

1-1999

Opinion: The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research

Ellen Cushman

University of California - Berkeley

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cushman, Ellen, "Opinion: The Public Intellectual, Service Learning, and Activist Research" (1999). *Service Learning, General*. Paper 84.

<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/84>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Service Learning, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Footer Logo

OPINION

THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL, SERVICE LEARNING, AND ACTIVIST RESEARCH

Ellen Cushman

While I support the good intentions of those who have recently proposed definitions of the public intellectual, I find these definitions problematic in their narrow delineation of the word “public”—they focus on a “public” consisting of middle and upper class policy makers, administrators, and professionals, and, in doing so, omit an important site for uniting knowledge-making and political action: the local community. Canvassing the letters submitted to the October 1997 *PMLA* forum on intellectual work in the twenty-first century, one notices numerous tensions regarding the larger public role of the intellectual:

New and old intellectuals in the twenty-first century need to try to answer such questions as: “What do people(s) want?” and “What is the meaning of the political?” (Alina Clej; Forum 1123)

In the next century, the intellectual must be willing to take more risks by choosing exile from confining institutional, theoretical, and discursive formations. (Lawrence Kritzman 1124)

American intellectuals appear to have entered a period of non-engagement, cherishing their autonomy over engagement and retreating into the ivory tower. (Patrick Saveau 1127)

If there is a task ahead for the kind of intellectual I have in mind, it lies in the attempt to forge a more secure link between the love of art and human decency. (Steven Greenblatt 1131)

[The modern intellectual’s] goal would be to enact in one’s research an informed concern with specific questions of public value and policy. (Dominick Lacapra 1134)

A postoccidental intellectual [is] able to think at the intersection of the colonial languages of scholarship and the myriad languages subalternized and banned from cultures of scholarship through five hundred years of colonialism. (Walter Mignolo 1140)

Ellen Cushman teaches in the College Writing Programs at the University of California at Berkeley. She won both the 1997 Richard Braddock Award and the 1997 James Berlin Outstanding Dissertation Award for research leading to the present work.

Taken together, these statements indicate a growing pressure for intellectuals to make knowledge that speaks directly to political issues outside of academe's safety zones. This urgency comes in part from administrators and legislators who demand accountability, but it also comes from academics who have grown weary of isolation and specialization and who hope their work might have import for audiences beyond the initiated few. They wonder if knowledge-making can take risks while both cultivating aesthetics and leading to political action. Above all, these quotations reveal the nagging suspicion that academics have yet to realize their full potential in contributing to a more just social order. I believe public intellectuals can indeed contribute to a more just social order, but to do so they have to understand "public" in the broadest sense of the word.

The kind of public intellectuals I have in mind combine their research, teaching, and service efforts in order to address social issues important to community members in under-served neighborhoods. You know these neighborhoods: they're the ones often located close by universities, just beyond the walls and gates, or down the hill, or over the bridge, or past the tracks. The public in these communities isn't usually the one scholars have in mind when they try to define the roles of "public" intellectuals. For example, Pierre Bourdieu recognizes that the intellectual has dual and dueling agendas: "on the one hand, he [*sic*] must belong to an autonomous intellectual world; . . . on the other hand, he must invest the competence and authority he has acquired in the intellectual field in a political action" ("Fourth Lecture" 656). Yet Bourdieu advocates only one kind of political action: "the first objective of intellectuals should be to work collectively in defense of their specific interests and of the means necessary for protecting their own autonomy" (660). Granted, academics must have the secure position that autonomy (typically gained through tenure) provides if the knowledge they make is to be protected from censorship. Yes, academics need to defend their positions, particularly in this socio-economic climate where big business ethics of accountability, total quality management, downsizing, and overuse of part-time labor conspire to erode academics' security within the university. However, the fight for our own autonomy is a limited and self-serving form of political action addressed only to an elite "public" of decision-makers.

