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Lutheran Colleges, the Lutheran Tradition, and the Future of Service-Learning

Service-learning's rise to prominence over the last twenty years, which I will refer to as the service-learning movement, has been quite a phenomenon. At colleges all over the country centers for service-learning have blossomed and a tremendous number of courses using service-learning now appear on class schedules. There are national and international organizations devoted to its promotion and to research about its effectiveness, and multiple conferences convene each year to discuss latest practices and model programs. I began using service-learning in my sociology courses in the early 1990s and have worked with service-learning centers at three different colleges. Currently I direct service-learning efforts at Newberry College. It is time to admit, however, that during my years of using and administering it, I have been decidedly ambivalent about its effectiveness and its role in higher education. I have felt that it claims too much and that it claims too little, that it is a transformative pedagogy and that it is just another teaching method, that it prepares students to struggle for social change and that it induces them to conform to the status quo. I have finally reached the conclusion that all of these are correct, that service-learning is paradoxical and contradictory. While this conclusion may be disturbing to some advocates and practitioners, I think that it is good news for Lutheran schools. The Lutheran tradition enables us to embrace the paradoxes and contradictions and use them productively to make our service-learning programs more robust, meaningful, and effective. This paper is my explanation of how I have arrived at these conclusions. I will begin with some history.

History of Service Learning

From a Grass Roots Social Movement...

The modern-day pioneers of the service-learning movement were people who cut their teeth in the 1960s and so, not surprisingly, came at this notion of combining higher education and community involvement from political perspectives. (A note here, in case it is needed: service-learning is the use of a community service activity as a teaching and learning component of an academic class.) They looked at communities and saw need for change—in race relations, inequality, support for war, gender disparities, or, a little later, the environment. And they looked at colleges and saw the need for educational practices that engage students in social issues and prepare them to address solutions. The community involvement they envisioned meant more than serving up soup or tutoring a child for an hour. They were advocates of empowering the poor and the dispossessed to organize for change and bring about a different distribution of opportunities, resources, and justice. Theirs was a political agenda that was also about making higher education itself more democratic, more about promoting active, assertive citizenship. So, service-learning, in its root formulation, was much more than sending students out into the community to give some help to community agencies while also learning a little more about history or psychology or whatever course it was attached to. It was about the nature of democracy, the proper role of higher education, and social change in the community. I think of Jane Addams and Hull House and its relationship with John Dewey at the

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University of Chicago as a more accurate vision of the pioneers of the 1960s than most service-learning offices that are now a part of so many colleges.

The history of the attempts of these pioneers to find a home for their efforts on campuses is told nicely in the book, *Service-Learning: A Movement's Pioneers Reflect on Its Origins, Practice, and Future* by Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999). The book contains interviews with 33 pioneers: how they became interested; how they viewed themselves, the community, and the university; how they defined the purposes of service-learning. The interviews are filled with references to social change, justice, and empowerment. Nadinne Cruz, as one example, describes her campus role: "Consistently from then until now, I have seen myself mostly as a political activist whose paid job happens to be by choice in the academy. I see myself as having figured out a niche in academic spaces in order to continue work I started in 1963 as a student volunteer caught up in social change. I see the academy as an organizing base from which to do social change work" (85).

Until the 1980s, service-learning users and advocates were small in number and marginal on their campuses (Stanton et al.: 5) and thus the political and ideological foundations of its birth were not an issue. As long as individual faculty members were driving service-learning, their political motives were confined to individual classes and projects. And even then, practitioners usually were sufficiently committed to the idea of education for democracy that they did not try to force political positions on students. Although they may have hoped that by raising what for most students were alternative ways of viewing issues and by talking in terms of justice they would convince students of the truth as they saw it, most probably realized what most of us realize now—that political proselytizing in class does not automatically produce converts. At any rate, as long as service-learning was what a professor did in her classes, it did not attract a lot of attention (although some of the people interviewed did say their jobs were threatened because of it).

