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Shari J. Stenberg and Darby Arant Whealy

Chaos Is the Poetry: From Outcomes to Inquiry in Service-Learning Pedagogy

This article argues for approaching pedagogical outcomes as ends-in-view that guide, but do not determine or limit, pedagogical possibilities. Reflecting on moments from a service-learning literacy course, the writers argue that experiences of chaos in the classroom, while often uncomfortable, can open opportunities for reflection and inquiry.

It is no secret that the contemporary university values a model of efficiency, of tangible, quantifiable outcomes. Jan Currie and Lesley Vidovich (qtd. in Downing, Hurlbert, Mathieu 9) contend that since the 1980s, the boundaries between higher education, government, and business have largely deteriorated, and business discourse of “excellence” has come to dominate university culture. Consequently, output, outcomes, and efficiency are valorized over and above process, inquiry, and the inevitable tensions of learning. Stanley Aronowitz puts it this way: “[A]cademic leaders chant the mantra of excellence . . . [which] means . . . all parts of the university ‘perform’ and are judged according to how well they deliver knowledge and qualified labor to the corporate” (158). Moreover, according to David Downing, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and Paula Mathieu, administrators tend to promote “short-term, external signs of success, such as rankings, rather than . . . long-term educational and social value” (10).

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Those of us in composition have long shared concern that conflating pedagogical success with outcomes can result in inadequate attention to, and devaluing of, process. After all, pedagogy is a rich, complex, messy interaction among learners that nearly always challenges our expectations and predictions, not to mention our research. Too rigid a focus on quantifying and measuring teaching may steer us away from the crucial ideas raised by poststructuralist thought: the importance of context, the partiality of knowledge, the multiplicity and fluidity of subjects, and the power dynamics at work in every pedagogical situation, which do not have a place in an efficiency model.

This is not to disregard the importance of outcomes in our teaching; it is difficult, even undesirable, to imagine a classroom without some predetermined goals. Our concern, instead, is with how outcomes *function* within a pedagogy and how they are appropriated to measure teaching success. As John Dewey argues, if ends or aims function as a final goal, a point at which activity and questions cease, they hinder both reflection and action. But if ends or outcomes are conceived not as fixed, but as ends-in-view, then these goals or aims function as “redirecting pivots in action”; they are a point at which to stop and reflect, but not to cease activity (72). While an outcome as an end-in-view serves as a guide or stimulus for present activity, it also leaves open the possibility for new goals and objectives to ensue. It allows that there are moments of learning that will exceed outcomes, which are as valuable as the end itself.

In our experience, the kind of learning that exceeds outcomes often transpires within what Elizabeth Boquet calls the “liminal zone where chaos and order coexist” (84). Feminist scholar Bonnie Miller-McLemore helps to explain this, pointing out that chaos theory in physics describes not a universe governed by inexorable laws but one “standing on the border between chaos and order” (59). Order emerges out of disorder, not apart from it.

For this reason, Boquet and Miller-McLemore seek to reclaim “chaos” as an inevitable, even positive, part of our life and work. Although we might be able to tame chaos, they remind us, we cannot banish it. Consequently, Boquet urges us to come “clean about the chaotic nature of our work,” an admission, she argues, that will be “troublesome to some people” (84). Chaos, after all, is typically associated with messiness or mayhem, turning efficiency and order on its head. But it may also be understood as a source for revisionary possibility.

Within writing center scholarship, the context of Boquet’s work, championing chaos means challenging the conflation of success with a “triumphalist trajectory” of improved grades, replicable methods, increased retention (84). And in the classroom, as Miller-McLemore suggests, “the redemption of chaos”

means questioning naturalized measures of success, evidenced in student evaluations that ask how well the course was organized and that consequently overlook “the constructive role of disorder in making space for the emergence of fresh insights and inspirations” (59).

Those of us who strive to put students’ needs and interests at the center of our classroom know that there is no student-centered pedagogy without chaos. We know that no matter how firmly grounded we may be in our pedagogical visions and values, our students do not always experience or respond to our teaching as we hope. And if we take advantage of those nebulous moments as opportunities for reflection—rather than squelch them—we are able to rethink our pedagogies, to change our minds. Indeed, as Paulo Freire argues, “there is no creativity without *ruptura*, without a break from the old, without conflict in which you have to make a decision” (Freire and Horton 38).

We do not mean, however, to fetishize disorder for its own sake or as an end in itself, which can lead to paralysis and inaction. Rather, we contend that moments of disruption become pivotal when they act as a gateway to new possibilities, rethinking and revision that enables both *reflection* and *movement*. In what follows, we draw from our experience in a senior-level, interdisciplinary service-learning course called Literacy and Community to demonstrate that the moments of conflict generated by service-learning pedagogy are as, or even more, rich with learning potential as are the oft-promised outcomes. Ultimately, we contend that “excellence” in service-learning-based writing courses, and the scholarship that investigates them, require that we retain a consciousness of discord that accompanies service-learning, lest it become another streamlined, institutionally sanctioned pedagogical technique that tidily positions students to produce a certain kind of written product or to occupy a prescribed identity.

Excellence in Service-Learning: What Does It Mean?

It is difficult to know what, exactly, the omnipresent notion of university “excellence” means and promises. In his oft-cited book *The University in Ruins*, Bill Readings argues that while there may be universal agreement that universities should seek “excellence,” this is only “because [excellence] is not an ideology, in the sense that it has no external referent or internal content” (23). Too often, however, we fear that excellence is conflated with met outcomes and product-focused pedagogy.