Another type of public intellectual, in the limited sense of the word *public*, believes in protecting scholarly autonomy through popularizing intellectual work. Here's Michael Bérubé on this kind of public intellectual: "the future of our ability to produce new knowledges for and about ordinary people—and the availability of education *to* ordinary people—may well depend on how effectively we can . . . make our work intelligible to nonacademics—who then, we hope, will be able to recognize far-right rant about academe for what it is" (176). Going public, turning to mass media, dressing our work in plain garb may help preserve autonomy, may even get intellectuals a moment or two in the media spotlight, but how will this help individuals who have no home, not enough food, or no access to good education? Popularizing scholarship may help solve problems on academe's front lines, but such action

does not seem to do democracy any great favors. Popularizing suggests that public intellectuals simply translate their thinking into less specialized terms, then publish in the *New Yorker* or *Academe*. Yet publishing to a greater number of elite audiences works more to bolster our own positions in academe than it does to widen the scope of our civic duties as intellectuals.

Bourdieu and Bérubé belong to the modern ranks of public intellectuals, among whom I might include such currently prominent figures as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Stanley Fish. They all share an implied goal of affecting policy and decision-making, and they reach this goal by using their positions of prestige as well as multiple forms of media (newspapers, radio, and television) in order to influence a public beyond the academy, though this public will usually be limited to the educated upper echelons of society. In their dealings with this public, moreover, they typically remain scholars and teachers, offering their superior knowledge to the unenlightened.

When public intellectuals not only reach outside the university, but actually *interact* with the public beyond its walls, they overcome the ivory tower isolation that marks so much current intellectual work. They create knowledge with those whom the knowledge serves. Dovetailing the traditionally separate duties of research, teaching, and service, public intellectuals can use the privilege of their positions to forward the goals of both students and local community members. In doing so, they extend access to the university to a wider community. Academics can reach these goals in two ways: service learning and activist research.

SERVICE LEARNING

To enact citizenship in the larger sense, and to unify the locations of research, teaching, and service, the public intellectual can begin by developing service learning or outreach courses. Service learning asks students (both graduate and undergraduate) to test the merit of what they learn in the university classroom against their experiences as volunteers at local sites such as philanthropic agencies, primary and secondary schools, churches, old-age homes, half-way houses, and shelters. When students enter communities as participant observers, they “begin not as teachers, but as learners in a community setting where the goals and purposes of a ‘service’ effort are not established beforehand” (Schutz and Gere 145). Students enter the community in a sincere effort to both engage in and observe language use that helps address the topics that are important to community members. When activist fieldwork is a cornerstone of the course, students and community residents can develop reciprocal and dialogic relations with each other; their relationship is a mutually beneficial give-and-take one.

As participant observers, students take fieldnotes that reflect on their experiences with community members and how these experiences relate to the set of read-

ings chosen by the professor. These fieldnotes serve a twofold purpose. First, they offer students a ready supply of examples to analyze in their essays, and second, they become potential source material for the professor. The professors' own notes, video and audio tape recordings, evaluations from the public service organization or area residents, and other literacy artifacts constitute a rich set of materials for knowledge-making. Since the professors also volunteer, teach, and administer the service learning course, they have first-hand familiarity with the important social issues and programmatic needs at the local level, and they tailor the curriculum to fit these. Thus, when activist methods are employed, knowledge-making in outreach courses happens *with* the individuals served. The course must respond to the immediate concerns and longstanding problems of the area in order to remain viable.

In their most limited sense, service learning courses unite in a single mission the traditionally separate duties of research, teaching, and service.

The research contributes

- to teaching by informing a curriculum that responds to both students' and community members' needs, and
- to service by indicating emerging problems in the community which the students and curriculum address.

The teaching contributes

- to research by generating fieldnotes, papers, taped interactions and other materials, and
- to service by facilitating the community organization's programmatic goals with the volunteer work.

The service contributes

- to research by addressing political and social issues salient in everyday lived struggles, and
- to teaching by offering students and professors avenues for testing the utility of previous scholarship in light of community members' daily lives and cultural values.

