Developing an Ethic of Tension: Negotiating Service Learning and Critical Pedagogy Ethical Tensions

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Abstract

In this paper, I use critical pedagogy to examine the ethical tensions within service learning curriculum. Specifically, I conduct a case study, analyzing the course materials for an upper division class titled "Refugee Health and Development," which was offered at a large public university in the Southwestern United States. I articulate four ethical tensions: a) the allowance of different points of view vs. supervision, b) concentration on cultural others vs. self-reflection, c) completion of preparation vs. community education, and d) "skills" development vs. perspectival growth. Through this examination of the ethical tensions emergent in service learning curriculum, I articulate an ethic of tension, in which each ethical dialectic cannot be resolved by simply applying deontological or teleological reasoning, but must constantly be negotiated in tension.

Introduction

What is the purpose of education? This fundamental question drives (or should drive) classroom instruction. Is the purpose simply to train future professionals and equip them with the necessary skills to make a lot of money? In this conceptualization of the classroom, knowledge becomes "a commodity to be acquired, to be horded and ultimately to be bartered in the market place of

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salaries and prestige" (Lewis, 2005, p. 17). Critical pedagogy offers an alternative vision for higher education (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003). In this paper, I will examine the contributions of critical pedagogy and how it informs the increasing trend of service learning in universities (Campus Compact, 2007). Before unleashing full-fledged service learning programs, however, I argue that it is imperative that we explore the ethical ramifications of such a paradigmatic and programmatic shift.

Critical Pedagogy and Service learning

Inspired by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the liberation work of Paulo Freire, critical pedagogy seeks to illuminate the ways in which context, power, ideology, history, and education overlap (Giroux, 2007; Steinberg, 2007). Critical pedagogy moves beyond theoretical discussions that isolate students from oppression in the world and toward self-reflection, urging students to actively interrogate the relationships between theory and practice. "Critical teachers seek out individuals, voices, texts, and perspectives that had been previously excluded" (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 23). Critical pedagogy also challenges dominant discourse that posits a neutral, detached, and apolitical learning environment equitable for all students (Giroux, 2007; Kincheloe, 2004). Freire (1993) argues that the status quo, which he calls "banking education," is predicated on the reduction of education to an object of consumption, which reproduces oppressive structures. "Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more-always more-even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing" (Freire, 1993, p. 40). In contrast, educators operating from a critical pedagogy approach seek to expose students to these disparities, actively naming oppression with the intent of social change, without imposing their particular stances (Freire, 1993; Kincheloe, 2004). Underlying critical pedagogy is the belief that "to affirm that men and women are persons and as persons should be free, and yet to do nothing tangible to make this affirmation a reality, is a farce" (Freire, 1993, p. 32).

Emphasizing the power of dialogue, critical pedagogy manifests in myriad ways: dialogue between instructors and students in co-construction of educational objectives (Freire, 1993), individuals and contexts (Steinberg, 2007), students and marginalized communities (Freire, 1993), and between students of varying levels of privilege (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Kincheloe, 2004). Students are not relegated to passive recipient status, but elevated to the role of knowledge producer, who engages different perspectives and takes steps

towards transformative action (Giroux, 2007), working *with* (not *for*) marginalized communities. Therefore, critical pedagogy does not exist distanced from cultural others, but in dialogue and struggle with communities, who act on their own behalf toward emancipation. From this dialogic approach, teachers do not operate as arbiters of truth, but seek to cultivate students' critical reflection of power relations and their own positionality (Giroux, 2007). Through this process of "conscientization," students are empowered as critical agents with a deeper understanding of the social realities that shape their lives and the lives of others, along with the agency to transform those realities (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Giroux, 2007). This environment dictates that professors must also challenge their positions as "authorities" and engage in dialogue with students (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Meister & Okigbo, 2000; Speck, 2001). Critical pedagogy is enacted out of a search for social justice; knowledge is not intended to be contained within the university's walls nor be limited to individualistic gains, but to impact society in positive and democratic ways.

