Justice Isn’t One-Size-Fits-All: Working toward Justice in Service-Learning Courses

Chelsea Lauder  
*Northeastern University, c.lauder@northeastern.edu*

Becca Berkey  
*Northeastern University, r.berkey@northeastern.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe](https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe)

Part of the Educational Methods Commons, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons

**Recommended Citation**

Available at: [https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol4/iss2/21](https://nsuworks.nova.edu/elthe/vol4/iss2/21)

This Praxis is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Experiential Learning & Teaching in Higher Education by an authorized editor of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.
Justice Isn’t One-Size-Fits-All: Working toward Justice in Service-Learning Courses

CHELSEA LAUDER  
Northeastern University

BECCA BERKEY  
Northeastern University

Introduction

Experiential Liberatory Education

The field of experiential education (EE) makes clear the role that experience has on enhancing student learning (Kolb, 1984). Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory presents a cycle through which students have an experience, reflect on their observations, conceptualize their reflections into new knowledge, and then apply this new knowledge in future experiences. Further, experiential education is built from social cognitive learning theory. This adult learning theory considers the ways in which learners are situated in social contexts and how environments and context influence their learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). In the case of experiential education, this means that students are developing their own learning through what they witness and experience in the world. When this type of learning intersects with social justice education, or liberatory education, new types of student outcomes may arise; specifically, those contributing to the development of social and critical consciousness. Liberatory education is centered around encouraging individuals to engage in the world in an inclusive, culturally-responsive way; it “prioritizes human potential and promise” (Randall, 2018, para. 14).

Service-Learning is a teaching tool that enhances both student learning outcomes and contributes to community goals (Bandy, 2011). This pedagogical approach is a form of experiential learning, and when done through a critical lens it seeks to redistribute power and work to understand the intersectional identities of faculty, students, community partners, and community members (Mitchell, 2008). Mitchell (2008) shares that critical service-learning must propel students to see themselves as “agents of social change and use the experience of service to address and respond to injustice in communities” (p. 51). In order to do this, stakeholders in the community-based learning (faculty members, students, community partners) must understand the role their identities play and challenge the status quo. This understanding can be developed through integrating liberatory educational practices, such as those posited by Friere (1970), Kendi (2019), hooks (1994), and Love (2019). Freire (1970) states that building a consciousness of one’s surrounding social conditions is important to understanding the systems of inequality that create injustices. Kendi’s (2019) approach to antiracism, bell hooks’ teaching to transgress (1994), and Bettina Love’s (2019) abolitionist teaching all call on liberatory education as a way by which to see possibility and make change through reflection, experience, and practice. Love (2019) asks educators to call in histories of violence and oppression and then center “educational survival tactics” (p. 70) to support student success and justice-focused initiatives or movements.

To understand how these liberatory education practices contribute to student learning and development, we utilize our institution’s Self-Authored Integrated Learning (SAIL) framework. This framework, developed by Ambrose et al. (2017) utilized learner science, student development theory, and design thinking to create a model that demonstrates the learning that happens within various contexts (e.g. classrooms, volunteer activities, work experiences, and the community). The following analysis, as it explores the impacts of rooting community-engagement activities in an explicit justice theory, tracked the skills within the social consciousness and commitment dimension. This dimension captures how “learners develop the confidence, skills, and values to effectively recognize the needs of individuals, communities, and societies

“Transformative justice sees the opportunity for healing not just for a victim, but as a pathway toward creating broader community change.”
as well as make a commitment to constructively engage in social action (p. 2)” (Talger et al., 2017). The specific skills in this dimension are: advocacy, civic-mindedness, conflict resolution, inclusivity, networking, and systems thinking (SAIL at Northeastern, n.d.). The data analyzed in the following sections of this piece are pulled from student evaluations which reflect the SAIL framework’s skills, dimensions, and foundational masteries (Talger et al., 2017).

The skills and competencies from the SAIL framework are meant as a guide for where and how to measure learner social and critical consciousness development. This can begin through integrating the liberatory educational practices described above, yet the specific connection between these practices and social, racial, and environmental justice in experiential education is not as evident. As a subfield of EE, Service-Learning and Community Engagement (SLCE) exists at the intersection of social justice education and experience, yet there is not a shared framing or articulation of what social justice within SLCE means. The phrase “social justice” alone is used broadly across the field, yet there is no shared definition. Garvin et al. (2019) attempt to make sense of how this phrase is used across the field, stating that:

In whatever ways we understand and operationalize social justice, the term carries weight, both intellectually and emotionally. It is central to perennial tensions related to how to undertake SLCE: whether to focus attention on the short term or the long term, on personal change or systems change. (p. 183)

Given all of this, an exploration of how social justice manifests in SLCE must interrogate not just the phrase itself, but the various theories of justice that inform justice-oriented work, such as that of experiential education.

