



Ethnographic Service Learning: An Approach for Transformational Learning

Melanie A. Medeiros and Jennifer Guzman
State University of New York Geneseo

Introduction

At the present time, we see a resurgence of historical debates about the aims and purposes of higher education. In the United States, divisions over occupational versus liberal models can be traced back as far as Benjamin Franklin's promotion of vocational learning and Thomas Jefferson's equally strong concern that young men develop the civic virtues that were needed for participation in a vibrant democracy. Today, similar contests play out as business efficiency models squeeze colleges and universities (Blumenstyk 2014), political discourse is shot through with talk about job preparedness and the knowledge economy, and dominant cultural models about the value of college education have shifted away from the common good to focus on the instrumental value of a college degree for the private individual who has acquired one (Berrett 2015).

Contemporary advocates of colleges as sites contributing to public good argue that institutions of higher education are places and spaces where young adults learn to become participatory citizens and train for public service (Felten and Clayton 2011). Scholars and educators such as Horton and Freire (1990) were among the first to advocate that institutions of higher education encourage students to critically examine social issues and become socially responsible citizens. Beck (2006) argues that colleges and universities who invest in addressing problems in their local communities contribute to both intellectual and social progress, and that more socially responsible education institutions are needed to educate 'new generations in the art of volunteerism, citizenship, and civic engagement' (3). The response to this call for student training for and engagement with public service is the pedagogical approach most commonly referred to as service learning.

Service learning combines the promotion of student volunteerism with learning experiences and encourages student engagement with community partners as part of their education, which allows for the application of student knowledge (Ivy 2011), including knowledge of theories, concepts and methods. Service-learning connects students from the classroom to local community groups such as non-profit and non-governmental organizations, church groups, the health services sector, schools, gardens and farms, and so on, in order to contribute to social causes at the same time as furthering their learning about such causes. Service learning also is an opportunity that provides students with transformational learning experiences, which are becoming the hallmark of a liberal arts education in the United States.

In this paper, we will discuss how the challenge and promise of 'transformational learning' is playing out at one liberal arts institution in order to explore the practical aspects involved in mentoring students in the conduct of ethnographic projects based on the service learning model, a combination of approaches that we refer to as *ethnographic service learning*. We will start out by discussing some key ideas that are circulating with respect to college learning for what has been referred to as 'The New Global Century' (AAC&U 2011). Next we will share how these ideas are being applied in the restructuring of general education requirements at one liberal arts college, as well as how we are applying them 'on the ground' in our own course design and classrooms. We will then focus on the use of service learning to train students in ethnographic field methods. We will share student insights on their experiences. Finally, we will introduce some ethical concerns that arise.

Transformational Learning As A Goal of Higher Education

In 2005 the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) debuted their LEAP initiative. Standing for 'liberal education and America's promise,' the LEAP initiative 'champions the value of a liberal education—for individual students and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality' (AAC&U 2011:1). The initiative ambitiously outlines a set of 'essential learning outcomes' that constitute a detailed model of 'what contemporary college graduates need to know and be able to do' (ibid). These outcomes are grouped into four categories: (1) Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World; (2) Intellectual and Practical Skills, (3) Personal and Social Responsibility, (4) Integrative and Applied Learning. The initiative promotes a 'new compact' of responsibility toward college students between 'educators and American society' and urges the adoption of principles of excellence that will allow students to realize these broad learning outcomes. Finally, the initiative identifies a set of 'high-impact educational practices' that are correlated with student learning. These include, among others, undergraduate research, collaborative assignments and projects, diversity and global learning, service learning and community-based learning, and capstone courses and projects.

