REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Countering the Service-Learning Privilege Problem Through Critical Communication Pedagogy and Critical Assessment

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Abstract: Because the communication discipline values action, civility, and service, it has placed emphasis on the integration of service-learning in its courses. Service-learning has the potential to bridge the gap between the classroom and the community by employing social justice pedagogy–activism that takes critical learning to sites of hegemony. However, service-learning can also promote the unintended side effect of entrenching beliefs about privilege. Therefore, we advocate for a critical service-learning to be facilitated through a critical communication pedagogy (CCP) framework, which emphasizes the recognition and response to hegemony that students encounter. Such an approach employs critical assessment, a means by which to reframe traditional assessment procedures to focus on both content knowledge and its application to ameliorate hegemony in society.

Introduction

The discipline of communication makes a commitment to being a discipline of action, civic engagement, and social justice. Communication is concerned with the applied nature of knowledge (Frey & Palmer, 2014); therefore, communication strives to teach its students ways in which to apply course content and theories to their lives. One effective way to accomplish this goal is by integrating service-learning in communication courses. Service-learning has the potential to bridge the gap between learning that is confined within the classroom walls and learning in and with the community. Service-learning can

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involve social justice pedagogy—activism that takes critical learning to sites of hegemony. Eby (1998) explains that "Service-learning has the potential to transform teaching and learning in the academy and to call a generation of students to develop social responsibility and an ethic of service" (p. 1).

Historically, service-learning has been seen as an opportunity for students to step into a community, other than ones to which they belong, and perform tasks with the community to better the lives of its members. Although some service-learning opportunities involve entrance into communities that embody privilege, interacting with marginalized groups has historically been a common way of conceptualizing service-learning. While service-learning has a myriad of benefits for students, problems can occur when students do interact with marginalized groups. Students often do not understand the power dynamics inherent in the relationships that they forge within these communities, especially if the students come from privileged backgrounds. Depending on the students' background they may also lack critical skill sets necessary to reflect on their own positionality, power dynamics, the nature of these relationships, or how learning is done in conjunction with these groups. Hence, in this essay, we propose critical service-learning, which embodies the critical communication pedagogy (CCP) commitments of power, dialogue, and self-reflexivity (Fassett & Warren, 2007). This approach will help to educate our students to be better equipped with critical literacies to understand dimensions of relationships and layers of power dynamics in service-learning projects. The following sections provide an overview of service-learning and discuss the commitments of CCP.

Service-Learning

One impetus for the integration of service-learning in communication classes is that educators are concerned with students' lack of civic engagement (Kennerly & Davis, 2014). In fact, the problem has been described as "so alarming as to question what and who will be preserving key democratic values in the future" (Harward, 2008, para. 1). Therefore, the integration of service-learning has been growing in communication programs specifically because the discipline of communication values the preservation of these civic engagement and democratic values (Oster-Aaland et al., 2004). Additionally, service-learning allows for problem-solving and the application of theory in a culturally diverse society (Smith, 2014), in addition to the promotion of justice (Frey et al., 2020).

Service-learning employed in an educational context provides students with the opportunity to experience cultural practices that might be similar to or different from their own. Service-learning can take place in a myriad of ways and students may interact with people of various backgrounds. Not all service-learning experiences involve interaction with marginalized groups, and not all students who participate in these projects embody privilege. The focus of this reflection, however, is specifically oriented on the experiences of working with historically marginalized communities because service-learning has the potential to positively affect both parties in this type of environment (Furco & Norvell, 2019). Through these interactions, students may learn about issues that marginalized groups face. However, this knowledge often remains at a surface level because students often do not possess the tools necessary to understand the nature of these communities or understand their own positionality, regardless of their standpoints, when they engage with these interactions. Additionally, in collaboration with these groups, students can work to develop solutions that could improve their social conditions. Unless students are equipped with the tools of CCP or critical service-learning, their solutions may not fully satisfy the needs of the community with which they work. Because of these limitations, the application of service-learning is often less than stellar. Specifically, service-learning has several unintended consequences if

students are not first provided with a critical background enabling them to engage with marginalized populations, understand their own privileges, and recognize their similarities with the members of the communities with which they are working.

