



# Collaborative-Based Research in a Service-Learning Course: Reconceiving Research as Service

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**Using a case study as its basis, this paper proposes a model for service-learning classes in which service is performed through collaborative research. After situating this model within service-learning and various modes of collaborative research between scholars and community partners, the paper will present lessons learned in bridging two traditional classroom pedagogies, undergraduate research and service learning. The paper will also provide specific strategies and pedagogical practices that help ensure an ethical, reciprocal, and collaborative relationship between faculty, students and community partners. Ultimately, the paper argues that research as service can lead to deep and meaningful civic engagement that extends beyond the specific boundaries of a single class or project.**

**Keywords: community based research, service-learning, undergraduate research, collaboration, case study**

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Research as service is not a new idea, just an underdeveloped one. In the book *Fundamentals of Service-Learning Course Construction*, Cone (2001) suggest there are six types of service-learning: a) "pure" service-learning, b) discipline-based service-learning, c) problem-based service-learning, d) capstone courses, e) service internships, and f) undergraduate community-based action research. The final category—undergraduate community-based action research—is most relevant to the concept of research as service. Cone explains: "In this model, students work closely with faculty members to learn research methodology while serving as advocates for communities" (p. 6). While he goes on to note that this approach "shares many of the same pros and cons as traditional research-focused courses" (p. 7), neither Cone nor Heffernan (2001), who wrote *Fundamentals of Service-Learning Course Construction*, provide further elaboration on the research dimension of this model beyond sharing the syllabus and assignments from a course employing this methodology. Clues to the distinction of this category, however, can be found in their choice of language: "action research" and

“community-based action research” specifically. In using these terms, Cone and Heffernan reference a growing body of scholarship applied most vigorously in social science research. Considering the aggressive growth of the use of service-learning in higher education to the extent that it has become “an accepted if not assumed part of higher education practice (Butin, 2005, p. xviii), one might expect this final category in Cone and Heffernan’s list to have proved a particularly fertile area for service-learning in college.

Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, Marullo and Donohue (2003) and Berhman (2011) have provided some of the most focused exploration into this intersection between community-based research and service-learning, but the bulk of the scholarship related to these two topics continues to develop in primarily separate spheres despite their potential overlap. For example, the most comprehensive book on action research to date—Reason and Bradbury’s *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (2008)—does not include service-learning in either its table of contents or its index. One reason for this omission may be simply a matter of language. As early as 1999, Hesser noted that, of the examples of collaborative, community-based research occurring in sociology departments in the U.S., they virtually never discussed their work in terms of service-learning, despite the fact that it fit comfortably within the service-learning definitions, frameworks, and models (p. 138). The scholarship of service-learning has been more ecumenical in its approach than that of action research, but it tends to reference action research as a possibility rather than a common partner that is fully integrated into the models most often used in the university setting.

By following Berhman’s (2011) lead and considering a pedagogical model that combines collaborative research, service, and learning within the structure of an academic course, this article aims to provide a clear idea of what undergraduate community-based action research can look like in a service-learning course. Further, such an exploration can help elucidate the benefits of service-learning when coupled with collaborative research. If Porpora (1999) is right, that action research is “the highest stage of service-learning” (p. 121), then greater attention to this intersection is clearly warranted. Further, as undergraduate research at many universities has been taken up as a powerful and effective means of education (Brownwell & Swaner, 2010), models for combining trends in service-learning and undergraduate research should prove particularly useful. As a rhetorical call to arms, the present article uses a case study as a means to explore the intersection of service-learning and community-based research, not only to encourage greater dialogue among the varied scholars working in these related fields, but also to provide theoretical and practical tools for developing college courses based on research as service.

## Collaborative Research as Service

To examine collaborative research as service, and to consider how this model can be enacted in the college classroom, it is important to begin by identifying and defining key terms and concepts: service-learning, community-based research, and the intersection between the two.

### *The Fundamentals of Service-learning*

In higher education, service-learning is typically defined and understood as *academic* service-learning. One of the most cited definitions for academic service-learning was articulated by Bringle and Hatcher (1995) as:

*a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (p. 112).*

Subsequent definitions have highlighted aspects of experiential learning (e.g. Jacoby, 1996), and reflection and reciprocity (e.g. Butin, 2010).

While community needs are stressed, outcomes of service-learning definitions focus on student learning goals. For an enterprise that places service at the center of its work, the imbalance between the vast body of service-learning scholarship focused on student learning goals compared to the anemic body of scholarship attending to impacts on local communities is problematic.<sup>1</sup> Stoecker and Tryon (2009) tackle this problem head on in their book *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning*, providing suggestions for how to work more collaboratively and productively. In particular, they mention project-based service-learning and community-based research (CBR) as models that provide a more hopeful future for service-learning in terms of addressing community interests (pp. 189-90; see also Sandy and Holland, 2006; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker and Donohue, 2003; and Berhman, 2011).

