

## Review Essay

### Facing, Embracing, and Tracing Social Justice in Service-Learning

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#### *Service-Learning to Advance Social Justice in a Time of Radical Inequality*

Alan Tinkler, Barri Tinkler, Virginia Jagla, and Jean Strait, Editors  
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In the weeks following an intensification of gun violence in the United States (US), a popular Internet meme emerged in 2016 – “Things are not getting worse, they are just getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil” (Brown, 2016). Penned by Black Lives Matter writer-activist, Adrienne Maree Brown, the quote quickly went viral. It offered a concise and accessible way for readers to reflect upon the history of social injustices, and implored them to summon the courage to *learn* despite fear of what might be found through that act of seeking. To “hold each other tight” is to value the role of closeness and relationships as a salve to the difficult knowledge that may be revealed. It is precisely this message that *Service-Learning to Advance Social Justice in a Time of Radical Inequality* presents. This volume, edited by Alan Tinkler, Barri Tinkler, Virginia Jagla, and Jean Strait, reckons with the indispensability of relationships and political orientations to the field of service-learning and community engagement. As with Brown’s excerpt, this book reminds readers that injustice is not new, even when it is uncovered in great waves through first-hand or vicarious experience. If Brown’s suggestion is true – that the most judicious response to injustice is a turning-toward one another rather than a turning-away – then this book offers a scholarly forum for such work without sacrificing a healthy exploration of resistance and critique.

*Service-Learning to Advance Social Justice in a Time of Radical Inequality* continues the important work of stitching together the currently fragmented relationship between social justice as a concept [and sometimes as a concept that Bocci in Chapter 9 calls “superficially social-justice-oriented” (p. 272)] and social justice as a lived reality in diverse

service-learning programs. Although I would like to have seen the notion of social justice explored in depth from the outset, this edited volume more than compensates for this through some authors’ critical engagement with the theoretical roots and practical application of social justice in service-learning. The 15-chapter book is structured into four sections: (a) Service-learning to Reach Across Disciplinary Boundaries in Higher Education; (b) Service-learning to Support a Reimagining of Teacher Education; (c) Addressing Unconscious Bias and Racial Inequality through Social Justice and Critical Service-Learning; and (d) Service-Learning to Advance Community Inquiry. Each section contains a short introduction written by one of the four editors and briefly lays out concepts and considerations that connect the chapters.

This review essay elaborates on two primary strengths of the book and raises one key suggestion for how we, as a community invested in social justice and community engagement, might approach similar volumes moving forward. First, I suggest that *Service-Learning to Advance Social Justice in a Time of Radical Inequality* offers readers a rich collection of critical theoretical approaches, rooted in an examination of systemic power and privilege. Here, the book *faces* important and uncomfortable root causes of inequities. Second, I describe ways in which the book exemplifies Brown’s (2016) apt metaphor: to be an act of *embrace* and turning-toward. It is as much a relational embrace amongst authors as a collaborative conversation about the different theoretical and disciplinary approaches they use. Third, as a fellow scholar and practitioner who grapples with my own privileged identity vis-à-vis the deeply rooted structural issues that we attempt to address through critical service-learning,

I suggest that social justice must not be a taken-for-granted term, as it appears to be at the outset of this volume. Instead, the ways that social justice is conceived must be *traced* through time and space. Especially in work that relies on – and aims to uphold – the efficacy of social justice, we render our inquiry more rigorous when we are explicit about our own theoretical foundations, positionality, and definitions. Through the implicit thoughtfulness of fleshing out a term as loaded as social justice, we also might do well to commit to an ongoing discomfort surrounding the contradictions and complications that imbue it. I close with a brief summary of my impressions and some questions for further reflection.

### Facing Power and Privilege

At the heart of many conversations about social justice is the problematization of inequality and the examination of power and privilege. Multiple chapters in this book take up these discussions by drawing on prolific critical service-learning scholars such as Dan Butin and Tania Mitchell. For those readers wishing to deepen their understanding of power and privilege in the context of service-learning, some authors discuss important concepts such as complicity, imperialism, resistance, and white privilege.

