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The Future of Service-Learning and Community Engagement: Asset-Based Approaches and Student Learning in First-Year Courses

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In the 20 years since Zlotkowski (1995) called for curricular integration of service-learning (SL) across the academy, we have seen increasing adoption of and support for the pedagogy in students' first-year experience. Gardner (2002) suggests that SL in the first year is particularly important because it can lead to increased self-esteem and self-confidence. Ferguson (2015) argues that it can be used then to awaken curiosity and help students connect to each other, the campus, and the community. And the field is accumulating evidence of the positive impact of SL in the first year on retention (e.g., Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014). Thus, it is becoming well established that SL plays an important role in the first year. As we see it, what we must attend carefully to in the coming years is how SL is framed and implemented in that crucial formative space. Our experience suggests that, given the particular challenges of first-year courses, it is all too easy to default to an approach that unintentionally sets students on a problematic path in their interactions with communities. Specifically, we call for attention to asset-based approaches that, from the beginning, help undergraduates see themselves and others on an equal footing and learn to look for, appreciate, and build on their own and others' strengths.

Service-Learning in a First-Year Course

Each fall, 600-900 first-semester first-year students from across Kansas State's campus enroll in the Staley School of Leadership Studies' Introduction to Leadership Concepts course, LEAD 212. This one semester, two credit-hour, multi-section course consists of a large lecture followed by learning community sessions – small groups of 12-14 students, facilitated by 70 upper class peer educators. For more than 15 years, we have partnered with the Flint Hills Breadbasket, a community-based food assistance program, for an annual canned goods collection. While service had always been part of LEAD 212, during the Fall 2013 semester we began to more purposefully integrate SL through a semester-long experience called "The Hunger Project." The purpose was for students to apply concepts and practices of civic

leadership and social responsibility to the issue of food security in our community (for more information see Priest, Bauer, & Fine, 2015).

On the one hand, we could call the Hunger Project a success: hundreds of students collected thousands of pounds of food. On the other hand, after several semesters of reading and listening to students' reflections, we noticed a troubling theme: Many students were framing their experience (and their role in exercising civic leadership through service) from a deficit-based perspective. For example, we frequently heard phrases like, "It felt so great to help those people" and "We made a difference for the less fortunate." While these comments suggested self-awareness and care for others, they also represented a savior mentality: positioning the hungry as receivers of food and the students as receivers of knowledge about hunger and "fixers" of the problems of "needy" others. This discourse not only contradicts values of socially responsible leadership but also represents an uncritical dominant narrative that perpetuates unjust systems. Despite our espoused commitment to transformational learning through SL, we were missing the mark on advancing students' understanding of community, social justice, and the purposes of education. We were deeply concerned that our well-intentioned project had this unintended outcome and felt compelled to take action.

It seemed to us that the stakes were especially high since we were shaping how these new undergraduates would view themselves and interact with community members for years to come. Zlotkowski (2011) notes, "the first college year is of critical importance ... as the platform from which to launch a series of ever-more-challenging community-based assignments" (p. 146). He goes on to suggest it is also "a key factor in determining whether the background of community service many students now bring with them to college will have any lasting value" (p. 146). Many of our students come from high school having done community service; for those whose past service experience has not been tied explicitly to meaningful learning, we have noticed it can be even harder to engage them in the first year – their assumptions about the process at times leading them to resist or lack confidence as they

begin to sense the more difficult and riskier work of SL. And, arguably, for most first-year students, an orientation toward SL that includes engagement with the systems underlying social injustices is challenging, insofar as it pushes them to unfamiliar levels of analysis and action.

It has become clear to us that *how* students experience SL in the first year is especially important in shaping their attitudes toward service and community and their roles as learners and engaged citizens while on campus and in the future. Thus, it is also especially important for faculty to be mindful of SL design for first year students. How can we enhance SL experiences so as to help students make progress on the mindset and practice of civic engagement while scaffolding them toward more challenging commitments and also engaging in a meaningful way with social concerns? In our case, we reconsidered the very framing of our SL design.

Asset- vs. Deficit-Based SL

In so doing, we found Mitchell’s (2008) distinction between traditional and critical SL helpful. Traditional SL emphasizes individual change and student developmental outcomes, while critical SL also emphasizes social change. In our experience, traditional SL, based on traditional problem-solving models and roles, easily defaults to being deficit-based. The pressures and constraints of our first-year course context may actively contribute – unintentionally – toward a deficit-based model. Creating an experience that mobilizes a large number of students new to a community was at times daunting for our faculty and led to over-structuring. While this may have helped facilitate a positive experience for our students and our partner, it also masked the messiness of social issues and left less room for exploring and enacting individual and collective roles as change agents.

Therefore, we suggest that attention to asset-based design is essential to achieving critical SL, setting the stage for future community involvement while on campus and after graduation, and advancing social change and student learning about social justice. Table 1 summarizes the tensions and challenges we have experienced in our own work through this lens.

Language

If we frame SL around a “problem” – what needs to be fixed or is broken – we start from a deficit mindset and position ourselves as doing *for* those in need. Starting with a “possibility,” however, invites collaborative visioning of the present and future that we can create by working *with* one another. For example, we now realize that by framing this project around “hunger” as opposed to “food security” we perpetuated a deficit-based mindset: simply speaking, *hunger* is a problem you can fix with food, but *food security* speaks to a positive vision and evokes collaborative and systemic change. Similarly, when we framed this as a “project” we implicitly suggested that students would be told what to do through an assignment and that there would be an endpoint or expectation that was ultimately about a grade. Framing it now as a “Community Leadership Experience” will, we believe, invite students, peer educators, instructors, and community members to create, learn, and practice with one another.

