

9-1-2009

On-campus service projects: an experiment in education for liberation

Michael J. Gent
Canisius College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj>



Part of the [Organizational Behavior and Theory Commons](#), and the [Organizational Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gent, Michael J. (2009) "On-campus service projects: an experiment in education for liberation," *Organization Management Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj/vol6/iss3/7>



Teaching & Learning

On-campus service projects: an experiment in education for liberation

Michael J Gent

Canisius College

Correspondence: Michael J Gent,
Department of Management and
Marketing, Canisius College, 2001 Main St.,
Buffalo, NY 14208.
Tel: 716 888 2638
E-mail: gent@canisius.edu

Abstract

This article describes an approach to service-learning based on Paulo Freire's model of education for liberation. On-campus Service Projects (OCSPs) differ markedly from typical service-learning assignments in two ways: (1) they take place in the students' own college setting rather than out in the community; and (2) in my version, they challenge students to engage in critical thinking and acting (praxis) to transform "oppressive" situations within their institution. The article reviews Freire's pedagogical approach and details how it is implemented in OCSPs. Like all service-learning, the OCSP experience enables students to practice course-related skills (e.g., team building, project planning). More importantly, it gives students insights into the political reality of organizations, and makes them aware of their ability, collectively, to change that reality.

Organization Management Journal (2009) 6, 166–177. doi:10.1057/omj.2009.21

Keywords: service-learning; education for liberation; praxis; Paulo Freire



Organization
Management
Journal

Introduction

This article is about a pedagogical approach based on the ideas of the Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire. It consists of my assigning, as a voluntary activity to students in Management (MGT) 101 sections, a specially designed version of On-Campus Service Projects (OCSPs). My purpose is to enable students to (1) practice course-relevant managerial skills, and (2) have an experience of education for liberation. In the Freirian corpus, education for liberation is also called "problem-posing" (Freire, 2004: 79ff). Students are encouraged to engage in "praxis" – to "confront, explore and act purposefully" vis-à-vis their situation in the world (Roberts, 1996: 297). They discover that the *status quo* is socially constructed and can be transformed. Problem-posing education "re-affirms human beings as subjects, furnishes hope that the world can change, and by its very nature, is necessarily directed toward the goal of humanization" (Roberts, 1996: 297). In more mundane terms, education for liberation involves students coming to know, and acting in, the political dimension of organization life. They become aware of the nexus of competing interests and power relations relating to aspects of their college or university. They learn to address problems and issues, not as givens to be groused about, but rather as situations that, in part, exist because they support the interests of one or another organizational stakeholder – and that they can be changed.

In order for education for liberation to happen in the OCSPs, several conditions need to be met:

- (1) Students participate with co-learners in the process of critical thinking about the root causes – political, economic, historical – of some facet of their social order.
- (2) They take action to shape what happens (transforming act dealing with underlying causes).
- (3) Praxis: they engage in a cycle of reflection–action–reflection. They “celebrate successes, analyze mistakes or failures, and formulate other approaches to the problem” (Wallerstein, 1987: 42).

It is essential that the context for this type of learning emerges from the students’ lives (Giroux, 1985; Freire and Campos, 1990). Thus, OCSPs are situated in the students’ own community – their college or university. It is also necessary that the service-learning projects deal with problems that have political aspects: for example, the distribution of power within certain social structures of their campus community. Freire uses a radical vocabulary in discussing the problems that education for liberation addresses. He refers to them as a distortion of our vocation to become more fully human, and as situations marked by “injustice, exploitation, oppression” (Freire, 2004: 44). He characterizes them as marked by *contradictions* between oppressor and oppressed (and those in solidarity with the oppressed). These kinds of problems would fall under the category of what Freire refers to as “limit-situations” (2004).

In the context of American colleges and universities talk of exploitation and oppression may seem extreme. Nevertheless, limit situations can be found on our campuses – for example, the substantial disparity in treatment of various categories of employees, or the vigorous opposition of administrations and trustees to adjunct faculty organizing. Even though students tend not to be aware of these types of situations, they are conscious of other concerns such as the escalating costs of education and high-profile issues stemming from the fair trade and anti-sweatshop movements.

It should be noted that universities are no different from other formal institutions in that they exist, in part, to maintain the *status quo* – including limit situations. As a result, students may perceive limit-situation contradictions as obstacles or “insurmountable barriers.” However, if students begin to see limit-situations as socially constructed obstacles and not as natural or deterministic

barriers, they can take action “directed at negating and overcoming, rather than passively accepting, the ‘given’” (Freire, 2004: 99; Klein, 2007). The OCSPs intend to expose students to contradictions, to help them see the political basis for situations that can be interpreted as unjust, inequitable – or to use Freire’s term, “oppressive.” They further challenge students “to envision different ... conditions and to fashion an individual or community response to problems” uncovered (Wallerstein, 1987: 34).

Because they encompass an evaluative, moral stance where students are encouraged to view situations in terms of equity, justice, or fairness, problem-posing OCSPs are not “neutral.” Paulo Freire contends there is no such thing as neutrality in education (Freire and Campos, 1990; Roberts, 1996). Espoused neutrality can be a cover to avoid conflict or responsibility. He comments, “if we are in the sciences, we might try to ‘hide’ in what we regard as the neutrality of scientific pursuits, indifferent to how our findings are used, even uninterested in considering for whom or for what interests we are working” (Freire, 1985: 103). I as a teacher am not neutral. And neither is the typical AACSB-oriented management curriculum neutral. As evidence for this, several management textbook authors have acknowledged that the text-publishing industry is fundamentally conservative, and that their textbooks promote an orthodox, managerialist ideology (Cameron *et al.*, 2003).