Edward Zlotkowski, a major figure in the service-learning movement, suggests we might adopt Ernest Boyer’s vision of a “new model of excellence” for remodeling American universities. Boyer’s vision of excellence would involve

undergraduates in “field projects, relating ideas to real life,” and would link faculty members to community practitioners, all in the name of improving “in a very intentional way, the human condition” (qtd. in Zlotkowski 1, 2). For Zlotkowski, of course, service-learning is a direct answer to Boyer’s call, but he contends that impediments to this vision still exist.

One such impediment is that service-learning has only recently begun to “develop the intellectual resources it needs to demonstrate academic legitimacy” (7). According to Zlotkowski, the most crucial resource for this initiative involves “outcomes assessment” of service-learning. He has faith that quantitative data will help make the case for service-learning as a rigorous, worthwhile intellectual undertaking. And in many ways, it is difficult to quibble with this claim; in the increasingly business-oriented university, numbers talk.

Consequently, we are beginning to hear more about the strong outcome numbers that result from service-learning pedagogies. For instance, Alexander Astin reported that a UCLA study of 3,450 service-learning students from forty-two institutions found all “thirty-four outcome measures . . . positively affected” by undergraduate participation in such programs (qtd. in Zlotkowski 7). Those outcomes included deeper community commitment, better career preparation, improved conflict management, and greater understanding of community problems—not to mention a greater likelihood of donating money as alumni (Sax and Astin). Likewise, in a comprehensive study of service-learning experienced by fifteen hundred students at twenty postsecondary institutions, Janet Eyler, Dwight E. Giles Jr., and John Braxton found that students who participated in service learning scored higher on nearly every outcome measured than those who opted out. Here the outcomes included improved citizenship skills, confidence, and perceptions of social problems. Service-learning pedagogy has also promised valuable outcomes to composition teachers, in particular: active, student-centered, cooperative learning; cross-cultural understanding; and critical thinking (Deans 2).

Prior to teaching a service-learning course, Shari participated in a two-year faculty-development seminar designed to help professors develop new courses in service-learning. Much of the curriculum was designed to help faculty become aware of these outcomes and to discover pedagogical visions and practices designed to facilitate their realization. But Beth Daniell reminds us that those of us who work in the humanities (and even social sciences) often find that our pedagogical theories do not do a good job of predicting or offering measurable or replicable results. Students, certainly, have a way of “defying

prediction,” (129) and in writing classes where student texts occupy the center of the class, pedagogies have to be worked out every time anew. Consequently, the beliefs, assumptions, and values we bring to the classroom—and the ways they are negotiated in particular classrooms with students—are as important to examine as are the “results” of our pedagogies, which are likely to be different with every pedagogical encounter, and sometimes even unknowable.

So rather than abiding by a predictive model—whereby a practice or theory is thought to produce positive outcomes—those of us who teach service-learning might benefit by documenting and reflecting on teachers’ interpretive approaches, which tend to be “incommensurate rather than comprehensive” (129). Interpretive approaches position theory (and, we could argue, outcomes) not as “above belief but in front of it” (130).

Indeed, recent scholarship on service-learning (Green; Himley; Welch; Herzberg), has called us to spend more time examining the complexities and problems that arise in the service-learning process. As the two of us taught Literacy and Community, we wondered what to do with the many moments when our pedagogical experiences ran vastly counter to, or in an altogether different direction from, our orderly plans. Did this mean we needed better objectives? Better practices? Or did we need to find a different way of engaging those moments that at first seemed to hinder a clear path to our desired outcomes?

Boquet posits that real intellectual growth happens not in the moments of greatest classroom efficiency but in moments of “noise” or uncontrolled creative possibility:

Efficiency is a bad model for the growth and development of the human mind. When I read my students’ literacy autobiographies, they never write about how quickly they can get through a really good book or how few extraneous words their favorite ones have. They write about their special places to stretch out and linger over those precious last few chapters, about the smell of the children’s library at story time, about a conversation with a friend that let them to discover a new author. These experiences fly in the face of efficiency, thankfully. These moments are not replicable. They are simply happenings. (52)

In our experience, efficiency is not a concept that can be easily applied to service-learning pedagogy: these courses are open to a range of external variables as the students and instructors confront experiences and individuals alongside theories and texts. Many of these occurrences cannot be pre-planned, nor can individuals’ responses to them be predicted or controlled. And yet, this is what makes service-learning a higher-risk/higher-yield pedagogy, a term

we borrow from Boquet. Whereas a lower-risk/lower-yield pedagogy might emphasize competence, error avoidance, and a direct path to predetermined outcomes, a higher-risk/higher-yield pedagogy recasts experience, training, or learning “not as something that someone either possesses or doesn’t but instead as something which is continually constructed and reconstructed” (81). While service-learning pedagogy is not inherently “higher-risk” or “higher-yield,” we would argue that it becomes so when the inevitable moments of dissonance that result from this work are understood not as roadblocks to predetermined objectives, but as sites for inquiry, reflection, and action.

Indeed, we first interpreted the many seemingly inefficient moments we experienced in our service-learning course as deficits or flaws; now we would like to read them as moments of possibility. We have come to wonder: What is flattened out or repressed within an efficiency model? What have we not accounted for? Who has not been heard? In these efficiency leaks may lie opportunities for reflection and resistance.

