade-offs in designing their courses accordingly. Our reflection tool aims to provide some element of guidance and accountability as collaborators—the term we use in the tool to encompass all participants and to position them as full partners—recalibrate relationships and shift practices.

To become critical service-learning practitioners, collaborators must build structural competency to both understand and intervene in the systems that

shape individual action and opportunities. Coined in the clinical setting, the term “structural competency” refers to understanding “how culture and structure are mutually co-implicated in producing stigma and inequality” (Metzl & Hansen, 2014, p. 6). For example, collaborators must operate with an awareness that “the mere option of being able to take part in service-learning in a university context already creates a hierarchical relationship” (Santiago-Ortiz, 2019, p. 45). Without critical investigation into the ways higher education structures and systems shape the pedagogy (e.g., Fine, 2016), service-learning can reinforce neoliberal values of “personal over collective agency” and can treat “public life and democracy as extensions of the marketplace” (Morton & Bergbauer, 2015, p. 19; Stewart & Webster, 2010). Dedicating effort to build authentic relationships between service-learning collaborators can limit the artificial homogenization of participants and their various communities, yet the cultivation of such relationships can be challenging within the structural and cultural norms and constraints of the academy. Collaborators in service-learning can problematize and push back on such norms and constraints through, for example, adopting asset-based approaches to engagement (da Cruz, 2017). An asset-based approach shifts blame for social problems away from individuals—locating causes of injustice within structures and enshrined systems of power and reducing barriers for students whose identities may be connected to communities otherwise framed as “those served” (Hickmon, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). Such a critical orientation to the processes, relationships, assumptions, and intended outcomes of service-learning, however, is often counter-normative. Given the student development mission of higher education, service-learning programs and research have focused “more attention on the learning and development of students than on development and change in communities” (Mitchell, 2007, p. 103). Moreover, some faculty worry that critical interventions can disrupt more “relevant” content learning and can, in turn, have negative effects on tenure or promotion (Cooper, 2014).

Consequently, the critical service-learning literature calls for instructors to reflect on their own positionality and partnerships through a critical self-assessment lens (Butin, 2015; Latta et al., 2018). Such reflection is necessary because pre-existing biases and stereotypes may limit the ability of service-learning collaborators to dismantle discrimination in and outside the classroom, especially when pursuing social justice in communities that are primarily low-income, Black, Indigenous, or people of color (Mitchell, 2007;

Pratt et al., 2017). Given these needs and challenges and with intentional focus on critical reflection as well as grounding in service-learning, social justice, and community-organizing literature, our reflection tool responds to the question: What actionable steps can service-learning practitioners take to orient service-learning more effectively toward social justice?

Description of the Practice

In 2016, students, staff, and faculty associated with Duke Service-Learning created a “Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool” to support the implementation of critical pedagogy and advance social justice in service-learning courses (Stith et al., 2018). During the 2020-2021 academic year, an expanded working group revised that original version of the tool to include emergent thinking in the field as well as feedback from multiple conference sessions during which we shared our work. Developed for experiential education and service-learning practitioners with any level of familiarity with critical theory, Duke’s Critical Service-Learning Reflection Tool is a reflection and planning instrument. The tool is intended to support all collaborators (i.e., instructors, students, staff, community members) in reflecting critically on their service-learning design and implementation and setting actionable goals that move their practices beyond performative, discursive, or tokenistic commitments to social justice.

The tool includes statements grouped into five themes: *Reckoning with Systems*, *Authentic Relationships*, *Redistribution of Power*, *Equitable Classrooms & Cognitive Justice*, and *Social Change Skills*. We developed the five themes from reading the critical service-learning literature and from our own experiences with community-engaged pedagogies. Three themes are based on the framework for critical service-learning established by Mitchell (2008): *Authentic Relationships*, *Redistribution of Power*, and *Social Change Skills* (originally, “Social Change Orientation”). The theme *Equitable Classrooms & Cognitive Justice* originated from our engagement with critiques of service-learning as a pedagogy of whiteness (e.g., Mitchell, 2012), and the theme *Reckoning with Systems* emerged from our engagement with the concept of structural competency (e.g., Metzl, 2014).

In developing and refining the Critical Service-Learning Conversations Tool, we aimed to be intentional in our use of language. For example, throughout the statements, instructors, community partners, students, and other stakeholders are referred to as “collaborators” to emphasize that all participants are to be positioned as co-educators, co-learners,

and co-generators of knowledge and practice in service-learning that enacts commitments to democratic engagement and social justice. We tried to minimize potential challenges associated with the use of jargon—for example, limitations on accessibility for all users—without diluting the intentions of critical concepts and without losing the critical social justice edge (see more below on the tensions associated with this).