Service learning provides an opportunity to actualize the goals posed by critical pedagogy. The implementation of service learning assumes that higher education does not "exist simply to increase the private earning power of individual students or provide free intern labor for private corporations. [It] exist[s] to serve broader public interests" (Karlberg, 2005, p. 18). Arguing that a service-oriented curriculum is consistent with the original purpose of higher education, Karlberg (2005) avows that public universities are publicly financed and should be geared toward societal contribution, "cultivating a service ethic in students" (p. 18). Service learning encourages reflection on commitment to the common good, counteracting predominant educational structures predicated on competitive individualism (Karlberg, 2005).

However, service learning can be employed in disparate ways. Some view its primary function as fostering citizenship in students, others, making students glorified volunteers. Still other practitioners combine community work with classroom instruction in order to empower students to "make a difference" (Canada & Speck, 2001; Meister & Okigbo, 2000; Rosenberg, 2000; Speck, 2001). As a tool of critical pedagogy, service learning combines academic and grassroots organizing toward societal transformation (Martin, 2007). This form of education engenders connection and partnership with disenfranchised communities, where all parties benefit, and is geared at more long-term

empowerment than immediate satisfaction (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Lee, 2009; Scott, 2004).

A social justice-motivated service learning curriculum is intentional in addressing issues of power, manifested in areas such as the selection of community partners, the determination of assignments, reflection, and evaluation (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Scott, 2004). Motivated by critical pedagogy, service learning courses avoid being merely skills development and résumé bullet points (Scott, 2004). Critical pedagogy enables service learning to resist perfunctory placations of "doing some good" or "doing charity", in favor of advocacy with various communities. Charity provides coping and adaptive strategies for the disadvantaged rather than challenging the status quo (Boyle-Baise, 2002). "Charity advantages the giver, humbles the receiver, avoids core causes for inequality, and skirts questions of fundamental reform. Charity stimulates a false sense of restitution-givers 'feel good' about making a momentary difference" (Boyle-Baise, 2002, p. 31).

The outcomes of these service learning formations, like traditional tutoring relationships, are "feel-good" vibes and "marketable" skills for students (like the "ability" to work with diverse populations; Meister & Okigbo, 2000). While these outcomes may be attractive for students, in that they might meet their educational (and future economic) expectations, service learning highlights the contested space of academia, providing opportunities for students to move beyond limiting expectations of career preparation and toward civic responsibility (Scott, 2004). While this goal appears to be quite noble, requiring students to participate in activities that possibly violate their ideological positions (and perhaps prejudices), in tension with dominant conceptualizations of education poses important ethical questions.

Ethics

Critical pedagogy and service learning both foreground ethical concerns, spurring students to engage in reflection on ethical issues (Frey et al., 1996; Giroux, 2007; Scott, 2004). "This critical perspective is grounded in the fundamental realization that we share a world with others, and thus ethical conduct requires consideration of the stories of others" (Frey et al., 1996, p. 111). An ethic steeped in the values and assumptions articulated in this paper, however, need not be one of consensus, but of engaged and dialogic tension. "Those engaged in critical pedagogy don't need to agree with one another,

rather, they need to passionately engage in the radical fire of discursive disagreement" (Steinberg, 2007, p. x). While ethics are central to this perspective, Frey et al. (1996) argue that personal ethics are not sufficient, as one's actions must also work towards the transformation of disenfranchising social structures.

Critical pedagogy engenders sundry ethical dilemmas. For example, those involved in the struggle for emancipation occasionally (paradoxically) act in abusive ways (as with paternalism that maintains relationships of dependence) if they do not fully embody the tenets of social justice (Bishop, 2002; Freire, 1993). Marginalized communities can also act in ways counterproductive to societal transformation (Freire, 1993). Service learning often does not meet its own lofty precepts, failing to develop in students critical awareness of the relationship between their efforts and larger social issues, as when students take away from critically-motivated service learning courses the notion that marginalization can be eradicated through community service by those with privilege (Scott, 2004; Lee, 2009). Service learning is susceptible to co-optation by dominant groups and discourses that disconnect projects from broader power relations (Scott, 2004). Other ethical tensions include empathy with marginalized groups versus an unwillingness to critique harmful discourses within those communities (Scott, 2004), and the result that some social justice-inclined individuals might actually be turned off by the tensions evoked by critical pedagogy (Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005).