### Theories of Justice

Beyond the field of experiential education, justice comes in many forms and has multiple theoretical and philosophical underpinnings, yet it is often presented in monolithic ways. The Merriam-Webster definition of justice is:

> The maintenance or administration of what is just, especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments; the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity; the quality of being just, impartial, or fair. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

This overarching, commonplace definition aligns with distributional justice, which John Rawls (1971) calls “justice as fairness” and in which justice is equality for all. While distributional justice recognizes the fairness of personal liberty in so far as it is compatible with the liberties of others, procedural justice is a theory by which systems and laws are enforced in society (Yale Law School, n.d.). The criteria of procedural justice are subject to a particular administration, enforced by law and judges. These two theories of justice, distributive and procedural, are most common in the United States when using the word justice, yet the use of these theories of justice are limited in some contexts, situations, and fields. When considering how education around social, environmental, and racial justice is achieved through experiential education, it is not enough to just consider the theories of distributional and procedural, we must also consider the role of productive, restorative, and transformative justice as well.

Productive justice is “aimed at creating a system within which we focus on causes rather than symptoms. Emphasizes participation in the decisions through which [environmental] burdens are produced” (Berkey, 2017, p 11). Restorative justice seeks to not only make right a system, or align with laws, but rather considers the hurt, need, and responsibility of victim and offender. Johnstone and Van Ness (2007), examine how restorative justice can be an alternative to procedural or punitive justices. According to this, restorative justice is:

> not simply a new programme or a new technique but something much more ambitious: a fundamental change in our manner of viewing and responding to criminal acts and associated forms of troublesome behaviour and of relating to both those who commit such acts and those affected by them. (p. 5)

Transformative justice takes this further to scale, exploring the role and impacts of a broader community within a particular situation or environment. Morris (2000) calls upon Quaker philosophies of healing and forgiveness to build upon restorative justice and develop stories of transformative justice. Transformative justice sees the opportunity for healing not just for a victim, but as a pathway toward creating broader community change.

What do we mean in our context when we talk about justice (and why)?

As we explored the intersections of experiential education and theories of justice, we identified a clear gap in explicit guidance on how to design EE experiences that foster a social justice mindset. In our context of supporting service-learning courses that contribute to communities and build student
social consciousness, this gap informs the questions we undertake here about how or why (or even if) a service-learning course could work toward justice. In doing so, we propose that as a field (and certainly at our own institution) we move beyond simply a critique of how these opportunities miss the mark to how or whether a facilitator’s/educator’s orientation toward justice can influence learners and communities alike.

Toward this end, in the sections that follow we consider the ways in which justice is situated (or not) in a set of selected service-learning courses (selected with the criteria of an intended first- or second-year student audience). The questions guiding this exploration are:

- What are the different philosophical foundations of social, racial, and environmental justice and how might those manifest in different approaches/orientations to experiential learning?

- As a form of experiential learning, does service-learning increase student social consciousness, and how can/does that in turn orient students toward broader social, racial, and environmental justice? If so, how?

- What beyond the content of a service-learning course contributes to increased student social consciousness?

- Is there an observable difference in evidenced or self-reported development of student social consciousness when comparing students in different service-learning courses as it pertains to the extent to which justice is explicitly stated as a learning outcome, as well as what opportunities are present to make linkages between course content, experiential learning, and social justice?

- Does it matter what the approach/underlying philosophy of justice is? Does that have an impact on the development of social consciousness and commitment among students?

- If yes, what are the key pedagogical interventions occurring in order to increase student social consciousness? If not, what are the implications for teaching practice?

These questions are examined here through the lens of service-learning courses at Northeastern University, which is a private, urban university that has a specific focus on experiential education. Service-Learning is a recognized form of experiential education at the institution and therefore is supported by the Community-Engaged Teaching and Research team, which recently shifted structurally to the Office of the Chancellor (it previously reported through City and Community Engagement). The communities in which Northeastern’s Boston campus is located are largely communities of color with rich histories and cultures that often differ from those of students, faculty, and staff at the university, particularly as the university’s profile has shifted significantly in the past decade. These dynamics mean that foundational support and infrastructure are needed to ensure that the needs of community partners are met and that the growth potential of experiential education is actualized for students as well as a better understanding of what inputs lead to the social consciousness and commitment outputs identified as imperative and central to student learning.

