

Feminist Praxis in University-Community Partnerships: Reflections on Ethical Crises and Turning Points in Temple-North Philadelphia IT Partnerships

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Introduction

Service learning is gaining attention as a means of providing university students with opportunities to participate in community organizations and settings to provide a social context for enhancing understanding of issues and dynamics introduced in the classroom. Student learning is often characterized as being accomplished through providing ‘direct’ interaction with people and places or contexts from which they can learn through doing and reflecting. Increasingly service learning courses and programs are becoming a more common university-community partnership format, gaining attention among geographers seeking to identify appropriate contexts for supporting community and grassroots efforts at social transformation. As such, service learning is considered to be a form of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy draws from a long tradition within the field of education that positions social action at the center of academic projects, placing the nexus of learning, and the measure of learning outcomes, beyond the academy.

This chapter describes and assesses a model of integrated service learning that was developed based on partnerships established through courses and programs at Temple University with community organizations located in North Philadelphia. The model developed expanded a course-by-course approach to service learning, and its development advanced critical pedagogical objectives for student participants. We argue here, however,

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that merely evaluating the effectiveness of critical pedagogical projects based on student outcomes does not provide an adequate framework for our program because we also intended to advance community objectives based on collaborations established through our integrated model. We suggest that using practical ethics as a beginning point for examining the diverse perspectives involved in, and impacted by, the integrated model we implemented provides a more appropriate means of assessing the overall effects of our program to meet its critical pedagogical objectives.

Using practical ethics to assess critical pedagogical outcomes

In proceeding with identifying ethical issues related to the model of integrated research, teaching, and outreach we developed and proposed as an alternative to course-by-course service learning approaches, we have considered the question of how we as critical academics can actively engage in the process of rethinking and revising the university and its relationships with community partners to promote social change. In doing this, not only are student learning and faculty development concerns central, it is also necessary to assess the outcomes of programs in terms of community goals, participation and perspectives. Shifting university accountability from academic and research standards to accommodate community outcomes is predicated upon an adoption of a critical pedagogical framework for learning, because critical pedagogy would seemingly necessitate moving beyond mere intellectual understanding of social inequality towards adopting an active role in mitigating social inequality.

Nicholas C. Burbules and Rupert Berk (1999) provide a thorough examination of critical pedagogy by differentiating it from critical thinking. For them, critical pedagogy assumes critical thinking as an essential component of examining and challenging oppressive processes. The tradition of critical pedagogy to which they refer has as its ultimate project a challenge to institutions and political structures that are embedded within and form oppressed thinking (Freire 1970). Their view of critical thinking is that it facilitates and is essential to critical pedagogy because it produces the possibility for challenging institutions and ideologies. They argue, however, that critical pedagogy requires the learning developmental step of praxis. They further state that critical pedagogy should be viewed: ‘not as an additional act beyond the pedagogical one, but as an inseparable part of it. For Critical Thinking, at most, the development of more discerning thinkers might make them more likely to undermine discreditable institutions, to challenge misleading authorities, and so on – but this would be a separate consequence of the attainment of Critical Thinking, not part of it’ (Burbules and Berk 1999, 50).

They draw on the tradition of Paulo Freire (1970, 1973, 1992) and Henry Giroux (1983) to describe the importance of reflexivity in examining the social justice aims of learning and to explain how teaching about social change is a necessary part of, yet differs from, doing social change. Boyce (1996, 2) takes this argument a step further by situating the need for social action as part of critical pedagogy in an examination of the ethics of instructing students to engage in the struggle against societal inequality, stating:

a politics of ethics, difference, and democracy grounds the practice of critical pedagogy. An ethic that recognizes humanity and struggles overtly against oppression and injustice is central. We are part of communities within which we are members, agents. There is no emancipation without context or accountability. We work to make context evident and to

establish and acknowledge accountability. Recognition of difference and the importance of many voices is a postmodern development in critical pedagogy... Dialogue, a long-valued element of Freire's critical pedagogical practice, facilitates the voicing of difference and enables difference to reside openly within relations rather than be suppressed. A relentless commitment to democracy requires social critique and transformation of social, political, and organizational structures. For radical educators, this politics of ethics, difference, and democracy requires praxis. This work cannot be solely an intellectual exercise.

