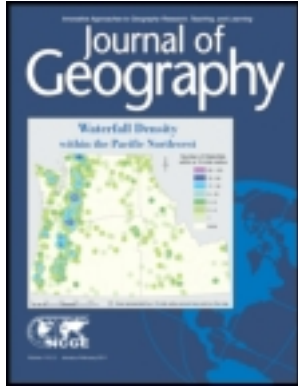


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Service-Learning: Critical Traditions and Geographic Pedagogy

Brian Grabbatin and Amanda Fickey

ABSTRACT

The rise of service-learning in higher education has been critiqued as little more than community service that encourages students to “do good,” but fails to generate original scholarship or social change. In this article, we argue that service-learning gives geographers the opportunity to challenge these critiques, by demonstrating the practical and political implications of collaborative research methodologies, while conveying powerful conceptual understandings of inequality. We begin by interrogating the philosophical overlap between experiential and service-based learning in the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Using this foundational approach, several theoretical and methodological debates in geography are examined, celebrating and drawing lessons from classic and current service-learning programs. We conclude with a discussion and reflection on experiences with implementing similar pedagogical projects.

Key Words: *service-learning, experiential learning, critical pedagogy, John Dewey, participatory action research*

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INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, educational theorist David A. Kolb developed the concept of experiential learning into a well-known and widely practiced form of pedagogy (Healey and Jenkins 2000). In both theory and practice, experiential learning encompasses teaching methods that emphasize the value of student experiences, observation, experiment, and reflection (Kolb 1984). In higher education, this method includes occupational preparation and professional development courses, where students master technical skills through internships, apprenticeships, and field-based labs.

Geographers have used this pedagogic strategy to expose and involve students in traditions of fieldwork, which have been critiqued for the power inequities they create between researchers and communities (see Kent, Gilbertson, and Hunt 1997). As geographers move toward more participatory and collaborative methodologies, they have also reshaped the curriculum, designing experiential learning courses that challenge the power inequities of traditional fieldwork by using service-oriented approaches that involve students *and* communities in the development, execution, and dissemination of research (Bunge 1977; Skop 2008; Kindon and Elwood 2009; Pain 2009; Taylor 2009; Yapa 2009b; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming). Such programs reflect the movement towards service-learning, an approach that combines the methods of experiential learning with concerns for social justice and applied research (Cantor 1997; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999; Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski 2011; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming).

Today, service-learning programs provide valuable educational experiences for students and encourage them to apply what they learn in the classroom to challenging problems facing society. While this approach is firmly established in the undergraduate curriculum, two lingering critiques continue to limit service-learning's effectiveness. First, scholars warn that service-learning programs encourage students to “do good,” but often fail to generate meaningful scholarship or develop critical thinking skills (Boyer 1990; Kendall 1990; Dorsey 2001). Second, service-learning programs are often designed to make students feel like they are helping others, but at best they create limited short-term benefits for communities outside the academy (Illich 1990 [1968]; Cantor 1997; Skop 2008; Stoecker and Tryon 2009). In this article, we argue that critical geography's commitment to social justice and its continued emphasis on place-based pedagogy make it well suited to develop service-learning approaches that transcend these critiques (Mohan 1995; Gruenwald 2003; Merrett 2004; Israel 2012).

To make this argument, we begin with a review of John Dewey's learning philosophy, which describes the intellectual rigor of teaching through practical field-based methods, while emphasizing the larger goal of encouraging societal change through experiential education. Then, we identify several theoretical and methodological debates in geography that can and have contributed to successful service-learning. Finally, we use classic and recent examples from the geographic literature, as well as our own reflections, to highlight some guidelines and lessons for service-learning in geography.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND SERVICE

Experiential learning flows from the confluence of constructivist and pragmatic theories of cognitive development, which argue that practical application

provides social interactions and firsthand experiences that people use to shape their worldviews (Dewey 1938; Westcoat 1992; Dorsey 2001). One of its earliest and most widely read advocates is philosopher and educational theorist John Dewey (1916, 1938), who argued that experiment and applicability are essential to learning comprehension. Though his pedagogical experiments were focused on primary schooling (e.g., Dewey 1902), Dewey's broader teaching philosophy also serves as an inspiration for educators at the university level (Westcoat 1992; Kindon and Elwood 2009).

Dewey's work on experiential education emphasized the importance of theoretical and analytical reflection in any field-based teaching program. In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey argues that effective experiential learning must involve serious intellectual consideration of cause and effect, as well as discourse and action, in order to draw attention to how our own actions and the structures of society affect others. His emphasis on the sociopolitical context and implications of education illustrate why Dewey's experiential method is also foundational to service-learning. Dewey is most explicit about the social and political purpose of his methods in the book *Democracy and Education* (1916), where he argued that the goal of experiential learning is to help students develop an awareness of how they can contribute to and change society. He notes that American students find themselves in positions of power because they live in a society "which makes provisions for 'participation' of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions" through democratic means (Dewey 1916, 115).