Because service learning includes an outreach component, the knowledge generated together by the area residents, students, and the professor is exoteric (as opposed to esoteric) and is made in interaction (as opposed to isolation).

Among composition and rhetoric scholars, Bruce Herzberg, Linda Flower, and Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere, to name a few, have created community literacy projects which include service learning. Joan Schine has recently discussed elementary and secondary programs in service learning, and Barbara Jacoby addresses the practical and political aspects of developing outreach courses at the university level. Although scholars have begun to develop these outreach initiatives, few have

offered a methodology that integrates the civic-minded mission of service learning with the politics of research in local settings.

ACTIVIST RESEARCH

One limitation of service learning courses can be students' perception of themselves as imparting to the poor and undereducated their greater knowledge and skills. Instructors in the service learning course that Anne Ruggles Gere and her colleagues developed noted that "their students often entered seeing themselves as 'liberal saviors,' and that the structure of tutoring had the potential to enhance the students' vision of this 'savior' role" (Schutz and Gere 133). Indeed, if the university representatives understand themselves as coming to the rescue of community residents, students will enact this missionary ideology in their tutoring. Service learning courses can avoid this liberal do-gooder stance when they employ activist research methodologies.

Activist research combines postmodern ethnographic techniques with notions of reciprocity and dialogue to insure reciprocal and mutually beneficial relations among scholars and those with whom knowledge is made. Since a central goal of outreach courses is to make knowledge *with* individuals, scholars need a methodology that avoids the traditional top-down approaches to ethnographic research: "The Bororos of Brazil sink slowly into their collective death, and Lévi-Strauss takes his seat in the French Academy. Even if this injustice disturbs him, the facts remain unchanged. This story is ours as much as his. In this one respect, . . . the intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people" (de Certeau 25). Traditional forms of ethnographic fieldwork yield more gains for the intellectual than the community residents. On the other hand, activist ethnographic research insures that, at every level of the ethnographic enterprise—from data collection through interpretation to write-up—the researcher and participants engage in openly negotiated, reciprocal, mutually beneficial relations.

Theories of praxis can be united with notions of emancipatory pedagogy in an effort to create a theoretical framework for activist methodology. Scholars who advocate praxis research find the traditional anthropological method of participant observation unsatisfactory because it has the potential to reproduce an oppressive relationship between the researcher and those studied (Oakley; Lather; Bleich; Porter and Sullivan). Instead of emphasizing observation, research as praxis demands that we actively participate in the community under study (Johannsen; for a thoughtful exploration of the connections between critical ethnography and critical pedagogy, see Lu and Horner). Applied anthropology provides theoretical models for how praxis—loosely definable as ethical action to facilitate social change—enters into the research paradigm, but many scholars still need to do the work of intervention, particularly at the community level.

Praxis research can take emancipatory pedagogy as its model for methods of intervention, since notions of emancipatory pedagogy work with the same types of theoretical underpinnings. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* exemplifies the pragmatic concerns of politically involved teaching aimed at emancipating students. His work teaching illiterate peasants in Latin America has been adapted to American educational needs in schooling institutions (Apple and Weis; Giroux; Luke and Gore; Lankshear and McLaren). Emancipatory teaching can only go so far in instantiating activist research, though, because teachers often apply liberating teaching only in the classroom, and they are hard pressed to create solidarity and dialogue within the institutionalized social structure of American schools. In order to adapt Freire's pedagogy to the United States, we must also practice it outside the academy, where we can often more easily create solidarity. In a conversation with Donaldo Macedo, Freire says: "it is impossible to export pedagogical practices without re-inventing them. Please, tell your fellow American educators not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas" (Macedo xiv). Our revisions of his pedagogy can be more fully expanded if we move out of the institutionalized setting of classrooms and into our communities. In this way, liberatory teaching can be brought together with praxis research to create the activist research useful to service learning.