It follows, therefore, that when I teach the MGT 101 course in a conventional way I am committing a non-neutral political act. When I assign the OCSPs, I am committing a political act. But, this does not mean I “fill the supposedly empty heads of the learners” with ideologically-based ideas or beliefs, or that my input “annuls the student’s creativity and responsibility” since the student is ultimately “the subject of the process of learning” (Freire, 1985: 10; Mayo, 2000). Their decision to accept or reject what I teach, or to participate or not in an OCSP, is also a political act.

What then do I want the OCSPs to do? Freire states that I may legitimately attempt to persuade students to adopt “a critical perception of the world, which implies a correct method of approaching reality in order to unveil it” (Freire, 2004: 111). But I cannot, nor do I want to, pre-determine for the students a particular way of construing the limit-situations they encounter because, ultimately, they have to be the arbiters of the stance they take (Shor, 1987; Wallerstein, 1987). However, I and

others who may wish to adopt this pedagogy can provide students with projects and possible ways to proceed. For example, students can be asked to investigate situations already mentioned (e.g., possibly unfair treatment of contract workers including adjunct faculty, or questionable college policies and practices regarding the sale of college-logo products). Or, projects could stem from other similar situations that appear to be contradictions of the mission and identity of the College (see Pigza and Troppe, 2003, for the importance of institutional mission in service-learning). Finally, students, themselves, can be charged with generating a project focus that relates to a limit situation they discover on campus.

Religiously affiliated institutions are especially supportive of service-learning, and this pedagogical approach tends to precipitate naturally from their mission statements (Bowes, 1998). This is true at my college, where the mission statement includes the following student outcomes: “a sense of responsibility to use one’s gifts for the service of others and the benefit of society,” “positive contributions to human progress,” and the “Jesuit mission of ... the promotion of justice” (Canisius College, 1993). It is easy for me, then, to encourage students to evaluate on-campus situations in the light of the institution’s mission. If, as part of an OCSP, they encounter unjust structures or practices in the College, the result will be not only their experiencing contradictions associated with limit situations, but also more than a little irony since the contradictions run counter to the institution’s expressed *raison d’être*.

Compare and contrast OCSPs and traditional service-learning

The problem-posing OCSP is both similar to and different from the typical service-learning experience. It intends both to enable students to practice skills related to the MGT 101 course and to engage in “praxis” in the context of education for liberation.

There exists a substantial literature on service-learning. I will refer only briefly to the standard definition, rationale, and list of outcomes conventionally associated with the practice, and I will indicate how OCSPs relate. Jacoby’s (1996) definition is frequently quoted:

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning

and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (5)

“Student learning and development” typically refers to managerial skills (e.g., team leadership, problem-solving, project management) and/or “civic education” relating to personal, moral growth (e.g., gaining social, intercultural understanding, creating social value, practicing “virtue”) (Kolenko *et al.*, 1996; Lamb *et al.*, 1998; McCarthy and Tucker, 1999; Pigza and Troppe, 2003; Abel *et al.*, 2004; Wells and Grabert, 2004; Winfield, 2005). Students report that service-learning allows them to put into practice what they learn in class, apply course concepts “in the real world,” and bring about positive social outcomes (Eyler *et al.*, 2001; Gibson *et al.*, 2001; Klink and Athaide, 2004). The problem-posing OCSPs I assign intentionally partake of this type of “student learning and development,” especially with reference to management skills.

In management courses, service-learning objectives tend to derive from the experiential education model. Drawing on the work of Kolb (1984), the notion that experience is a basis for learning means that hands-on practice of course concepts, coupled with reflection and further experimentation, aids conceptual and skill development and retention (Jacoby, 1996; McCarthy and Tucker, 1999). There is also some evidence that students are more motivated to master course content when they know they will have to apply concepts in real organizations (Service Learning, 2004). Problem-posing OCSPs seek explicitly to implement the experiential education model and achieve its outcomes.

The conventional service-learning paradigm, however, also calls for students to respond to “needs that are defined by the community,” with “community” most often referring to social service-type agencies in the environs of the school (Jacoby, 1996: 5; Godfrey, 2000). Typical interventions include helping in non-profits that work with literacy training, poverty-related issues, health care, and senior services (Pigza and Troppe, 2003; Campus Compact, 2007: 2). As previously mentioned a major rationale for putting business students in these settings is because the practice is a form of civic education. Other reasons that have been put forward include to counteract criticisms of business education’s complicity in well-publicized ethical scandals (Kolenko *et al.*, 1996; Papamarcos, 2005), and to prepare students for careers in organizations that seek to maximize the positive correlation between



community service and profits (McCarthy and Tucker, 1999; Godfrey, 2000; Samuelson, 2000). Problem-posing OCSPs do not send students to work in settings in the off-campus community. Rather they specify the community as being the college proper, the institutional community of which students are active members.