Feminist geographers have applied this tradition of critical pedagogy to provide an ethical basis for linking feminist social action to instruction through service learning approaches (Oberhauser 2002). Oberhauser's perspective that critical pedagogy provides an implicit challenge to the academy, which in turn creates a space for including feminist perspectives within and outside of the academy, is shared by many feminist scholars (Oberhauser 2002; Todd 1997). Further, this argument infers the role that critical thinking must play as a basis for critical feminist pedagogy because students are provided with a structure to actively engage and critically examine the social construction of knowledge and assumptions about social inequality (Oberhauser 2002; Todd 1997). An essential component of this approach is the need to assess the level of appreciation for, and comprehension of, power relations and social inequality gained by students through critical pedagogy. Yet Todd (1997) points out that the power relations of students and instructor must not be overlooked as an essential element that affects which specific path a critical thinking or critical pedagogical exercise may take in the collective discourse of the classroom environment, highlighting the need for a reflexive process among educators.

Masucci and Renner (2001, 5) combine the concepts of critical pedagogy and critical thinking into a model of critical service learning that is comprised of four learning stages: prelection, theory, action, and reflection. Drawing on Freire, they argue that critical pedagogy must reflect on the hegemonic relationship between knowledge and ignorance that is embedded in the power differentials among partners. They comment on the illusiveness of social justice outcomes in relation to a specific critical service learning course they taught in which students worked to create a literacy library for children at Montgomery Village in Knoxville, TN through raising practical ethical questions about the relationships between the 'server' and the 'served.' (14). Their critique of service learning is that if not placed in a critical service learning framework, service learning does not necessarily result in critical pedagogy, a research framework, social action process or outcomes. Therein is a key limitation of service learning as a strategy for critical pedagogy, even though it is a widely accessed mechanism for providing students with structured opportunities to engage marginalized communities for learning purposes. Further, without embedding the experiences in a structural critical or feminist framework as Oberhauser suggests, the questions that arise are: Does the community benefit from the structured interaction? Are the students being exploited as free labor? Is there an educational benefit to the students? Are students bringing personal frameworks such as racism, classism, and sexism into the interaction unchallenged? Is there a diverse representation of faculty and student involvement with the community or does the service learning activity replicate gender and race inequalities within the academy in a community service setting? Does this impact on the resource capacity of faculty to do all aspects of

academic work (and for that matter, meeting individual and family needs) in a negative manner?

We adhere to Oberhauser's (2002) tenant that feminist critical pedagogy must reflect an understanding of the hierarchical structure and hegemony of patriarchy as a basis for engaging and reflecting individual agency based on field experiences. We also draw on social action methodology to create a context for a form of critical service learning introduced by Masucci and Renner (2001) to provide a structure that integrates learning, research and partnerships towards working with communities on community oriented objectives. We situate our work directly in the tradition of critical pedagogy, informed by, but not the same as, critical thinking as differentiated by Burbules and Berk (1999) and addressed in Giroux and Myrsiades (2001), Giroux and Shannon (1997), and Todd (1997). Finally, our assessment approach builds on the work of Monk et al. (2003) by examining the outcomes of each institutional partner towards the determination of whether or not feminist critical pedagogical objectives were advanced.

Collaborations with community partners in North Philadelphia

Over the past five years, we have been working with poor communities in North Philadelphia to address digital divide barriers that impact on the daily lives of poor women as they seek to access educational, health, and work related services. In particular we have focused on the interrelationship among welfare reform, the increasing prevalence of information and communication technologies that individuals navigate to obtain information related to services, and barriers to technology access that impact negatively on accessing needed information and services. Our collaboration began with a service learning course that collaboratively generated an intranet depicting economic human rights testimonials with the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, situated in North Philadelphia. This course evolved into the development of a Community Technology Center and associated educational programs at Harrison Plaza Public Housing Development, and now involves providing Information Technology literacy training to over 200 high school students throughout North Philadelphia in partnership with schools and community organizations. Our program initially established a means of community engagement through course interactions, but it quickly evolved into a program of integrated research, instruction, and community outreach that worked to support community, student, and faculty empowerment. This transition of purpose occurred because in trying to do our work we experienced ethical dilemmas involving the sustainability of the programs and the empowerment of participants. These ethical dilemmas had practical repercussions, such as balancing time, resources, student learning objectives, and community needs – in an environment in which workload and resource issues were limiting despite the enormous resource gap between the university and the communities in which it is located.