### *Community-Based Research (CBR)*

If the scholarship of service-learning has too often given short shrift to impacts on local communities, the literature on community-based research provides a helpful antidote. The two dominant principles at the heart of CBR—full collaboration with community partners and action towards social change—are both community centered (Strand et al., 2003). Of course, the scholarship on CBR is hardly monolithic. In fact, there has been a proliferation of concepts and terms that have emerged in the past few decades surrounding this type of research, including action research, participatory action research (PAR), community-based research (CBR), community-based participatory research (CBPR), and community-based participatory action research (CPAR). Even in publications that attempt to introduce and clarify these concepts, authors often fall into using terms synonymously (see for example U. C. Berkeley's "Definitions, Goals and Principles of Participatory Action Research," n.d; Stoecker, 2004). Among these definitions there are clear differences in primary focus and the degree to which a particular criterion is required, encouraged, or optional, but the overlap among these approaches is extensive and emergent, including the following: collaboration among scholars and community partners; production of practical knowledge; responsiveness to local interests; extensive involvement of all members at all stages of the project; production of materials

accessible by multiple audiences; flexible and emergent structures; contribution to academic and local discourses; and mutual benefits for all participants. For the sake of discussion, however, one term must be chosen, and based on the approach we have taken in the research project we are using as a case study for this article, community-based research (CBR) seems most appropriate. The name stresses both engagement with the community and a clear research focus. Academic and operational definitions also suggest action. Because many of the approaches that incorporate "action" into their titles suggest that all members of a project are included in all parts of the research such as Participatory Action Research (PAR), we have typically avoided this term to describe our work. Rather, our project follows a division of labor model in which our community partners serve as advisors rather than fieldworkers.

### *Synthesis: Research & Service-Learning*

The synthesis of these two concepts—service-learning and community-based research—has most explicitly and most recently been captured in yet another acronym: CBRSL: Community-Based Research and Service-Learning (Berhrman, 2011). This model of community-based action research falls more comfortably within a civic model of service-learning than a philanthropic one (for a discussion of the tension between these two models, see Speck & Hoppe, 2004). Accordingly, research-based service-learning typically requires deeper engagement with the structures, systems, and issues in a community that have led to disparities and inequalities that the community organization is working to address (see Berhman, 2011; Butin, 2010; Strand et al., 2003, pp. 119-137).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, by beginning with a focus on research as a basis for service-learning, students are reoriented in terms of their learning goals and the roles they adopt, particularly in establishing obligations to an academic community as well as a more local one. Further, the nature of these relationships is governed not only interpersonally, but also intellectually. Service-learning should have clear intellectual learning goals for the student, but a model that begins with collaborative research embeds these learning goals in the relationships students form with agencies and community members so that intellectual inquiry becomes the service, rather than a by-product of other, often prescribed work.

### *Benefits of Research as Service*

A model of research as service challenges some of the common assumptions made about service-learning that suggest a practical, if not an ideological, tension between the two terms, service and learning. Robert L. Sigmon (1994), developed a typology of service and learning, suggesting that only when we give equal weight to both service and learning will we reach an optimal balance that accentuates positive outcomes and effectively distinguishes service-learning from other kinds of experiential education. Furco (1996) uses Sigmon as a starting point to further clarify the relationship between service and learning, arguing that only when the beneficiary and focus are evenly split between recipient and provider and between service and learning, are we effectively engaged in service-learning. The practical challenge of ensuring this balance is made particularly difficult when service-learning is attempted within departmental structures where courses that count towards a particular major may have

required learning goals that do not align, or at least do not overlap, with service goals. Temporal restrictions add additional practical challenges, as Porpora (1999) notes when he argues that not only is action research “more difficult to do with students as a form of service-learning,” but it is particularly difficult, though not impossible, to do during a single semester (p. 129; see also Enos & Troppe, 156, pp. 175-177).

One solution to these practical demands is to draw the goals of service and learning closer together, where courses do not attempt to give equal balance to learning goals and service goals, but rather where learning goals *are* service goals. Furco (1996) describes a project where students in a course on the Physiology of the Aging could learn about how aging affects mobility by providing senior citizens with mobility assistance (p. 5). Although research and learning are not synonyms, the similarities between these more academically-focused goals suggest that a research as service model can bring service and learning together as part and parcel of the same enterprise—research *as* service as opposed to research *and* service.

Further, service need not be direct, as in many service-learning models and in Furco’s example above. In a model of research *as* service, service can be provided through processes of inquiry rather than solely through direct assistance. Research as service can efficiently build on the skill sets of each constituency. For example, agency partners typically bring topical and local expertise, as well as knowledge of the social and political landscapes integral to navigating many of the practical complexities of community work. Community members typically bring personal experiences and a variety of viewpoints and perspectives that ensure a robust discussion. Faculty members typically bring theoretical, methodological and topical expertise, along with institutional support that often allows them to serve as the primary liaisons between institution and community members. Finally, students—being trained as they are in critical thinking, analysis, research methods and specific issues relevant to the topic at hand—bring emerging expertise in these areas, as well as their time and labor as active, engaged workers.

### *Persistent Tensions*

Considering the focus of action research to “stop working with people as ‘subjects’ (which, in actuality means to hold them as objects of our gaze)” and instead “build relationships as co-researchers” (Reason & Bradbury 2008, p. 9), and in light of the critique leveled against service-learning of contributing “to the oppression of the needy as persons who need to be cared for” (Mayback 1996, cited in Kenny & Gallagher 2000, p. 192), one can perhaps understand why service-learning scholars might be interested in drawing upon action research, but scholars of action research might be less interested in drawing on the scholarship of service-learning. Service is, after all, a problematic term if one strives for egalitarian, non-hierarchical relationships. Denotative meanings include “work done for others,” and “an act of assistance or benefit.” As a transitive verb, service is used in ways that again suggest a clear us/them dichotomy: “to provide services to” (thefreedictionary.com). Connotative meanings will vary widely according to who uses the term and the contexts in which it is used. While the origins of the term—from Latin, *servus* meaning slave (thefreedictionary.com)—suggest a particularly

dark connotation that suggests the work is being done for someone else unwillingly, the use of “service” in “service-learning” suggests willing work. The problem, however, remains with respect to the nature of the work. Is it *for* someone else, or *to* someone else, or can service suggest *with* someone else?