Although there are multiple models for service-learning, some of which support students' acting for social change, many partake of what Paulo Freire calls education for reproduction, or "banking," or "nutritional" education – education that feeds the students with content representing current disciplinary orthodoxy (Freire, 1985). The emphasis in conventional service-learning is on helping, and it eschews partisanship and conflict. It is more what Abel *et al.* refer to as the philanthropic approach in which the student takes the role of "assistant observer as opposed to trained partisan advocate" (Abel *et al.*, 2004: 153). The operative goal is to enable students to develop relevant course-related skills in a "social responsibility" setting – usually a non-profit social service agency, as previously mentioned (Kolenko *et al.*, 1996; Lamb *et al.*, 1998; Godfrey, 2000; Winfield, 2005). The approach downplays political issues touching on power relations among stakeholders, including students. According to Kolenko *et al.* (1996), "conflicts between providers of services, recipients, and students need to be minimized early so as not to threaten student learning objectives or community relationships" (134).

There is little doubt that in many instances the conventional approach to service-learning involves social consequences. Students do interact with social structures that speak to them of injustice, and in many cases when they reflect on their service, they see themselves as having made a contribution to improving society (Jacoby, 1996; Godfrey, 2000; Papamarcos, 2005). But, as Freire suggests, regardless of the experiential pedagogy, students remain largely helpers or apprentices, and are "not invited to participate creatively" in grasping the meaning underlying the reality of the service-learning setting (the limit-situation) (Freire, 1985: 101; Freire, 1998).

According to Freire's critique, experiential service-learning could be seen as a type of "education for domestication" that keeps students politically illiterate. "A political illiterate ... is one who has an ingenuous perception of humanity in its relationships with the world. This person has a naive outlook on social reality, which for this one is a

given, that is, social reality is a *fait accompli* rather than something that's still in the making" (Freire, 1985: 103). In schools of business, education of this type may likely mean "reproducing and legitimizing capitalist ideologies" (Giroux, 1985: xiv). As if to validate this claim, Bernard Milano, President of KPMG Foundation, commented on service-learning projects involving SIFE¹ student groups: "Students are learning about the principles of free enterprise and how the market works, pricing, and profit motivation. But they are also learning teamwork, presentation skills" (Taylor, 2005: 367). When business students engage in typical service-learning projects, therefore, they are not expected to confront the structures and forces that make the service setting necessary in the first place (Freire, 1998). The projects are designed rather to promote students' pursuit of knowledge and skills, and perhaps growth of character, in hopes society will benefit (Abel *et al.*, 2004).

If service-learning stops short of students' engaging critically the social structures they encounter in their experiences, it may unwittingly be reinforcing in students a "mystified" version of reality. It is not that they are discouraged from thinking and reflecting on their experiences. Rather, their thinking lacks the critical element (Freire, 1985).² The social order is seen as given; and social responsibility consists not in questioning it, but rather in working with institutions helping those disadvantaged by it. For example, a marketing major helps a United Way agency conduct focus groups to determine more effective fund-raising approaches, or a management major works with a women's business center developing training programs on employee recruitment and selection. Students hone leadership and team-building, decision making and project management, marketing and human resource management skills while assisting social agencies that operate fully embedded in the social order. Thus, service-learning acts in a way to "adapt the learner to his environment" (Freire, 1985: 116).

Problem-posing OCSPs attempt to go beyond the typical, albeit beneficial, involvement of students in helping organizations in the external community. They seek to enable students to break apart the limit-situations, framed as natural aspects of institutional structures and relationships, in their own campus community. They encourage students to analyze situations, and through praxis, to experience education for liberation. As Freire puts it, "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against

oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 2004: 35, note 1).

The problem-posing OCSP

In this section I will describe the workings of the OCSPs as I have designed them, and will make a particular effort to show how aspects of the OCSPs achieve the learning objectives of enabling students (1) to practice skills related to the MGT 101 course, and (2) to experience transformative, “problem-posing” education through praxis.

Project communication and set-up

Participation in the OCSP assignments is voluntary. This is due in part because they require students to look at certain conditions on-campus as contradictions – limit situations that contain some unjust aspect. In communicating the nature of the projects to students, I make clear this non-neutral, or “biased,” aspect of the projects, and also the expectation that students will work to transform the situations for the better. Furthermore, since this process is potentially confrontational, I require students to work in teams, in part to provide mutual support in the face of institutional social pressures (Wallerstein, 1987).

All service projects require a level of involvement beyond the normal expectations for a college course. In general, mandatory service projects tend to be frustrating to students and detrimental to project objectives (Gujarathi and McQuade, 2002; Klink and Athaide, 2004; Winfield, 2005). OCSPs, with their emphasis on transforming action, are doubly dependent on reasonably motivated students. This is another reason I make participation in the projects voluntary, an “extra credit” assignment. To provide incentive for students to participate, the extra credit is substantial, up to eight points assigned directly to their final course score (100-point scale). Thus, consistent, quality participation in an OCSP could improve a student’s grade for the course a whole letter grade, from, say, a “B” to an “A”. The number of students who choose to participate varies, but the range has been between 10 and 15 volunteering – that is, from a third to a half of a typical class of 30. Although I have not systematically polled those students who choose not to participate, some have expressed concerns about the time commitment involved or their aversion to working on yet another group project. I offer other opportunities for students in the course to earn extra credit (e.g., attending and reporting on selected campus-sponsored lectures);

but the extent of this extra credit is significantly less than what they can obtain through an OCSP.