We developed an alternative model of university-community partnerships that built upon this more traditional service learning course approach to community involvement. This model expanded on community connections established through service learning courses to include integrative learning, research and outreach program rooted in the critical pedagogical tradition. Our goal was to improve the sustainability of university-community partnership activities that were threatened due to the lack of continuity presented by relying solely on service learning courses as the means of implementing partnership programs. Because of the tension that is presented by the differences between

community needs for sustainability and long-term involvement versus the schedule and shorter-term orientation of students enrolled in specific classes have, additional contexts for partnership were identified to better meet the needs of community participants, students, and faculty. Increasing the empowerment of each of these groups, we believed, would greatly increase the sustainability of the program.

A model for integrating community collaboration, research and instruction

In practice, what this model has involved is the establishment of a series of community projects focused on addressing digital divide barriers in North Philadelphia and how such barriers are interconnected to a host of other inequalities faced by poor women and their families in these communities. The core set of activities is predicated by our social action research program, which involves understanding perspectives on the role that information technology can play in further isolating, or networking women to address other conditions of inequality in their lives, such as educational inequality, health care inequality, and income inequality. Our research objective is to contribute to an expanded understanding of the digital divide through examining the different means by which low-income, racialized minority female-headed households access the Internet, and relate the information obtained to specific decision making processes. Moreover, we aim to shift the focus of digital divide research from an examination of differential access to computers connected to the Internet to an examination of the means by which Internet information resources are differently accessed due to lower levels of work and home based computer and Internet access. This research agenda involves an examination of the problem of the digital divide through:

1. Examining the barriers and incentives to attaining access to information technology and related educational programs, basic skills and literacy, technological skills, and job training among poor inner city public housing residents in the context of the new welfare reform laws that limit the amount of time one can receive assistance, links the receipt of assistance to work requirements, and reduces the ability of recipients to pursue educational goals.
2. Evaluating the patterns and processes of job skills attainment, job searches and employment outcomes between those with access to information technology and related educational programs and those without access in order to better understand the role that technology may play in helping poor women attain economic self-sufficiency, particularly in the context of welfare reform requirements.
3. Questioning how the power dynamics among partners with vastly different resources (i.e., knowledge, money, access to information technology) affects the partnerships' ability to establish and achieve mutually desirable outcomes that will empower poor women through access to technology and related training.

In seeking to understand perspectives about the role that information technologies can play in mitigating or increasing negative impacts on poor women's survival strategies, we have implemented a series of technology literacy programs based on needs specific communities have identified. These programs are now supported through grant funding

and work study. We have developed a series of service learning activities that can be integrated into any of the specific courses that we teach that allow students to participate in programs that have been established addressing technology literacy issues; and we have developed a service learning seminar that addresses the theoretical, ethical, and efficacy issues involved in partnership approaches to addressing community needs.

Finally, throughout these activities, there is permeability – that is to say that courses are taught in community settings, open to community members; students can participate in work study or internship opportunities while simultaneously engaging in service learning designated courses; faculty and graduate students can pursue research interests based on community partnerships; and new resources can be requested to address needs that are identified as a part of improved communication and understanding generated by situating the praxis of critical pedagogy outside the confines of the facilities of the university.