How Our Theoretical Framework Informs Our Methodological Approach

Given our guiding questions and context, our goal for this paper is to compare seven different service-learning sections of first- and second-year courses to determine if there is an observable difference in the development of student social consciousness and commitment as it pertains to the extent to which justice is explicitly stated as a learning outcome, as well as what opportunities are present that make linkages between course content, experiential learning, and social justice through course activities and reflection.

We selected courses for this analysis that were offered within the same semester (Spring 2021) and all of which were aimed at first- and second-year students (were listed as 1000- and 2000-level courses). Additionally, we selected lower-level courses to compare ‘like to like’ in some ways, knowing that it would also provide important diversity of perspective on how these topics are realized in multiple disciplinary areas.

Given that this is a thought-praxis piece, what we present here is only loosely guided by best practices within qualitative content analysis. We used this as a framework to guide our inquiry and reflection on our key questions and goals. In content analysis, one selects content, defines units of meaning for observable evidence within that content, codes the content-as-data, and analyzes the results of this coding. As illustrated in our process below, we followed this approach in spirit by selecting our content and creating a system by which to analyze and understand...
it, also often summarized as preparation, organizing, and reporting (Elo, S. & Kyngäs, H., 2008). Utilizing inductive content analysis due to a lack of existing theory building the connections we wished to explore, we sought to move from the specifics within certain courses associated with service-learning at our institution to develop a sense of general patterns and relationships between them (Chinn & Kramer, 1999). Further, because we were exploring the relationships between concepts, we used the principles and practices associated with relational analysis, wherein:

Relational analysis begins like conceptual analysis, where a concept is chosen for examination. However, the analysis involves exploring the relationships between concepts. Individual concepts are viewed as having no inherent meaning and rather the meaning is a product of the relationships among concepts (Content Analysis, 2021).

As described previously, our Community-Engaged Teaching & Research team regularly collects much information about each of the service-learning courses we support. The program material reviewed for this piece is covered by our Institutional Review Board certificate for course materials collected on behalf of the program. Within each of these data sources, we sought unique contributions they may make to our understanding of the relationship between the theory of justice with which the course was aligned, the level to which this was transparently communicated with the students, and the students’ own self-reported and documented understanding of their growth around social consciousness and commitment. Table 1 lays out each data source and what we evaluated these data sources against (the aspirational state or what evidence of the ideal would look like) to better understand how explicitly or implicitly these courses were informed by theories of justice and the impacts that had on student learning—essentially creating a rubric for understanding and comparing the content we had collected as a program for each discrete course.

### Findings and Discussion

#### Findings

We begin here by presenting the results of our content analysis across the data from the courses by noting similarities and trends observed across them, as well as the differences and their potential impact. These observations are recorded in Table 2.

#### Discussion

One primary pattern unearthed through this analysis is that even when service-learning is explicitly embedded into a course syllabus and learning objectives, it does not necessarily mean that students are gaining a critical consciousness. The course information and assessment data we collected, while evidencing student learning, does not showcase a clear connection to student social consciousness building. Literature around critical service-learning and liberatory education calls for educational practices to be more explicit—calling out injustices in practice and preparing students to see

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA SOURCE</th>
<th>ASPIRATIONAL STATE/WHAT WE ‘EVALUATED’ DATA SOURCES AGAINST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Syllabus</td>
<td>Clearly states it is an S-L course. States why it is an S-L course. S-L actively embedded into assignments, learning objectives, etc. Course is rooted within a theory of justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Service Student Surveys &amp; Post-Service Student Evaluation/ Surveys</td>
<td>There is an increase in the level of understanding of how college education can benefit the community. There is a clear pattern around skills in the SAIL framework (systems thinking, inclusivity, &amp; self-awareness) that were gained through service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Course Planning Form</td>
<td>Selected “Analyze one or more social issues through the lens of the course’s discipline and/or topic” and/or “Demonstrate critical reflection of service through guided activities” as a learning objective. Use language that showcases they are utilizing S-L for reasons beyond student learning - there is a recognition of how field/discipline contributes to social change/impact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistant Documentation of ‘Preparing Students for Service’ activity</td>
<td>There are activities around cultural competency and responsible engagement and these activities talk about justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Service-Learning EXPO artifacts</td>
<td>Artifacts display student’s recognition of how their experience contributed to justice and demonstrate critical reflection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
themselves as change agents (Love, 2019; Mitchell, 2008). Even with the addition of teaching assistants to support faculty in the work of preparing students for engagement and asking faculty members who utilize service-learning to express the why they do it, there seems to be a missing link between students in these courses reporting increased social consciousness and commitment, as defined institutionally through the SAIL framework (SAIL at Northeastern, n.d.).

