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Keywords: educational choice, service learning, activism, adult education, higher education

Abstract: In this paper, we share insights from a research project that investigated the effects of a service learning experience in a graduate adult education seminar with an explicitly critical pedagogical focus and activist placements. We analyze a subset of the findings related to the lack of “choice” through a critique of CSL as a market commodity and argue that disrupting the hegemony of choice had implications for reconstructing student identities.

Introduction

In recent years, service learning has become prominent in both K-12 education and higher education. Generally, service learning is used to provide students with “real world” experiences, promote citizenship, and encourage students’ moral development and sense of social responsibility. Critics suggest that service learning often fixates on certain kinds of experiences, namely, those that maintain a charitable or voluntary orientation that fail to address the root causes of the injustices and social needs that the placements seek to address (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In many cases, CSL placements “have glossed over the presumption of neutrality, the privileging of Whiteness, and the imbalance of power relations” (Butin, 2003, p. 1679).

In this paper, we share insights from a research project that investigated the effects of a Community Service Learning (CSL) experience at the University of Alberta in a graduate adult education seminar with an explicitly critical pedagogical focus. In this study, we invoked critical pedagogy as a means of problematizing predominant CSL models that do not sufficiently explore or challenge unequal relations of power and social structures. We asked: *How might a critical/radical CSL pedagogy inform a critique of service learning in post-secondary contexts?*

We focus here on a subset of the findings related to a particularly contested aspect of the CSL placements, i.e., the lack of “choice.” We analyze the students’ response to the lack of choice through a critique of CSL as a market commodity. The notion of individual choice is embedded in western liberalism and has been a pillar of market ideologies that have permeated higher education in recent years. Today’s “student as consumer” expects to exercise her individual choice. Even experienced activists, whose activist work generally disrupts such ideologies, invoked this ideology.

First, we describe the context and dominant discourses in higher education today, within which CSL is situated and notions of educational choice are embedded. This is followed by a description of the research project, including information about the course that was studied. We then present themes from the research, including those related to the disruptive effects of the lack of choice and others related to positive outcomes. Finally, we discuss our conclusions related to identity and implications for community service learning and critical pedagogy.

Discourses of Choice in Today's Neoliberal University

Higher education in Canada operates within a pervasive neoliberal ideological framework (Smith, 2009). According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism can be understood as a theory of political economic practices that sees the advancement of human wellbeing as best achieved through “liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). The ideology of neoliberalism shapes our understanding of political freedom as the freedom to choose and consume products and services in the marketplace, and conceptualizes citizens as individuals who act in their individual self-interest. Giroux (2010) argues that universities are becoming increasingly implicated in the neoliberal colonization of everyday life. Shifts in context generated by neoliberalism challenge and perhaps redefine the purpose and practice of universities, and induce them to commodify their key product: knowledge (Graffikin & Perry, 2009). Porfilio and Yu (2006) describe this phenomenon as a “school as business and student as consumer” approach to education that commodifies academic knowledge and repositions education as a means to economic reward (§ 2). Service learning is a knowledge product offered to students for their consumption and personal benefit. It is “sold” as a means to prepare students for the “real world,” to enhance their resumes and to become better citizens and, as consumers, they “buy” it, expecting to gain the cultural capital that is promised them.

The Research Project

The instructor of a course on “learning in social movements” initiated this research project in order to “contribute to scholarship on community engaged-pedagogy by examining the impacts of service-learning.” The course focuses on the pedagogical dimension of social movements, including experiential, transformative, social and political learning. The in-class component is supplemented by CSL placements in activist organizations. Placement projects included: a legal rights card and pamphlet, school curriculum regarding the land claims of the Lubicon Cree in Alberta, and materials for promoting the local Anarchist Bookfair. Students generally attended meetings of the activist organizations during the term and activists from the organizations worked with the students after every class, including a mid-term half-day working session. A small minority of students were also members of the activist organizations.

Based in phenomenology, wherein the research process is aimed at unfolding the meaning of human experiences (van Manen, 1990), data collection methods for this research project included analysis of three selected homework assignments and an interview conducted by a research assistant. We used the University of Alberta’s learning management system (eClass) to obtain consents, upload homework assignments and conduct a short survey. Fifteen students who had completed the course over the previous two years participated in one or more aspects of the project. Because the principle investigator was also the course instructor, we paid special attention to ethical issues related to privacy and participant rights, but privacy and issues of power have been ongoing concerns.

The theoretical framework that guided our analysis follows from the course in that both are informed by critical pedagogy (Allman, 2001; Freire & Horton, 1990). We initially used Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) three kinds of citizens (personally responsible, participatory and justice oriented) to explore how students situated themselves within this model over time. We also analyzed the data connected to “choice” and began theorizing the idea of “student as consumer” of service learning, situating this analysis within a critique of neoliberalism in higher

education as identified above. This is the focus of the findings that we present in the next section of this paper.