The narrative that follows aims to investigate moments that disrupted our neatly laid pedagogical plans but, upon reflection, could have been approached as a gateway to inquiry, reflection, and revision.

Objectives, Aims, and Outcomes

In designing our Literacy and Community course, we found that like a first-year writing class, service-learning courses bear pressure to meet expectations and objectives from multiple sources. This was certainly true of our experience. First, there were the objectives designed to help students, a group of twenty seniors whose majors included theology, pre-med, English, and education, enter a new discourse community on literacy issues. Here, we hoped students would develop their abilities to do the following:

- Analyze literacies by taking into account specific cultural systems, values, and beliefs
- Develop an increased awareness of literacy/illiteracy in American culture
- Examine competing conceptions of literacy and analyze the social and personal purposes and ends each definition serves
- Discover and reflect on our own literacy histories, assumptions, values, and beliefs
- Explore and critique different approaches to enabling or teaching literacy

- Reflect on the way others' literacies enhance, challenge, and extend our own.

The course also needed to meet the goals of the interdisciplinary senior capstone program, of which our course was a part. These objectives required students to do the following:

- Articulate a cogent personal position
- Employ a variety of research techniques to describe and analyze different literacy behaviors
- Make connections between our academic research and our service learning work
- Link issues of literacy to our own fields of study and our future work as employees, managers, parents, or citizens.

Finally, there were the college and university's expectations, which became clear during a college-sponsored orientation. Here, the university administrator who facilitated encouraged the students to *represent the university well*. It was important, she said, to keep their expectations reasonable and to communicate with the organization facilitating the service-learning experience. A second speaker, who represented a community agency that often relied on volunteers, emphasized another important charge: *be careful*, she warned, *that you are respectful of the agency's needs*. She then surprised some of the students by informing them that their presence may be resented by the clients. After all, the students at our private university had a reputation of being wealthy and elitist.

As the teachers of this course, we felt every bit as responsible to ensure that our students were good university representatives and were respectful of the agency's needs as we did to make certain that they learned about literacy acquisition. Further, since the service-learning program was brand new at our university, the pressure for the course to succeed (however measured) was strong.

We felt it important, then, to make certain the students were well prepared as respectful, responsible university representatives before they even began their service. Consequently, we began this preparation with a class discussion of service-learning and, in particular, what service means at our Jesuit institution. A group of students who had completed service-learning in other contexts took the lead in responding. These students were deeply invested

in social justice causes, an interest that emerged after they spent a semester studying in Central America. They also lived together in an “intentional community” called the Justice House, where they committed to active participation in community service, shared meals and regular prayer, and eco-friendly living habits.¹ Early in the class discussion, these students aligned themselves with the speaker from the agency, as those who already possessed knowledge about the complexities of service work. They were also aware of the negative associations that sometimes accompany our university’s students. They spoke eloquently about the importance of not approaching this work as “charity” or seeing ourselves as “saviors.” *It must be reciprocal*, Rosa insisted.

Encouraged that these students’ strong participation bolstered our own pedagogical values, we were enthusiastic about their contributions and leadership. These students seemed to represent, in fact, the kind of “subject” we hoped a service-pedagogy might produce. Jennifer Gore reminds us that all pedagogies involve a particular “self-styling” and promote a particular kind of “being to which we aspire” (63). Like our “ideal subject,” these students demonstrated a complex understanding of social structures and understood themselves as change agents within these systems. They were also deeply invested in critiquing institutional structures and modeled this practice often in class.

In reflecting on the session, Rosa admitted some annoyance with the college administrator’s words of warning to represent the university well. “The university benefits from our work in service sites,” Rosa remarked. “We make it look good.” Shari remarked that this was an interesting point; the university’s improved reputation is not an outcome we typically discuss when promoting service-learning, but it is certainly worth consideration. After all, weren’t the two of us experiencing pressure to make sure the service went smoothly and efficiently? To represent the university well?

The Agency’s Needs

The second orientation, at the [state] Literacy Center, provided a much more specific picture of the nature of the service-learning work. We went to the [state] Literacy Center late one Thursday night, a time chosen to accommodate student schedules. We sat around a conference table in a small training room, while Philip, the head administrator at the Literacy Center, gave us a quiz on literacy in the United States (which nearly all of us failed). He showed a PowerPoint presentation that listed statistics about rates of illiteracy among American adults and finally described the mission statement of the Literacy Center and the qualifications for those wishing to volunteer there.

Due to the semester-long time frame for the course, students did not have adequate time to become full-fledged Literacy Center tutors, so their service learning hours would involve offering supplemental activities for clients. Prior to our work together, Shari and Philip met several times to discuss the respective needs of the students and the literacy clients. Philip surveyed those who used the center to learn what projects might be of most interest to them. Based on the feedback he received, he generated a list of possibilities, including computer classes, spelling fairs, fund-raising and promotional opportunities, and even administrative work at the center. Philip made it clear, however, that the list was not comprehensive, and he was open to suggestions for potential projects from the students.