...To Institutionalization, Pedagogy, and Citizenship

By the late 1980s the use of service-learning was expanding dramatically and thus colleges began to create programs and campus offices that took service-learning to a new level of visibility and scrutiny. National organizations (such as Campus Compact) and national and regional conferences sprouted. Campus programs began to fashion mission statements and definitions and best practices. The service-learning movement began bidding for acceptance as a legitimate addition to the higher education establishment and a place at the table. Now, its basic character was an issue for discussion. Just what is the vision and the purpose

of service-learning? What is its contribution to the university and its relationship to the curriculum? Should it be the vision of the founders or something else? As we saw, the pioneers defined the movement in terms of socio-political ends, as a vehicle for social change and grassroots democracy, preparing students to be advocates with an emphasis on the poor and disposed. They used the language of empowerment and social justice. Secondly, they also understood that the community work should be connected to higher education by integrating it into classes so that the tools and knowledge of history, psychology, physics, or any other field could illuminate their work for social change.

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However, with rising use, greater visibility, and institutionalization this founding vision came under scrutiny. Edward Zlotkowski, a prominent service-learning advocate, looked at the state of service-learning and its socio-political emphasis in a 1995 article entitled, “Does Service-Learning Have a Future?” In his words: “As a phenomenon tied to the social and political upheavals of the past 30 years, the movement has, quite often, revealed a fundamental—if not determinant—ideological bias” (124). The result, he says, is that “the movement has remained far less visible—and attractive—to the higher education community than is necessary for its own survival” (126). Unless the movement pays more attention to academic concerns, it likely “can never be more than a fringe phenomenon” (128). In other words, continuing to focus on the socio-political dimension of service-learning would preclude its development into an accepted campus program. Thus, the movement needed to make some decisions.

In looking at the movement today we can say that it has over the last 15 years turned decidedly away from the socio-political emphasis of the pioneers. The classroom learning goal (or pedagogical goal) has become the primary focus of service-learning; it is now first and foremost a form of experiential education, a teaching strategy that uses the community as a kind of text for students to gain deeper knowledge and experience about what they are studying in their classes. In this form it has secured a place at the academic table; few colleges do not have some kind

of service-learning program. Secondly it is used as a way to bring up citizenship. Empowerment, social change, and justice are less frequently touted.

The Paradoxical Vision of Service-Learning

Nevertheless, there is still strong support for the earlier socio-political character of service-learning and there are particular programs that use that language and have that emphasis. Thus there are competing visions at work in the movement which causes dissension, sometimes expressed in conferences and essays, about the character of service-learning and its *primary* goal. These competing visions also reveal a paradox for the movement. Using service-learning for its socio-political purpose challenges the status quo; it raises questions about current levels of inequality, the distribution of resources and opportunities, discrimination, and the consequences of poverty. On the other hand, using service-learning as an experiential pedagogy to complement classroom learning places it in the mainstream—as another part of an education that gives students a competitive advantage in income, wealth, and status that comes from a college degree and thus, in the end, preserves the status quo. Thus service-learning has two goals which are in conflict. To state this in a different way, the socio-political goal is partly a critique of dominance and inequality, both in the community *and* within the academy; it is confrontational and critical. The pedagogical goal, on the other hand, is complementary and affirmative, promoting the use of experiential education and greater prominence for service within the existing conditions of academy and community. What does this mean for the movement? Can it promote democratic social change while it is also a pedagogy that focuses on transmission of course knowledge (which as I argued above tends to support the status quo)? And, how important is this debate about the goals of service-learning? Ira Harkavy, historian and the Director of University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships, believes that if service-learning is oriented chiefly toward disciplinary learning then “the service-learning movement will lose its way and result in the inevitable reduction of service-learning to just another technique, method, or field” (5). If this happens the potential of service-learning to be a driving force for more democratic campuses, communities, and nation is lost. In fact, he believes service-learning is our best hope for achieving this goal and that if it fails we are left with little defense against encroaching vocational-technical education in our public universities and even our liberal arts colleges. For him then the stakes are high and the future direction of service-learning is crucial.