In the classroom, teachers perform from a position of power. Some argue that the role of instructors is not to teach ethics, but "information," because ethical inquiries pertain to the personal realm and create unhealthy classroom environments (O'Byrne, 2001). On a philosophical level, if freedom is posited as fundamental to ethical decisions, educators and scholars need to address the ethics of requiring students to participate in assignments to which they may be resistant. Others have dismissed this opposition as irrelevant to ethics. Schnaubelt and Watson (1999), for example, exclaim, "One could argue that forcing a student to do algebra homework also violates one's personal freedom. This imposition, however, may lead to greater freedom (i.e., admission to a good college, a better job, etc.)" (p. 12-13). Other critical scholars acknowledge their imposition as an acceptable means in accomplishing the ends of social justice. Reason et al. (2005) distinguish between the imposition of values as acceptable and the requirement of conformity as unacceptable. It is within this liminal, or "in-between", space that instructors negotiate ethical tensions. Critical pedagogy,

connecting education to social justice, does not necessarily indoctrinate students, but reflects engagement with alternative perspectives contrary to politically-sanctioned worldviews (Giroux, 2007). While students might be initially resistant to service learning objectives, they often come to appreciate the experience (Speck, 2001). Those students who are reluctant to participate in social justice might just need the invitation provided by service learning (Broido, 2000).

Method

This paper is motivated by the following research question: What are the ethical tensions constituted by service learning programs motivated by critical pedagogy? To answer the research question, I conducted a case study, analyzing the syllabus, course assignments, class videos, lesson plans, readings, classroom activities, and course proposal of an upper division class, titled "Refugee Health and Development," offered jointly by the psychology and anthropology departments at a large public university in the Southwestern United States. I chose this class for a case study analysis because of the instructors' aims to actualize the goals of critical pedagogy and service learning. The class assigns students to work with a family as part of a community-based participatory research study that brings together African refugees, their children, and undergraduates to engage in mutual learning and advocacy. According to the course proposal, "The fundamental goal of the project is to promote the mental health and well-being of refugees through these processes. Other important goals include creating mechanisms for increased understanding across cultures, improving undergraduates' educational opportunities, and building mutually beneficial relationships between universities and the communities in which they are situated." The service learning project aims to familiarize refugees with U.S. culture and the tools (legal, political, cultural, etc.) for success without undue assimilation. For the students, the class provides an opportunity to engage in experiential learning, applying class concepts and developing a critical awareness of social justice issues. Students interested in taking the class must attend a brief orientation and complete an application, as enrollment is limited.

I utilized a grounded theory approach during the coding process, allowing for emergent themes to develop. I went through the entire data set (34 pages in total), assigning the data with open codes (Strauss, 1987), making connections with and distinguishing between the various codes (Banks, Louie, & Einerson 2000), continuing until reaching theoretical saturation in the list of codes I had identified (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For each open code, I asked the

following questions: 1) What are the ethical implications of this attribute? 2) What is the alternative to this attribute? 3) What are the ethical implications of this alternative?

Results

I will articulate four ethical tensions that emerged in the data set; a) the allowance of different points of view vs. supervision, b) concentration on cultural others vs. self-reflection, c) completion of preparation vs. community education, and d) "skills" development vs. perspectival growth.

Different points of view vs. supervision

A primary ethical dilemma for instructors is that critical pedagogy does not automatically engender critical consciousness in students. A very plausible result of the de-centering of the professor, intrinsic to critical pedagogy, is the reaffirmation of students' assumptions, values, and prejudices they held prior to enrolling in these classes. However, in taking a more central role in lecturing and guiding students toward the "right ideas," these professors are vulnerable to reproducing "banking education" (Freire, 1993). When students voice positions reflective of racist, sexist, ethnocentric, etc. biases, should the professor aim to correct the student or engage in dialogue hoping that the student will become "enlightened" to their biases? This tension is evident in the service learning course I examined.