Philip described to the students, in general terms, the clients who come to the Literacy Center for help. Many, he said, were working-class, nonnative English speakers who were motivated by the desire to read their children a book, write a letter to a relative, or enhance their job skills. The center also regularly served native English speakers who had never learned to read and had developed complex compensation systems to cover their illiteracy. He also described the obstacles many clients had to overcome to enroll in literacy training. The majority, he said, had to make complicated transportation arrangements or take city buses, and if those arrangements fell through, clients were often forced to miss their appointments with their tutors. They also had to make appointments at the center that fit into their work schedules and their children's school schedules, adding another layer of potential complication. Philip emphasized that for clients to come to the center was not to be taken for granted; it took courage and determination. After the orientation ended, several students waited to talk with him about how they could integrate their various skill sets and interests to benefit the center, and on the way out the students were optimistic and motivated.

After this initial encounter with Philip and the Literacy Center, the students said they appreciated the flexibility he offered them. Many immediately identified aspects of the center's work that matched an interest or skill they already possessed. Chloe and LaKiesha decided to use their technical skills to produce a promotional video for the center; Tanya, Becca, and Sara planned a spelling fair, and Beth and Jon opted to teach a computer skills class. The common characteristic among all these possibilities was that none of them came pre-assembled. Almost all of the service-learning opportunities required a significant degree of initiative on the students' parts; Philip had the basic

tools, such as curriculum, materials, and lists of client contacts, but it was up to the students to plan, administer, promote, and participate in the activities.

Multiple Literacies in the Classroom

As students began their service at the Literacy Center, they worked simultaneously on their first writing project: literacy histories, in which they would critically interrogate their views of literacy and illiteracy from a cultural standpoint. We hoped that through our classroom efforts to problematize the definition of literacy as reading, writing, and job skills, we would equip students to garner new respect for lost or undervalued literacies. Several students used the concepts elucidated in Denny Taylor's *Many Families, Many Literacies* to gain a new appreciation for the literacies that their working-class parents or grandparents possessed. An unexpected outcome of these narratives was the revelation (particularly for us as teachers) that this group of students did not represent our university's typical population, as we had first assumed.

The student body of our university tends to be largely homogeneous in terms of race (white), class (middle to upper middle), and family's educational background (college and often beyond), and it became all too easy to assume that this group, too, conformed to that norm. Perhaps this was partly because those who were most vocal in our class underscored their experience as middle- to upper-class citizens who had to be cognizant of their own privilege while working at social sites. Martha was the most outspoken on this issue, and both her comments in class and weekly writings were regularly devoted to the turmoil and (self-described) "rich girl" guilt she felt after returning from Central America.

As we read the literacy narratives, which were workshoped in small groups in class, we learned that a handful of students were first-generation college attendees, one student was a single mother of a young child, and another cared for her grandmother nearly full-time on top of attending school because her parents could not take time away from their jobs or afford to hire outside help. These students experienced complex literacy situations in their own homes, and several even had familiarity with some of the same issues with which the clients at the Literacy Center dealt, such as juggling care-taking responsibilities for family, work, and school or negotiating the needs and expectations of drastically different home, work, or school communities.

Before reading these narratives, we thought of our students and the literacy clients as two distinctly different groups. When we composed the objective "Reflect on the way others' literacies enhance, challenge, and extend our own,"

“others” meant the literacy clients, not classmates. While we knew our students’ literacy backgrounds would represent some variation, we had focused more on their commonalities than differences: their college education, their position as literacy “experts” (at least in terms of culturally valued literacies) in relation to the clients, their status as university students. As Margaret Himley reminds us: “service students are typically the ones who can and do cross borders, the ones who are mobile and accrue cultural capital through that mobility” (425). Indeed, many of our students fell into this category. The group of students who identified themselves most strongly as “social activists” made clear that they were from upper-class backgrounds. And these were also the most vocal students in the class.

But as we began to see the variance in our own students’ literacies and social positions, we realized that the students whose positions fell out of the university’s “norm” had so far remained relatively silent. We felt increasing concern that our classroom dynamics were reproducing the very dynamic of privilege we hoped to counter; that is, were we giving more space to a particular kind of knowledge, such as knowledge that stemmed from an institutionally sanctioned experience like the Central America trip, or that represented the experience of privileged students, than to the lived experience of poverty and marginalization of some of our other students?

This tension climaxed when the class read Sapphire’s provocative literacy narrative *Push*. The novel relates, in the first person, the story of a young African American woman named Precious who enrolls in a writing class for at-risk high school students and begins to process her experiences of abuse through writing, simultaneously developing her literacy skills. Precious’s narrative develops in its clarity and insightfulness as the book progresses, thus telling the story of her life, as well as showing her increasingly skillful use of language. The book is also packed with brutally frank descriptions of poverty, abuse, exploitation and racism.

We chose the book because it offered a moving account of the power of literacy. We assumed the text would offer yet another way for students to interact with and learn from someone who possessed a dramatically different literacy background.

Our first discussion of *Push* was rather stilted, with much discussion of the book as a literary experiment, rather than an account of situations that happen in real life. In fact, several students questioned the realism of the book. I can’t believe that someone—a teacher, counselor, nurse—would not have intervened,” one student remarked. “It doesn’t make sense that the nurse

would discover Precious had been abused and do nothing,” another insisted. “It’s just not realistic.”

Once again, our classroom served primarily as a space for theoretical discussions about issues of literacy and social stratification, that is, until LaKiesha raised her own experience in relation to the novel. “Listen,” LaKiesha said. “I’ve been in situations like this. Social workers and nurses in underfunded urban institutions don’t have time to care about every abuse case that comes through. And Precious isn’t a white, wealthy patient. She’s not going to get as much attention as those clients who can afford to pay.”