Although Dewey's work reflects romanticized notions of equal participation and an overly optimistic assessment of institutional change through democracy, we interpret his argument as a precursor to critical pedagogy; a method of teaching that challenges student worldviews and empowers them by providing skills and tools to affect change (Kanpol 1994; Giroux 2011). Dewey also disapproved of pedagogy that subordinates the individual to the institutions of state and authority. He encouraged students to test truth claims, including those made by the state and so-called experts, and argued that instructors should serve as guides, providing students with the opportunity to create knowledge and develop a sense of their own power (Dewey 1938). This critical approach to education has the radical potential to make education "a dialogic process in which knowledge is produced in the interaction—the dialectical exchange—between instructor and student" (Heyman 2007, 116; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming). Dewey's emphasis on broader theoretical context, knowledge production, and empowerment can serve as guidelines for effective service-learning projects, guidelines that geographers already follow in their own research and that fit well with our roles in the broader scheme of higher education.

GEOGRAPHIC APPROACHES

Geographers are well equipped to meet Dewey's expectations for student learning because such goals resonate with

our strong disciplinary traditions of theorizing social justice and using participatory research methodologies (Dorsey 2001; Merrett 2004; Kindon and Elwood 2009). Geography has a long tradition of writing and research that relies on social and spatial theory, but simultaneously works toward practical solutions and encourages participation in social change. From Peter Kropotkin's (1885) call for geographers to fight for worker's rights and speak out against racial injustice to 1960s radical geography when scholars challenged the boundaries of what constitutes "real scholarship" (Peet 1977), to the current wave of critical geographers who believe in the potential for changing society (Blomley 1994; Samers 2006) and the university itself (Roberts 2000; Yapa 2009b), the discipline has demonstrated a long history of connecting academic work to profound sociopolitical struggles of the day. To address these theoretical and social concerns, geographers have developed participatory action research methods (PAR), demonstrating that cartography and qualitative field work can be "adapted to the concerns of the poor and powerless" (Pickles 2004, 184; Sparke 1998; Kindon 2005; St. Martin 2005; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2007).

For our argument here, it is important to point out that these critical traditions have not only reshaped our geographic writing and research, but have also impacted the way that we teach, with particular importance for service-learning (Castree 2008; Heyman 2007; Kindon and Elwood 2009; Merrett 2004; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming). For example, PAR requires researchers to ask whether their research findings are useful to the communities in which they work, a question that is also beneficial for evaluating service-learning projects (Kindon and Elwood 2009; Pain 2009; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming). The very essence of critical-activist geography is "working with people in a non-patronizing way to assist—rather than necessarily direct—their organization and protest against oppression" (Samers 2006, 282), a valuable characteristic for any form of service-learning project that seeks to achieve effective university-community collaboration (Skop 2008; Dorsey 2001; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming). Further, this type of research also generates a relationship between students and knowledge creation that allows them to explore how their own technical and analytical skills can create new ways of framing problems and solutions in the real world (Bunge 1977; Dunn 2007; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming).

In today's universities, geographers are saddled with broadly defined and ambitious university goals such as cultivating global citizenship or raising global awareness. Within this context, service-learning can be an effective theoretical and methodological teaching approach. While teaching and research are often viewed as separate parts of our academic life, service-learning allows us to merge our theoretical and methodological training in the classroom (Colbeck 1998; Pain 2009). Many geographers have demonstrated their ability to develop such courses and here we briefly explore three of them: William Bunge's *Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute*, Lakshman Yapa's *Rethinking Urban Poverty: A Philadelphia Field Project*,

and Matthew Taylor's *Field Quarter: The Political Ecology of Natural Resources in Guatemala*.

EXPEDITIONS OF SERVICE

A classic example of service-learning in geography is the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI). This project, headed by William Bunge, served a predominantly African American community in an inner-city Detroit community by providing scholarships and free courses to residents. This mix of traditional and nontraditional students acquired practical skills, such as cartography and urban planning, which were used to produce original scholarship, particularly maps, that challenged Detroit's planning and zoning practices (Bunge 1971).

The collaborative spirit and intellectual rigor of this project is reflected in the 1969 principles of the DGEI. The project's founders gave control over course content and project design to the students and communities, while remaining focused on university level instruction in cartographic theory and techniques (Horvath 1971). With these guidelines, the DGEI achieved essential goals of service-learning: empowering students *and* community members by providing them with skills and concepts to conduct research for social change. Bunge argued that this program was not only creating a new type of learning community but also a new geography:

... not a "nice" geography, or status quo geography ... [but] a geography that tends to shock because it includes the full range of human experience on the earth's surface; not just the recreation land, but the blighted land; not just the affluent, but the poor; not just the beautiful, but the ugly. (Bunge 1977, 35)

We identify the DGEI as an essential model for geographic service-learning because it resulted in original collaborative scholarship that facilitated social change in inner-city Detroit. In 1970 the DGEI published a collection of counter-maps and essays, which were adopted by community groups. This document forced the local school board to respond to charges that its redistricting practices were illegal because they enforced segregation and inequitable access to education (Horvath 1971).