Project design

Although praxis-related student projects need to be primarily student-centered, there still remains a significant role for the teacher. Freire says “the educator invites learners to recognize and unveil reality critically” (1985: 102). This means “helping them to foster modes of self-education and struggle” against the structures of “domination” they encounter (Giroux, 1985: xxi). This is not easy, nor is it always clear how to go about it. Freire claims, however, that while emphasizing students in the learning process, “I would never accept thoughtless spontaneity” and that transforming education always requires an educator (1985: 102; see also Freire, 1987: 212–213; Roberts, 1996: 299–302; and Mayo, 2000: 377–381). He insists that teachers must present appropriate course content in their classes. As it was Freire’s job to teach literacy to poor Brazilians, in the MGT 101 classes and OCSPs it is mine to teach management concepts and skills.

In the OCSPs much of my input is along the lines of “key practices” or “best practices” (Gibson *et al.*, 2001; Kenworthy-U’Ren and Peterson, 2005). This includes effectively communicating project objectives and specific assignments, training in team building and other project-related skills, providing mechanisms for reflecting on the experience and for evaluating projects. But I am also, obviously, working to foster problem-posing education for liberation: to set up opportunities for students to gain knowledge and engage in praxis regarding some limit situation they find in their organizational reality. The goal is for them to transform this reality and be transformed in a way that empowers and is socially liberating.

Project selection and generative themes

In the Freirian method, the educator chooses a “generative word” from the linguistic universe of the learners (Roberts, 1994). The generative word is a concept from the world of the learners that includes “given” social relations that may be problematic (i.e., limit-situations). Wallerstein (1987) calls this concept a “generative theme.” In my MGT 101 classes, as generative themes I have proposed a number of project options: for example, fair trade coffee on campus, Canisius College-logo apparel sold on campus, textbook pricing, College investment decisions, and College relations with workers and their unions. These topics expose potential

contradictions associated with limit situations. For example, the campus food service contractor has not made fair trade coffee available on campus; the bookstore's pricing and the College's policy regarding publicizing required texts add to students' costs; investments of the College's endowment are generally made without social screens; and the College administration aggressively contests the unionization of adjunct faculty. By virtue of their being members of the college community, students could experience these topics as pertinent themes.

Implementation

Some of the details of the projects, at least on surface, are indistinguishable from typical, experiential learning/service-learning practices.

1. *Forming OCSP teams.* The MGT 101 syllabus informed students that, should they volunteer for an OCSP, they would be required to "collaborate with other students, working as part of a group to document relevant issues, ... create action plans for key activities for accomplishing goals, and follow through by engaging in action to complete the project."

Part of the reason I have constructed the problem-posing OCSP as a team project is to provide students with practice in team building and team decision-making skills. More importantly is Freire's insistence that education for liberation is "a social act," "a social process of illumination" (Shor & Freire, 1987: 23). I want students to understand that learning about and attempting to struggle through limit-situations can only be "undertaken with and for other people" (Peckham, 2003: 235). Effective team dynamics and team skills can facilitate this endeavor.

During the third or fourth week of class, I provided students with short descriptions of and guidelines for the projects and answered questions they had about the assignment. Then I passed around a sign-up sheet for students to indicate which project they might be interested in working on. I set up a Blackboard site for the OCSPs, and put up preliminary rosters for each project.

2. *Coding and Decoding.* The codification of a situation, according to Freire, "is the representation of that situation, showing some of its constituent elements in interaction" (2004: 105). The coding should enable learners to see the "contradictions of a social structure that privileges a few people at the expense of the many" (Peckham, 2003: 231). It is gathering data to build a description of a situation as a limit situation, open to the presence of political

contradictions. According to Freire, learners work in two contexts. One is the "Real Context," the reality of a situation, directly affecting the students, seen as a framework for objective facts. This is the context for coding. The other is the "Theoretical Context," the *reasons* for the situational reality unearthed by the project group as it engages in a dialogic process (Freire, 1985). This is where decoding takes place. I provided teams a smattering of Real Context sources about their project in the form of relevant websites, College contacts, and in some cases, materials generated by prior OCSP teams. The teams felt an urgent need, however, to gather more information on their topics. I encouraged them to employ business and social science research tools – interviews, surveys, document analysis, environmental analysis – and I provided guidance and feedback on the use of these methods. I made it a requirement that all information gathered be communicated to all team members (Wallerstein, 1987).

For some teams, the bulk of their project consisted in working the Real Context (i.e., coding). In Freire's literacy training, codification consists in pictures or descriptions of scenes that symbolize what learners know about limit situations. In the OCSPs coding occurred as students gathered data and created descriptions of situations related to their generative themes. Depending on the project, students conducted interviews with various College officials – for example, Vice President of Finance, Director of Human Resources, Director of Athletics, campus bookstore manager, food service manager, chief steward of the maintenance and housekeeping employees' union. They regularly surveyed students, and several times surveyed the faculty.

The following excerpt from an interview transcript stands for a coding that gives a flavor of the kinds of Real Context revelations students encountered relative to the theme of Canisius-logo apparel on campus:

(from an interview of an athletic department representative (AR) by an OCSP team)

OCSP: "Does the college license its name directly or does it go through an agent company?"

AR: "We use LRG – Licensing Resource Group ... you can visit their web site."

OCSP: "Are retailers as well as manufacturers licensed? Does the college charge a royalty on retail sales?"

AR: "Royalties are the standard rate of 8 per cent."

OCSP: "How much money does the college earn from licensing its logo? Does this income go into a general fund or is it earmarked for a specific purpose?"