After class LaKiesha waited until the students cleared out and then approached us about her response to the book. As one of the few students of color in most of her classes, and one of the few students in the university from an economically disadvantaged background, LaKiesha shared her experiences of racial and economic marginalization. With tears of anger and frustration—and many apologies for them—LaKiesha explained that other students did not, could not, know about her “outside life.” They couldn’t know that she worked so much because she was giving part of her paycheck to her mother to support the family, or that she could not afford new clothes and had to strictly budget her small income in order to make ends meet. Or that she understood the desperation of her friends in her old neighborhood; she knew why they stole and lied in hope of getting ahead.

She said that she had wanted to speak to the class about *Push*—and her experiences at the Literacy Center—as they related to her own experiences, but knew that if she did, she would get emotional. By making her situation visible to the class, she felt she ran the risk of marginalizing herself or upsetting other students. Sharing her experience meant “outing” herself, even further, as different from the other students. She talked about the fact that nobody in the class understood the reality of her “outside life,” not even her close friend Chloe. Although we knew we were included in that statement about not understanding, we asked LaKiesha to consider speaking more openly about herself and her context, but we also reassured her that we did not *expect* this of her. We discussed the ways that *Push* could serve as a means to facilitate understanding, rather than ignorance, about the lived reality of not only Precious and LaKiesha but possibly many of the Literacy Center clients.

Our conversation with LaKiesha made it abundantly clear that the vocal dominance of the white, upper-class “activist” students, despite their insistence on political correctness and social justice, helped to produce a climate that silenced the voices of the other students, in particular, the minority students.

Those students did not understand, LaKiesha said, that what they were talking about as a theoretical issue was not somebody else's problem, it was her problem. Inequality, poverty, and exploitation were not abstractions to be overcome so that the world could be better for other people; they were immediate problems in her life. She felt that her fellow students wanted to talk about it, but they did not want to *talk* about it.

Or, we could talk about these issues in relation to literacy clients, but not in relation to those of us sitting together in the classroom. While there is much written in service-learning discourse about the complexity of "client-provider" dynamics in service sites, there is relatively little mention of how service situations can illuminate the differences among our own students, creating a complex set of dynamics within the classroom. Like Ann Green, we began to discover that "those who come from marginalized groups, working class students and students of color, may have very different definitions of service and widely varying experiences of service than our mainstream students" (283).

We had been so focused on theoretically grounding the practice of service-work with the literacy clients, hoping to adequately prepare our students to engage the clients with increased understanding and respect, that we failed to think about our classroom as an equally important site of "practice" as they engaged *one another's* literacies. That is, we worked hard to ensure—as much service-learning scholarship promotes—that the service activities were well integrated as a crucial text in the course, not a mere "add-on." We took seriously Green's admonition that it is important to make power relationships visible between those who "serve" and "are served," by creating space for students "to explore their different subject positions and relation to service" (296). But these power relationships exist *within* the class as well, and exploration of subject position might have served to help students consider how their different subject positions affect their relationships with one another. To be sure, we found that the dynamics in the classroom generated as much tension as did the dynamics at the Literacy Center.

Because of LaKiesha's self-disclosure, our perspective on our classroom discussions changed; we began to hear the discussions through (our perceptions of) LaKiesha's ears. The dissonance was increased by our knowledge that all the students did not approach literacy or service learning with the same assumptions. Classroom discussions continued to reflect this disconnect. There were days when LaKiesha was silent and withdrawn, and days when she spoke more assertively from her own experience and position. Consequently, the dynamic shifted ever so slightly. LaKiesha's stories seemed to make small

ripples to which other students added; we began to hear more from some previously silent students like Nicky, who as a single mother, first-generation college attendee, and the only fluent English speaker in her home, had much to add to our discussions. But we also noticed that the group of students who came in with the most entrenched notions of service and activism were not changed by these “ripples.” Thus, an increasing divide emerged between the students who were actively engaged in the process of service-learning and those who felt they had already achieved the position of social agent or owned a particular cultural awareness.

The latter group seemed to approach this position and knowledge as an end in itself. As Dewey argues, “when ends are regarded as literally ends to action rather than as directive stimuli to present choice they are frozen and isolated. It makes no difference whether the ‘end’ is ‘natural’ good like health or a ‘moral’ good like honesty. Set up as complete and exclusive, as demanding and justifying action as a means to itself, it leads to narrowness” (72). But we, too, had at first understood these students as embodying the ideal knowledge and behavior of a service-learning student: they represented the “outcome” for which we at first hoped. We began to realize, however, that any outcome for this class needed to represent a pivotal point for further consideration and movement, not a fixed end.

“This Is NOT Productive Frustration”

This is not to say the service, itself, was without complications. In “Living Literacy,” Lytle writes, “There may be diverse routes into literacy, and in different cultures or social groupings such learning may revolve more around joint work and interdependence than around individual initiative” (380). Working with Literacy Center clients forced us to reckon with the reality that service-learning in a literacy acquisition context was not simply about helping other people learn how to read and write, but also about understanding and meeting the needs of the center’s clients. The students were required to engage the tension between theory and practice, using Lytle’s framework to value a variety of literacies while bringing Literacy Center clients into the dominant discourse.