Inherent Problems With Service-Learning

Self-Aggrandizement

Students arrive at college with unique perspectives deriving from their own socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Some students are economically privileged, while others come from historically marginalized backgrounds. Regardless of background, all students benefit from learning to better recognize privilege and respond to it critically. Students, especially those coming from White, elite, privileged backgrounds, are taught by society to believe that service should benefit the doer just as much as the groups with whom they work. Thus, when students with privileges interact with marginalized groups in their communities, they may do so, sometimes unknowingly, as a means by which to feel important. As a result, although service should foster humility, it has become a form of condescension (Deresiewicz, 2014). When this occurs, students never question who is serving and learning from whom, and the power dynamics inherent within their interactions. When students engage in service-learning, their privilege often causes them to approach it as they have been inculcated to do, believing that their work is noble and honorable. Thus, when students engage with marginalized groups, they frequently demonstrate this ideology by desiring to complete their assigned projects but showing less interest in actually assisting those in need (Steimel, 2013) or questioning the nature of these relationships and power dynamics between them. Deresiewicz (2014) explains this phenomenon:

> "Service" is a flock of middle-class messiahs, descending in all their virtue, with a great deal of self-satisfaction, every once in a while, when they remember to think about it, upon the miserable and helpless. Like "leadership," it is a form of self-aggrandizement. (p. 126)

Service-learning necessitates dedicated communication with any community, but marginalized populations in society in particular. However, unless critical approaches are employed, service-learning can carry neocolonial tendencies since it is built on the idea of helping those who are less privileged, who seemingly cannot help themselves. Because service-learning often distorts itself into a form of self-aggrandizement, the practice teaches students to confuse the concepts of need and deficiency, incorrectly learning to view marginalized populations as deficient (Eby, 1998). When this occurs, students can form inflated ideas of self-worth, believing that their work can fix their deficiency.

Entrenchment of Economic Privilege

Self-aggrandizement can deepen students' sense of economic privilege. Specifically, service-learning can entrench hegemonic beliefs about economic privilege that derive from neoliberal thought. Neoliberalism, the current iteration of capitalism, has extended the belief that students can do good for marginalized groups, but in so doing, should derive some personal benefit. This benefit can manifest itself through the entrenchment of pecuniary hegemony. Hence, this particular idea fits with the neocolonial tendencies and how the "other" or "marginalized" is conceptualized and treated. Neoliberalism has perpetuated the myth that people who lack economic resources are not victims of an economy that privileges consumerism over collective responsibility (Kahl, 2018a). Instead, they are viewed as individuals who lack the intelligence, willpower, and/or skills to achieve economic success. Some students forget that

these characteristics are often disguised in toxic Whiteness. Ciepley (2017) explains that corporations communicate this nefarious ideology by saying, "If you fail in the market, you should accept the consequences, and not expect the wealth generated . . . to be redistributed to you" (para. 41).

Because of this, communication students may believe that their time (Steimel, 2013), energy, and resources are more important than those communities with which they work. Thus, students may enter into communicative interactions believing that the marginalized groups with whom they interact have failed in the market, negatively influencing their interactions. These students may make a fundamental attribution error (Robinson, 2017), inaccurately ascribing economic situations in which marginalized groups find themselves to internal flaws rather than understanding that their situations are directed by neoliberal economic policies external to their control. Additionally, as explained by standpoint theory (Harding, 1991), students may not take time to discover the cause of wealth disparity and leave the experience with a heightened sense of entitlement and classism. Hence, they may lack critical reflexivity to understand their positionality, power dynamics embedded in these types of relationships, and the nature of learning and teaching that occurs. In some cases, however, students who come from historically marginalized communities are able to recognize privilege and oppression, but these students may need to learn to think critically about intersectionality of identities. Furthermore, because of the assumed role of the marginalized communities, students often fail to realize that they are learning from and with these communities. Instead, they see themselves as the source of knowledge. Hence, these issues must be critically examined through the lens of CCP to develop critical service-learning approaches and tools.