Not seeing clear ways these courses are rooted in a theory of justice elicits new questions around what else may be happening to influence the student reflection and outcomes we see. Is there something else happening in the course, other framing being used around social change and community impact? How much does the background of the students or faculty member matter - is there a difference across identities if they are able to make the connection to justice in their experience/teaching? The question of what justice really means in a service-learning, or experiential education, context is explored in Garvin et al. (2019) through a rhetorical, word association exercise of the phrase social justice. It is possible we could have seen different results if we chose a different analysis framework, one that casts a wider net of rhetoric related to justice. Additionally, while our program aligns itself with a transformative approach to justice,

Table 2. Similarities & Differences Across Data Sources from 1st- and 2nd-Year Service-Learning Courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATA SOURCE</th>
<th>SIMILARITIES &amp; TRENDS ACROSS COURSES EXAMINED</th>
<th>DIFFERENCES &amp; THEIR POTENTIAL IMPACTS ACROSS COURSES EXAMINED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Syllabus</td>
<td>All but one course syllabus explicitly stated/scoped that it was a service-learning course and explains why.</td>
<td>All but one of the courses examined referenced the purpose of integrating service-learning into the course - both as a pedagogical approach, but also as a philosophical one – this included direct ties into the learning objectives or a separate articulation of the outcomes associated with it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most of the courses included S-L as a graded component of the course - most commonly this was a separate part of the grade.</td>
<td>Despite overwhelming communication about what and why S-L, there was less consistency in how it was evaluated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All but one course syllabus (the same one that omitted information about it being an S-L course and why) either incorporate S-L into the course learning objectives or have a separate section of objectives.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None of the courses examined explicitly named justice or articulated a theory of justice within which the course was situated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Service Student Surveys &amp; Post-Service Student Evaluation/Surveys</td>
<td>Most courses did not have a measurable increase in understanding or gain in student skills around social consciousness and commitment.</td>
<td>One course had a measurable increase in students’ reporting their self-awareness and inclusivity skills. The students in this same course demonstrated a strong understanding of how their education can benefit the community in the pre-service assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No course had a clear loss in skills gained and there was some consistency in the skills selected across courses, but nothing substantial.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Course Planning Form</td>
<td>Most faculty associated with these courses selected the relevant learning objectives.</td>
<td>Did not have clear responses from all faculty members for these courses, which calls into question what we know about the instructor’s commitment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All courses with data stated why engaging in community was a benefit to student learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None of the courses speak to how justice is a motivator in teaching a service-learning course.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Assistant Documentation of ‘Preparing Students for Service’ activity</td>
<td>Fairly consistently, the student leaders documented a plan to prepare their students for engagement with lessons around cultural competency and responsible engagement.</td>
<td>There was a wide range of variability in how student leaders were planning to incorporate/implement lessons from their trainings around Preparing Students for Service - it is likely that this variability is rooted in both how deeply integrated/not S-L is in the curriculum of the course, and also attributable to faculty member orientation toward the importance of/need for this work to be done explicitly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>None of the documentation from the courses examined explicitly illustrated plans to tie together the role of service-learning in working towards justice, nor did they mention or discuss justice in straightforward ways.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual Service-Learning EXPO artifacts</td>
<td>None of the courses had artifacts that were clearly tied to justice. Language around community impact was limited in all but one course.</td>
<td>Most course artifacts mentioned their actions within community, but did not reference the impact itself. There was still no direct line to justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Artifacts were more focused on individual skills gained, ie. time management and communication.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
we wonder, but could not explore through our data, if the theory of justice used to ground an experiential education experience affects student outcomes.

The analysis we were able to conduct from existing data still leaves us with many questions and future considerations. One such set of questions being: does it matter what the approach/underlying philosophy of justice is? Does that have an impact on the development of social consciousness and commitment among students? While we were not able to extrapolate an answer to these questions in our data, it did offer an opportunity to consider which theories of justice may map to experiential education in practice. Table 3 maps examples of experiential education to four different theories of justice, each of which conceptualize social, racial, and environmental justice differently. There is still no one-size-fits-all practice or tool to have experiential education elucidate specific justice-oriented outcomes, yet our analysis helped us to see the need for showcasing what these various theories of justice look like in our field.

Limitations
As described in the methodology section, rather than being a rigorously conducted content analysis we pull upon best practices of the approach to better draw patterns and conclusions across data that we collect at a program level. Because of this, there are severe limitations to the generalizability and transferability of our insights as presented. However, repeating this approach to seek similar understanding or insight on other campuses and/or in other experiential contexts may serve to be illuminating in a reflective sense.