While the engagement of this idea was quite smooth in our theoretical class discussions, it was not so easy for some of the students to engage in practice; in fact, it was ironically the most difficult for those students who could espouse the theoretical vision with the greatest ease. And with this breakdown, chaos ensued.

Part of the problem seemed related to one of the acclaimed outcomes of service-learning pedagogy: “confidence that students can and should make a difference in their communities” (Deans 2–3). While this is presumably a positive outcome, we began to wonder if sometimes this confidence led some students to work from a limited understanding of their roles as change agents, wanting only to do certain kinds of work, which they felt best facilitated change, rather than to work reciprocally with the Literacy Center and its clients.

This issue began to emerge one Tuesday morning, several weeks into the course, when we asked students to meet in groups to discuss their work at the Literacy Center. Tanya and Becca, who were promoting a spelling fair, a service requested by the clients, were frustrated with their inability to get commitments from clients at the Literacy Center, despite the many phone calls they had made. “It’s frustrating,” Tanya remarked, “to spend so much of our time just making calls with not very many results.” They agreed among themselves that what they really wanted to do was work with the clients, not establish the conditions for this work.

We suggested they might try to see this as part of the service-learning process, pointing out that the clients’ lives are different from their own: returning phone calls may not be at the top of their lists. Tanya then suggested putting together a calendar of dates to hand out, so that they would not have to deal with so many phone calls and confused clients. “But would a text-based calendar be appropriate?” Amy asked. “After all, the clients struggle to read and might not base their lives on a print calendar like we do.” A double-major in graphic design and English, Amy then offered to put together a calendar that used symbols rather than text. Although Amy’s solution seemed to solve the problem, in later classes Tanya, Rosa, Becca, and Martha continued to express their frustration over trying to make phone calls to schedule events with the clients and articulated that the Literacy Center staff had been too shorthanded to quickly return calls when they did come in. Other students also seemed to be struggling to find a place to get involved or were waiting to get approval on their ideas. Several students reported that their initial efforts to get involved had yielded positive results, but it was difficult to distinguish whether the frustration voiced by a few students represented concerns of the larger group.

Their complaints led us to evaluate the requirements of the course and the ways we expected students to meet them. Should we contact Philip? Should we reduce or revise our expectations of the service-learning project? Our first instinct was to fix the situation so that they could get to their desired work.

Indeed, we wanted them to achieve that outcome of “making a difference” and to experience the affective rewards that result, which might lead to more service. (Indeed, we also wanted them to be “good representatives of our university at the center.) Further, as much service-learning scholarship indicates, direct contact with community members typically leads to the most dynamic results. But the scholarship does not typically address the messy groundwork that often needs to be established—and the possibilities inherent within that work—that precedes what feels like the “true” service-learning experience.

We were anxious for the service-learning work to be in motion, and this lag time—as described by the Justice House students—seemed unproductive and frustrating. Because the course was a pilot, fraught with the usual unforeseen details and challenges of a first-time experience, it was tempting to conceal the rough spots from the students as quickly as possible. If the majority of the students were experiencing some degree of frustration in their attempts to perform their service-learning, however, concealment would not be possible.

As we continued to discuss the messy process of simply “getting started,” we realized that through this work, students might begin to understand social problems as systemic and to see things from multiple perspectives. According to the Eyler, Giles, and Braxton study, service-learning was the best predictor that these two outcomes would be met. We also began to see that students’ desire to “make a difference” (and our interest in helping them to do so) in a predetermined way could conflict with their ability to see from different perspectives and to examine the problems they experienced at the Literacy Center as systemic.

With Tracy Hamler Carrick, Margaret Himley, and Tobi Jacbi, we agree that service-learning pedagogies should promote a “rhetoric of acknowledgement” that requires articulation of and reflection on the tensions and complexities that inevitably arise in service-learning pedagogy (57). As they point out, if we ignore the conflicts because they hinder our desired outcomes, we risk far worse consequences:

We risk confusing our ethical and political desires for reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations with the much messier realities that those relations often (re)enact. We risk masking rather than unmasking power dynamics. We risk mis-recognizing our own desires and needs. If we move too quickly toward discursive constructions such as the reciprocity narrative [or in this case, the “making a difference” narrative], which then suture over these difficulties, we risk fixing complexities rather than acknowledging them as central to and part of learning. (59–60)

Once we understood that this frustration could serve as a catalyst for reflection and action, we came back to Boquet's idea of controlled chaos, a concept on which we had spent a great deal of time in a graduate seminar the semester before. During the next class period, we distributed passages from Boquet's book about the productive potential in chaos. The discussion seemed to go well. Interestingly, it was led largely by Becca, Rosa, Martha, and Tanya, who spoke in eloquent terms about the importance of confusion and frustration in service work, offering experiences from their work in Central America as evidence. Ironically, though, this was the same group from whom the complaints came. When Darby pointed out that perhaps control and order might be regarded as a middle-class value, these students nodded vigorously in agreement. Shari reminded the class of Philip's point that an incident we might regard as mere inconvenience could well constitute an emergency for one of the Literacy Center clients. Indeed, their lives included many emergencies unknown to most of us: power being shut off, a medical concern with no insurance to provide care, a car in need of repair and no funds to pay the bill. In actuality, though, we were speaking not to the class (some of whom did not fit into the "we" Shari used above) but to the group of students who had leveled the complaint. We left feeling it had been a productive day—that we had efficiently turned the conflict into a "teachable moment" about class differences and had perhaps increased students' tolerance for the frustration inherent in service-learning work. Turning this moment around, as quickly as possible, seemed important if we were to move on, to get to the "real" work of the course so that our outcomes would be met. The efficiency model was so deeply engrained, we failed to even notice it.