Using Critical Communication Pedagogy and Assessment to Reframe Service-Learning

As we have discussed, service-learning has the potential to be a transformative pedagogical practice, especially if it is informed by a critical perspective. However, for this to occur, students must approach the experience by applying a critical lens to their communicative interactions. Namely, students need to be able to examine their own privileges or oppression, understand their role in hegemonic society, and recognize that solutions to the amelioration of hegemony can only be realized through dialogic interaction, not through the imposition of ideas on a population. Students also need to be critical about their intentions in these service projects and carefully explain the role of power as they co-create knowledge by engaging with new communities. Applying a critical perspective to a service-learning experience can reframe it to teach students to learn civility, humility, and critical self-reflection to interrogate power structures that they may hold due to their privileged positions in society. To work toward this goal, we advocate for critical service-learning experiences to be developed and facilitated through the lens of CCP and critical assessment.

Critical Communication Pedagogy

A primary problem when sending communication students into the field to interact with marginalized populations is that they tend not to have a critical lens through which to view the world they enter. Rather, they often possess a neoliberal lens through which they view the world as black and white and without nuance. This can be true for both privileged and marginalized students. Neoliberalism teaches students that marginalized people have "chosen" to forego economic prosperity as a result of poor financial decision-making. Hence, students are not encouraged to question the larger social and cultural

structures that created or perpetuated such challenging circumstances. Additionally, if students do question these structures, they may not have appropriate tools with which to challenge them. Embodying this form of thinking, students, who are earning degrees in higher education, believe that they have made the "correct" economic choice to invest in their future, while oppressed groups have made the "incorrect" choices in their lives, choices that have resulted in their current economic and social state of being. Therefore, the rhetoric of neoliberal education creates a false consciousness and sets a particular way of conceptualizing success, which is often based on capitalistic and White, economically privileged, heterosexual, and able-bodied ideas.

CCP challenges students to uncover the hegemonic power structures that have inculcated them with these neoliberal thoughts. CCP involves the examination of and response to power in society. It involves the study of the intersections of pedagogy, communication, and power (Fassett & Warren, 2007). In doing so, it challenges instructors and students to identify and respond to hegemonic forces that privilege some and marginalize others. In this case, CCP, which involves a critical response to the ways power communicates, can aid students in gaining a critical, nuanced perspective regarding the populations with which they are working.

Critical Assessment of Service-Learning

A service-learning project transforms into a rich opportunity for critical learning when communication instructors frame it through CCP. The success of CCP rests on assessment. Critical assessment allows the instructor to gauge students' paradigm shifts from the traditional, albeit troublesome, neoliberal perspective, to the more social-justice-minded critical communication perspective. Reflection papers, ethnographic or autoethnographic assignments, and journal reports (Kahl, 2018b) are tools that have been used for assessment, but we will focus more broadly on the questions critical assessment should answer, regardless of the specific assignment or tool an educator may choose to utilize. Two central questions should be asked when critically assessing service-learning: (1) How do students use course content to attempt to facilitate change? and (2) How are students learning to become critically engaged members of society who can facilitate change through collaboration with marginalized groups? Both of these questions are important in critical assessment. Too often, instructors focus their assessment efforts only on the application of content knowledge—half of the first question. Also, instructors often focus on students' level of satisfaction with their experiences (Molee et al., 2010). While important, these foci deemphasize the broader question of whether communication students can adopt a paradigm shift from a neoliberal ideology to a critical one. In order to answer the two broad questions listed above, critical assessment must examine and assess the application of three commitments of CCP: power, dialogue, and reflexivity.

Assessment of Power

Students must become aware of the power structures/ideologies and dynamics involved in their service-learning project. Questions that students should be able to answer with greater detail and complexity as a service-learning project progresses include: What power structure(s) are you (the student) part of and how did you become a part of these structures? How do power structure(s) marginalize the community group with which you work? How do power structure(s) benefit by marginalizing them? What would a collective response to this hegemony look like?