The incorporation of community-based action research as a type of service-learning clearly suggests that service can be done *with* someone else. But in terms of actual execution, what does community-based research as service look like? And as importantly, what are the challenges and benefits to incorporating such a model within a traditional semester course structure?

## Case Study

In Fall 2013, I attempted just such a course. It was an approved service-learning course structured around a collaborative, multi-year research project that brought students, faculty and community partners together to address the stereotypes about welfare and welfare recipients conveyed through stories told in the mass media, in political discourse, and interpersonally among friends and family. While the project was not confined to a single semester, the formal service-learning component was.

### *Project Origin and Collaboration*

The initial idea for the project emerged after an encounter I had with a local resident whose stereotypes about the poor were intimately tied to contemporary legends about “welfare queens” that have been pervasive ever since the term was introduced in the 1970s during Ronald Reagan’s stump speeches. At the time, the Program for Ethnographic Research and Community Studies (PERCS) I direct was looking for its next collaborative research project to develop, and the topic of contemporary perceptions of welfare seemed to require, or at least easily accommodate collaboration, both because of its sensitive nature and because of the potential for direct application of this research to community challenges.

Building on local contacts where I live and serve on the board of a local non-profit agency that assists women and families in transition, I set up meetings with some relevant community leaders. Over the course of the following month, we established a group of community partners interested in turning a nascent idea—addressing stereotypes and other perceptions of people who receive public assistance—into a research project. On campus, an established committee dedicated to ethnography and community studies provided additional assistance to develop the project as a rigorous academic research project.

Over the course of the next year, all of the stakeholders met to have conversations that would lead to the development of our collaboration and the roles each of us would undertake. During that time, we set the parameters of the research project and established specific research questions and project goals. We established list of 10 outcomes, six to serve



community agencies and community members, and four to be written for academic audiences. Additionally, we determined a timeline, submitted grant applications to fund the project, set the structure and learning goals for a service-learning course, received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and developed fieldwork protocols, including interview questions, field note templates, and processes for how to identify and approach participants.

The conversations were integral to the project. We made no major decision nor did we undertake any major initiative without conversation as a group. Meetings typically included focused discussions of a particular project outcome, fieldwork processes, or emerging challenges, as well as sharing new developments related to the project, including new community resources, media coverage, and proposed legislation.

That said, our collaboration was not marked by the kind of full participation in all aspects of the project that is typically assumed in the PAR literature (see for example Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Instead, we followed the more expansive lead of CBR research which embraces a division of labor model as one of a number of viable options (see Strand et al., 2003, p. 176, p. 188-191). From the beginning, community partners made it clear that they had neither the time nor the specific skill set to undertake traditional anthropological and ethnographic research. Their expertise lay primarily in their knowledge of the topic, issues, and policies; access to aid providers and aid recipients; and understanding of local contexts including historical, cultural, and political. Accordingly, I served as the principle investigator for the project involved in all aspects of the project; the students served primarily as fieldworkers and data analysts; and community partners served as project developers, advisors, facilitators, advocates, and researchers in gathering and providing statistical and policy information.

### *The Course*

The course was developed from the beginning as a part of the larger research project. Students were alerted in the course description for *Faces of Welfare* that the class was tied directly to an on-going collaborative research project, and that they would be working towards specific outcomes developed with community partners. They also knew it would be a service-learning course. Beyond that, they were taking a fairly large leap of faith, knowing very little about what to expect on a day-to-day basis in the classroom, or in terms of the scale and scope of the work ahead. In preparation for teaching the course, I worked with the project partners to develop clear learning goals and outcomes, and drew on my past teaching and research experience to consider how best to scaffold the work.

Students in the class were expected to wear at least two distinct hats. On the one hand, they would be traditional students, learning about poverty and welfare in the United States as well as methods for ethnographic fieldwork. On the other, they would be researchers, applying what they learned in class to their fieldwork as they observed, interviewed, and participated in the work and daily life of aid providers, recipients, and members of the general public. Because the project was conceived as a broad survey of the perceptions of welfare in the county, students broke into pairs to work with a particular agency or constituency.

Using interview scripts developed with community partners, and equipped with skills in establishing rapport, systematic observation, and field note writing, student entered their various field sites with the goals of interviewing members of the group, observing activities, and documenting experiences relevant to the research project. Their work would form the primary data collection of the project and thereby contribute to all of the major outcomes and products. That said, students were also involved in the analysis of the data and the development of a few specific projects. For analysis, students were trained in Atlas.ti, a qualitative software program that facilitated the coding of all the interviews and field notes. We used open coding on some of the initial interviews to develop a codebook that we have used for the rest of the project, revising it slightly as new themes emerged. Based on this analysis, and coupled with research of the published literature earlier in the semester, students worked on three specific outcomes for the project, the first two from the list developed with community partners at the outset of the project<sup>3</sup>, the third as part of the on-going, reciprocal nature of the project. All of this work would contribute to the goal of challenging harmful and erroneous stereotypes of public assistance and its recipients that have had dramatic impacts on public policy, local funding, and daily life for people who depend on public assistance to meet their basic needs.