When the students handed in their weekly responses, however, we realized the issue was far from resolved. Becca, one of the Justice House students, turned in an angry paper, arguing that her frustrations about the disorder of the experience were just pure frustrations and were therefore *not* good. The students' skills would be best used, and they would receive the best learning experience, she insisted, if they could move directly to work with clients—not spend time making phone calls and struggling to set up these interactions.

The two of us spent a good deal of time reflecting on Becca's response. Shari felt conflicted, wanting to provide a productive experience for her students while also meeting the needs of the Literacy Center, which might mean that students would not immediately get to do the work they most *wanted* to. Service-learning as reciprocity, after all, is about making compromises.

But Himely reminds us that it is all too easy to rely on a “rescue fantasy” that convinces us “that education can be made from the proper teacher, the proper curriculum, or the proper pedagogy so that learning will be no problem to the actors involved” (Britzman qtd. in Himley 433). While Becca may have felt she could best serve the center (and her own educational interests) by moving immediately into one-on-one work with clients without having to negotiate the set-up for these meetings, doing so would have denied her a chance to consider the contexts that the clients negotiate to simply *attend* the Literacy Center.

For Becca, frustration represented an insurmountable road block to her “real” service work; it became a reason to cease her practice. For others, the frustration became a chance to think about what the experience of making contacts with the client taught them about the clients’ lives and also about what it meant to contribute to the Literacy Center (after all, the “real” employees there had none of the appointments set up for them). Students like Amy, who made the visual calendar, were thus able to reflect on the situation, to learn, and to act. Her frustration led to movement.

Interestingly, along with Becca’s angry response came an equally irritated response from Beth, who complained that a certain group of students was slowing down the class by complaining about the service-learning. She felt frustrated not by the conditions at the Literacy Center, which she had successfully negotiated, but by the conditions in our classroom that perhaps gave too much credence to this group’s complaints.

Together, the two of us came to realize that so long as we, and our students, perceived service-learning as another place for order, efficiency, and outcomes-based measures of success, we set up ourselves, and the class, to fail. In responding to Becca’s paper, then, Shari emphasized that she, too, longed for order, but that our biggest collective challenge was to experience the disruption to our plans as a catalyst for reflection and action. But we also didn’t want to dwell so long in it that we stopped acting or failed to recognize the action that was taking place for many of the students.

Revising Outcomes

While most of the students, like Jon and Beth, continued to contribute their energy and time to the Literacy Center, teaching computer classes, reviewing grammar and spelling, and helping clients fill out forms and write letters, others such as Tanya, Martha, and Becca grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of internal structure at the center. As the semester continued, their resistance

compounded. They often referenced with enthusiasm the self-selected community they enjoyed at Justice House, and when they handed in their reflection papers about their most valued literacy experiences, they wrote about their semesters serving and living in Central America, not the Literacy Center.

As the two of us read and reflected on the students' written work, we thought about one of the foundational ideas in the course—James Paul Gee's notion of "secondary discourse." Importantly, Gee reminds us that discourses serve as "identity kits," allowing us to take on a particular role that others recognize (526). As we gain more literacies, we work not only out of our primary discourse, our "original and home-based sense of identity," but also out of secondary discourses that allow us to critique and revise the other literacies that constitute us (529). Ideally, we continue to acquire secondary discourses throughout our lives, which allow us ongoing literacy development. Of course, acquisition of secondary discourses necessarily results in chaos or tension, as our discourses collide and conflict.

We began to realize, then, that while all of the students in our class had written about the secondary discourses that helped them think differently about their original literacies, not all of them were equally committed to the disorientation that accompanies literacy acquisition. Some students, that is, embraced a particular secondary discourse as a final answer or fixed end. Martha's ongoing work reflecting on her semester-long semester in Central America exemplified this. She described her experience of great despondence in returning to the United States, now seeing the consumerism and excess in a new light. In particular, she was frustrated with her friends' and family's lack of social consciousness and felt she needed to rethink her relationships with them. Consequently, she often retreated into isolation or in community only with those who shared her newly found position.

What she was not able to do—or what our class did not prompt her to do—however, was to investigate the privilege that allowed her not only to travel to—and depart from—Central America but also to treat her despair by retreating into her room to watch movies or write in her journal. Here frustration and disorientation became somewhat of a permanent state.

It became clear that this group of students was highly committed to a critique of culture, our class, and the Literacy Center—all of which was useful to a certain extent—but that this reliance on critique eventually resulted in a refusal to act. These students, in fact, seemed to have acquired a certain comfort with this literacy and saw it as an ending, rather than beginning, point.