In the following sub-sections, we review each of the tool's five themes and provide a selection of the literature that inspired the statements within that theme. We encourage readers to use the [Critical Service-Learning Reflection Tool](#) to reflect on their own service-learning and experiential education designs with the goals of determining degree of alignment with social justice principles and practices and taking subsequent action to improve their pedagogies. We suggest that collaborators focus attention on as many statements as they deem reasonable and return to the tool over time to review their progress and deepen their practice. We offer the set of statements not as exhaustive but rather as a generative starting place for collaborators in experiential education to consider and undertake concrete steps toward deepening commitments to social justice.

Reckoning with Systems

Calderón (2014) critiques service-learning's lack of focus on the systems that surround and create social problems by stating: "Without an education that looks at the systemic and structural foundations of social problems, students will be taught the symptoms of the problems instead of understanding the character of the structure that is placing individuals in those conditions" (p. 92). By reckoning with systems, collaborators in service-learning build understanding of, for example, how the "contours of racial inequality today flow directly from the racial and spatial heritage bequeathed to us from the past" (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 17). Sample statements from this theme in the tool include:

- Collaborators examine how societal narratives and norms, institutional structures, policies, and routine practices systematically perpetuate injustice—rather than reducing injustice to the acts of individuals.
- Collaborators examine their personal stakes in dismantling unjust systems and how they and the institutions they participate in sustain inequities within systems.

The items that comprise this theme encourage collaborators to "combine action and reflection in class-

room and community to examine both the historical precedents of the social problems addressed in their service placements and the impact of their personal action/inaction in maintaining and transforming those problems" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 54).

Authentic Relationships

When building authentic relationships, collaborators aim neither to ignore the realities of social inequality nor to artificially homogenize people based on their positionality and identity factors. To clarify, there is nuance in forming authentic relationships; the experiences and insights shared by individual collaborators do not monolithically represent entire communities. To better understand and intervene on systems, it is prudent to get to know individuals organically. The statements in this theme center on building relationships that "analyze power, build coalitions, and develop empathy" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 58). Sample statements from this section include:

- Collaborators develop a shared understanding of the assets and history of the places and people where community engagement takes place, including the relationship between community and campus.
- Collaborators create supports for authentic relationships such as written understanding of expectations, responsibilities, and goals for working together (e.g., memorandum of understanding, regular/scheduled check-ins, meetings both on campus and in the community, ongoing feedback and planning sessions, and engaging beyond the service-learning experience).

Items in this theme acknowledge that service-learning takes place within an existing history of community-campus relationships, that accountability and transparency can be built into relationships, and that engagement beyond the limits of the service-learning projects can help deepen authentic relationships.

Redistribution of Power

This theme "names the differential access to power experienced by students, faculty, and community members, and encourages analysis, dialogue, and discussion of those power dynamics" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 56). Sample statements from this section of the tool include:

- All collaborators have the opportunity to influence course content, syllabi, activities, roles and responsibilities, schedules, and indicators of success.

- Collaborators respect community assets and existing personal and social capital as resources central to the partnership.
- Collaborators seek to balance the interests and roles of all stakeholders, with social change as the primary focus of the partnership.

Overall, statements that comprise this theme focus on co-creating the design and content of the collaboration; using the power of narrative to challenge dominant framings; and taking concrete actions to share, shift, and redistribute power and resources.

Equitable Classrooms & Cognitive Justice

Students and other participants in service-learning experiences are more diverse than ever; however, university faculty continue to be overwhelmingly white (Davis & Fry, 2019). Numerous scholars have indicated that service-learning as most often theorized and implemented remains a pedagogy of whiteness (e.g., Bocci, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2012). Therefore, the statements within this theme anchor service-learning in cognitive and epistemic justice: the recognition and active inclusion of numerous co-existing knowledge sources and systems. Sample statements from this section of the tool include:

- Instructors and facilitators ensure that sources from diverse identities and perspectives are represented in the educational and service experiences, and make clear that no one person represents the thoughts and experiences of an entire group of people.
- Collaborators make deliberate choices about how learning environments reflect power differentials and choose more participatory and egalitarian approaches (e.g., meeting circles, collaborative inquiry, shared leadership models).
- Conversations and reflections about race, class, and privilege are sustained throughout the educational experiences and collaboration.

The statements within this theme situate decisions about readings, resources, and knowledge production as political acts and focus on practices that allow collaborators to partner, learn, and act together in ways that are equitable, inclusive, and just.