AR: "Revenue goes to athletics. I would rather not reveal the amount, although it changes each year."

OCSF: "Is the college a member of the Collegiate Licensing Consortium or the Fair Labor Association?"

AR: "No."

OCSF: "Do you have any personal recommendations on what the school...could do to support a non-sweatshop campaign?"

AR: "We could initiate correspondence ... refuse to order their products."

Decoding consists in breaking down what has been codified, penetrating the whole in terms of relationships among its parts, and then putting the information together again in a way that opens "untested feasibilities" regarding a situation (Freire, 2004). Put more simply this means analyzing situations in terms of causes. It starts with teams uncovering espoused, surface, rational, functional reasons for situations. It then penetrates further into political causes: teams explore whose interests are being served, what power relations exist among interested parties, etc. According to Freire (1985) "the deeper this act of knowing goes, the more reality the learners unveil for what it is, discarding the myths" (91). Freire's descriptions of activities like coding and decoding can be hard to fathom. For the OCSF teams, however, decoding was fairly straightforward. It transpired through group discussions that allowed students to generate and test ideas about what's going on in their projects at the political level, and what can be done about it. As a way of helping students engage in decoding activity, I did the following:

- (a) To facilitate productive group discussion, I required teams to organize meetings to analyze findings and plan actions. I provided a detailed handout on project team roles, norms, and expectations, and a second handout on team building and team meetings. To monitor this phase, I regularly queried team leaders concerning team functioning.

The process of decoding should lead to the "discovery of the interaction among the parts" of a limit situation. Freire says that in decoding learners go from information about a situation (coding) to an understanding of its concrete underlying causal relationships. As a result learners "behave differently with regard to objective reality, once that reality has ceased to look like a blind alley and has taken on its true aspect: a challenge which human beings must meet" (Freire, 2004: 106–107).

- (b) To concretize this expectation, I required teams to generate a mission statement based on their growing understanding of the situation and why it exists as a limit situation. This assignment coincided with our discussion of mission statements and strategic planning in class. One team's mission statement contained the following: "The ideals and values that Canisius College upholds require that we no longer ignore the crisis that is facing coffee farmers We seek to educate ... about fair trade coffee and its economic and environmental benefits and to form a strong coalition ... that will pressure [food service] into purchasing fairly traded coffee."

3. *Taking transformative action.* At this point in the projects, I began to nudge the teams toward action. Freire says that in his work with Brazilian peasants, this is the "decisive moment." It is when the educator asks the learners, "Do you think we can create something with these pieces?" (Freire, 1985: 92). In the problem-posing OCSF the idea is that the students will, based on their coding and decoding analyses, discover some action or actions that will transform a limit situation at the College. Having analyzed the causes of the situation, now through the action–reflection–action sequence of praxis, the goal is to "retotalize" it. That is, to reshape it politically in order to make it more equitable, or more just, or less of a *contradiction* in terms of student values or institutional mission (Freire, 1985; Brown, 1987). In support of this stage in the learning, I required students to produce "strategic objectives" for the remainder of the project. Inherent in the coding/decoding process were implied transformations of the situation (e.g., making fair trade coffee available everywhere on campus). Students tended to include references to these transformations in their mission statements (see above), but in some cases they initially failed to directly operationalize them in the strategic objectives.

Freire speaks of the problems middle-class learners can have with acknowledging limit-situations that might be transformed through praxis. He states that, "in the face of a problem whose analysis would lead to the uncomfortable perception of a limit-situation, their tendency is to remain on the periphery of the discussion and resist any attempt to reach the heart of the question" (Freire, 2004: 104, footnote 20). Instances of "resistance" have occurred in teams that limit their analysis to the



“real context” (coding – essentially just describing the situation) or who, when uncovering the political reality underlying a situation (decoding), report that there is nothing they can do to change it. As a nudge to the teams to take action regarding the limit-situations in their projects, I required them to identify key transformative activities to accomplish each strategic objective, and to prepare a detailed action plan for each activity (including specific steps, time lines, and accountability). Here are some examples of activities OCSF teams ended up engaging in:

Fair Trade Coffee days and petitions: In several iterations of OCSF fair trade coffee projects, teams served free coffee at high-traffic locations on campus. Their primary purpose was to raise awareness of relevant social justice issues pertaining to distribution, pricing, etc. of coffee worldwide. In addition they used the events to recruit students for possible additional actions, and to obtain signatures on petitions demanding that the Administration and the food service contractor make fair trade coffee available wherever coffee is sold on campus. One team distributed a brochure explaining the fair trade movement and promoting their event. They administered a coffee taste test and a questionnaire on students’ willingness to spend more on fairly traded goods. Another team collected close to 500 names on a petition that was presented to the president of the College and to the food service manager.

Letter to the College President: A team working on an OCSF dealing with Canisius College-logo apparel decided to address its concerns to the president of the College. Here is the concluding paragraph of their letter:

Before companies can supply clothing to both the Canisius College Bookstore and the Athletic Department, they are required to have written authorization from the college. Since Canisius College claims to follow “the contemporary Jesuit mission of the service of faith and the promotion of justice,” we feel that authorization of the Canisius College Logo to companies that may use sweatshops contradicts the mission. We have already contacted the United Students Against Sweatshops and we are in the process of contacting the Workers Rights Consortium to help to end any sweatshop-supplied apparel at Canisius College. With the cooperation of the administration, ... we believe that a relatively inexpensive alternative can be found.