There were clear challenges to this ambitious course plan: balancing the time constraints of a single semester with the unpredictability of fieldwork was an obvious one, as was the challenge of working with students whose experience with fieldwork ranged from complete novice to published researcher, and whose interest in the topic varied almost as widely. Balancing the workload was also a challenge, particularly in terms of ensuring quality and ethical engagement in all aspects of the work. But there were also clear successes. Some were hoped for, planned for, and expected, such as the student's development intellectually in terms of the course content and interpersonally in their development of an informed empathy towards aid recipients. Beyond student learning outcomes, there was the strengthening of partnerships between the university and local community agencies and the development of information and knowledge with and for community members. Other successes were serendipitous, unexpected, and virtually overlooked, particularly those related to the model of service-learning we were engaged in rather than those related directly to our research topic. It is those impacts, benefits and successes I want to focus on for the rest of the paper.

## Impacts

As noted earlier, the bulk of the impacts of service-learning have been studied according to benefits for students. Many of the benefits of service-learning for students were evident in this class, benefits irrespective of the type of service-learning with which we engaged. Based on the direct assessment of student presentations and final papers, as well as indirect assessment reported by students in their reflection essays and in correspondence since the end of the class, students experienced many of the positive personal, social, and learning outcomes



identified in the literature review of service-learning scholarship by Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray (2001).

Three outcomes, in particular, expand upon or add to our current understanding of the impacts of service-learning that relate specifically to a research as service model for service-learning courses: a) positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding; b) positive impact on such academic outcomes such as demonstrated complexity of understanding, problem analysis, critical thinking, and cognitive development (Eyler, et al., 2001); and c) how students may come to re-envision research as civic engagement. These outcomes are articulated most clearly in student reflections of their experience during the course. In these reflective responses and without specific prompting, students repeatedly commented on differences between a research as service model of service-learning and other service-learning experiences they had undertaken. Analysis of these responses coupled with informal focus groups with students after the class had ended reveal some key benefits that expand our understanding of the impact of service-learning. These benefits—by the nature of the small sample size and the descriptive nature of the comments—are suggestive rather than quantifiable and conclusive. However, they provide a productive list of areas for more intentional development and continued exploration.

### *Reduction of Negative Stereotypes and Increase in Tolerance for Diversity*

In their comprehensive survey of the effects of service-learning, Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray show that a number of studies—32 in all—indicate that service-learning has a positive effect on reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding (2001:1). Similarly, one student articulated how the class encouraged her to challenge stereotypes during her daily life:

*At the conclusion of this course, I spend far more time thinking about my "first impressions" of people, and how these impressions may subconsciously affect the way in which I interact with others. I am now constantly asking myself, "Why do I think that?" Whether a person or a policy, I have realized how our first impressions are really a reflection on who we are as people. This realization will forever encourage me to think independently, and keep an open mind.*

Such an outcome is powerful. However, as is clear in Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray's (2001) survey, this benefit is cast almost universally as one of *student* development as opposed to any other participant including community members. The reason is not hard to fathom: the studies on which much of this research is based derive their results from student surveys (e.g., Eyler et al., 2001). To what extent, however, might these benefits apply to community members as well?

The students from our institution have a mixed reputation in the local community. Among many community agency directors, they are often seen as dedicated, hard-working, intelligent, and dependable. The quality of their work may vary, but even in cases where a promised

outcome was less useful than a community partner might have hoped, there remains a positive view of students generally. The reputation among some community members, however, is decidedly different, mirroring the town/gown stereotype so often evoked in formal and informal conversation. It is an image that many students describe encountering regularly, an image of being rich, spoiled, entitled, and unconcerned with their local neighbors. It is a view marginally buttressed by demographic differences between the two groups. For example, the cost of tuition at our university is \$40,046 a year, while the total average median income in the county is almost the same at \$44,430. The perceived distance between the two groups may be exacerbated by the fact that 75% of the students are from outside the state (see <http://www.elon.edu/e-web/about/default.xhtml>) lending to the “othering” of the student body by some community members.

Another explanation for these divergent views can be found in the differences in context in how students are encountered within the community. Community agency directors typically meet students as they volunteer and provide service to their organizations. The students are interested in, and often committed to, community service. The general county resident, on the other hand, rarely meets such subset of the student body. Nor do they typically interact with students in the explicit act of service. Brief encounters in stores and around town provide little evidence for the assessment of students beyond superficial appearances and behaviors. The students’ material wealth is often literally worn on their sleeves, further confirming assumptions about socioeconomic class.

People who come to agencies for assistance encounter students in the same basic contexts as agency providers: a subset of students interested and actively engaged in service. Yet, because class divisions remain, these service-oriented contexts are not enough to counteract the negative stereotypes evoked by the service relationship, and can often be reinforced and exacerbated by placing the student—who is often markedly younger than the client—in additional positions of authority and power. The same may be true for agency employees, many of whom may have once been clients themselves and even when not, typically do not have the same degree of education as either the students or agency directors. Again, class divisions may color the relationship between agency employees and students.

The result is that many college students enter communities facing not only their own stereotypes about the poor, and various minority groups, but also the stereotypes others hold about them. Student reflections at the end of our course support the literature that students’ stereotypes were challenged and eroded, and that their acceptance of diversity, in this case racial and socioeconomic diversity, increased dramatically. However, some students also perceived changes in the stereotypes held by members of community agencies and the clients they served. One student, for example, described a shift among both employees and clients at the local homeless shelter.

