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Links: Student Learning, University Rewards, and Community Service

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Service-learning has increasingly been used to provide hands-on education in contemporary social issues. Service-learning programs vary considerably in terms of their content, resulting in tensions within the field over the definition of service; whether the purpose is academic development or to bring about social change; student readiness to participate in service-learning activities; control in the relationship between university and community, and evaluation of service-learning activities. Students engaged in service learn while also cultivating their own social awareness or managing the philosophical crises of experiential education.

This article describes an institutional model for service-learning called the Social Action Project (SOCACT). The SOCACT has operated for fifteen years teaching multi-disciplinary teams of undergraduate students to conduct field research. The project initiatives focus on bringing the knowledge and resources of the university to bear on problems defined by community residents. Participants can then work to change those problems.

In a forthcoming paper (Bryant et al., in press) we provide more detail on our approach, introduce a conceptual model for supporting the continued development of service-learning as a pedagogy of engagement, and identify tensions and issues for the continuing development of service-learning in higher education.

What We Do

The project is action research designed both as a community intervention (to deal directly with troubled communities to enact social change) and as a research project (to generate theory on the nature of social change) (Chein, Cook & Harding, 1948; Lewin, 1948). SOCACT's work is done by teams of students and professionals who develop interventions in collaborate with community members.

As straightforward as this sounds, the process is often convoluted, protracted, and just plain tedious. Deeply rooted social issues are sustained by forces hidden beneath layers of convention or bureaucracy. As interventionists, we are forced to look for the processes at work underneath the problem (internalized stigma) rather than attack the social problem's structures (public education about HIV/AIDS).

We ask community residents: "What do you need?" The answers lead to uniquely tailored, joint projects designed to help people build on their own strengths, focusing on the problems marginalized groups face every day. The teams work with people in the community to understand the problem, plan the best approach, and then take action to bring about change.

The goal of each joint initiative is to develop replicable models for community asset

building by asking what is required for residents to be efficacious – to perceive they have control over the events of their lives. The challenge is to create psychological assessment tools sensitive to differences caused by inequities regarding race, gender, class, ability, or sexual preference. The university-community partnerships established through SOCACT are mechanisms to generate efficacy profiles that provide insight into the diverse ways participants cope.

How We Do What We Do

Project initiatives are not undertaken based on the assumption that only agencies or organizations can bring about social change. Rather, some of SOCACT's partners are individuals or loosely defined groups whose members share a common passion or concern: for instance, members of the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered (LGBT) community, who daily face challenges to their right to thrive; and poets and spoken word artists who use verse and song to combat racism and sexism. These partnerships have led to enduring social interventions.

The SOCACT joint initiatives are Youth Community Theater, Poetry Jams, Sexual Minorities and Alternative Lifestyles, and Recovery International. The Youth Community Theater (YCT) is an arts education project to examine personal development and civic responsibility. Youths create "found art" banners to express themselves about living with disabilities and with AIDS. Poetry Jams are an open mike forum for "spoken art of poetry." Poets speak out about society's inequities, making the Jams a mechanism for community living, conflict resolution, self-expression, and healing. Sexual Minorities and Alternative Lifestyles examines the impediments to safety and support for members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community. The emancipatory design looks at the issue without attaching any label of pathology. Recovery International replicates these interventions in South Africa. The Theater produces public pieces to exchange and exhibit; poetry from the Jams are collected to produce an anthology of stories and poems about overcoming violence; findings from Alternative Lifestyles will address service delivery and public policy.

Appropriate social science methodologies – as in, the least intrusive – are selected once the nature of the intervention has been established. As a research project, each intervention is theoretically grounded and systematically examined. The SOCACT examines personal and collective efficacy (the exercise of control) to generate profiles describing the characteristics of such a person. Resource mobilization (distributing person, service, and information) is also examined to determine its role as the mechanism for efficacious individuals and communities.

The project explores theory through practical application, addressing issues prioritized by our community partners. This knowledge will be used to change university curricula, social policy, and public perceptions. As a teaching model, the SOCACT uses the principles of service-learning. The classroom component is designed to complement the field research to ensure that students gain knowledge as well as acquiring skills. Course content emphasizes social responsibility and personal reflection to evaluate each participant's role and contributions.

When they begin with SOCACT, student team members receive a project manual describing each joint initiative and project operating procedures. Students are assigned readings and other learning activities to develop a conceptual framework for the work. Each person on the team designs, implements, and disseminates results from an independent study conducted under the auspices of a SOCACT initiative. Before a study is designed, team members listen to as many

stakeholders as possible to develop relationships and ensure ecological validity. Since each of the joint initiatives is unique, the nature of the roles, tasks, and responsibilities varies accordingly: facilitate the Poetry Jam, provide technical assistance for the Theater, be a counselor at Art Camp, launch a website for Breaking Silence, develop banners for Art Explore. To coordinate the work, team meetings are held bi-weekly. Members are also expected to write process logs on a weekly basis in the States and daily throughout their stay in South Africa.

Service and Service-learning

Service learning is not new. Its roots can be traced to John Dewey (1916). It regained prominence in higher education with Boyer's (1990) redefinition of faculty scholarship. Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens (2003) presented twelve models of successful service-learning. Excellent resources in the field are available at the National Service Clearinghouse and in the Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning (see References).

The service dimension of service-learning is relatively straightforward -- an activity that meets the needs of the community partners involved. Yet many well-intentioned university projects in community fail because the residents do not see the need for them and neither support nor participate in the initiative. Therefore, building relationships and trust are essential elements of the SOCACT's operation. These connections generate a change agenda that residents are committed to pursue.