Some may want to object and point out that the pedagogical goal of service-learning also contains a sub-goal of teaching about citizenship that can promote elements of the socio-political

agenda about social change. However, perhaps as a result of the paradox described above or perhaps as a strategy to further consolidate its legitimacy, we find that as service-learning has evolved more decidedly toward the pedagogical goal, citizenship education as expressed in the socio-political (and democracy-building) goal of the founders has changed shape. Where the

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founders stressed citizen action for justice and social change, the pedagogical side of service-learning today focuses on citizenship as volunteering, voting, and being a good community member. So, even the citizenship goal has undergone a change as service-learning has focused more on classroom pedagogy and the transmission of disciplinary knowledge. For service-learning today, the goal, whether in connecting the service to the classroom or in education for citizenship, is about learning to take your place in the community. Given the attempt of the service-learning movement for the last 20 years to gain credibility, this may have been inevitable; to be accepted it had to be tamed, to have broad appeal beyond the kinds of people who are cited as its pioneers in the 1960s and 1970s. So, a movement that started out challenging the social structure of communities and campuses has evolved into one that has taken its place within these structures.

Let's look at how this has happened by examining the particular characteristics of the practice of service-learning. What happens in a class that integrates a service-learning component? At the risk of simplification and generalization, I suggest that the following characteristics are typical: we send students into the community for short periods of time that conform to our academic calendar; we send them out to ‘serve others’; they tutor, work in soup kitchens and homeless shelters; they engage in various reflection activities (journals, reflection papers, class discussions) about what they have learned, how they felt, how they changed. They are graded for this learning and (hopefully) how the learning connected to course content. Is there anything wrong with these features? Perhaps. For example, some have pointed out that sending students into communities for such short periods of time may reinforce stereotypes and misunderstandings that they sometimes bring with them to

the service experience. Others suggest that sending students out to ‘do service’ emphasizes a one-way relationship—more privileged college students serving less privileged others which separates server from served instead of promoting understanding, collaboration, and community. Some point to the typical types of service—tutoring, serving at soup kitchen or homeless shelters—as individual charity rather than collective solutions, as teaching students that charity is a synonym of service, thus ignoring issues of justice and social change. Some decry the lack of depth in the reflection, that it focuses on description and feelings more than analysis and explanation, that it fails to incorporate big questions and any real recognition of the tensions raised by the issues of “short-time service” done in “service to others,” and that it focuses on individual charity rather than collective solutions. Some note that we do not evaluate what students accomplish for their agency or the people served, that we have no rubric for assessing social change or growing political awareness, outcomes that were part of the original socio-political goal of service-learning (we can imagine the animated argument that would ensue following proposals to grade on the basis of these outcomes). Finally, some surveys find that students who engage in direct service often are dismissive of politics and political action; the service becomes an alternative to politics (see Battistoni 5). So, all in all, there are questions about what kinds of lessons are being imparted through an activity that the pioneers thought would promote social change and political activism. Again, paradoxically, the movement started by pioneers may be helping to maintain what the pioneers were trying to change. By trying so hard to become accepted it altered itself into a mainstream phenomenon.

Service-Learning in the Lutheran Context

Time now to bring Lutherans into the picture. We have situated the service-learning movement in the context of its pioneers, its internal debates about mission, the paradox of serving the status quo while resting on socio-political foundations, and weaknesses of its current use. While the debates, paradox, and weaknesses of current practice may be problems for the movement in general, my conclusion is that Lutheran higher education can use these productively to support service-learning as a pedagogy while reclaiming the socio-political spirit and concerns of the pioneers. The particular characteristics of the Lutheran tradition and of Lutheran higher education support such a hope. Why do I say this? Because the Lutheran tradition has some strengths that can help us deal with the issues raised above. Let’s look at these.