Assessing partner perspectives on collaboration outcomes

To provide a sense of impact in terms of scale, we will describe generally how we began, and the scope of our current activities, in terms of outcomes from each perspective. From a community perspective, our first service learning course placed one computer in one organization, an organization of poor and homeless people, and linked student learning to assist with the project of taking records of economic human rights violations collected by the organization and cataloguing those records through creating an Intranet that could be updated and easily accessed by organization members. This project also involved showcasing this system at a meeting of poor people's organizations held in Philadelphia and served to assist with furthering the organizing objectives of the group.

Yet, despite the successes, there were a number of ethical dilemmas that we faced that required us to change partners as well as the nature of assistance. Firstly, there were politics within the organization that were exacerbated by the resources we brought to the table that was making it difficult for us to feel ethical in our interactions. Secondly, we did not have the time or money needed to sustain the partnership as it was organized. Thirdly, while the student's roles were meaningful, it was impossible to coordinate the academic time line with the organizations' needs.

The collaboration led to an additional service learning course being offered that focused on expanding this model to create a community technology center for a different community, drawing on the leadership of the first organization. The center was ultimately created as a demonstration project and four service learning courses, including two that were offered at the center and open to community members. The center, situated in a public housing development, became the nexus for establishing a series of community education courses, staffed by community service work study students, graduate student volunteers, and community members. The program served approximately 50 children and 25 adults. The key ethical dilemma we faced was ultimately our inability to assist the community with attaining a permanent facility for the CTC. Due to the lack of resources in the community, the community center had to be used for multiple purposes. This was causing tension between different constituents within the community as well as different partners operating in the facility. In addition, we were finding it difficult to attain resources for both the programs and the research. To solve these problems we moved the CTC into a neighborhood elementary school and joined with another partner who had

received a substantial grant to run similar programs. However, we were losing our ability to ensure the quality and sustainability of the educational programs at the school as well as Temple. While we no longer have a CTC with a fixed facility, the CTC served as a basis for our involvement in generating additional technology training programs reaching approximately 250 families per year in six other community settings.

From a student perspective, some involved in the first service learning course expanded their involvement with specific groups through internships and thesis research. Others became staff members or volunteers for specific groups based on the desire to maintain continuity with those entities. Others have become program managers for activities that have grown out of initial partnership activities. And others have become instructors for service learning courses that are part of the university education component of this overall approach. We began with two enrolled students in the one course. There are now five courses that can be offered with links to activities in six settings, involving between 50 – 100 students per year. Moreover, what began as a handful of active volunteers has grown into a staff of four program managers and approximately 100 undergraduate and graduate student mentors, tutors, technology trainers, and organizers supported through the America Reads work study program to provide continuity in delivering services through partnership programs established as part of this integrated program.

This has allowed students, both undergraduate and graduate, to have more meaningful educational experiences. For example, students who were interested could link their community involvement to a wider and more systematic curriculum and could have an active role in social action research. Furthermore, students with financial needs could continue to be involved through work study thereby improving the continuity of the educational experience and reducing the need for non-academic related employment.

From a faculty perspective, what began as a program on the margins of the departmental mission, though ostensibly central to the university mission, has emerged as a parallel institutional structure with strong linkages to the instructional mission of the department but separate research and outreach missions, more central to an interdisciplinary movement within the university. The student staff has been organized as its own entity – Harrison Campus Compact, funded through external support from city and state government – and new research funding has been a basis for creating a strong linkage between the outreach activities and legitimating faculty involvement through providing support for course buyout, conference participation, equipment and supplies.

As our integrated program has become more institutionalized, we personally have lost the one-on-one community involvement (our students have not) that we had previously. This has meant that we have not been able to establish the relationship and trust we built with previous partners. Yet we feel that trade-off has been an increase in the empowerment of all partners and the increasing sustainability of the programs.

By expanding the role of the university beyond the individual efforts of specific faculty and students through specific courses, more extensive resources could be drawn upon to address community resource issues. For example, we have used technical staff to provide support for community technology centers, relied upon university resources for transportation across multiple locations, and provided much needed facility options to augment community facility availability given that most of the programs are located

within a 10 block radius of Temple University's main campus. Furthermore, we have been able to draw upon work study resources to transition between semesters through paying for staff support.