Discussion of Findings

Tension around the lack of choice in selecting placements particularly captured our attention. On the first day of class, the instructor asked students to choose a CSL placement from among a small number of local organizations that were specifically activist, not charitable. These included: an indigenous solidarity group and a group demanding affordable housing in the first year, and the same indigenous solidarity group and two anarchist groups in the second year. Most of these groups were campus-based. All students initially complained that the placement choices were too few and too narrow, but later reported that the placement experiences were ultimately positive and acknowledged that the initial disruption had enhanced their learning experience.

Lack of Choice

The disruptive effect of the lack of choice fell into two broad themes. The first is *anxiety and discomfort about the placements*. A number of students were initially nervous about their placements or apprehensive that their involvement might conflict with their jobs. For example, one student commented: “I couldn’t be standing there and protesting... That would be sort of stepping over the line.” A number of students perceived the placement options, especially the anarchist organizations, to be very radical in nature and well out of their comfort zone. According to one student: “[We were] left with [two anarchist organizations]... And it was like ‘you gotta pick today’ kind of thing. And I found that really pushed boundaries for me a lot... So it didn’t really feel like a whole lot of choice.” The second theme that emerged as a direct result of the lack of choice is *questions about self-efficacy*. At the outset, students felt that they did not have confidence in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the activist placements. Some students expressed only nominal interest or lack of intrinsic “passion” about the cause, and believed that this would diminish the effectiveness of their involvement. Stereotypical beliefs about anarchism, for example, may have resulted in a student questioning the value of an anarchist organization. Also, students reported feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems and issues. We interpreted these beliefs as indicative of low self-efficacy, an idea that was echoed by a student: “A lot of people... don’t really have a sense of personal efficacy and I think that’s the default position... ‘I’m just a small person, I can’t do anything about it.’”

Engaging with the Disruption

Both the course instructor and the activists were sensitive to the students’ disruptive response to the lack of choice. The course instructor addressed the disruption about placement choices as part of the critical pedagogical process. She congregated a “talking circle” to debrief with the students after the placement presentations, giving them the opportunity to express their fears and frustrations and then make choices about how to proceed. She explained her pedagogical philosophy and the role of disruption in the learning process. There were numerous opportunities to reflect on learning. As one student explained: “Within our blogs, we were reflecting a lot on the CSL component... Actually putting something down on paper, I think, sometimes involves a bit more of a deeper reflection of what’s going on.” In addition, placement organizations made numerous efforts to mitigate students’ concerns, from allowing one student to use a pseudonym in the on-line discussion forum to accepting that another student’s

involvement “is gonna look a certain way, and, you know, if it can’t look this way, we can’t participate.” An activist-student recounted his conscientious approach to his classmates’ anxieties: “When we worked on something new, we’d talk about it... I was very, very careful to make sure that we checked in with people on a fairly frequent basis.” The lack of choice that initially resulted in anxiety and resistance diminished once the students commenced working in their placements and became more familiar with the organizations.

Positive Outcomes

Despite their initial resistance to the lack of choice, students identified fruitful learning from the experience. As one student concluded: “Initially, there was a lot of frustration but it went from there to... a great experience in the end.” Three main themes emerged as positive outcomes. First was recognizing the *double-edged nature of choice and flexibility*. In hindsight, students reflected that, had they had a greater number of options to choose from, they may not have chosen to work with the more radical organizations and would not have had the positive learning experiences that resulted. In essence, the CSL placement options compelled students to participate in something they might otherwise have stepped away from. Students recognized that the disruption they experienced was important for active learning and critical thinking. One student reported that she would use a similar approach in her classroom.

The second theme related to positive outcomes was developing *critical consciousness and praxis*. As students were simultaneously exposed to *theories* in the classroom – such as those related to marginalization, power and privilege and social movement learning – alongside social justice *practice* in the activist organizations, they began to make important connections between the two. The CSL placement gave students the opportunity to *participate* in activism, not just to read about it. As one student stated: “One thing I took away from the class was kind of a concept [of] praxis: the idea that you kinda have to both consider social movement theory as well as act on whatever theory it is... [to] put the learning into something tangible.” The experience of praxis was instrumental in developing a growing critical consciousness about the world and their place in it as well as tools for critical social analysis. One student acknowledged: “I am more aware of issues and look at them critically from many angles.” When it comes time to donate to the food bank, one teacher is “a little more committed now to looking with [my students] at the root causes of [hunger]... and going a little bit deeper into the issues.” Many students became critically conscious of their privilege and complicity in systems of oppression.

Presently, this has been my experience of working with [my placement]. *I am part of the oppressive force as a white Canadian having lived in reasonable privilege. Despite my ignorance, I am a part of this society that consumes cheap oil, and ignores the plight of many. It took a while to come to terms with this. I don’t know if I even have.*

Thus, the lack of choice about the “radical” organizations within which students were placed allowed them to open their eyes to the reality of the world around them and to develop a heightened consciousness of their responsibilities.