For example, Chapter 3 ushers in an important exploration of feminist approaches to service-learning as a vehicle for social justice education. Using a community activism service-learning course entitled, “Take back the halls: Ending violence in relationships and schools,” Catlett and Proweller extend the ongoing dialogue about the vital role that feminist and critical theory plays in the use of service-learning. They underline ways in which the interrogation of structures of power and privilege are destabilizing, but nonetheless vital, to college students’ participation in social justice service-learning. The authors’ posit that destabilization galvanizes learners to both identify and deconstruct systemic inequalities in three areas: (a) students’ perceptions of white privilege, (b) students’ “understanding of interpersonal violence” as it is affected by structural inequality, and (c) “ways in which new insights translate into a transformational orientation to advance social justice” (p. 66). Importantly, this chapter outlines a theoretical framework that provides a context for the authors’ conception of social justice, interweaving complementary principles of feminist scholarship and critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008). They also highlight Black feminist theory, which frames systems of power as “relational, structural, politi-

cal, and ideological” (p. 69). I read this chapter as a call for continued “existentially disturbing” (Butin, 2010, p. 20), “destabilizing,” (Catlett & Proweller, p. 65) and “unsettling” (p. 85) pedagogies. To be effective, the authors are careful to point out that such pedagogies must be paired with a professor’s commitment to and demonstration of a turning-toward – a sense of encouragement, openness, and a nurturing push in the direction of exploring critical connections.

In a continued demonstration of Butin’s influence, Seher and Iverson’s Chapter 5 illustrates a discipline-specific study in which the researchers explore how dietetic educators frame and teach service-learning courses. They effectively articulate the relevance of social justice in their field, particularly through the illustration of inequities related to healthcare access and opportunities for a variety of well-being measures. As with many in this volume, the authors suggest that the roots of their approach to social justice service-learning can be found in Butin’s (2003) political approach to service-learning: underlining issues of power imbalances, voiced versus silenced perspectives, and understandings of objectivity versus neutrality, among others. Through a critical content analysis of service-learning research in dietetics and nutrition over a five-year period, the authors discover that an overwhelming majority of articles (76.5%) are oriented within Butin’s (2003) *technical* conceptualization of service-learning, in which service-learning is situated as a tool with which to achieve academic and professional socialization objectives. In contrast, only 3% of the research in dietetics approached service-learning in terms of social justice-oriented or politically-engaged understanding. In response to what the authors call the “apolitical and atheoretical” enactments of service-learning in dietetics, the chapter offers useful recommendations for those who educate health professionals through community engagement work: (a) incorporate reflection (informed by critical and feminist pedagogy) into teaching, (b) consider sustainability in community partnerships, and (c) consider and examine reciprocity. Overall, the chapter argues for a reconceptualization of service-learning within dietetics and health, and as a reader, I was left with a greater understanding not only of why social justice matters in dietetics, but also how service-learning tends to be conceptualized and used in that field.

Casting a continued spotlight on power and privilege, Chapter 6, by Dowell, Barrera IV, Sall, and Meidl, contains an excellent theoretical section outlining “a socially just framework for teacher preparation” (p. 149). The authors state that, “as a foundation, social justice teaching acknowledg-

es oppression and seeks educational practices that provide ‘full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is shaped to meet their needs’” (full quote, Bell, 1997, p. 3; partial quote, p. 143). Understood through this lens, each of the four teacher educators share a unique case study of non-traditional field experience placements, emphasizing the need for critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) in teacher education.

The introduction to Section III presents concepts that, to this point in the volume, receive little attention, including deficit beliefs pertaining to marginalized communities, white privilege, racism, and unconscious bias. In presenting Section III, Strait offers a short primer of these notions and positions their relevance to service-learning. Bocci picks up this conversation in Chapter 9 through a judicious reframing of service-learning based on her experience with Participatory Action Research (PAR). What is noteworthy about this chapter is its in-depth analysis of three specific critiques that Bocci argues need to be taken seriously if service-learning is to move toward criticality in more than a superficial way. The first critique examines the form that service-learning takes, with a special focus on charity and “voluntourism” (For more explorations of this critique, see Chapters 3, 8, and 14; also see Bruce, 2013; Cole, 2012; Dewey, 1932/1998; Grain & Lund, 2016; Lewis, 2004; Mitchell, 2008; Morton, 1995). Bocci’s second emphasis falls on the deficit ideology that often underpins service-learning (i.e., “the idea that oppressed people are responsible for their relative lots in life due to their individual and collective deficiencies” [Gorski, 2008, p. 138]). Finally, she problematizes the assumption of/focus on servers as socially privileged. Bocci offers youth PAR – and its theoretical underpinnings – as a way for researchers and practitioners to simultaneously address these three critiques and “seek to empower participants as critically-conscious change agents in their communities” (p. 291).

Together, these highlighted chapters face systemic issues of power and privilege embedded in service-learning scholarship. The second strength of this edited volume extends a social justice-oriented dialogue through a focus on embracing relationships and collaboration.

### Embracing: An Act of Turning-Toward

Drawing on Brown’s (2016) quote that commenced this article, readers may consider what it means to “hold each other tight” in the context of service-learning and social justice. I take it to mean an embrace of others, in addition to an act

of turning-toward; in the case of this book, it is exemplified through a diversity of disciplinary and theoretical approaches to service-learning for social justice. What seems to cut across the different approaches, however, is a focus on relationality, working “with” rather than “for” community, as well as working toward reciprocity.