*One of the main and most immediate differences [from previous service-learning experiences] I noticed was the way that guests at the shelter treated me. Before the*

*research they were respectful, but clearly saw me in a position of "power" and did not easily open up to me. After the interviews, however, I felt guests (and staff) were much more willing to open up to me and truly saw me as an equal. It made me feel much more comfortable to be seen on this level, and I felt I could more effectively communicate and work with guests in order to achieve a positive change.*

*While the research helped my open-mindedness, I believe the presence of interviews at the shelter is what helped guests and staff feel more comfortable talking with me because they gained a level of trust during the interviews. I saw this most clearly with one of the shift managers I interviewed. Prior to the interview we would never talk much during our shift, and he would usually encourage me to leave 10-15 minutes early saying I didn't have to stay if I didn't want to. Perhaps he thought I was volunteering out of obligation? Regardless, it was evident he thought I did not want to be there. After my interview with him, our relationship was much more open during my shifts. He has never reminded me of the time or encouraged me to leave early, is supportive of me coming in extra hours to "hang out" even if it's not a scheduled volunteer shift (something I suggested before with no reciprocated interest), he opened up to me about his family situation, and seemed genuinely interested to learn about me and my life. I was able to work much better with him in learning about how the shelter works and effectively assisting him and his duties during my shifts because of our newly defined friendship and relationship.*

This student, a Human Service Studies major, is an avowed activist. She had participated in numerous service-learning classes and regularly volunteers within the community. In other words, neither service nor service-learning were new to her. It is from this informed perspective that she was able to contrast previous service-learning experiences with the research as service model. The research she was engaged in provided an avenue for a deeper engagement with agency personnel and clients alike. The in-depth interviews broke down many of the barriers of skepticism and wariness that often accompany service relationships. The effect snowballed and become self-reifying. With increased trust came true reciprocity. As she asked others about their lived experiences, she found them asking about her own. The sharing of stories led to the erosion of stereotypes, not just those she may have held, but that employees and clients harbored despite years of what might be described as positive interactions with students.

These interviews did more than provide an avenue for increased trust; they provided a forum to confront these stereotypes in the first place. Relatively brief, low impact encounters typical of service-learning within a semester course structure means that uncomfortable issues such as stereotypes are rarely discussed explicitly and instead go unchecked and unchallenged. But in the course of interviews and conversations that typically lasted over an hour, and may have been repeated over the course of months, these stereotypes and assumptions were in fact raised directly and explicitly. As one student noted in her written reflections: "It was very hard for me to stay neutral upon hearing two of the recipients I was interviewing tell me that I am just a rich white girl who will always be able to rely on her parent's money. It was very difficult for me to hear something I already knew." When the student shared these experiences in class,

her peers immediately shared their own experiences, spawning an outpouring of similar stories among the students who had also explicitly been described as rich, spoiled, and privileged. But what is most significant is that these claims were leveled most often as collegial, but no less stinging, statements of difference between local community members and students. In other words, people in the local community felt comfortable enough to talk about deep-seated stereotypes with the students they held them against.

Certainly much of this development can be attributed to indirect rather than direct effects of conducting research. The increased amount of time spent talking with employees and clients required by the research; the need to establish rapport in order to carry out the interviews; and the sustained commitment made evident by being part of a large project; may all have contributed to the improved relationships the students noticed. However, more direct impacts of research as service also appear relevant. Qualitative research of the type we were engaged in—ethnographic research that attempted to understand the lived experience from the perspectives of people most closely involved—coupled with the collaborative nature of the project, helped to position employees and clients as the experts and the researchers as the learners and beneficiaries, inverting the power dynamics that often structure service relationships. Rather than entering the community in order to help others, students entered in need of help. Students as researchers are able to position themselves as people who need the expertise of the people with whom they work, so they can work together towards a shared goal. This shift in power and hierarchies cannot be underestimated.

### *Deeper Understanding of the Complexity of Social Issues*

Another finding in the survey of the effects of service-learning undertaken by Eyer, Giles, Stenson and Gray (2001) is a demonstration of complex understanding, including the complexity of social problems within a community (also Dunlap, 1997). Assessment of student learning throughout the course—through homework, major assignments, and self-reflection—made it clear that students understood issues of poverty and public assistance as a complex phenomenon with many related issues that posed practical, ideological and theoretical problems. However, the research project also challenged them to consider the complexity of service-learning and its assumptions about the common good.

That complexity became evident as students began their interviews, sitting across from individuals with unique life experiences and stories. As noted above, stereotypes that students had encountered— even if they did not adhere to them—were challenged in these interviews. Contact theory suggests possible reasons why. According to contact theory, “when groups are isolated from one another, prejudice and conflict grow like a disease” (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, p. 751). Allport (1954), who initially developed the theory, proposed that under certain conditions contact among groups could drastically reduce prejudice by promoting understanding and awareness. Those conditions include equal group status during the interaction; shared goals; intergroup cooperation as opposed to competition; the support of authorities, law, or custom, and informal, personal interactions (Forsyth, 2009). In other words, when members of different groups interact and these conditions are met, stereotypes erode.