The course materials avow the importance of student contribution to and ownership of the course, features of critical pedagogy. Students are required, for example, to write thought papers, which are not intended to be summaries of their readings, but expressions of their beliefs and attitudes, which may or may not diverge from their fellow students' and professors' perspectives. During class instruction, the professors are intentional about having every student in the class share their views on each question, indicating the plurality of possible perspectives rather than advocating one right position, which can function to silence students. Whether invoked by a reading or a graphic film, this tension is not meant to be quelled, but to trigger a productive grappling with ideas, positions, and experiences.

This tension is exacerbated by the requirement of weekly supervision by instructors, in which the previous week's events are discussed and upcoming goals are agreed upon, ensuring that students are "following the project

guidelines and philosophies." Students are not given the green light to initiate service projects until "supervisors feel comfortable with [their] competency and skill in the advocacy model." As a protective measure, the class requires students to sign a "Student Agreement" form. This supervision, while it may upend critical pedagogical assumptions, is legitimized by teleological rationale, or the justification of behaviors according to their end results rather than their inherent rightness/wrongness.

Their writing makes clear, though that undergraduates also benefited greatly from their experiences, and talked about many ways in which they were impacted personally (e.g., increased self-confidence, more connections with others, changed life goals). Undergraduates' perspectives were transformed by engaging in advocacy and seeing how difficult it can be for people to access the resources they need and get government assistance if they are poor, people of color, non-citizens, and non-native English speakers. In addition, undergraduates developed an understanding and appreciation of refugees' cultures, strengths, and resiliency, and learned about the devastating consequences of political conflict and violence in many parts of the world. Thus, through discussions and direct experience, many undergraduates began to realize all that they took for granted and were motivated to make changes in the world. An ethical caveat to these achievements, however, is that the emphasis on amelioration of students without challenging the structures reproduces disenfranchising status quos.

Concentration on cultural others vs. self-reflection

A second ethical tension pertains to the amount of energy that is invested in discussing the experience of cultural others at the expense of engaging students in contemplation on how they are implicated in global relations to one extreme, and over-emphasis on student positionality at the expense of a complex understanding of the issues faced by refugee communities.

The first pole in this ethical tension emerges in the selection of reading texts, videos, handouts, field trips, and discussion topics, geared at understanding and relating to others from different cultures. This emphasis goes in-depth into historical factors influencing refugee experience, including genocide, immigration, global economy, civil war, modern warfare, terrorism, environmental destruction, joblessness, high child mortality, and policy issues. Through historical explication, the goal is for students to understand the

psychological and political challenges facing refugees. Together, the course materials present many narratives from refugees and immigrants from all over the world. Students learn about the negative psychological impact of long-term confinement in refugee camps, such as idleness, despair, exploitation, and abuse, and they learn about the myriad challenges refugees face after coming to the U.S.

The class examines global intolerance and prejudice, focusing on international crises, which subtly designates discrimination to be "out there." This designation, without self-reflection by both professors and students on their own prejudices, however, is ethically dubious, as it presupposes that it is everyone else who needs to change. The class introduces dramatic tales from the lives of refugees, including arrests, deportation, and lack of employment and educational opportunity. These provocative and emotional tales, which can be quite effective in mobilizing students for activism, can also function to other-ize refugees as static, powerless, and needing white, American saviors.

On the other spectrum of this tension is an egoistic concentration on the self, and how the groups one belongs to are implicated by existing hierarchies that disenfranchise refugee communities. A primary way this is manifested is in discussion of U.S. foreign policy, including choices to refrain from action that have either caused or compounded refugee situations around the world. As one of the documentaries shown in class asks, "How could it happen that America and the West stood aside and did nothing to stop the slaughter of 800,000 human beings over 100 days?" In addition to U.S. foreign policy, course readings and videos examine how the global economy and the involvement of U.S. corporations have forced immigrants to leave their homes, as the gaps between rich and poor continue to grow. As the description for one of the films shown in class attests, "These powerful stories raise critical questions about U.S. immigration policy in an era when corporations cross borders at will." The class probes the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the subsequent responsibility to assist Iraqi refugees, discussing whether the U.S. and the world community have learned anything that could help prevent another Rwandan genocide.