Assessment of Dialogue

Freire (1970) discusses dialogue as fundamental to critical thinking, making dialogue an important component of the critical assessment of student learning. Thus, assessment of dialogue could include asking students to take detailed notes and/or record (with permission) their community partners to understand the current situation, dialogue about change, and engage in collective decision-making. Assessing dialogue means that students should display the knowledge and ability to take the perspective of marginalized people and understand them through their own words. Assessment of dialogue includes encouraging students to continuously reframe their thought processes to foster greater sensitivity to nefarious ways in which neoliberal hegemony functions to subjugate these groups.

Assessment of Reflexivity

Finally, one of the most important ways in which critical assessment of service-learning differs from traditional assessment measures is that it employs reflexivity. Traditional assessment of service-learning, even when it does employ aspects of personal contemplation, tends merely to involve reflection. Reflection asks students to simply discuss what they did, how they felt about it, how they helped marginalized populations, and how their lives were enhanced through their participation in the project. In contrast, reflexivity challenges students to critique their experiences during the project. Reflexivity challenges students to consider both their work to mitigate the effects of power as well as their recognition of their participation in it (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Reflexivity requires students to reexamine their own beliefs by reflecting upon the origin of their values, thoughts, and words. This way students can illuminate the power dynamics and structures that keep marginalized populations perpetually in oppressed positions.

These questions regarding power, dialogue, and reflexivity can be discussed in class and included in assignments throughout a service-learning project. Thus, the goal of critical assessment of service-learning is a means by which instructors can discern the degree to which students are becoming critically conscious individuals and civically minded members of society. A key component of the critical assessment of service-learning is to determine the degree to which students understand power dynamics within their own experience. One means by which instructors can determine students' understanding of power is through the writing of self-reflexive reports. In such reports, students can act reflexively about their experiences by writing about "contemplative engagement, cultural understanding, critical exploration, collective action, and creative application" (Blinne, 2021, p. 287).

After students have completed their work with their organizations, students can present their work to the class, university faculty, and community leaders to create awareness of the societal conditions that have subjugated people in order to move toward conscientization—recognition and praxis-oriented action (Freire, 1970). Representatives of the marginalized groups should be present at the presentation in order to share their voices and to speak about their life experiences so that all involved can learn how they can foster change.

Conclusion

In this essay, we propose a pedagogical shift regarding the ways in which instructors and students approach service-learning. In the current grade-driven academic culture in which academic achievement becomes valued over learning and the critical evaluation of societal inequality (Rudick, 2021), a need exists to reframe the ways in which students interact with marginalized groups in society. When

service-learning is reframed and assessed as a critical act, it can be transformed from the traditional act of reflection which merely teaches students to learn to serve and serve to learn (Mitchell, 2008) to a pragmatic CCP process that involves "a social change orientation" which works to "redistribute power" by "developing authentic relationships" with marginalized populations (Mitchell, 2008, p. 53). We argue that this reframing can occur if service-learning is reframed and assessed in a way that challenges students to examine the hegemony that has privileged them and subjugated others. It is important to note that a single experience of critically oriented service-learning will not completely change a student's attitude from one of privilege to one of social justice advocacy. Holding such a belief would be incorrect and naïve. However, a critically oriented service-learning experience has the potential to accomplish two important goals. First, critical assessment grounded in the commitments of CCP helps instructors to determine if students are beginning to approach service-learning in ways that counter neoliberal manifestations. When this occurs, students begin to understand the true purpose of service-learning through their knowledge of power, dialogue, and self-reflexivity. When students undertake service-learning through the lens of CCP, and are assessed as such, they are more likely to resist the self-aggrandizement that service-learning tends to foster and replace it with justice (Deresiewicz, 2014). Second, because the critical assessment of service-learning reframes the way in which students view the process, the application of critical assessment has the potential to begin to cultivate a sense of civic responsibility for students so that they may learn the importance of intervening into sites of oppression.

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