The research project that structured the service-learning also structured many of the interactions students had with community members, including aid recipients. Students were trained in strategies to help reverse power dynamics, shifting authority from themselves and their institutions to the people with whom they worked, since it was those people who had the information and experiences that could shed light on the problem at hand. Working ethnographically, students and community members collaborated on a joint project that had received wide buy-in from people across the community as well as formally from the university's IRB. This collaboration encouraged informal personal interactions in addition to more formal ones during interviews. In other words, the grounding of service-learning in a research project helped ensure that all of Allport's conditions were met to varying degree for each of the field sites. Confirmation of the impact of this theory seems evident in the outcomes noted earlier as barriers dissolved and trust was built.

However, the complexity of the issues raised during this fieldwork was also brought to the fore. In the same way that negative stereotypes and assumptions can be challenged by getting to know people over time, so, too, can overly positive stereotypes and assumptions change. By conducting fieldwork, critically analyzing the data, and reflecting on the process, students recognized that their particular agendas and idealized stances were not perfectly supported. They were challenged with people whose complex life histories included aspects of the negative stereotypes they expected to challenge and prove false. The critical approach of academic research provided an avenue for tackling rather than shying away from or ignoring these challenges. Two examples will serve to illustrate.

One of the political science majors in the class was focusing particularly on perceptions of public assistance held by politicians. He had been interviewing some of the county's commissioners and was surprised when he found that the political perspectives of the individual politicians he talked to did not match his assumptions about the political platforms of each party. "I met politicians who didn't fit the 'Republican' or 'Democrat' stereotype, and I was forced to really think about how complex the issue of public assistance is. There are no perfect answers, nor is there the 'good v. evil' narrative that we so often hear on both sides of the aisle."

More common was the experience that many students had when they began interviewing aid recipients. Many of the recipients they talked to fit the profiles of recipients we had read about who described their reliance on government and charitable assistance as temporary aid on their path to self-sufficiency. But many of those same people also readily admitted to selling their food stamps for cash. While the legends of droves of "welfare queens" were clearly false, aspects of these legends such as the widespread selling of food stamps appeared to be true. In a traditional service-learning course, such a contradiction may be left for students to navigate in reflective essays. But as part of the research project, students had to ask why? What might explain their data? Why did so many aid recipients feel they needed to sell their food stamps and what were they selling them for? In conducting their interviews, students were told again and again that with no money to buy toilet paper or dish soap or pay electric or water bills,

selling food stamps had become a necessity for “getting by.” The answer for why they had no money for these necessities opened up further areas of complexity tied to welfare policies about eligibility for Temporary Assistance to Need Families (TANF, or what many would understand as “the welfare check”) and work requirements, as well as to the structural and systemic problems of living in poverty. Because these questions were explicit in our work, students were forced to confront them head-on as a primary focus, not as an aberration that had to be described away or as an observation reflected upon with no clear goal for how such reflection might be used in the production of knowledge.

Service-learning begins with a set of assumptions, whether implicit or explicit, that service is inherently good. Further, service-learning courses typically encourage critical engagement with the issues focused on by a particular agency, but may gloss over critical engagement with the mission or the actions of the agency itself. They *can*, but it is rarely an explicit frame for the experience. Research as service makes critical analysis of the entire phenomenon—issues, structures, systems, processes, stakeholders, etc.—explicit. Students are reacting, responding and reflecting, but they are also actively searching and asking questions. This aspect of the research process required students not only to gain a more complex understanding of a particular issue as proscribed by the professor and community agency, but of the fundamental systems that the various stakeholders—professor and agency included—were operating under.

### *Revising the View of Research: Transforming the Ivory Tower into a Town Hall*

Research as service impacts not only how students think about service and service-learning, but also how students view research. Students engaged in undergraduate research, particularly in the social sciences, are often encouraged to find the gap in the published scholarship and develop a research question to address that gap. In this way, previous scholarship guides future scholarship, a process that can seem particularly insular and detached from local communities, and feed stereotypes of the university as an ivory tower. This image of the university—detached, isolated, elite—is deeply embedded in U.S. society (Bond & Patterson, 2005). Service-learning is a particularly effective antidote to such accusations, at least at the local level if not in the national media. Returning again to Eyler, Giles, Stenson and Gray’s (2001) survey of service-learning outcomes, there are a number of outcomes that help erode the image of the ivory tower and the town/gown divide:

1. Volunteer service in college is associated with involvement in community service after graduation.
2. Service-learning has a positive effect on commitment to service among students.
3. Students and faculty report that service-learning improves students' ability to apply what they have learned in “the real world.”
4. Institutions report enhanced community relations and in return, communities report enhanced university relations.

Left unaddressed is how views of research and the research process might be transformed through service-learning. Research as service reorients the development of research questions



from an origin rooted in academia and previously published literature, to one shared by scholars and local community members. This is not, of course, to suggest that only local, applied research should be undertaken in academia. Rather, that opportunities for students to engage in applied research developed collaboratively with local community members can have a positive effect on how students approach other research projects, whether in college or in their careers. Such an approach considers the multiple perspectives of numerous stakeholders, many who will have specific ideas about the desired outcomes. As one of the political science students in the class explained:

*It has forced me to not just view research as asking an interesting question, but also trying to make an impact on policy and politics. For me, this showed me that my research could really matter for someone—I have the potential to impact a community. This is very similar to the original missions of universities: to service the public good and improve democracies.*

One of the anthropology majors in the class noted a similar revision in her thinking about academic research generally and ethnographic research in particular: “As a service-learning course the Faces of Welfare class gave me an opportunity that my previous experiences with ethnographic research have not been able to offer -- a chance to give back to the community with which I have come to identify.” Accordingly, we should consider not only the impact that research has on our understanding and efficacy of service-learning, but also the effects that engaging in service as research has on future research projects, carried out by students whose views of research have become informed by civic responsibility. In this way, the impacts of re-envisioning the research enterprise as part of civic engagement extend far beyond the confines of a single course.