Section I, comprised of five chapters, highlights the capacity of “service-learning to reach across disciplinary boundaries in higher education” (p. 1). Chapter 2, for example, is a multi-voiced reflection on social justice service-learning in teacher education. It is a creatively generated conversation amongst the five co-authors, practitioners, and students who elucidate the impact of a service-learning field component within a teacher education program. In particular, this article is valuable in its illustration of specific social justice concepts embedded in student placements. For example, service-learners are engaged in critical conversations around the factory model of education, the justice-oriented implications of systemic emphases on standardized test scores, and, perhaps most importantly, the many ways teachers and service-learners are themselves complicit in ongoing inequities. The dialogues shared in this chapter exemplify the power of embracing one another in discussions of social justice.

Further facilitating a form of embrace, Jagla’s Section II introduction posits that service-learning is a *relational* and caring pedagogy that can teach education students about empathy and engagement, both of which they can carry forward into their own teaching practices. Extending the use of critical service-learning for teacher education, Chapter 7 offers findings from research on a fascinating service-learning program that partners pre-service teachers with *local* Hispanic families for a cultural and linguistic immersion experience. The strength of chapter authors Grassi and Armon’s research is rooted in the creative design of the program, whereby preservice teachers – many of whom cannot afford international study abroad programs – can still gain the impactful learning benefits of an immersion experience and engage in a paradigm shift that positions local Hispanic family members as expert mentors, particularly in the realm of language and culture.

In a continued emphasis on relationships in service-learning, Nemeth and Winterbottom review shifting perspectives in the field in Chapter 10, particularly those that reject the charity model and reconceptualize the notion of working “for” communities to a working “with” communities (p. 302). Their chapter pivots on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of “communities of practice”<sup>1</sup> and

its relationship with service-learning. Nemeth and Winterbottom ask how service-learning can nurture overlapping communities of practice, and in part answer this question by applying Butin's research on antifoundational service-learning (2005) and poststructuralist service-learning (2003) to their inquiry. The authors propose through their theoretical analysis that "the victory narrative" (p. 314) is a danger inherent in service-learning research and "not every student is going to change through service-learning, nor are all students going to align themselves, ideologically, with a justice-oriented framework" (p. 315). Overall, this chapter contributes to an important, ongoing conversation that remains committed to examining the fluid, shifting, and often unpredictable student outcomes of service-learning.

Similar to Chapter 10, Chapter 11 takes up the idea of "with" rather than "for;" however, Harshman and Duffy are inspired primarily by critical pedagogy and Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), wherein transformation toward liberation is achieved through collaboration and solidarity with the oppressed rather than through service or education for them. Unlike the majority of previous chapters up to this point, this chapter delves into a study of service-learning in the context of high school social studies. The authors – a university faculty member and high school teacher – use their research project to inquire whether students desired deeper and more meaningful service opportunities than those typically presented to them, and what role a teacher can play in bolstering student interest and motivation "to become more engaged citizens rather than just volunteers taxed with completing a task" (p. 320). Their findings suggest that critical reflection combined with a critical pedagogical framework can lead students to increased desire for meaningful service and a deeper understanding of the roots of inequities within their community.

The final section of the book consists of four chapters that explore issues of community, communication, critical reflection, and cultural humility. Section IV's introduction gestures to two final concepts that undergird social justice service-learning: community and communication. I suspect these are the key themes that the editors would like to see readers reflect upon, and the final four chapters do much to nurture this. For example, in Chapter 12, Getto and McCunney propose a three-pronged model of critical service-learning which uses reflexivity, reciprocity, and place as "key considerations for enacting and supporting service-learning in a critical manner" (p. 350). Their deeper look at reciprocity in both the literature and their own institutional context offers important considerations

for any program looking to strengthen its socially just engagement.

Similarly, Lund and Lee's Chapter 13 does an excellent job of outlining their argument that "the inherent reciprocity of *community-led* service-learning initiatives can be mutually beneficial" (p. 360; emphasis added). They arrive at this by analyzing findings from both students and community partners involved in a social justice-oriented service-learning course in a Canadian teacher education program. Not only does the study reveal that students gain a greater cultural awareness and a deeper understanding of the "hidden curriculum" (p. 370), but it also shows that community partners notice in pre-service teachers an increased appreciation for community programming. The study also reveals that community partners, in turn, often see their work with education students as laying a foundation for future alliances between the schools and social service agencies. Lund and Lee also suggest that premising the course on *cultural humility* (Tervalon & Garcia, 1998), as opposed to cultural competency, is one of its promising features, which makes more space for community voices and bolsters context-dependent learning. While this chapter would have been more aptly placed in Section II, which focuses on teacher education, it nonetheless offers valuable insights into the relationships forged between community agencies and pre-service teachers.