Unfortunately, the DGEI did not last long. By the spring of 1970 the DGEI had grown to 500 students and eleven courses, but it lost university support and the program folded a year later. So while the DGEI serves as an important model for success in collaborative and intellectually rigorous service-learning, it also provides a lesson in maintaining university support for such programs. Bunge's radical political views and altercations (verbal and at times physical) with college administration resulted in loss of sponsorship and his own firing. Although Bunge started similar programs at other universities in the United States and Canada, none of these efforts attained the status or impact of his projects in Detroit (Johnson 2010).

While the DGEI allowed traditional and nontraditional students—many of whom were from the same community—to collaborate with one another, geographic service-learning can also give traditional students an opportunity to expand their worldviews and collaborate with other groups that they have little in common with.

From 2000 to 2009 Lakshman Yapa of Penn State University provided students at Penn State and Schreyer College an opportunity to conduct social science research pertaining to poverty alleviation in Philadelphia communities. The project, *Rethinking Urban Poverty: A Philadelphia Field Project*, succeeded in part by securing widespread support from university administration. The project was a good fit for a new learning unit called the Laboratory for Public Scholarship and Democracy, an interdisciplinary minor in civic engagement, and the College of Earth and Mineral Sciences (which acknowledged service-learning projects in the tenure review process) (Yapa 2006, 2009a, 2009b). This strong university support and the hard work of an interdisciplinary group of professors resulted in a decade of student cohorts who received scholarships for their participation in the project. The goal of the project was to redefine poverty, challenging narrow definitions based solely on income. Before going into the field, all students completed a course on social theory, where they grappled with how poverty is conceptualized, measured, and combated. In addition, students learned methodological skills for collecting data about household economies, as well as information pertaining to nutrition, health care, and access to transportation. Through their research students created a new epistemology of poverty and were "challenged to find agency within his or her academic major at a scale correlated to the power they have in the world" (Yapa 2009b, 132).

While empowering students was an important part of this project, Yapa also recognized the importance of community-university relations and strived to alter the university's traditional paternalistic role as a voice of expertise (Boyer 1990; Yapa 2009b). In fact, one of the project's main goals was to challenge academically produced knowledge about poverty, using creative solutions for alleviating poverty through informal and household economies instead of a singular focus on income (Yapa 1996). To achieve effective collaboration, the field project developed partnerships with churches, community business coalitions, neighborhood associations, and extension agents to promote community-driven programs and enhance geographic understandings of social problems. Students and faculty worked with community mentors who advised and guided the research program. Together, this collaboration produced a credit cooperative, multipurpose transportation routes, identified inequitable distribution of fire services, and started community gardening projects (Yapa 2009b). This project created tangible change in Philadelphia neighborhoods by creating what some scholars call "learning communities" (see Cantor 1997; Skop 2008), which have the power to change "students' perception of themselves by empowering them to recognize the value of their skills

in making the world a better place for all to live" (Yapa 2009a; Israel 2010).

University of Denver geographer Matthew Taylor offers yet another recent example of service-learning, but this time in an international context. Taylor has designed a course titled *Field Quarter: The Political Ecology of Natural Resources in Guatemala* where students learn a "critical modernist view of development" (Taylor 2011), one that recognizes the inequities of global development programs, but instead of rejecting development altogether seeks new ways for growth that benefit marginalized portions of society (Peet and Hartwick 1999; Carr 2011). Taylor's project in Ixcán, Guatemala, is focused on potable water. With support from the university's Public Good Fund, Taylor was able to provide immediate relief in the short-term by giving community groups clay water filters. Students then are involved in the more long-term projects of creating rainwater and fog collection systems, as well as facilitating workshops where community members learn to build bio-sand filters for personal use and distribution to surrounding areas (Taylor 2009).

Taylor refers to himself as a "public-good" scholar, who is giving back to a community where he has conducted fieldwork for over two decades. His service-learning pedagogy addresses concerns over short-term volunteer style programs (Illich 1998 [1968]) by bringing his students to communities in the Global South where he has developed relationships through previous research and involved community members in the development of these projects (Taylor 2009). After long-term research and rapport building, he is now using his position at a university in the Global North to create access to potable water for small, rural communities, while providing students the opportunity to learn about structural inequalities that produce unequal access to water in the Global South (Taylor 2009, 2011).