Although I have conducted a three-and-a-half year long ethnography of literacy in an inner city (Cushman), Spring 1998 offered me the first opportunity to bridge activist research and service learning through a course called "Social Issues of Literacy." The course links Berkeley undergraduates with the Coronado YMCA in Richmond, a place residents of the East Bay call "the forgotten inner city." Undergraduates read scholarship on literacy, volunteer at the YMCA, write fieldnotes, and then integrate theory and data in case studies. The course has met with initial success in three ways.

First, students immediately saw the tight integration of literacy theory and practice. Their essays revealed careful attention to the scholarship and some rigor in challenging the limitations of these readings against their own observations. One student's paper noted that Scribner and Cole's famous work on Vai literacy showed their limited access to Vai females' literacy practices. Her paper then illustrated two interactions where she noticed how girls were excluded by the boys during storytelling, playing, and writing. She considered methods of participant observation that might invite more of the girls to engage in these activities. At the same time, she conducted informal interviews with the YMCA members in order to understand better how their values for oral and literate language shifted along gender lines. She did this with an eye toward filling gaps in knowledge that she saw in the scholarship on literacy that we read in class.

Second, the outreach course has filled a very real need for the YMCA staff. While this particular YMCA had numerous programs, including African dance, sports, teen pregnancy prevention, and scouting, they needed adults to engage youths

in language use that would promote their reading and writing—without reproducing a school atmosphere. As one supervisor told me, “if the undergraduates come in here with too much school-like structure, they could turn the kids off to the reading and writing that they’ll need to get ahead in school. So let’s create a flexible structure for activities.” Her point was subtle; area children hold schoolwork in low esteem, but the adults value the reading and writing needed to succeed in education.

With the supervisor’s goals in mind, the undergraduates and I ask the YMCA members what kinds of activities they would like to do and offer a broad range of reading, writing, and artistic events in which they can engage. One ongoing literacy event centers around the creation of personal journals. Shawn, a nine-year-old, told me he wanted his “own journal here [at the YMCA] where I can keep all my stories and things.” Together with the undergraduates, the children have produced journals with decorated covers bound with staples or yarn. Inside the journals, they keep their stories, math homework, spelling words, drawings, and letters to the undergraduates and myself. Leafing through a set of completed journals, the YMCA supervisor noted that the children “don’t even realize that all the art, math, and writing they’re doing in these journals will help them with their schoolwork.” At the intersection where university representatives and community members meet, these journals offer a brief illustration of the way in which public intellectuals and community members can work together to identify and ameliorate local-level social issues. In this case, we together found ways to engage in reading and writing that would bridge a problematic split in generational values attached to literacy.

Finally, “Social Issues of Literacy” has met with some success in terms of research: the course has generated numerous literacy artifacts and events which could potentially serve as data for an extended study of community literacy. In exchange for the hours I have invested in curriculum development, site coordination, grant writing, and local research, I have the immediate reward of writing this paper. Thus, at least the initial results indicate that everyone seems to benefit from the service learning and activist research in this project.

However, even with examples of outreach and activist research like this, literary scholars may be hard pressed to see their intellectual work as amenable to service learning courses. To put a finer point on it, can outreach courses help forge a more secure link “between the love of art and human decency” (as Greenblatt put it in the *PMLA* forum), between intellectual work which cultivates aesthetics and work which speaks to common, lived conditions of struggle in the face of vast and deepening social inequalities? If public intellectuals hope to find and generate overlaps between aesthetics and politics, they need to first understand that what they count as art or political choices does not necessarily match what community members count as art or political choices. Because university representatives tend to esteem their own brand of knowledge more than popular forms of knowledge, they deepen the schism between universities and communities. Bourdieu described well the production of legit-

imate (read specialized, publishable, esoteric, academic) language, which gains material, cultural and symbolic capital by implicitly devaluing nonstandard (read colloquial, vernacular, common, vulgar) language. The educational system, particularly higher education, “contributes significantly to constituting the dominated uses of language as such by consecrating the dominant use as the only legitimate one” through “the devaluation of the common language which results from the very existence of a literary language” (*Language* 60–61). How can public intellectuals link the love of art and human decency if we continue to value university-based knowledge and language more than community-based knowledge and language? Unless the love of art and human decency, as they manifest themselves in university culture, justify themselves against local cultural value systems, academic knowledge-making will remain esoteric, seemingly inapplicable, remote, and elitist.