## Practical Lessons Learned

As others consider a research as service model of service-learning, it makes sense to conclude with a brief survey of the lessons learned in the course of our own experiment in developing and using such a model. Some of these lessons are obvious and support what we know about service-learning pedagogies and research practices already, such as the importance of student reflection, regular faculty feedback, scaffolded learning, trial runs before entering the field, inverting the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewed, and the perennially thorny issue of objectivity in action research. However, there are other lessons more specific to the research as service model that deserve brief explanation.

### *Material Resources are Cheap; Human Resources are Priceless*

The material resources our university provided were a necessary part of the project, but such resources cost very little and should not be a barrier to embarking on a collaborative research project. Many students have digital recorders and cameras either built into their phones and computers or as stand-alone equipment. For those who do not, providing digital recorders is

inexpensive, running only a few hundred dollars. Internal grants and departmental funds can typically cover such costs.

Far more important is the recruitment of community partners. I spent a year and a half cultivating those relationships and meeting with community partners to develop both the project and the class. Much of that work was based on relationships I had made years earlier as an active member of my community, long before the development of the idea for the research project. Having that collaboration firmly in place allowed the class to immediately step into the project and begin their work.

### *Co-Researcher Role of PAR May be Too Demanding*

Early in preliminary conversations with community partners, it became clear that asking these women and men working long hours for little pay in their community agencies to participate in all aspects of the research project was simply not feasible. As theoretically powerful as Participatory Action Research (PAR) is, practically it can be difficult and problematic. Instead, we chose to use a division of labor model of Community-Based Research (CBR) where project partners participated according to their particular expertise and abilities. This model will not be appropriate for everyone or all projects, but our team continues to find it viable, reasonable, and ethical.

### *Self-Awareness is the First Step*

Before students begin their fieldwork, it is crucial that they attempt to identify their perceptions, assumptions and implicit biases about the topic and people with whom they will work, as these will impact their how they behave in the field, what they perceive as significant, and how they interpret the data. Objectivity is an impossible ideal, but informed subjectivity is a powerful step in the right direction. I have students brainstorm and free-write everything they think or believe about the topic, or group, at the very beginning of class. I ask them to include views, claims and beliefs they think probably are not true, but that they have heard. I have them repeat this at least once more during the semester, and then ask them to refer to those sheets throughout the semester, making notes and amendments as they engage in their fieldwork, reminding themselves of those places that may unfairly guide their interpretations and their final reports. When it is time for them to reflect on their experiences at the end of the semester, this document is invaluable.

### *Cultivate Informed Empathy*

Service-learning courses in particular tend to evoke emotional responses to the work at hand and the people encountered in that work. Often, students respond with sympathy for the clients they work with who may be struggling with one issue or another. More productive is to get students to identify their own struggles and identify areas for the development of empathy, a process that helps erase hierarchies and position student and client on more equal footing. This empathy becomes even more powerful if it is informed not only by personal experience but academic study. For our class, engaging in a poverty simulation helped provide

an engaged and emotional experience that forced students to confront many of the obstacles faced by the poor every day, while providing information about poverty. So, too, did the face-to-face fieldwork. One student commented: "After this experience I feel that I have a slightly better grasp of the challenges that recipients face not as just as people who are in poverty or need assistance, but as human beings." Echoing this sentiment, another student pinpointed specific activities that fostered this growth:

*Some people spend their entire lives studying poverty and inequity. It is an incredibly nuanced and convoluted issue yet, I feel that I have emerged from this course a little wiser and more empathetic. Specifically the poverty simulation, hearing stories of recipients and visiting aid providers contributed to my evolving understanding of these issues.*

Perhaps most vivid is the experience one student had:

*In my interview with "Julie," a resident of a local homeless shelter, she asked me to come visit her at her job. I wondered how many times students have ordered food from her without even considering the fact that she just got kicked out of a homeless shelter, and whether I had ever had an encounter with her myself prior to our interview. Experiences like these change you when we think about how many faceless people with whom we interact every day; it was incredibly rewarding to literally be able to put a face on welfare to keep in mind.*

### *Ethics at Every Stage*

In the recent explosion of engaged and experiential learning, more and more faculty are sending students into local communities as part of their learning. Less often, however, are they getting the kind of training in ethical approaches to fieldwork they need. This was made vividly clear early in my career when a student from another class showed up at the church where my students had established a strong relationship of understanding and mutual respect in order to film a video ethnography. The student violated countless social norms, without ever identifying herself or her reason for being there. None of my students were present at the time; the result was that many in the congregation assumed she was part of my class. I spent countless hours with the pastor and deacons in the church working through what had happened and considering how we could avoid similar situations in the future. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. While this was a lesson learned not in this class but far earlier, it remains equally applicable. A single day in class discussing ethics is simply not sufficient. Ethics need to be embedded throughout the class; initially, in the development of the research project and in the engagement with the community partners and members; later, discussing ethical dilemmas as they arise in the field; and ultimately, discussing the ethics of disseminating the findings.