The service learning course also challenges students to locate themselves within these macro-structural forces like governmental foreign policy and transnational economies, asking them to think about how they can help as individuals. The class interrogates issues of diversity and oppression through the lens of privilege. Through readings, activities, and discussion, students are encouraged to grapple with their own positionality, not as distanced from, but

interconnected with refugees. The class syllabus affirms, "Students will learn the intricacies of the American culture from an outsider's perspective and how they are connected with the social and economic infrastructure." As a result of their experience working with immigrant families, students learn more about their cultures than the refugees'. The underlying message is that knowledge does not exist "out there," separated from our identities, but is shaped by embodiment and performance of those identities.

It is important for students to be engaged in self-reflexivity. "Through service learning…the parameters of one's 'neighborhood' and 'community,' the very definition of us, can broaden and deepen as educators cultivate a sense of common concern and potential alliance" (Boyle-Baise, 2002, p. 3). However ethical foibles will result if the individual student, as the unit of analysis, is over-emphasized. Concentration on the individual obscures the need for structural transformation, that charity and individual-focused solutions are a panacea for that which ails marginalized communities. This emphasis on self-reflection re-centers the experience of students and their positions of privilege. The tension in these service learning classes necessitates an ethic that foregrounds the interconnectedness between individuals, groups, and nations, while avoiding simplistic notions of stability and placidity, as well as refraining from naïve attempts to extinguish this tension.

Completion of preparation vs. community education

A third ethical tension in the service learning course pertained to students' readiness to start their projects and the implications of the decisions to do so. The class is divided into two semesters: roughly according to exploration of research on refugees/intervention and project implementation. With expressions like "when training is completed," the syllabus implies that within that timeframe, students will be ready to undertake a project that fulfills the vision of critical pedagogy, with enlightenment having been accomplished, as opposed to an alternative conceptualization that conceives of continual learning throughout the service learning project. The class structure does not account for the fluid identity of allies, who vacillate between oppressors and liberators in their quest to end social injustice, negotiating when to act and when to refrain from acting.

The second semester focuses "on the progression and completion of assigned cases." However, the class also takes steps that problematize this conceptualization. The proposal for the class espouses that the "university

faculty and students have much to gain and learn from community members and leaders. Therefore, it is important to focus on developing genuine partnerships." Hence, education does not cease after students enter their respective sites, as they learn from community members. A second challenge to the notion of completed preparation is that students are instructed that communities will determine their own courses of action – so, students do not simply take what they have learned and outline solutions for communities. While this complication on the surface sounds great, if taken to the extreme it can also reproduce disenfranchising effects. Namely that responsibility is placed solely on the shoulders of community members to effect structural change, without exhorting students to grapple with their own responsibility and interconnectedness, as developed in the second tension.

"Skills" development vs. perspectival growth

The final tension I will articulate in this paper pertains to the service learning class's accentuation of "skills" development, which students will be able to draw upon in future professional or graduate schoolwork. The syllabus details the following objective:

> An opportunity to develop the skills and ideas necessary to be an effective social change agent with and for the refugee family with whom you will work. You will learn how to be a successful advocate…and you will sharpen your empathy skills and gain valuable experience interacting with diverse individuals and settings.