Lutherans Know Robust Reflection

First, the Lutheran tradition supports the kind of serious reflection that is essential for dealing with all of the issues raised. In the very first issue of *Intersections*, Mark Schwehn writes that our Lutheran colleges are “voices in a conversation” and that the principal aim of our colleges, and presumably the conversation, is “the pursuit of the truth of matters” (5). The liberal learning of our Lutheran colleges cultivates “arts and skills of analysis, criticism, and interpretation. It frees students and teachers from unexamined tyrannies that hold dominion over their souls and minds” (7). And he states that “an education that addresses simultaneously the mind and the spirit is the most meaningful” (8). His description of Lutheran education is, of course, echoed in the ELCA document *Our Calling in Education* (2007) which describes Lutheran colleges as places that “nurture an ongoing dialogue between the claims of the Christian faith and the claims of the many academic disciplines as well as explore issues at the crossroads of life” in a setting of academic freedom (30). In Schwehn’s and the ELCA’s comments we have a prescription for robust reflection: about service-learning’s mission, paradoxical use, and classroom use. For example, whereas reflection is often weak and little more than descriptive in many service-learning applications, the Lutheran tradition nurtures a deeper and wider-ranging immersion in matters of meaning, of values, of faith claims and counter claims. Schwehn’s comments affirm the Lutheran tradition that sees whole campuses as communities of discourse, so that the search for meaning, for the “truth of matters,” is done in interaction with multiple others. Thus, reflection in service-learning is a part of the larger community of discourse and not just peculiar to service-learning. A community of discourse enables powerful service-learning reflection; service-learning reflection augments the community of discourse. Reflection is thus deeply ingrained in the academic culture of a Lutheran college and service-learning users do not have to cultivate it each time they use service-learning. Jodock describes the powerful presence of the Lutheran tradition in supporting the development of this community of discourse:

The Lutheran tradition’s understanding of freedom, its incarnational principle, and its principle of authority, considered together, suggest that a college founded in that tradition must be a community, a community whose members are engaged with each other and with transcendence. Such mutual engagement involves them in discourse, and such discourse equips them to lead. Participation in the search for truth is open to all member of the community, and no external authority determines in advance the outcome of its engagement with the truth. (31)

And a final thought on reflection as part of the Lutheran college: as part of a community of discourse, reflection brings together the campus community with the larger community outside the college, enlarging the community of discourse. A problem that plagues typical service-learning—“we” from the college serving “them” in the community—should have a different outcome in Lutheran schools: all of us, together, work to figure things out, to search for the truth, to apply knowledge for the good of our neighbors, to learn from this application, to learn in discourse with others whom we may be serving and with whom we may be serving. This is a powerful and broad reflection-environment for service-learning, one not matched by most campuses.

Lutherans Know Service and Vocation

Second, Luther’s concept of Christian vocation (along with the Lutheran tradition of dialogue between competing claims as part of the search for truth) helps us recapture the spirit of service that characterized the pioneers but that has diminished with the growing use of service-learning as part of mainstream pedagogy. As we use service-learning as pedagogy and benefit from the knowledge gained from reflection on the service in relation to course content, we never forget that the service itself (as Christian vocation) is part of the Lutheran tradition. Service becomes a way to learn how to apply what we learn to being civically engaged, that is, to learn the role of citizen. However, as I stated earlier, the reflection that does occur now in most service-learning uses is often limited to thoughts about volunteering and implies that the role of citizen is a separate role from others we play. Lutherans, through Christian vocation, understand that service to others is not a separate role but is infused in all roles, is transcendent; we do not serve others or serve the community in our spare time, or when there is a disaster, or just because we are part of a service group or service-learning class. Instead we are called, in all we do, to so serve, as human beings living in interdependency with others. As Darrell Jodock has said about serving the community, embracing the Lutheran tradition “offers a more profound understanding of what such service entails than can be found in dance marathons or other less self-involving charitable projects (as beneficial as they may also be)” (31). In other words, service, in the Lutheran conception, becomes connected to the larger socio-political picture and is not limited to narrow conceptions of citizens as volunteers (or just voters). Thus a service-learning that focuses on the use of service as a learning tool for course content can also focus on the big picture: the Lutheran tradition does not differentiate between service-learning as pedagogy and service-learning as socio-political analysis. And thus the paradox of service-learning simultaneously supporting and challenging the status quo, which weakened

reflection about civic engagement as the movement gained popularity and which now represents a potential weakening of the entire movement, is for Lutherans a learning opportunity. For Lutherans paradoxes can be negotiated; they do not have to be solved or ignored. More below about Lutherans and paradox.