### *Flexibility: Opportunities and Challenges*

Anyone who conducts qualitative research with other people knows that you have to be flexible. People cancel or do not show up at all for scheduled interviews. Events get delayed or occur outside the timeframe of the project. Problems arise that need to be addressed, disrupting carefully constructed timelines. Some flexibility is required. But students can be disoriented by too much flexibility. Deadlines, research questions, assignments and outcomes that keep changing in order to address the fluid nature of research can be dramatically disorienting for students. Framing the course to highlight the dynamic nature of research is not sufficient to calm these anxieties. It is important to identify those assignments, readings, and places in the syllabus that can remain fairly stable, even as the research project shifts. For me, that has meant staying firm on deadlines for fieldwork and providing specific numbers of interviews required regardless of the community.

### *Quality Control: Realistic Expectations*

Collaborative research typically involves agreed upon outcomes that benefit all parties, obligating each group to the other. That obligation extends to students who join the project, implicating them in the expectations for a certain degree of quality in the work produced. But as all teachers know, students have variable abilities, skills, and motivations. It is therefore important to construct a class where mediocre student work does not undermine reciprocal obligations among the research partners. Balancing individual work with group work is one way to ensure that mediocre work can be isolated and revised or removed as the project continues. Working with community partners to explain how student work will contribute to the final product is also helpful.

### *Balance Student Outcomes with Project Outcomes*

Positioning student outcomes and project outcomes as distinct and in need of balance risks reinforcing the tension between learning (glossed as the student outcomes) and service (glossed as the project outcomes) that research as service can usefully challenge. That said, assignments should be carefully constructed so that student learning is scaffolded as part of the process of constructing project outcomes. For example, one of the assignments of our class required students to choose a particular topic—for example, national and state trends in childbirths among aid recipients—that could be used in developing our “Top Truths about Welfare” document. Although I provided guidelines and an extensive set of examples as models, I did not sufficiently prepare the students for how to go about finding this information or explain how we hoped it would be used. It was the latter that posed particular problems. Believing the assignment was simply an exercise in research methodology, many of the students mirrored the model I provided without identifying new, significant, relevant information that would effectively contribute to the “Top Truths” document. Clearly identifying all the goals of an assignment—student learning goals *and* project outcome goals—is critical.

## Conclusion

Had I known we were going to stand back at the end of the semester and consider the course as a potential model for what to do, and importantly, *not* do, I would certainly have planned better. I would have asked for more systematic feedback from the students, to be sure, but more importantly I would have asked more consistently for feedback from clients and agency employees throughout the process. Further, now that we know that one possible impact of a research as service course is the erosion of stereotypes about students and academia more generally, future research can survey these groups for possible shifts, to determine whether those shifts are mutually felt rather than merely perceived by students.

So while we did not set out to formally evaluate and assess a research as service form of service-learning, we nonetheless learned a lot about both research and service, lessons that should be useful to future groups undertaking similar work. These lessons, and the benefits we reaped from our work together, are not what *will* happen when we engage in research as service, but what *can* happen. That is, our case study provides an example for possibilities, not certainties. But the possibilities are encouraging, and knowing them beforehand provides a greater opportunity to foster them throughout a semester or over the course of the life of a particular project.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>In 2001, Eyer, Giles, Stenson and Gray conducted an exhaustive survey of the scholarship assessing service-learning. While the cataloging of student learning outcomes is seven pages long with 28 categories and hundreds of sources, the impact on communities is only a half a page with three categories, and a total of 14 sources. Of those three categories—(a) satisfaction with student participation, (b) service-learning provides useful service in communities, and (c) communities report enhanced university relations—there is little discussion about possible changes to the people with whom students and faculty work.

<sup>2</sup>I have not included Problem Based Service Learning (PBSL) in this list since original research is not necessarily an integral part of the process of PBSL (see Gordon, 2000). There are many problems that can be solved without the kind of systematic research that gathers new data, analyzes it, and adds to the body of knowledge in a way that advances the ongoing scholarly dialogue. It is this type of research as scholarship that I am focused on in this paper. Although I do not use his terminology in this paper, the same distinction is made by Porpora (1999) in his discussion of the differences between service research and service scholarship (pp. 126-127).

<sup>3</sup>The 10 outcomes that our collaborative research group developed for the overall project (including but extending beyond the scope of the course discussed in this article) include some outcomes that are more clearly directed to local agencies and groups, others more clearly directed to academic audiences, and still others that more seamlessly bridge the two: 1) A brochure and website exploring the top truths about welfare (see "Top Truths" on our website: <http://blogs.elon.edu/voicesofwelfare/>); 2) An annual report on public assistance in the county geared primarily for members of public office but also for local community leaders and interested parties; 3) An online database of the personal experience stories of people living with the help of public assistance (see "Stories" on our website: <http://blogs.elon.edu/voicesofwelfare/>); 4) A protocol paper for aid providers highlighting the obstacles people experience to getting, managing, and then leaving public assistance; 5) A qualitative report on the successes and challenges of programming for public housing residents; 6) An open forum for the public to discuss research findings and discuss next steps that could be taken by other agencies, groups, etc.; 7) A journal article analyzing the contemporary legends and personal experience narratives related to poverty and welfare; 8) A journal article on the gap between how people tell their stories of their life's circumstances and



what aid providers need or look for in order to provide assistance; 9) A journal article that provides a narrative analysis of the barriers to self-sufficiency and that challenges assumptions about self-sufficiency as a shared goal; and, 10) A journal article on the impact of national mythologies and narratives that underlie the more personal stories people tell about poverty and welfare.

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