Citing Philip's lack of response to their phone calls as reason for not completing their hours, Rosa and Martha asked if they could use other volunteer work outside of the Literacy Center to fulfill their requirement. Shari insisted that they speak again with Philip and try to locate a project at the Literacy Center. Because the students were seniors, we decided that it was important for them to meet this responsibility themselves—or to take responsibility for not meeting it. To “fix” the situation for them would omit an important component of their learning process. Interestingly, while they persisted in objecting to differing aspects of the Literacy Center, they continued to express their solidarity as a group and their desire to promote their ideals in other contexts. Eventually, through talking to Philip and reading his responses on the required assessment forms, it became clear that Becca, Tanya, Martha, and Rosa had not contacted Philip as they claimed, nor had they participated at the Literacy Center beyond their initial interactions. Their attendance in class diminished, and several stopped handing in their weekly response papers. Ironically, those most deeply committed to the ethic of service failed to complete their service requirement.

We did not want to shut down the critiques of the Justice House students, and yet, if critique was an end in itself for them, engaging it over and again seemed unproductive. We decided to make a concerted effort to invite students who were engaging the friction or conflict at the service center productively, that is, as a gateway to reflect on and then move out from it.

As the semester continued, then, we regularly invited students to articulate and analyze their Literacy Center experience. Jon talked about, and eventually wrote about, his critical reflections on the experience of using an outdated computer program to help a client, named Roger, learn phonetics. In Jon's case, the limited resources that made the work challenging yielded a highly insightful response. While he was able to articulate the problems with the computer program, he did not let this hinder his work with Roger as a person or a literacy learner. That is, he was more interested in learning from the conditions in which he worked than in a predetermined outcome.

A group of six students who taught computer classes reported that the clients responded with enthusiasm and picked up the computer skills quickly. They seemed to learn as much from the motivations that fueled Literacy Center clients' interest in acquiring literacy skills as they did from the interactions. For instance, they spoke often of one client, Rosie, who wanted to create an e-card for her daughter-in-law, who was to give birth soon. While these were not the reasons they expected would prompt the clients to acquire computer

literacy, this interaction allowed them to reflect on what literacies our culture assumes citizens need and for what reasons. That is, they effectively used the moments that surprised them—or even that frustrated them at first—as a site of reflection and investigation.

LaKeisha and Chloe, in addition to teaching computer classes, worked to create a video to advertise the center to other volunteers. In so doing, they also had to consider unexpected issues: who wanted to be taped and be “outed” as a Literacy Center client, and who did not. They had to think about how to effectively represent the center in ways that would encourage others to volunteer, making decisions about what to include and what to leave out. Many of the students showed an increasing interest in their service learning as a holistic experience composed of both challenges and success. Many wrote response papers that reflected skillfully on how their work at the Literacy Center spoke back to the theorists we read, as well as their own familial experiences with literacy.

By understanding the complex processes and demands of literacy, many of the students not only assisted others in gaining control of multiple discourses, but they also came to understand their own literacies as adaptive and shifting as well. This became clear in Maggie’s work shadowing Philip, so as to gain an overall picture of the center. As Maggie, a future social worker, learned more about the inner workings of the center, she found that advocating for clients required Philip to work both with and against the system, even when he did not agree with it. While she (like Philip) was critical of the state-required assessment tool for measuring clients’ progress, she learned that simply opposing it would do little good to the clients or the center. She began to reflect on how, as a social worker, she would negotiate her own positions, her clients’ needs, and the requirements of the state; while it was important for her to approach these requirements critically, she also needed to develop a literacy that would help her clients succeed within them. Drawing from Ellen Cushman’s discussion of gatekeepers, as well as from her work with Philip, Maggie worked on a project that involved “translating” documents that domestic abuse survivors were required to complete when reporting their situation, since she believed their obscurity kept some women from seeking help.

Chaos Is the Poetry

In retrospect, there were no heroic episodes of intervention and change that emerged from student narratives, either on paper or in class discussion. But

as Carrick, Himley, and Jacobi remind us, “we foreclose important possibilities when we tell the service learning story teleologically, especially in terms of final or failed transformations” (60). Service-learning was a stretch for the entire class, including the two of us, as we took the risks connected to community involvement. It was by no means a flawless semester. Some students embraced the process wholeheartedly, even the slow, disorganized processes of planning and preparing their Literacy Center classes, contacting clients, and promoting their events. They applied their individual skills and interests to their work and accomplished things that were both enriching for the community and satisfying for them. Throughout the process they maintained a willingness to examine their own positions, to remain self-reflexive, and to be service minded without converting their service work into an elitist discourse. And other students, although they had firsthand, theoretically grounded opinions of how to promote literacy, seemed ultimately to value tidy, fissure-free solutions that manufactured literacy as a consumable product given by them to the Literacy Center clients. Their biggest challenge was simply experiencing moments of rupture as potentially positive fields for growth.

While we would not remove the objectives from the course syllabus or our pedagogical vision for the class, we would now approach them differently—as ends-in-view that are themselves deserving of reflection, that require a complex process of struggle, and whose results may not look exactly as we predict. Moments of rupture or chaos can be repressed, they can lead to paralysis, but they can—and should—be used to move toward deeper understanding, to operate at the edge or our expertise rather than to retreat (Boquet 81).

We would also advocate for more public representations of the complexity and richness of service-learning as a process, so that those of us who teach service-learning courses can begin to teach our students, colleagues, and administrators that the value of service-learning exceeds outcomes and predetermined ends. In fact, those of us working in this area might add an objective for ourselves, which is, in Welch’s words, to transform “the experience of dis-orientation into *practices* of dis-orientation” so that we theorize dissonance “not as a problem to be corrected but as the start of revisionary activity” (7).

Note

1. All names and identifying characteristics have been changed in this discussion.

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