The president responded to the team by letter. He assured them he was aware of the issues; he was pleased that the students were concerned; and he indicated a willingness to support their efforts. The team was surprised he wrote them back.

Creating a campus fair trade organization: Based on considerable groundwork done by prior OCSF teams, in fall 2006, MGT 101 OCSF students formed an official campus club, an affiliated chapter of United Students for Fair Trade. With 25 charter members, they completed all the Student Activities paperwork, petitioned the Student Senate, filed a budget, elected officers, etc. The club continues the struggle to expand awareness and availability of fair-trade products on campus, and to make the College “sweat free.”

4. *Presenting and reflecting.* Praxis requires learners to codify/decodify generative themes → act → reflect. At the end of the course, students in OCSFs were expected to reflect on their experiences, and make sense of them in terms of the types of learning that occurred. To stimulate this activity, I required teams to prepare a comprehensive overview of their projects, and then to present these to the class.³ For several of the teams, the actual presentation and question period afterwards further opened up for them an awareness of the liberating nature of what they had experienced.

Deliverables

Project teams were expected to document their activities. They turned in their project mission statement, an environmental analysis (of forces that were most likely to affect their projects’ success/failure), a strategic plan for their project, detailed action plans for each project activity, a presentation outline/script/slides, and a binder containing interview notes, e-mails, articles, web pages, and other project documents. Each student was required to complete an anonymous questionnaire on the OCSF process and outcomes (see Appendix A), and encouraged to comment further in a Discussion Board forum in Blackboard.

Grading

As mentioned earlier, students participated in the OCSF as a voluntary extra-credit assignment, and they received credit based primarily on their level of participation. Each team received a feedback sheet covering their performance on the presentation, but also including comments from me regarding the extent and quality of the team’s documentation (see above). All project participants were required to fill out a form in which they rated, and commented on, each of their team members, including themselves (see Appendix B). The number of extra-credit points an individual received was based primarily on the results of the

evaluation forms, weighted slightly by my evaluation of the team as a whole.

Assessment

There were two major objectives of the OCSP assignment: (1) that students would practice skills related to the MGT 101 course – specifically team building, problem-solving, planning and delegating, and presenting to a group; and (2) that they would experience transformative, “problem-posing” education via praxis – that is, analyze a problem situation in terms of political causes (coding/decoding), take action to change the situation, and reflect on the experience of trying to “make a difference.” The follow-up questionnaire (Appendix A) was designed to gather data on both objectives. Data were gathered over five semesters ($n=128$). Regarding the first objective, students answered questions on the value-added of OCSPs to the course, and on important things they learned from the projects. The top-three responses, in descending order of frequency, referred to teamwork and group processes, leading and delegating, and organizing by developing goals and plans. Here are some representative student comments:

The project “gives you a hands on feel on actually applying concepts we learned in class, e.g.: how to write an action plan, mission statement, practice group norms/roles.” “It taught you skills you can’t learn in a classroom setting, like real problem-solving & strategizing & people interactions.” “It was a positive experience that taught me a lot about my abilities, organizing, leading & implementing plans.” “It gives students a real-life application of management material ... understand material much more thoroughly after project.” “It gives hands-on experience to what we learned, coordinating and organizing the teams and developing various roles within the team.” The project “allowed those students who participated to see that these skills ... are a little more difficult to pull together than can be perceived from the textbook, which paints a nice pretty picture of the management world.”

It was not nearly so easy to assess how well the OCSP assignment accomplished the objective of providing problem-posing education for liberation. In part, I think this is because such learning is deeper, and the relevance to students is not as obvious. The most frequently expressed responses in the questionnaires that appear germane to this objective indicated that, through project participation, students learned that they “can make a difference” and that they “have more power” than they thought. Some expanded comments:

“I learned about something that directly affected me. Now I want to get more involved and do something more.” “I

learned the power of campus activism in changing the administration and the willingness of students to support a particular cause.” “The more students know about these issues the better chance they will become involved and try to make changes as needed I also learned that students have a lot of power around campus that we are not generally aware of.” “Learning how to work with others while trying to make a difference in the Canisius College community.” “Fighting for a good cause can have positive results.” “You learn a lot about a current problem and seek out [ways] to fix it not only for your benefit, but for others as well.”

The Discussion Board submissions gave further indication of the projects’ ability to foster education for liberation. Some examples:

“It seemed to me that the service projects were a very good experience for all I feel that it is important to speak out against what you believe is wrong and stand up for what you believe in. The only way to make a change is to speak up and take action. I think that if the students at Canisius College took these subjects seriously we could all make big changes and affect the school for the better.”

“The service projects ... showed us all that there is a way that we can make a difference around this school. All of the teams had great ideas as to how to make changes and actually implement plans to make things better”

“I think that this was a very good learning experience for all who participated, and even more than that, it could result in some future changes on campus. In my group for fair trade coffee, we have progressed very much from our first meeting when we were not even sure what fair trade coffee was.”

The questionnaire responses and Discussion Board submissions give the sense that students had done the coding/decoding regarding problematic aspects of their project topics (generative themes), had engaged in action, and upon reflection found themselves “transformed,” that is, seeing themselves differently in terms of what they can do, collectively, to humanize their environment.