Social Change Skills

With attention to various models of social change

that actively push against the status quo, the statements within this theme encourage collaborators to develop critical “orientations” (Mitchell, 2008) and to utilize skills that address barriers to social, economic, and racial justice. Sample statements from this section of the tool include:

- Collaborators look beyond the usual non-profits, schools, and government agencies for partnerships with groups actively working to change systems and policies.
- Collaborators examine various approaches to social change (e.g., community-engaged learning and research, community organizing, activism, direct service, philanthropy, policy and governance, social entrepreneurship, and corporate social responsibility) in terms of their potential benefits and potential to perpetuate systems of inequality.

We highlight social change “skills” because of our sense that collaborators desire social justice but may lack the concrete tools and strategies they need to implement change. The tool suggests that all collaborators actively participate in all aspects of service-learning, including program implementation and delivery, root-cause analysis, coalition building, and social change strategy mapping. This collaborative approach to design and implementation encourages reciprocity within service-learning and experiential education.

Productive Tensions

We recognize that our process of revising the Critical Service-Learning Reflection Tool and writing this article was “an exploration of what inquiry and practice might look like when practitioner-scholars acknowledge that the process is always inherently enacting values and when . . . [we] define and undertake it in ways that explicitly walk the talk of [our] values” (Kniffin et al., 2020, p. 20). In this section, therefore, we reflect on tensions that arose in our working group as we refined the tool and wrote this article together. These tensions were an important part of our own experiential education as a working group of multiracial, multigenerational practitioner-scholars who, while committed to exploring service-learning as a potential tool for social justice outcomes, have varying depths of knowledge in critical theory and service-learning literatures as well as different lived experiences of both systems of oppression and work towards social justice. Conflict, miscommunication, and tension were part of our writing process as we struggled to honor each member’s contributions

while also holding different perspectives on both the field and ways forward. We believe our experience will be relevant to users of our reflection tool, as tension points are bound to emerge in any efforts to integrate an explicit social justice orientation in service-learning and other forms of experiential education. It is our conviction that acknowledging tension and holding it generatively can transform the practice of and inquiry into service-learning and other forms of experiential education in ways that deepen our individual and collective orientations toward social justice. Below, we frame the tensions that became visible in our working group process as five questions—questions practitioner-scholars must grapple with to advance critical service-learning practice and inquiry.

How Can We Support Generative Conflict?

After an academic year of remote work together, tension and conflict nearly dissolved our working group. For some group members, these difficulties echoed critiques of service-learning as a pedagogy of whiteness (Mitchell, 2012). Different perspectives about when racism should be named distinct from other forms of injustice created tensions. We also struggled with the appropriate mix of authors to cite and highlight from the multiple bodies of work related to experiential education, service-learning, and critical service-learning.

Sitting with these tensions and making them visible to each other allowed this project to move forward, but this process was frequently taxing for the authors. Drawing upon the *Authentic Relationships* section of our reflection tool, we could have better managed tensions by establishing “how critical feedback and conflict will be handled, used to make collective decisions, and grow authentic relationships.” We did eventually learn to “name [our] shared experiences, the things [we] don’t know about [our] partners’ experiences, and the way systems of power impact [our] relationships and interactions,” as the tool enjoins. Our collaboration confirmed for us the importance of finding ways to promote healing throughout processes that contain conflict. To make discussions related to race and racism more productive, we could also intentionally implement the item: “Examine how intersectional identities shape and constrain authentic relationships.” With these considerations and direction from our reflection tool, we believe holding space for productive tensions and conflict in implementing and inquiring into experiential education can be generative—perhaps even transformative.

Who Defines Social Justice?

Critical service-learning continues to be refined and

critiqued through both decolonial and post-critical lenses that decenter the western canon and hegemonic ways of knowing (Bruce, 2018; Santiago-Ortiz, 2019). Our collaboration has often mirrored the contentious divisions that continue to emerge in the field of service-learning. Members of the working group with different understandings of and experiences with “democratic,” “critical,” and “transformative learning” strands of literature each provided different, and, at times, conflicting perspectives on how social justice might be understood and enacted. For example, one tension our working group experienced centered on how we should frame the origins of service-learning. We struggled to decide whether to highlight the intentions of the field’s founders or to focus on the problematic nature and impact of the assumptions, relationships, and systems “traditional” service-learning so often reproduces. The conflation and flattening of democratic, critical, and transformative approaches under the heading of social justice—which we both experience ourselves and observe in the field at large—represents an opportunity for service-learning and experiential educators to delineate and discuss the commonalities, distinctions, and metrics through which each of these frameworks is implemented and evaluated.

Can (or Should) Service-Learning Be Reformed?