AN EXPERIENCE WITH SERVICE LEARNING

As young teacher-scholars, we are optimistic about the possibilities for service-learning in geography. Though we are presently doctoral candidates, managing heavy research loads along with teaching and service obligations, we have worked diligently to incorporate service-learning into our classrooms—regardless of the extra time and effort this has required on our parts.

For example, in the fall of 2010 we took students in our department's Appalachian geography course to a post-mining community in southeast Kentucky, providing them with insights into livelihood strategies in places that no longer rely on resource extraction (Oberhouser 2005; Fickey and Rieske-Kinney 2011). Before traveling to the community, students learned about the history and geography of the region over the past 200 years, and completed readings pertaining to critical development, diverse economies, and alternative economic and political spaces.

Facilitating the field trip required a great deal of preparation and involved numerous on-campus and off-campus actors. Acquiring funding for travel expenses was coordinated with the university-based Appalachian Center and Appalachian Studies program. Planning the trip and research itinerary involved collaboration between the instructor, Appalachian Center staff, as well as an AmeriCorps Vista worker located in the community who helped build relationships between local community members and the university.

During the field trip, students spoke with local entrepreneurs and government officials to gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties individuals with limited capital faced in rural regions. This place-based approach challenged students both from Appalachia, as well as those who grew up outside the region, to examine this place through the lens of critical development and alternative economic practices, exploring new and diverse understandings of "the good life" (McKinnon 2010; Fickey 2011). After completing the field trip, students then conducted interviews with regional leaders and wrote reports about organizations throughout southeast Kentucky that were engaged in alternative economic development strategies that moved beyond resource extraction. Each student examined the sorts of development practices that a particular organization—of their own choosing—engaged in and what benefits these organizations offered to the region.

Final reports were submitted for review to the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) located in Berea, Kentucky. Several of the reports were published as part of the *Alternative Transitions Initiative*, which featured the stories under the heading "Student Stories" (see <http://appalachiantransition.net/stories>). The Alternative Transition Initiative, led by MACED and Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, seeks to advocate for economic development strategies other than the extraction of natural resources. Even though the project was perhaps limited in its time and scope, students learned that they could play an active role in critiquing the hegemonic development discourse in Appalachia. Through this project students engaged in a process of celebrating and making visible alternative economic practices, which a capitalist discourse of resource extraction renders invisible (Gibson-Graham 1996; Gibson-Graham 2002; Lee 2010).

LESSONS FOR GEOGRAPHIC SERVICE-LEARNING

Despite critiques that service-learning lacks scholarly and collaborative outcomes, we are not inclined to dismiss it, like some other scholars have argued (Illich 1998 [1968]). The projects described here illustrate how geographers have created valuable service-learning projects that require students to produce original, theoretically and technically informed scholarship, like maps illustrating spatial distributions of risk (Bunge 1971; Johnson 2010; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming), reports that redefine how poverty

is measured and mapped (Yapa 2009a; McKinnon 2010), and projects that reconceptualize development practices (Taylor 2011; Fickey 2011). These projects also provide examples of genuinely collaborative research, extending scholarships to nontraditional students (Horvath 1971; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming), facilitating community involvement in project development (Yapa 2009b; Taylor 2009; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming), as well as placing conceptual and technical skills in the hands of community members (Bunge 1971, 1977; Taylor 2009; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming).

For those of us who use theory to expose inequality and social justice concerns, and for those who use participatory methodologies to restore balance in university-community relationships, service-learning is an excellent way to bring this attitude and approach into the classroom (Merrett 2004; Kindon and Elwood 2009; Pain 2009). For geography students, service-learning creates an excellent opportunity to apply technical skills and to develop an awareness of how they can participate in meaningful change (Dewey 1916; Bunge 1977; Taylor 2009; Yapa 2009a; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming). For geography instructors, it offers an opportunity to build long-term relationships with surrounding neighborhoods and organizations, extending the learning community beyond the boundaries of campus through place-based pedagogy in both a local (Israel 2012; Skop 2008; Allahwala *et al.* forthcoming) and international contexts (Biles and Lindley 2009; Veeck and Biles 2009).

We remain ambitious in our goals for undergraduate teaching, but feel limited by our role in teaching introductory courses and acknowledge that service-learning is a challenge for most faculty members. Service-learning is a time- and resource-intensive teaching method and, as the short-lived DGEI reminds us, institutional support can be just as important to the long-term success as rapport building with communities. Further, the time and effort involved in creating meaningful service-learning projects can run counter to the impact teaching achievements have on tenure and promotion (Fairweather 2005; Erasmus 2007). As young instructors we are disheartened by an academic climate where the value of labor-intensive pedagogies like service-learning are appreciated and encouraged, but remain disconnected from academic survival strategies. However, we remain optimistic that if they choose to do so, geographers are well equipped with the theoretical and methodological skills to engage in service-learning projects that are educationally powerful and meaningfully collaborative.

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