Additionally, while we extrapolate our understanding to broader forms of experiential education, we base our observations and reporting on one form of EE on one campus across just a subset of courses offered in one semester. We encourage the reader to consider how one could create similar lines of inquiry to better understand how (or if) experiential education creates opportunities to develop social consciousness and commitment in students, more just communities in which our campuses reside, and what (if any) the role of the faculty member-as-facilitator has in whether those outcomes are realized.

Recommendations & Implications
Recommendations for Future Research
Building upon our findings, discussion, and even limitations, we suggest that this approach may have utility for program improvement and understanding intra-institutionally, as well as for cross-institutional research both in SLCE and more broadly across different forms of EE. Additionally, by expanding thinking in our field’s research and practice to include an interrogation of what we mean when we say ‘social justice’ as well as what experiential opportunities would look like that worked toward said justice could create systems of assessment, inquiry, and accountability that are currently missing. Further, determining the type of data, evidence, and aspirational realization-in-practice in various forms of EE is necessary to develop tools to better understand if the theory of justice used to ground an experiential education experience affects student outcomes as intended. Finally, more inquiry is needed into the through line between ‘inputs’ (i.e. explicitly naming a theory of justice; being clear about justice as a course outcome; opportunities that make linkages between course content, experiential learning, and social justice through course activities and reflection) and ‘outputs’ (increased social consciousness and commitment).

Implications for the Field of Experiential Education
Considering how experiential education purports to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEORY OF JUSTICE</th>
<th>EXAMPLE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE THAT MAPS TO THE THEORY OF JUSTICE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distributive</td>
<td>Internship experience where a student contributes to policy development or law making around advancing equity and fairness for all. Experience grounded in furthering a system where personal liberties align for all (Rawls, 1971)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>A research-based experience or capstone where students analyze root causes and contexts of a specific social issue. Experience grounded in analyzing the root causes and developing strategy and agency in decision-making around the issue. (Berkey, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restorative</td>
<td>A direct engagement opportunity with a student interacting one-on-one, building relationships, connecting with community members impacted by a specific social issue. Experience grounded in addressing the hurt and responsibility of victims and offenders in the systems (Johnstone, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformative</td>
<td>An integrated community-engagement opportunity with students developing solutions to a specific social issue that recognizes the role of individuals and broader community. Experience grounded in how individual challenges are rooted in the broader ecosystems of a community and therefore an opportunity to enact societal change. (Morris, 2000).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
make learning more ‘real world,’ and, because we live in a world rife with inequity and injustice, it is important to ask how the experiences we provide and facilitate with and for our students not just impact their skill-based learning and future employability, but also if it makes them better equipped to contribute positively to society. Therefore, scholarship and practice in EE would dictate that we explore the following questions further and make our position on them clear:

- Does an articulated theory of justice matter?
- What matters (if not that)?
- How does our orientation toward justice (or the theoretical framework with which we most closely align) manifest in how we work with educators, partners, student leaders, and students in EE experiences and courses as it pertains to broader impact on the world?

Returning to the literature around critical service-learning and liberatory education (Love, 2019; Mitchell, 2008) that calls for educational practices to be more explicit, we must determine what it means to call out injustices in practice and prepare students to see themselves as change agents. Further, we need to better understand how we know if and when experiential education approaches are successful in accomplishing these goals so we can better and more intentionally design these learning opportunities to accomplish these ends.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is a gap at the intersection of experiential education and various theories of justice that leaves us with a lack of explicit guidance on how to actually design experiential education opportunities in ways that foster the development of a social justice mindset, attitudes, and behaviors in students and that contribute meaningfully to communities. As illustrated above, one primary pattern unearthed through our analysis is that even when service-learning is explicitly embedded into a course syllabus and learning objectives, it does not necessarily mean that students are gaining a critical consciousness. Through this, we argue the need for explicating what these various theories of justice look like in different forms of experiential education so we are better able as a field to purposefully connect our approaches to building a more socially, racially, and environmentally just world.

Content analysis is one method through which we can take what we already have (various data sources from experiential learning activities) to better understand how the framing and explicitness of inputs (i.e. whether a theory of justice is articulated and/or if the potential for impact of the EE on the world is communicated) maps to observable outputs (student growth and development in social consciousness and commitment, as well as positive community impact and contribution). By problematizing our use of “social justice” as one-size-fits-all, we can better practice a customized approach to justice-related processes and outcomes that are tailored to the students and external partners within experiential education opportunities, the knowledge with which the experience connects, and to the facilitator/educator’s orientation toward this work. In doing so, we move closer to the aspirations of experiential liberatory education.

**References**