The syllabus reproduces the dominant educational model that frames skills development, including empathy, in terms of benefit for the individual student, rather than the community, ostensibly for future career use. By defining empathy as a skill, empathy becomes an ability and a competence resulting from expertise and aptitude, rather than an attitude for social justice, or perspectival growth, signifying that students are able to appreciate differences in perspective and see things in new and complicated fashions. Through simulations and role plays, this style of curriculum locates agency in the hands of the privileged, relegating social justice as a means to some other end, rather than an end for its own sake. The particular skills that students will presumably develop include advocating, teaching, and researching, as well as articulating, initiating, and terminating intervention with communities. As the syllabus attests, "This course is an opportunity for students to gain invaluable experience while making a unique

contribution to their community." As a skill, empathy becomes an instrument (like problem solving) to be manipulated for some purpose, as opposed to a general mindset, attitude, and/or spirit that cannot be turned on and off like a skill can.

The ramification of treating empathy as a skill, demonstrated through listening, understanding, providing feedback, and tactfully giving suggestions, is a lack of genuineness, as communities become a target by which skills of empathy are employed upon, rather than a collective of people to be related to and interacted with. While this particular class leans toward the skills development side of the dialectic, at a few points the class does traverse over to the perspectival growth side. For example, as a manifestation of perspectival growth, service learning cannot be separated from the identities and ideologies of those who are executing the service learning. On the other hand, without any pedagogical concentration on skills, and thus over-emphasizing perspectival growth, instructors could potentially send out students who are ill-equipped to challenge existing structural barriers.

Discussion

Through this examination of the ethical tensions emergent in service learning curriculum, as shaped by critical pedagogy, I have been articulating an ethic of tension. Ethical choices in response to each dialectic (allowance of different points of view vs. supervision; concentration on cultural others vs. self-reflection; completion of preparation vs. community education; "skills" development vs. perspectival growth) cannot be resolved by simply applying deontological (duty-based) or teleological (outcome-based) ethical reasoning, but must be constantly negotiated in tension. For teachers, this negotiation entails not only awareness of these oppositional goals, but actualizing them through the selection of readings and assignments that work toward making visible both sides of the various dialectics. Even more importantly, instructors should engage in meta-communication, initiating class discussion about these competing goals, as well as being comfortable in the complexity and non black/white nature of service learning.

Therefore, the choice to either require students to participate in assignments they may be resistant to because of the good that results (teleology) or to acquiesce to students' wishes by avoiding these assignments because students should have the freedom to choose or abstain (deontology) is not an

adequate binary, but must be negotiated as a both/and ethical tension. The adamant adherence to either extreme is the ethical pitfall to be evaded by service learning classes motivated by a critical pedagogy. While context is important, this ethic of tension does not equate with a situational ethic that argues that ethical determinations are solely contingent on immediate context. For "an ethical system that is grounded in an 'it all depends' attitude, quickly degenerates into ethics of personal desires, which destroys the very basis of community" (Hall, 1997, p. 33).

A service learning approach provides students with the means to analyze social injustice and challenge inequities by incorporating theory and service (Meister & Okigbo, 2000), but the ethical ramifications need to be explored by anyone who desires to conduct these kinds of classes before, during, and after offering them, for the adoption of critical pedagogy in service learning foregrounds ethical reflection. "Service learning projects…require work that has explicit ethical considerations and often present students with various ethical dilemmas, including how to negotiate organizational politics or how to balance their duties to their instructor, their organization, and their audiences" (Scott, 2004, p. 298).

As a case study, these four ethical tensions are far from exhaustive. They do not serve as a final statement on ethical issues pertinent to service learning, but should inform future curriculum and scholarly work that operates from these assumptions. I would also add that it was not my prerogative to determine whether this particular course was or was not ethical, but to identify the ethical tensions that the class invokes. While I concur with the lofty goals espoused by critical pedagogy, I would express caution toward full-fledged immersion without grappling with these various ethical tensions. In summary, I argue that the ethic of tension provides a useful theoretical concept for approaching ethical decisions, and can be quite helpful for service learning instructors who are negotiating the deontological and teleological ramifications of requiring students to participate in assignments to which they might be resistant. As Kale (2003) articulates, "There is nothing wrong with attempting to persuade people…to accept our values. Before   we do that, however, we must be convinced that our values are worthy and not based on limited self-interest" (p. 467).

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