This encompasses more than deciding what activities will be done and where. Conducting action research in communities also requires looking at social systems, power analyses, social justice, and issues of differential access (Boyle-Baise, 1999; Fine et al., 2001; Kidder & Fine, 1986; Montada, Schmitt & Dalbert, 1986).

The SOCACT position is that "justice" is contextual, constructed, and relative to the context and the individuals being victimized. Our responsibility as interventionists is to become informed about the issues as they relate to our community partners in any given instance. For the Youth Community Theater, justice is the youths' right to express their views about sex, life, god, and country without ideological censorship from adults in their environment. In the Poetry Jam, justice means the young (as in new) artists have a forum to present and develop their works without fear of retaliation because of unpopular and politically incorrect views. Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community define justice as the freedom to be whole human beings and not be characterized only in terms of their sexuality.

The goal of SOCACT field research is to create a social justice initiative in a specific community. Working with the SOCACT involves more than weekly volunteerism in a service activity. Project members are learning to be agents of social change. Members of the SOCACT project team negotiate, conceptualize, design, implement, analyze, and disseminate their project. This means immersion in the community so that the knowledge available there becomes integral to the joint initiative.

Service-learning as Relationships

In order for the effort to make sense in the lives of participants, we devote time to building relationships. We get to know residents who will be part of the intervention.

As the SOCACT team and residents develop the joint initiatives, the emphasis is to build relationships and address problems of daily living. The team goes into neighborhoods, groups, or agencies to learn what is meaningful to people. Public issues are identified by building consensus, not through exerting control by virtue of being the “scientists.”

The SOCACT initiatives build networks -- within the team, in the community, between the university and the community. Along the way, research is done on how resource networks are built, how they function best, and how universities can be important network members.

Residents and scholars discover that community needs can be met through collaborative research. Academics working with the SOCACT come to realize that a top-down approach devalues the wisdom of community residents. For their part, community residents see how academicians can help them to reclaim control over the public issues that effect daily life.

The exchange of information and expertise builds relationships as well as building competence. The participants in the community are not being served, they develop links with one another and serve themselves.

Partnerships at Home and Abroad

The interventions in the United States have Sistersites in South Africa to determine whether theories created by North Americans have any meaning elsewhere in the world. We assume that culture plays a role since all human experience is embedded in a social context. The question is to determine whether there are elements of generating efficacy profiles that transcend cultural divisions. Through the replications, we seek to identify aspects of efficacy and resource mobilization that may be present across cultures, even if they develop in culture-specific ways.

The SOCACT partnerships in the States are comparable to those in the Sistersites in South Africa. Participants are residents and loosely formed groups of passionate citizens as well as community organizations, nonprofits, and youth serving organizations. The list of such partnerships includes: a ten-county initiative to provide youths with personal multicultural experiences; a center for the homeless, whose population of children under the age of 10 is growing exponentially; youth drop-in centers, providing latch-key programs; cultural heritage centers for African-Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics; arts education programs whose participants are people with disabilities.

The Sistersites provides a unique learning environment because some of psychology's time-honored methodologies make cultural assumptions that may be completely inaccurate. Educators and practitioners in developing nations complain that their western -- read American -- counterparts impose ideas and projects onto communities without regard for cultural differences. The replications deliberately broaden the scope of inquiry to examine the cross-cultural validity of the theories on which the models are based. For instance, when team members traveled to South Africa and assumed that because the setting there was also urban, crime would be handled in similar fashion. In reality, residents reported they used traditional sanctions to handle "hooligans": they were banished by elders of the community. Although it would have been methodologically elegant to study crime in both settings, the Sistersites had little need for such a study.

Learning to Take Control

Members of the SOCACT team are “students” in the sense that they are all learning. “Students” in the project are just as likely to be homemakers, laypeople, or practicing professionals. They may be formally enrolled for university course credit, but are as likely to be residents who become involved because the issue is important to them. Whether or not course credit will be earned, the expectations of membership on the project are the same. That is, to connect community intervention and public service with academic study. The focus is on the learning process, not on the degree status of the learner.

Participation in service-learning links concrete examples and abstract concepts. The resident who has been actively involved in her community for years learns a language she can use to talk to policy makers. The student of social change, just beginning to get onto the front line of social justice activities, can apply recently learned principles to real situations. Theory and practice bolster one another, giving learners a chance to explore the world and their place in it. Over time, the people in the neighborhoods assume increasingly greater responsibility to maintain the network begun by the SOCACT team. By that point, students have learned about social systems and power from people, having been invited into the lives of our community partners. Residents have acquired the skills required to maintain the intervention. They are empowered to do without the academicians.

Evaluation of service-learning outcomes is challenging. The existing literature is predominantly non-systematic and anecdotal. Service learning activities may become exploitative (the charity model) and/or too costly in terms of faculty time versus institutional benefit; evaluations need to address such issues. A clear conceptual framework of the nature of the intervention, its constituents and their relationships, and its social context is essential (Bryant et al, in press; Gelmon et al. 2001).

Beyond Reflection, Into Action

As the interventions evolve, the SOCACT project team learns the value (and the pitfalls) of community building, in which it is equally important to maintain relationships as it is to collect data. For example, the team leading a theater project must work with thespians and artists. Their challenge is to nurture a balance between artistic creation and scientific rigor.

Bridging scholarship and social justice is precisely what today’s social problems require. Toward that end, SOCACT residents and students present their work at professional conferences, at town meetings, and at kitchen tables. When the art is exhibited, the anthology is published, the life stories are on tape — the greatest lesson of all will have taken place. That is, the power to serve already exists within our communities and needs only to be brought forth.

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