It has allowed us to have our research, instruction and community involvement linked thematically to a core set of research questions which provided us with a strategy for addressing very commonly experienced gender issues in workload and resource equity. This allowed us to demonstrate an alternative service model to the university community as a whole without falling into the trap of servitude to the university at the department, college, and university scale. Moreover, it sidestepped the service learning trap that many women faculty experience in which they are adding to an already overloaded service agenda due to empowerment politics by now having to manage the complexity of both field placement and pedagogical needs of students along side of addressing community needs and issues related to involvement. The most difficult problem from an academic merit standpoint is that typical service learning courses, when disconnected from research and other service activities, are not recognized within the mainstream channels for assigning academic merit. Our approach allowed us to participate in mainstream supported activities, including pursuing extramural funding, reducing workload through buyout, and generating publications.

Despite the vast improvement in the community's access to resources based on needs articulated through the partnerships established by our programs, the University gains even more. One of the most important of these is that Temple gains an improved reputation for sustainability, having brought resources to long-standing needs such as delivery of after school programs (especially given that Temple has a new role in managing five area schools as part of a comprehensive restructuring of the Philadelphia School District administration).

Yet in developing and implementing this model, we recognize that it is raising a new set of ethical problems. At the core of these is the tension between critical pedagogy and social action research and institutional change within the university. In the remainder of the paper, therefore, we will draw from a developed literature on critical pedagogy to introduce a more nuanced framework for assessing the overall outcomes of the integrated model we have developed than the ethical framework we used as the basis for moving away from individual service learning courses.

Assessing empowerment issues among partners

One of the challenges we have faced is that once multiple perspectives for assessing outcomes are introduced, we must face the limitation of our own perspective for adequately assessing outcomes in terms of another perspective. We must also face the ethical dilemma that our inadequacy for understanding outcomes from multiple perspectives poses as a basis for decision making.

Our answer to this dilemma has been to use two criteria for assessing our involvement or the success of our praxis, including our decision making about the evolution of our role in partnerships, student involvement with the community, and community outcomes: empowerment and sustainability. Our view of community empowerment is that social change in the community is led by the community and that university involvement is positively viewed by the community. Our view of student

empowerment in the context of being involved in community activities driven by a pedagogical objective in the classroom is that they are provided roles that will facilitate the necessary academic project of self-reflexivity that is central to the learning that service learning opportunities provide. Our view of faculty and researcher empowerment is that involvement is contributive to the overall ability of the individual to engage in academic discourse. University empowerment can be assessed by considering whether this model of an integrated service learning program enhances its overall ability to provide meaningful educational experiences for students while also permitting faculty to be productive, contributive and empowered within its institutional setting. If faculty involvement in service learning produces positive experiences for students and the community at the expense of faculty development, this is not a sustainable model. And if community members feel that the partnerships' activities do not produce needed outcomes, then this would not be a strong basis for future involvement. So for us, sustainability is the second criteria for examining the effectiveness of our integrated model. Our view of sustainability is that each partner must be able to identify how its interests are forwarded by partnerships that are established through the continuum of activities in the program.

Assessing the integrated model

Our model for an integrated model of research, education and community outreach is centered on our identity and agency as faculty in academic settings. It should be understood that along side our own model would be parallel models for other participants implied by this model. While we reflect that those other perspectives are involved in our own, we intend to illustrate the potential community impacts of moving beyond course-by-course service learning approaches to implementing critical pedagogy.

We have incorporated into an integrated model of research, education and community outreach in thematic projects, critical pedagogical praxis in the forms of creating service learning opportunities for students, supervised community research, and community collaborative research. From a research perspective, many of the thematic areas we have identified as central to critical theoretical praxis require developing original data sets in collaboration with local communities. Our main objective is to identify community goals and perspectives as a beginning place for establishing sustainable partnerships.