Another recurring tension while refining the tool and writing this article involved our team’s various understandings about service-learning’s potential to achieve equitable distributions of economic, political, and social rights, opportunities, and power. For some of us, the context of systemic and institutional inequity, racial capitalism, and settler-colonialism severely limit progress toward such ends. In this light, service-learning can teach:

... the racializing codes for vulnerable or exploited groups through so-called leadership training and discourses of service, mission, benevolence, and reform. As students learn to do good, to feed the poor, to uplift women, and to presume responsibility for near and distant others, they learn to play their parts in the civilizing/disqualifying regimes that target populations disconnected from circuits of neoliberal wealth and value. (Melamed, 2011, p. 45)

For other members of our group, the field of service-learning, like an asymptote, is continually approaching a social justice orientation such that practitioners become more equipped to enact social justice commitments the more they critically reflect and learn. To make this latter perspective a reality, we can accept existing critiques of service-learning, take

up a lens of futurity, and consider how service-learning practice that is increasingly oriented toward social justice would look (e.g., Latta & Mitchell, 2020). One assumption our working group agreed upon is that such action to advance a social justice orientation in experiential education is preferable to no action at all.

How Might Service-learning Practitioners Be Prepared to Implement Critical Service-Learning?

A core tension we experienced both in refining the tool and writing this article centered on who the imagined users and readers would be. One of the most common areas of improvement raised by participants in a conference workshop focused on critiquing an earlier draft of the tool was enhancing accessibility through limiting jargon. In particular, workshop participants mentioned their unfamiliarity with terms like “abolition” and “decolonizing” within service-learning. Our working group differed on whether to prioritize accessibility of language for service-learning practitioners or to continue to use the language of social justice and critical theory so as to connect users of the tool with deep traditions of critical thought.

These tensions prompted us to reflect on a statement in the *Equitable Classrooms & Cognitive Justice* theme of our tool: “Collaborators confront how knowledge creation is a political project in terms of what questions are valued, what truths are legitimized, who and what sources are considered experts, and what values are endorsed (e.g., objectivity, scientific positivism).” Focusing on the complexities of systemic injustice while balancing access and amenability for a broad range of users and readers is a challenge. As the field increasingly works to deepen the orientation of service-learning and experiential education more broadly toward social justice, collaborators must consider their motives, worldviews, and language choices and build their capacity to institute both incremental and substantive change on campuses and in communities.

What Does the Urgency of this Moment Call for in Terms of Movement Toward Social Justice-Oriented Service-Learning?

As institutions of higher education increasingly adopt the language of social justice and antiracism (in their mission statements, curricula, and marketing), whether these rhetorical shifts will also be accompanied by substantial and material changes has yet to be seen (e.g., Reneau & Villarreal, 2021). Ahmed (2004) suggested that institutional speech-acts may serve as a replacement for more tangible changes. Therefore, we aim to support service-learning collab-

orators in making changes that result in more than shifting language. One statement in the tool read, “Collaborators examine the complexities and risks of social movement building (e.g. [performance activism](#), [non-performativity](#), [burnout](#), and [movement capture](#)).” We included this statement precisely because the tool should provide support in shifting systems and outcomes towards greater justice and liberation.

However, members of our working group differed on the extent to which we patiently work within systems of higher education or actively disrupt them. We struggled with the following questions: How much and what types of change is needed within service-learning to create liberatory shifts? Additionally, how do we best undertake change processes at the departmental-, campus-, and community-level to support implementation of social justice aligned pedagogies?

Conclusion

As Kniffin et al. (2020) observed of inquiry in service-learning: “The tools used to deepen understanding and practice can, have, and need to expand to reflect both the changing contexts within which [. . .] work is undertaken and the ever-growing set of relevant conceptual and theoretical frameworks available” (p. 3). The overall purpose of our team’s work together is to guide the ongoing development of service-learning and experiential education principles and practices in ways that explicitly encourage transformations in critical consciousness and the redistribution of power.

In this article, we provided an overview of a tool designed to incorporate and advance social justice in higher education and shared our understanding of how service-learning and other forms of experiential education might best operationalize and push ever-advancing leading edges. We documented some of the central tensions service-learning practitioner-scholars may experience as they try to deepen the processes and products of their work in ways that are counter-normative to dominant methods of teaching, learning, and inquiry—indeed, in ways that walk the talk of our commitments to social justice. As with all efforts to advance social justice and democracy, deepening critical orientations to service-learning and experiential education requires that we generatively and co-creatively hold tension between the world we encounter and the world to which we aspire. Our hope is that our analysis of the ongoing development of the Critical Service-Learning Reflection Tool may provide readers with inspiration, encouragement, guidance, and proposed lines of inquiry to advance this important and timely work. Please find the

current reflection tool here: <https://servicelearning.duke.edu/duke-service-learning-critical-conversations-tool>. ■

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