Public intellectuals challenge the value system of academe by starting with the assumption that all language use and ways of knowing are valuable and worthy of respect. To enact this principle, service learning offers meeting places for community and university values, language, and knowledge to become mutually informative and sustaining, places where greater numbers of people have a say in how knowledge is made, places where area residents, students, and faculty explore works of art, literature, and film to find ways in which these works still resonate with meaning and inform everyday lived struggles. Service learning “mak[es] rhetoric into a social praxis . . . assigning students to effective agency in the ongoing struggle of history” (France 608). Public intellectuals can use service learning as a means to collapse harmful dichotomies that traditional university knowledge espouses: literary/vernacular; high culture/low culture; literature/literacy; objective/subjective; expert/novice. Because these dualities place faculty members in a presumably higher social position, they distance academics from those they hope their knowledge serves—from those their knowledge must serve.

Public intellectuals can use their service, teaching, and research for the benefit of those inside and outside the university. Their knowledge, created with students and community members, can have political implications in contexts beyond the university. Their positions as faculty members can have readily apparent accountability, and their intellectual work can have highly visible impact. In the end, public intellectuals can enact the kind of civic-minded knowledge-making that engages broad audiences in pressing social issues.

WORKS CITED

- Apple, Michael, and Lois Weis. eds. *Ideology and Practice in Schooling*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1983.
- Bérubé, Michael. *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics*. London: Verso, 1994.

- Bleich, David. "Ethnography and the Study of Literacy: Prospects for Socially Generous Research." *Into the Field: Sites of Composition Studies*. Ed. Anne Ruggles Gere. New York: MLA, 1993. 176–92.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Fourth Lecture. Universal Corporatism: the Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World." *Poetics Today* 12.4 (1991): 655–69.
- . *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Cushman, Ellen. *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community*. Albany: SUNY P, 1998.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Flower, Linda. *The Construction of Negotiated Meaning*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1994.
- Forum. *PMLA* 112.5 (October 1997): 1121–41.
- France, Alan. "Assigning Places: The Function of Introductory Composition as a Cultural Discourse." *College English* 55.6 (1993): 593–609.
- Giroux, Henry. *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 45.3 (Oct. 1994): 307–19.
- Jacoby, Barbara. *Service-Learning in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- Johannsen, Agneta. "Applied Anthropology and Post Modernist Ethnography." *Human Organization*. 50.1 (1992): 71–81.
- Lankshear, Colin, and Peter McLaren, eds. *Critical Literacy: Politics, Praxis, and the Postmodern*. Albany: SUNY P, 1993.
- Lather, Patti. "Research as Praxis." *Harvard Education Review*. 56 (1992): 257–77.
- Lu, Min-Zhan, and Bruce Horner. "The Problematic of Experience: Redefining Critical Work in Ethnography and Pedagogy." *College English* 60.3 (March 1998): 257–77.
- Luke, Carmen, and Jennifer Gore. *Feminism and Critical Pedagogy*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Macedo, Donald. *Literacies of Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know*. Boulder: Westview P, 1994.
- Oakley, Annie. "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms." *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge, 1981. 30–62.
- Schine, Joan. *Service Learning*. Chicago: NSSE/U of Chicago P, 1997.
- Schutz, Aaron, and Anne Ruggles Gere. "Service Learning and English Studies: Rethinking 'Public' Service." *College English* 60.2 (1998): 129–49.
- Sullivan, Pat, and James Porter. *Opening Spaces: Writing Technologies and Critical Research Practices*. Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997.