Community Service Learning: Perspectives from Adult Education

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Abstract: *This paper positions Community Service Learning (CSL) within traditions of adult education, examines related work on international CSL, transformative learning and social justice in higher education, and briefly considers a CSL initiative at a major research university. It concludes with suggestions for further research on CSL in adult education.*

"One way of making education more holistic is to get outside the classroom and off the campus. It interrupts the programming that twelve years of classroom conditioning automatically call up; the change in environment changes everything. The class becomes a social unit; students become more fully rounded human beings not just people who either know the answer or don't know it. Inside the classroom, it's one kind of student that dominates; outside, it's another. Tying course content to the world outside offers a real-world site for asking theoretical questions; it answers students' need to feel that their education is good for something other than a grade point average. And it begins to address the problem of the student who has no conception of what is possible after graduation…"

> *A Life in School* by Jane Tompkins, Duke University, AddisonWesley Longman, 1996. Quoted on the St. Francis Xavier University Service Learning website: <www.stfx.ca/ academic/service learning>

Introduction

Community Service Learning (CSL) is an experiential model of learning in which university students are sent from their home institutions to volunteer their time, energy, skills, expertise and enthusiasm in a diverse range of non-profit community organizations, schools and other community-based initiatives, both local and international. Students ideally develop a better sense of self, they test and deepen knowledge gained in classroom settings, develop as active citizens, and contribute to a more equitable society.

Community Service Learning has been a popular and widely adopted pedagogy in the U.S. for many years, but has only recently begun to put down roots in Canada. It is now growing rapidly: with impetus from St. Francis Xavier University, in 2001, the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning (CACSL) was established and currently enjoys the membership of over 30 Canadian Universities. In 2008-09, my own university's Community Learning Initiative had over 1,700 students involved in some form of Community Service Learning (TLE, 2010; Fryer, 2009). These students engaged in a broad range of volunteer activities across disciplines and communities. CSL projects during Spring Break in 2008, for example, included Civil Engineering students working with the Classical Chinese Garden to building a Ming Dynasty Fence; students in First Nations Studies working on a salmon creek revitalization project with members of a local aboriginal Band; students in the Co-coordinated Arts Program volunteering with Stream of Dreams Murals Society to create educational materials; and Biology students working with the University Farm on a cob shed building project.

To date, the field of Adult Education has had a limited engagement with CSL [notable exceptions are recent edited works by Reed & Marienau (2008) and by Sandmann, Kiely &

Grenier (2009)]. This paper aims to provide an adult education perspective on the educational practice known as Community Service Learning. To this end, I examine Community Service Learning in light of: (a) parallels in adult education in extension education and social movement learning; and (b) conceptualizations of CSL in higher education and its two adult education "sister" strands of transformative learning in International CSL, and Social Justice CSL, respectively. I then characterize my own university's CSL initiatives in terms of these areas of scholarship. Lastly, I offer some reflections on possible areas of further research on CSL in adult education.

CSL Parallels in Adult Education

Community Service Learning has many similarities to the ethic and practice of the Land Grant research university, and in particular to extension education programs which were popular from the 1910s to the 1960s (after which universities began to shift from extension for the public good to continuing education for profit or "cost-recovery"). Extension education provided local people and communities with practical, research-based knowledge to improve agriculture, home economics, environmental conservation and community development. This took place mainly through nonformal education programs, field visits by extension officers (i.e. adult educators), study circles, and a healthy supply of pamphlets, radio, films and other forms of extension communication. By contrast, CSL supplies practical knowledge through the extension not of expert researchers, knowledge and faculty, but of relatively novice university students.[8]

Unlike extension education, CSL's primary aim is to put students' theoretical learning to the test of practical application, and secondarily to contribute students' labor and expertise to the community. That is, CSL students may at times supply mostly their volunteer labor to local communities, and in fact learn more than they teach. As such, CSL does not normally embody an extension-style community development curriculum addressing the needs of local people and organizations. Instead, the volunteer work of students in communities is primarily designed to meet the learning objectives of their university curriculum, and is course-, project- or task-based. This does not preclude identifying and serving the learning needs of local communities (and CSL often does this), but the focus is on the education of students rather than communities.