One additional comment about this second point: in an essay that was also part of the first edition of *Intersections*, Professor Martha Heck writes about dual tasks in a Lutheran education in a way that further explains why the Lutheran tradition can strengthen students’ ability to deal with the service part of service-learning in a deeper way. A Lutheran education, she writes, should address mind and spirit (as Schwehn stated), include theological and philosophical and moral reflection, and be a search for truth. She also states that “doing must be given a higher priority” (10), that while we prod students to search for the truth and feed the spirit “it may be more important for them to struggle against what is not true” (10) and for our colleges to include “moral reflection in a dialectic with moral action” (12). She adds that Luther’s view of vocation is a “call to moral responsibility” (11) and requires “the moral clarification of how we act out our commitment to those who have less or who are different” (11). Her remarks constitute a clear definition of the value of service-learning and converge seamlessly with the potential for service-learning expressed by the pioneers and in Harkavy’s critique. Her call for moral reflection in a dialectic

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with moral action identifies our Lutheran colleges as places where service-learning can realize the potential that Harkavy believes is being squandered in general by the movement. And, it connects us to the energy, power, and scope of the pioneers.

Lutherans Know Tension and Paradox

Third, Lutherans do not shy away from tension and paradox. As stated above, these do not need to be avoided or solved. As Jodock, echoing Heck’s message, notes, the Lutheran tradition “lives with paradoxes and unresolved tensions” (33). Our use of service-learning can be richer because of this trait. For example, some practitioners use the disorienting dilemmas that Mezirow has written about as a framework for reflection. These dilemmas

occur when students struggle with the service experience, finding that it contradicts their understanding of the subject matter learned in class or their own assumptions. In my experiences and observations, moving reflection to really meaningful levels where paradox and dilemmas animate the dialogue is very difficult and many practitioners are unable to do it.

However, the Lutheran tradition can help us engender in students a more sophisticated understanding of how the search for truth requires peeling back layers of simplistic assumptions many bring with them to college and enables them to understand that something can be, at the same time, good and bad, faith-affirming and faith-threatening, worthy and unworthy. Far from avoiding such situations, the Lutheran tradition encourages us to face them and show students the power of paradox in dealing with the complexities of the world and of their own service-learning experiences. If students reach the conclusion that service to others seems to bring little change, scant justice, and brief comfort to those we serve, this becomes a learning moment, a time for us to ask tough questions about actions that produce unintended results. Though concluding that our service does not accomplish what we might hope is not good news, it is worse if we fail to see it. The Lutheran tradition enables us to learn and grow through the tensions, paradoxes, and disorienting dilemmas that characterize the service-learning movement. One of the richest paradoxes may be that the more students struggle with the disorienting dilemmas and their encounters with the marginalized and disenfranchised, the less certain they will feel that their classroom education alone equips them to deal with them on a personal and societal level. This uncertainty may make students more receptive to community-based knowledge and knowledge based in the experiences of people being served; it may lead to a realization that not all knowledge comes from books and experts. Understanding this is part of the power of service-learning in the Lutheran tradition.

Conclusion

The Lutheran tradition of reflection, of Christian vocation, and of negotiating paradox supports and nourishes the use of service-learning. At Lutheran schools, service-learning can be both pedagogy and a socio-political program, a contradiction for the service-learning movement as a whole but for Lutherans an opportunity. As pedagogy, it can have a disciplinary focus that makes it a valuable teaching tool, providing experiential learning to complement classroom instruction (while connecting to notions of service and citizenship that are part of most mission statements). But it can and should also be about democracy and socio-political thinking and action. And I think that a service-learning program that embraces both goals, holding them in

tension, can become more than a service-learning program. It can become the center of gravity for a campus where the weight of becoming a real discourse community can be borne, where big questions, controversies, and thus real learning can take place. Parker Palmer, in a 2010 essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, listed some of the ‘habits of the heart’ necessary for the preservation of democratic institutions and for sustaining a discourse community—listening to others, seeking out opposing viewpoints, appreciation of ambiguity, exploration of contradictions and paradox—and how these habits could lead to students knowing their own voice and having the confidence and courage to use it. Service-learning in Lutheran schools can nurture these ‘habits of the heart.’ More than a program it can be the campus movement that Ira Harkavy seeks and the pioneers imagined.

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