Overall, the book's strengths are to be found in its role as a forum both for facing and critiquing power and privilege, and for generating a scholarly sense of collaborative embrace, which happens between diverse authors and even more importantly, among community members, learners, host organizations, and faculty. Having discussed some key strengths, I now turn my attention to a supportive critique meant to strengthen the future work of service-learning for social justice.

### Name that Social Justice

Social justice, as an eponymous term for this volume, deserves to be unpacked, explored, troubled, deconstructed, and named. Although this is done – and done well – in some of the chapters, I was hoping for a thoughtful conversation from the editors up front, or in some of the section introductions. What does social justice *mean* and to whom? Whose version is being used and why? What are the explicit and implicit goals of social justice in service-learning? What theoretical frameworks underlie the term and the practice? How does the use of social justice as a goal in service-learning or education generate the potential for harm? What are



some historical considerations embedded in social justice, and how can they inform the future of our work? When such questions are left un-asked, and when the meaning of a loaded term is left unexamined, it can dilute its power to affect change and further play into the hands of a normative construction that supports the status quo. The good news, however, is that this volume has done a great deal to engage in some of the conversations that our field so desperately needs. As a supportive scholar working with similar values as the editors and authors, my own future work is made better through this book, as I can learn from what has been included, and interrogate some of the questions that were omitted.

One chapter that demonstrates a deep analysis of the intersection of service-learning and social justice is Chapter 14 by Hussain. It takes a critical look at the history of service-learning and expands upon it in great depth. While it offers findings from a fascinating study on a college-prison collaboration, it also provides a well-researched, six-page section that delves into the historical and theoretical roots of both the charity and critical/collaborative approaches to service-learning; it is also a section that could have aptly been used in the book's introduction. Hussain's connections to historical events such as the campus uprisings of the 1960s are another reminder that social justice issues have long been of concern in both higher education and service-learning. This reminder highlights the message from Brown (2016) that we are not necessarily witnessing a *resurgence* in social injustices, but that we could instead be *uncovering* injustices that were not previously as visible. Hussain does a brilliant job of bringing this history to bear on her own research, while also imploring liberal arts colleges to become more critical as a way to truly empower the learning process.

### Conclusion

The reason I found this book so enjoyable to read is its carefully chosen diversity of authors, all of whom offer different perspectives from their teaching experiences, and all of whom are patiently invested in a critical exploration of the service-learning field. Depending on the readership, there is something uniquely valuable for anyone interested in social justice-oriented service-learning. Among those who can benefit are faculty members, researchers, practitioners, community partners, students, and teacher educators. Researchers, for example, can gain new methodological insights from authors who employ case studies (Chapter 6), participatory action research (Chapter 9), mixed methods (Chapter 1), content analysis (Chapter

5), critical ethnographic inquiry (Chapter 13), and a variety of other qualitative methods that have a social justice bent. For teacher educators, there is no shortage of inspiration, as Chapters 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 13 all gesture to innovative and critically-informed strategies for engaging future teachers to be socially just in their approach to curriculum and pedagogy. For those readers interested in a strong theoretical grounding for social justice service-learning, this volume is a cornucopia of perspectives, with particularly strong arguments captured in Chapter 3 – examining feminist and critical theory – as well as in Chapter 9, with its insightful analysis of the potential misrepresentation of social justice. As a practitioner-scholar, I felt inspired by the innovative program ideas and analyses presented in nearly every chapter, but especially Grassi and Armon's (Chapter 7) service-learning model that simulates a global immersion program through service-learning with local Hispanic families, and Lee and Lund's (Chapter 13) program design that highlights cultural humility in training pre-service teachers to work closely with diverse children and youth. Importantly, the volume includes chapters that would be of interest to any person invested in service-learning. I plan to use Hussain's (2016) essay as required reading in future service-learning courses I teach. In it, Hussain explores the historical roots and contemporary expressions of the divergent charity versus collaborative approaches to service-learning, and offers a poignant "Dream for Service" that transcends individual readership and could be used to guide large institutions in their framing of service.

As the contributors to this volume make abundantly clear, service-learning calls for epistemological openness, agility, and humility – characteristics doubly relevant in the context of social justice work. *Service-Learning to Advance Social Justice in a Time of Radical Inequality* is a book that happily turns *toward* diversity. It sends readers a strong message that service-learning for social justice eludes capture in a universal set of principles or tidy categorization; rather, its richness is to be found in its complexity. Just as we may be shaken by the troubling current events that provide a context and backdrop for service-learning education, this volume demonstrates how we can best respond to destabilizing events: to face the systemic issues that render social justice a necessary focus; to trace the historical, personal, and theoretical roots of the notion of social justice; and to embrace the importance of relationships – to "hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil" (Brown, 2016).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Lave & Wenger define communities of practice as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage” (1991, p. 98)

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