A few students expressed a sense of futility as a consequence of the project, that they had failed to dent oppressive campus structures: “It’s a hard process to change the use of sweatshops. We were unable to and I’m not sure if the next group will be able to either.” “Our topic was frustrating for me because it is a very controversial issue, so any ideas we brought to the table were easily disputed.” “I felt that there was not much we could do about improving costs of textbooks directly.” Others were more sanguine for the future: “I knew that our group couldn’t actually change the policy, *but* we could start to get things rolling, so that was satisfying.”

One theme that emerged in almost every team’s feedback was the need for continuing action and



reflection on the projects. They wanted what they had started to be carried forward, by them or by other students, or both. For them praxis is ongoing and cyclical; transformative learning is open-ended.

Conclusion

The problem-posing OCSPs provide students with traditional service-learning experiences in which they can practice course-related skills. But, more importantly, they approximate for the students education for liberation according to the Freire model of praxis, that is, transforming action and reflection. In the case of the OCSPs, the service is uncovering campus-based political/conflictual, and probably ironic, institutional structures and practices associated with limit situations. In addition to uncovering, the service involves action to try to change things “for the better.” There is reciprocity in the OCSPs (Jacoby, 1996) in the sense that both students and the campus community benefit. As Freire (1998) points out, “the emergence of the popular consciousness ... is also a moment in the developing consciousness of the power elite Just as there is a moment of surprise among the masses when they begin to see what they did not see before, there is a corresponding surprise among the elites in power when they find themselves unmasked” (507). Students awaken from “political illiteracy” about aspects of their school, and in so doing they hold up a mirror to the powers that be reflecting an image that often is a distortion of the institution’s mission and values. The OCSPs went one step further by taking action to remedy these limit situations.

A concern I have regarding OCSPs is the extent to which topics are real generative themes for the students (Freire and Campos, 1990). That is, do the students, themselves, experience the topics as

containing contradictions associated with limit situations? The motive for signing on and fulfilling the requirements of OCSPs is for some, at least, primarily instrumental: getting extra credit toward their course grade. For others the project topics may approximate generative themes. But I suspect that were students directly involved in identifying on-campus project topics, other issues would surface (Klein, 2007). In future, I intend to experiment with having students participate directly in determining generative themes, and thus project topics, for OCSPs.

In closing I must admit that my teaching style and the bulk of the course structure in MGT 101 partake of the nutritional model, in which good grades go to the student “who repeats, who renounces critical thinking, who adjusts to models” (Freire, 1985: 117). The OCSP is an attempt to provide a taste of education for liberation, a call to the student who “reveals one’s doubts or wants to know the reason behind facts, or one who breaks with pre-established models, or one who denounces a mediocre bureaucracy, or one who refuses to be an object.” In other words, it gives students, through Freirian-oriented experiential learning, the opportunity to practice management skills in order to uncover political causes for situations, and to mobilize resources to change those situations for the better.

Notes

¹Students in Free Enterprise – a student organization with a presence in over 1800 colleges and universities in 42 countries. SIFE is a strong supporter of service learning in schools of business.

²For a similar critique applied to management development, see Reynolds and Vince (2004).

³PowerPoint slides for two presentations are available from the author at gent@canisius.edu.

References

- Abel, C.F., Lacina, J.G. & Abel, C.D. (2004). The ethics of classroom advocacy. In B.W. Speck and S.L. Hoppe (Eds), *Service-Learning: History, Theory, and Issues*, 153–166. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Bowes, J. (1998). Service-learning as a new form of Catholic action. *Review of Business*, 20(1): 26–29.
- Brown, C. (1987). Appendix: Literacy in 30 hours: Paulo Freire’s process in northeast Brazil. In I. Shor (Ed), *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Cameron, K.S., Ireland, R.D., Lussier, R.N., New, J.R. & Robbins, S.P. (2003). Management textbooks as propaganda. *Journal of Management Education*, 27: 711–729.
- Campus Compact (2007). 2006 service statistics: Highlights and trends of campus compact’s annual membership survey. Retrieved November 15, 2007, from Campus Compact Web Site: http://www.compact.org/about/statistics/2006/service_statistics.pdf.
- Canisius College (1993). Mission statement. Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://www.canisius.edu/about/mission_statement.asp.
- Eyler, J.S., Giles Jr., D.E., Stenson, C.M. & Gray, C.J. (2001). At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, institutions and communities, 1993–2000: Third edition. Retrieved November 15, 2007, from Campus Compact Web Site: <http://www.compact.org/resources/downloads/aag.pdf>.
- Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power, and liberation*, (D. Macedo, Trans.). South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.