Thus, we are learning that closer examination of the language we use is essential in creating an asset-based and more “critical” SL experience. Our language can create deficit-based practices and feed the notion that only outside “experts” can provide real assistance in the face of challenges, ultimately reinforcing problematic patterns of power, privilege, and injustice that underlie them (Shabazz & Cooks, 2014). Simply using different words is not enough: “the language of assets can be a code and a cover for the same old deficit frame that ignores the real strengths of the community” (p. 74). Creating an educational experience that models “with” – sharing power and collaborating toward preferred futures – requires transformative, inclusive educational practices that enable students to truly partner with others.

Structure

Our original approach to SL asked students to research the “problem of hunger” (e.g., How many people are hungry and why?) and to follow a pre-defined plan to collect food from community members for the Breadbasket. While we attempted to educate students on the root causes of hunger, we constructed a hierarchy: a privileged perspective of “I have

Table 1
Deficit- vs. Asset- Based Considerations in SL Design

	Deficit-Based	Asset-Based
Language	Problem; Do for	Possibility; Work with
Structure	Pre-defined; Short-term	Generative; Long-term
Relationships	Expert-driven	Shared knowledge
Orientation to Social Justice	Absent	Embedded

something I can give, therefore it is something you need.” Collecting cans also represents what Kretzman & McKnight (1993) describe as a short-term, externally-driven solution to a social problem and fails to engage people traditionally cast only as “those served” in mobilizing themselves and others in systems change (see Hartman in this collection of essays).

Utilizing an asset-based framework invites students and all partners to look first for strengths, resources, and capabilities. We are using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a guide for this approach as we redesign LEAD 212. AI utilizes a multi-stage generative cycle – discover, dream, design, deliver – to identify the best in people and communities, imagine better futures, and make positive change (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). The *discover* phase applied to SL includes community asset-mapping. We are challenging our students to *dream* beyond what previous classes and groups have done toward what could be better done – and to be *co-designers* of the enhanced processes. AI provides us with asset-based language and a structured process for co-created learning through action (*deliver*) and reflection; in our case, we add iterative stages called “debrief” and “define” to further articulate and apply learning.

Relationships

Asset-based work with communities is driven by relationships (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). As faculty, however, we live in a world that rewards our individual expertise and where course design is expert-driven, with instructors holding authority. A shift toward understanding knowledge and expertise as shared among students, instructors, community partners, and community members invites work *with* one another in addressing challenges (see Pisco and Hicks, Seymour, & Puppo in this collection of essays). This shift is highly valuable, yet difficult in practice. We must constantly remember that we are all learners and maintain a curious and open mindset. One way we do this well in LEAD 212 is with our peer leaders, who serve as co-teachers in lieu of traditional teaching assistants or employees. In turn, the peer leaders are positioned within their learning communities as facilitators of first-year students’ learning rather than givers of knowledge.

A related area of growth for us is our community partner and community member relationships, which have been much less asset-based and co-creative. As we continue to meet with our partners at the Breadbasket, we seek to better understand their role in the community, their strengths and challenges, and their goals. We are challenging students to consider how they can encourage community members to see themselves as not only providers of food or money,

but also partners in food security. We are mindful that those who receive donated food should also be partners in the process, and we are challenging ourselves to continue deepening the co-created and systemic nature of our work on food security.

Orientation to Social Justice

Our community partnership builds on the Breadbasket’s charity-based system of bringing food from the community to its clients. We wondered: Is this approach inherently deficit-based or can our work with this organization be asset-based? Designing SL for social change seems more meaningful, but Morton’s (1995) work helps us understand that charity rooted in social justice can also be powerful, for both learning and change. He explores the idea that service experiences lie on a continuum made up of three distinct paradigms: charity, project, and social change. Instead of positioning charity on the lesser end of change, he argues that all three paradigms can be enacted deeply through increased understanding of root causes and investment in relationships. Knowing that our partner’s purpose is charity-based, we must frame it in the context of social justice and support students in exploring systems that contribute to food security and insecurity. If students only think about “fighting hunger” they can walk away feeling they accomplished that by providing food to “hungry people.” We want to shift this interpretation by enabling students to learn with those experiencing food insecurity about the complexities of poverty, social systems, and food systems. As an example, a junior leadership course recently developed The Facing Project (facingproject.com), meeting with Breadbasket clients, listening to their stories, and weaving those stories together into a book, which we now use in LEAD 212 to share the beauty, intelligence, and grit of individuals who experience food insecurity.

Providing an entry experience of charity-based SL in the first year allows us to begin conversations about social justice. Asking students to be advocates for social change may go beyond their developmental readiness in the first year. To begin facilitating change one must know about the community and the social issue, and through continued, strategic curricular and co-curricular opportunities, our program can build on this foundation with later opportunities for students to engage in social change (see Saltmarsh, Janke, & Clayton and Dostilio & McReynolds in this collection of essays).

A Vision for the Future

While SL can play an important role in advancing higher education’s mission to develop engaged citizens, we are mindful of Zlotkowski’s (1995) asser-

tion that “everything anyone chooses to call ‘service-learning’ should not be automatically sanctioned and supported” (p. 129). SL must be carefully designed to create a powerful foundation for ongoing learning and engagement. In the future we hope that asset-based SL will set the bar for practitioners, particularly in the first year.

Our goal is for students to become – and see themselves as – civic leaders capable of addressing the most daunting issues of our time. To do this we must be intentional about creating asset-based SL experiences that engage everyone with curiosity and care. To move in this direction, we are trying to do what Zlotkowski (1995) urged of SL advocates: to “stretch and learn from experience” (p. 129). We are finding it a stimulating growth opportunity and echo his call, especially among first-year instructors.

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