The ethos of academic and community-based adult education programs – particularly within Canada – has historically been to serve the people, and to promote education for social change. A growing contemporary literature on adult learning in social movement contexts shares some common ground with the idea of Community Service Learning (Auretto, 2001; Hall & Turay, 2006). Adult "volunteers" within social movements—the environmental, peace, women's, gay rights, indigenous rights, food security, economic justice, anti-racist and other movements— not only experience individual and collective learning, but also generate new knowledge for the benefit of local people and communities. Learning is usually informal or incidental, based on the requirements of participation in the movement (Hall, 2006, p. 3): adult volunteers will learn and educate others "on demand" about a particular social issue (violence against women, environmental pollution, deforestation, wars and militarism, racism directed against particular communities, unfair labor practices and corporate profiteering, homelessness, etc.). As active

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8 In Canada, this dimension of CSL has parallels in the extension education of Frontier College's Labourer-Teacher Program, where university students were sent out to live, labor and teach literacy among working immigrants in mining, rail, agriculture and farming camps (Walter, 2003).

participants in the construction of civil society, they will form networks of activists and concerned citizens who raise awareness of issues, and foster transformative learning (Auretto, 2001). Recent scholarship in this vein shows, for example, how adult volunteers in community organizations (such as housing and energy cooperatives and immigrant settlement organizations) generate new skills, knowledge and attitudes in the learning process, and in this way contribute to the health and vibrancy of their communities (Guo, 2006; Duguid, Mündel & Schugurensky, 2007; Mündel & Schugurensky, 2008).

While adult learning and education within social movements is not institutionalized, has no fixed curriculum and is not usually credited or otherwise recognized by universities or other formal schooling, it nonetheless shares many of the characteristics of Community Service Learning. Adults are volunteers, they provide their expertise and labor to local community organizations, and actively teach and learn from others. This form of adult learning is often creative, synergistic, adaptable and free flowing; it has un-predictable and un-measurable outcomes, but these are often transformative for both individuals and communities. By contrast, CSL is anchored in schooling institutions, constrained by formal curriculum and degree requirements: it normally begins and ends over a specified period of time, with specified numbers of "service" hours, and specified activities to be completed. However, there is also great diversity among forms of CSL, with many streams of CSL overlapping with adult education, as the next section makes clear.

Conceptualizations of CSL in Higher Education

The higher (and secondary) education literature on Community Service Learning is immense. In the United States, CSL has enjoyed over two decades of educational practice, institutional support and scholarship. Most recently, in April 2009, President Obama gave CSL a strong boost in signing into law the "Serve America Act" which puts close to $6 billion into mobilizing 2.2 million community and student volunteers in service learning and other volunteer initiatives, many of these in higher education (CNCS, 2009). At the university level, Campus Compact, founded in 1985, is a national network of over 1,100 college and universities, with 6 million students involved in CSL in higher education (Campus Compact 2010). In Canada, in 2005, a similar university alliance, the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning, received several million dollars in private Foundation funding to promote university-based CCL programs across Canada. All of this action on the ground has fostered a rich academic scholarship on CSL in higher education, much of it centered on the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, a peer-reviewed journal founded in 1994. Without attempting to summarize the voluminous higher education CSL literature here, I instead review a conceptual mapping of the field (Butin, 2003), and then describe two recent strands in higher education CSL which resonate well with adult education: transformative learning in international CSL (Kiely, 2004; Crabtree, 2008; Wright, 2009), and CSL for social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2007).

Butin (2003) identifies four conceptualizations of service learning in education: the Technical, Cultural, Political, and Post-Structuralist perspecives, respectively (pp. 1679-1684). Briefly, the *Technical* perspective focuses on the structural and process "technology" of CSL programming; that is, process and outcome efficacy, quality, efficiency and sustainability. This line of thinking includes a consideration of the connections between service learning and personal, social and, above all, cognitive outcomes for students; and the quality, length, frequency and nature of placements in relation to academic learning. By contrast, the *Cultural*

perspective focuses on individual meaning-making for students in CSL: the focus is on how CSL fosters civic engagement, democratic renewal and a sense of community belonging. Through CSL, students might develop a greater tolerance of diversity, better awareness of social issues, and a stronger moral imperative to engage as citizens in a social democracy. The *Political* perspective describes a transformative experience in CSL in which students better understand power relations and social conflict (in the Freirian tradition), and act with local communities to challenge oppressive relations. However, Butin (Ibid.) cautions that this form of CSL can also reinforce pre-existing stereotypes and oppressive relations "under the guise of benevolent volunteerism" in which solutions are bestowed upon marginalized groups by outsider students (p. 1682). Finally, the *Poststructuralist* perspective, according to Butin, is one in which CSL challenges the notion of a single objective Truth, and students' self-identity is socially constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed (following Foucault). CSL is assumed to be neither positive or negative; but relies on deconstructing asymmetrical social identities and relations in which students and CSL are implicated.