Because of the need for projects to develop original data sets, working on establishing long-term and sustained relationships with these communities allows us to build research agendas that are mutually beneficial to both partners. Many researchers are faced with the challenge of individually establishing credibility before they can begin to conduct such projects. Moreover, they are faced as individuals with great uncertainty about the quality of the relationship, or the ability to access resources that would permit the quality reciprocation necessary to plan and develop longer-term projects or to return to specific communities with follow up work. And, because of the difficulty in sustaining long-term relationships, new investigators face additional challenges of entering communities where previous relationships have resulted in unsustainable or unreciprocated partnerships due to the resource problem inherent in a non-integrated model.

Central to the ability of faculty to conduct high quality research that requires sustained involvement with communities is the role of graduate and undergraduate

students. It is both beneficial to faculty researchers and students that students acquire research training and experience as a cornerstone of their educational development. Many academic programs reflect this by requiring students to engage in practicums, internships, and supervised research experiences. Yet, many poor communities do not have facilities or other infrastructure to accommodate these needs.

We also believe that respectful and sustainable community outreach linked with academic programs and faculty research requires building backwards and forwards linkages between the university and the community. By working to ensure that both partners have a stake in sustaining the relationship, we aim to enhance educational and research opportunities of university students and faculty while simultaneously working with communities around community-identified needs.

There are some key barriers to student participation in this model due to resource constraints that many students face. The university can help overcome these barriers by getting funding to support research education for undergraduate and graduate students. As part of an integrated model, resources for students should enhance education through providing opportunities to work closely with faculty on research, enhance education through integrating academic and community activities, and provide alternative work opportunities that are integrated with and support academic goals.

Conclusion

We have suggested that one way to assess the integrated model that we have proposed as a solution to the dilemma of how to implement a community involvement curriculum that is consistent with a feminist critical pedagogical framework is to examine its viability from the stand point of sustainability and empowerment. We have reviewed the relationship between ethical issues that we faced and how these served as impetus for making specific decisions about how to continue with our collaborations across all three concerns – instruction, research and outreach. Key transition points brought issues of empowerment and sustainability to the forefront of decision making about the next collaborative steps in terms of partnership and academic projects, which resulted in shifts in direction and new emphases. Throughout our involvement, issues related to unequal power relationships and politics among partners arose, and these critical junctures resulted in complete shifts in the nature of the partnerships, including the actual partners themselves. The constant actors are us as researchers, students (graduate and undergraduate), the university, and residents of the community (many of whom have been served throughout the entire evolution of both partners and nature of programs). We oriented our community-university activities to meeting community needs at the scale of the individual through development of technology access and educational programs. While this began as an effort to work through partnerships with community organizations, it has evolved in relation to the needs and interests of subsets within the local community. But as we progressed, the efforts which began as highly specific, grass roots activities eventually became embedded in more formalized arrangements, drawing upon greatly enhanced university resources used on behalf of both university and student needs.

Our work in North Philadelphia addressing digital divide barriers through an integrated program of social action research, community outreach, and service learning illustrates the need to continually assess the dynamics of university-community partnerships. Our partnership began with sharp differences in resources, access to decision

making power, facilities and technology resources. As the university has expanded its academic mission to improve student and faculty access to Information Technologies, ostensibly to decrease the gap between its resources and community resources, the technology gap has only widened despite not only ours but many other university efforts to address IT access issues at the community level. However, had the partnerships never materialized at all, the expanded gap would be still larger.

Our impact has been to provide an integrative service on behalf of and in collaboration with the community as an alternative to individual service learning courses. We do not envision that the university and community will ever be equally empowered, but we need to ask about how choices made impact upon each group. In our case, community activities and university activities would have gone on in parallel directions, but the question becomes does integration improve outcomes for community, students, and faculty, as is the assumption in university partnership models? Further, we need to keep asking questions about who gains and loses power through university-community collaboration, what benefits are realized at the community level, how power dynamics within organizations are affected, and how student empowerment is affected.

We suggest that critical pedagogy in action provides a viable alternative to a more isolated university environment. But as universities move to implement models such as the one we have developed and implemented, the criteria for educational outcomes should be expanded to include not only learning outcomes, but community outcomes. This would truly change institutions of higher learning. Until that happens, these types of programs at best can help mitigate the unequal power relations between the university and the community as well as within the university.

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