Third, students reported an *enhanced understanding of and commitment to activism* stemming from their compulsory exposure to the activist organizations. Students who felt anxious about the radical nature of the placements reported that the welcoming and supportive nature of the groups drastically changed their perceptions. One student stated: “They were participating to help us learn... They were very welcoming, they were very accommodating, it was very much about our needs.” Their new understandings differed significantly from the stereotypical conceptions of radical activism with which some students started the course. One

student observed a classmate being “terrified by the fact that she might be working with anarchists, you know, they’re gonna be wearing black masks and have guns and stuff, right?... And they didn’t attack her, which was nice. And she got to like them and she really learned from them and they absolutely, ABSOLUTELY, changed the way she looks at anarchy. Absolutely.”

Some students adjusted their definitions of activism. As one student reflected in a homework assignment: “Does activism mean to lead to radical change? Can I do that by leading or living without the title of activist? I ask this because I think of my own life, as a lesbian... by living openly in my life, conscientiously, am I not radical... ?” Another student demarcated her activism within realistic boundaries: “I know I can’t possibly understand all of the issues in our world... but I can identify what I am passionate about and I can work for positive change in that area.” Even some students with a strong activist identity experienced shifts in their understanding of activism: “Now I see the role of an activist as much more organic.”

Their positive experiences with the activist organizations led the students to sustain their involvement and participation in activism for the long term, whether with the CSL placement organization or in activism in a different capacity. One student recalled: “I was introduced to the idea that activism is a lifelong process. So, I don’t remember whether or not I made a personal commitment to still being involved with [my placement] or still being involved in various activist circles, but I realized that... I’m an activist in my everyday life.” Some students became active in the environmental movement, one started an organization for trans-identified people, a subset co-founded a popular education centre, and a number remained active with the indigenous solidarity organization.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many students, whether consciously or not, experienced, not only a disruption related to their perceived lack of personal choice, but a disruption in their understanding of choice itself, a challenge to the hegemony of choice in a capitalist society. First, they recognized that the limited choices presented for CSL placement options had some beneficial pedagogical outcomes. Second, their growing critical consciousness about structural realities within which choices are negotiated challenged their previous conceptions of the unfettered free agency of individuals. While working through the course materials and the placement projects, many students learned how limited the “choices” are for those who are homeless or for those without basic service on their traditional lands. They faced the very difficult recognition of their own privilege and complicity and of their role in making change. In challenging the neoliberal identity of consumer through a growing critical consciousness of the world and action on the world, students were constructing new identities – identities as activists.

Butin (2005) describes identity reconstruction as a principal foundation for interpreting student resistance in learning about social injustice. In contrast to theories that portray identity as an internal process, Foucault (1984) rejects the idea that identity is internally constructed and challenges the essentialist belief that identity is fixed. Instead, he postulates that identity is a social construction created through discourses that evolve through a series of power relations. For Foucault, discourse is not simply linguistic, but exists as a body of knowledge that is linked to the disciplinary practices of “social control and social possibility” (McHoul & Grace, 1997, p. 26) and that shapes “the identities and practices of human subjects” (Luke, 1997, p. 51).

As we have argued above, the socially constructed identity of the individual as an agent of choice is highly valued within the socio-historical context of neoliberalism. The discourse of student as consumer acts as a self-regulating form of control and possibility. What happens, then,

when the neoliberal discourses from which a student has constructed her identity are challenged by new discourses generated within critical pedagogical processes and activist placements? Critical discourses that emphasize systemic causes of inequality, that recognize structural constraints on individual choice, that unveil positionalities of privilege directly conflict with neoliberal discourses of choice. New discourses that challenge the hegemony of choice are ultimately implicated in reconstructing identities.

According to Butin (2005): “Social activism in higher education becomes identity reconstruction which, in turn, may become social activism” (p. 10). If this is so, then the incorporation of activist CSL placements within a critical pedagogy offers some hope for turning around the consumerist student identity that is constructed in today’s neoliberal university.

Implications

In this paper, we have already explicated the implications for students of disrupting the hegemony of choice. A second implication is to legitimize the combination of critical pedagogy and critically engaged service learning as a valid and effective pedagogical tool in social justice work within formal educational settings. Radical adult educators often engage in critical and feminist pedagogies but the actual implementation is an ongoing and challenging endeavour within the context of a university classroom (Allman, 2001; hooks, 2003). This research supports the use of radical activist placements to complement critical and feminist pedagogies and provides some guidance to instructors. In the context of an adult education graduate course, the students are themselves teachers and adult educators who might later take up critical pedagogies, coupled with social justice placements, in their educational work. Finally, our analysis demonstrates that it is possible to disrupt the hegemonies of the “new university,” as constructed in the context of neoliberalism, and particularly to challenge the growing hegemony of consumerism in our educational institutions.

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