In higher education, two promising strands of CSL scholarship—one on International CSL and transformative learning in the Cultural tradition, and the second on CSL for social justice, in the Political tradition—clearly have shared roots in Adult Education. In a recent paper reviewing the theoretical foundations of International CSL (ICSL), Robbin Crabtree (2008) argues that beyond being a pivotal cross-cultural experience for students, ICSL can also act as a form of Participatory Development, it can incorporate authentic Community-based Research and can serve as a site of Transformative Learning for participants (in which they may move from a "charity" orientation to more of a social justice orientation). All of these strands have clear parallels in Adult Education (see Hall, 2009; 1997). In ICSL, Kiely (2004), for example, has shown how students involved in ICSL have experienced a perspective transformation, taking on a complex, "emerging global consciousness" after working on community health issues in Nicaragua. In a similar vein, Don Wright (2009) has documented a raised awareness of and commitment to global human rights among CSL volunteers for Amnesty International in Vancouver, Canada. CSL for Social Justice (in domestic programs) also has a strong Adult Education impetus. The Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for instance, brings a critical social justice orientation to CSL and explicitly aims to develop students' abilities to promote social change (Mitchell, 2007). In similar fashion, Seattle University has begun to institutionalize social justice CSL in keeping with its Jesuit mission and Civil Rights principles, particularly in action research projects in the College of Education (Cuban & Anderson, 2007).

The CSL Initiative at the University of British Columbia

The CSL initiative at the University of British Columbia (UBC) was built on the on-going work of the Learning Exchange, a decade-long UBC volunteer initiative placing students in inner city schools, homeless shelters, drop-in centers hospices and other community settings.[9] With support from a private foundation, in 2006, the CSL initiative began to integrate volunteer work and learning more directly and consciously into academic coursework. By 2008-09, almost 1,700 UBC students had volunteered for CSL with 47 non-profit organizations and 26 public schools. Further, by 2010, the UBC CSL initiative had: (a) developed a CSL Community of

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[9] This section is based on information found in The Learning Exchange (2010), Fryer (2009, 2010) and Murray (2009).

Practice among faculty staff and community partners, (b) integrated CSL projects or placements into 32 courses, (c) had a CSL project coordinator in place in the Arts Faculty, and (d) had an interactive website up and running with sample CSL projects and curriculum, CSL bibliographies and video streaming, among other things (see http://csl.ubc.ca/). According to Margo Fryer (2010), founding Director of the UBC Learning Exchange and the CSL Initiative, "Community Service Learning is the combination of three key elements: students doing volunteer work in the community, some kind of academic content, and structured reflection--which means getting students to think critically about the connection between what they're seeing and experiencing in the community and what they're studying in their courses." In broader terms, the goals of the UBC's CSL initiative are (Fryer, 2009, p. 2): 1. To enhance students' learning: about themselves and their roles as global citizens; about critical community issues; and about academic fields of knowledge. 2. To apply the resources of the university (people, knowledge, and methods of inquiry) to critical community issues (social, ecological, and economic). 3. To build the capacity of the university and community organizations to engage in successful university-community partnerships. 4. To evaluate the processes and outcomes of the UBC-CLS and disseminate the results so that the lessons learned through the planning and implementation of the UBC-CLS can benefit the CSL field.

Major university courses within the UBC CSL initiative include a 3rd Year core course in the Faculty of Land and Food Systems on food security in diverse communities (over 350 students);a 2nd year core course in civil engineering (120 students) focusing on CSL team projects with a sustainability theme;17 courses with a CSL component in the Faculty of Arts (300 students); and one CSL seminar (15 students) on health promotion in the inner city neighborhood of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. In conceptual terms, the UBC CSL Initiative appears to fall into Butin's (2003) *Technical* and *Cultural* perspectives. In the first instance, as a program in the *Technical* tradition, since it is a foundation-funded initiative, the UBC program is accountable to its sponsors for measurable outcomes, well-defined pedagogy, transparent programming and replicable results. However, as an extension of the more social justice-oriented Learning Exchange in the *Cultural* tradition, it is an initiative with strong roots in an inner city community grappling with poverty, homelessness, addiction, hunger, illiteracy, the sex trade, domestic violence, mental health disabilities and HIV/AIDS, among other issues. While this is not broadcast as widely or directly to students, this social justice theme is implicit in many of their UBC CSL experiences.

Conclusion

This paper touches briefly on some of the defining characteristics of Community Service Learning as these might be understood from an adult education perspective. Areas for further research are as wide and varied as the field of Adult Education: they might include research on elements of CSL programming and design, on pedagogy, transformative learning, community development, and CSL as social movement learning. This might take place within the Technical and Cultural perspectives, or—honoring adult education's historic connection to education for social justice—within the Political Tradition. Questions about CSL practice and theorizing which might well benefit from community-based perspectives in adult education include: What are the benefits of CSL for local community organizations? (Shauna Butterwick, personal communication). How are these organizations involved in designing, managing and evaluating CSL learning? How do programs of CSL reinforce existing inequities of knowledge and

privilege? In what ways do universities benefit from the power relations inherent in many CSL initiatives? Whom do they serve? How is transformative learning provoked by CSL experiences, international or otherwise? What sort of pedagogy and experience promote this? What is the role of informal, unpredictable, collective, "off the books" learning? What place does social justice CSL take in a university curriculum built largely on the needs of fairly well-off students? How might CSL contribute to movements for social change?

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