- Freire, P. (1987). Letter to North-American teachers. (C. Hunter, Trans.). In I. Shor (Ed), *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Freire, P. (1998). Cultural action and conscientization. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68: 499–521.
- Freire, P. (2004). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary edition*, (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Freire, P. & Campos, M.D. (1990). Reading the world. *The Unesco Courier*, 12(December): 4–9.
- Gibson, M.K., Kosteci, E.M. & Lucas, M.K. (2001). Instituting principles of best practice for service-learning in the communication curriculum. *The Southern Communication Journal*, 66: 187–200.
- Giroux, H.A. (1985). Introduction. In P. Freire (Ed), *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers.
- Godfrey, P.C. (2000). A moral argument for service-learning in management education. In P.C. Godfrey and E.T. Grasso (Eds), *Working for the Common Good: Concepts and Models for Service-learning in Management*, 21–41. Washington: American Association for Higher Education.
- Gujarathi, M.R. & McQuade, R.J. (2002). Service-learning in business schools: A case study in an intermediate accounting course. *Journal of Education for Business*, 77(3): 144–150.
- Jacoby, B. (1976). *Service-learning in today's higher education*. In B. Jacoby & Associates (Eds), *Service Learning in Higher Education*, 3–25. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kenworthy-U'Ren, A.L. & Peterson, T.O. (2005). Service-learning and management education: Introducing the "WE CARE" approach. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4: 272–277.
- Klein, M. (2007). Peace education and Paulo Freire's method: Towards the democratization of teaching and learning. *Convergence*, 40(1/2): 187–203.
- Klink, R.R. & Athaide, G.A. (2004). Implementing service learning in the principles of marketing course. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 26: 145–153.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kolenko, T.A., Porter, G., Wheatley, W. & Colby, M. (1996). A critique of service learning projects in management education: Pedagogical foundations, barriers, and guidelines. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 15: 133–142.
- Lamb, C.H., Swinth, R.L., Vinton, K.L. & Lee, J.B. (1998). Integrating service learning into a business school curriculum. *Journal of Management Education*, 22: 637–654.
- Mayo, P. (2000). Remaining on the same side of the river: A critical commentary on Paulo Freire's later work. *Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies*, 22: 369–397.
- McCarthy, A.M. & Tucker, M.L. (1999). Student attitudes toward service-learning: Implications for implementation. *Journal of Management Education*, 23: 554–573.
- Papamarcos, S.D. (2005). Giving traction to management theory: Today's service-learning. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4: 325–335.
- Peckham, I. (2003). Freirian codifications: Changing walls into windows. *Pedagogy*, 3(2): 227–244.
- Pigza, J.M. & Troppe, M.L. (2003). Developing an infrastructure for service-learning and community engagement. In B. Jacoby (Ed), *Building Partnerships for Service-learning*, 106–131. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Reynolds, M. & Vince, R. (2004). Critical management education and action-based learning: Synergies and contradictions. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 3(4): 442–456.
- Roberts, P. (1994). Education, dialogue and intervention: Revisiting the Freirian project. *Educational Studies*, 20(3): 307–327.
- Roberts, P. (1996). Structure, direction and rigour in liberating education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 22(3): 295–316.
- Samuelson, J. (2000). Business education for the 21st century. In P.C. Godfrey and E.T. Grasso (Eds), *Working for the Common Good: Concepts and Models for Service-learning in Management*, 11–18. Washington: American Association for Higher Education.
- Service Learning (2004, August 6). *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 50(48): B4.
- Shor, I. (1987). Monday morning fever: Critical literacy and the generative theme of "work". In I. Shor (Ed), *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*, 104–121. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Shor, I. & Freire, P. (1987). What is the 'dialogical method' of teaching? *Journal of Education*, 169(3): 11–31.
- Taylor, M.L. (2005). A service-learning kaleidoscope of insights: Conversations with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, theorist/systems change artist; Bernard Milano, practitioner/foundation leader; and John Saltmarsh, historian/service-learning educator. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4: 363–376.
- Wallerstein, N. (1987). Problem-posing education: Freire's method for transformation. In I. Shor (Ed), *Freire for the Classroom: A Sourcebook for Liberatory Teaching*. Portsmouth NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.
- Wells, C.V. & Grabert, C. (2004). Service-learning and mentoring: Effective pedagogical strategies. *College Student Journal*, 38: 573–578.
- Winfield, I. (2005). Fostering social entrepreneurship through liberal learning in the social sciences. *Peer Review*, 7(3): 15–17.

Appendix A

On-campus service project follow-up questionnaire

Instructions: *Please answer the questions below in the space provided. You need not put your name on the questionnaire if you wish to remain anonymous. Please hand in the completed questionnaires during the final exam.*

Name of Project: *Fair Trade on Campus*

1. What useful things did your project group accomplish?
2. What value do you think the project adds to the MGT 101 course?
3. How much time did you personally spend on the project?
4. What are the two most important things you learned from the project?
5. What were the most frustrating and/or dissatisfying aspects of the project (besides scheduling meetings)?
6. What could students in the future do to build on what your group has started?
7. Would you recommend that MGT 101 students in the future should volunteer for one of the on-campus service projects? Why or why not?

Appendix B

Service team participation rating form

Instructions: *Use the following scale to rate each member of your service project team (including yourself)*



on the five statements listed below. The evaluation covers performance on the team's service project and presentation.

1=Seldom 2=Sometimes 3=Most of the Time 4=Always

1. Was present and prepared for group meetings and activities.
2. Provided valuable input for meetings and other team assignments.
3. Took responsibility for a fair and meaningful share of team tasks and assignments.
4. Accomplished tasks and assignments on time.
5. Did a thorough job in accomplishing tasks and assignments.

Total score

COMMENTS (Please use the back of this form to comment on your project teammates. Since

participation in the project can merit up to 8 extra points being added to the final grade, it is extremely important that I get a good read on who has done what. Use an extra sheet of paper if you need more room to write your comments.)

About the author

Michael J Gent is a professor of Organization Studies at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York. He earned a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from Texas Christian University. His recent research focuses on management education, neoliberalism in Latin America, and the impact of religious organizations on civic life in Central America. He teaches courses in management, organizational behavior, and labor relations. He can be reached at gent@canisius.edu.