At our institution, the faculty and administration have taken the recommendations of the LEAP initiative under serious consideration and are currently restructuring the college's general education requirements accordingly. [college name removed for blind review] is a selective, public liberal arts college with just over 5,000 students, mostly undergraduates. The college is located in [removed] and was founded in 1871 as a normal school (removed). The newly proposed curriculum has been dubbed the [removed for review]. One of the primary objectives identified in [removed] is to foster students' ability to use the knowledge and skills they acquire in their courses and co-curricular activities to real-world situations, and to encourage reflection on their experiences and encounters. A second primary objective is to prepare students for successful interactions with people from diverse backgrounds, while developing students' global self-awareness and ability to understand and navigate global systems, applying what they've learned to contemporary global issues. The process of fulfilling these outcomes is understood to be transformational for students in ways that will prepare them for both engaged citizenship and, as the college mission states, 'a successful life,' superseding as it were, the dichotomization of vocational and liberal goals.

One area of particular attention is the idea that students' involvement in such high impact practices as intensive research, capstone projects, service learning, and community based learning has the greatest potential to promote transformational learning. Scholarship in adult learning defines transformational learning as a process that effects change in our frame of reference, the assumptions we hold about the world (Mezirow 1997). This kind of learning may be prompted by a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow 2000), for example an experience in another culture that disrupts a person's assumptions about a cultural group. This rupture is an important component in the learning process because it affords an opportunity for individuals to reconsider what they believe to be true and, through critical reflection, develop new or transformed points of view. Engagement in this process of rupture, critical reflection, and development of new perspectives affords precisely the kind of autonomous, responsible thinking that is the goal of liberal education. As authors of recent books on the topic (Deresiewicz 2014, Roth 2014) have argued, there is great transformational potential in the liberal model of higher education.

Transformational Learning & Training in Ethnographic Field Methods

It strikes us that anthropological approaches, and ethnography in particular, are uniquely suited for facilitating transformational learning. At the foundation, ethnography requires of the ethnographer a stance of cultural relativism and intellectual curiosity about how other people and groups see, constitute, and act in the world in ways that differ from one's own. Beyond cultivating and practicing this kind of psychological openness, the methodology of ethnography provides conceptual and practical tools (e.g. longitudinal participant observation, rapport building, and reciprocity) that constitute a professionalized form of empathy. Finally, the task of field note writing and, later, ethnographic reporting constitute activities of goal-directed critical reflection that invite the ethnographer to say something new about the human world. These activities tie the active processes of observation and empathy with the discipline of producing written scholarship that conforms to aesthetic, discursive, and ethical criteria of representation. To the extent that doing ethnographic fieldwork facilitates making the strange familiar and the familiar strange, it facilitates transformational learning by triggering disorienting dilemmas and requiring the kinds of critical reflections that reconstitute our understanding of the world.

Ethnographic Service-learning

Courses in ethnographic field methods are important preparation for fieldwork, and help to support students through the process of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. We argue that students can have valuable fieldwork experiences in local communities and engage in service learning that both contributes to their training in methods, as well as benefits the community with which they are studying. For the field of anthropology particularly, although not exclusively, service learning teaches students a model of research design that values collaboration with individuals and groups of people, encourages a learning relationship between student researchers and participants, and can help overcome the risk of ethnographers 'otherizing' their research participants (Beck 2006).

There are several approaches for using service learning to teach ethnographic methods. One approach involves student participation in an in-progress engaged or applied anthropological research project. This model uses a participatory community approach to collaborate with community members to design and implement research that benefits the community; this model often involves an intervention of some sort. In this case, students are able to join an established project as researchers and contribute to both research and intervention goals while acquiring experience with ethnographic field methods (see Hathway and Kuzin 2007).

A second approach involves individual students collaborating with community members to design a research project, conducting participatory community research and developing programs and interventions with the local community. This form of service learning, while admirable, requires a sustained long-term commitment on the part of the student in order to ensure the sustainability of the research and intervention. We believe that for the purpose of a one-semester ethnographic field methods course, this model is not the preferred option. Instead, we engage a third approach for teaching ethnographic field methods that has the sustainability of the first model but allows students to design their own individual research projects and engage in public service.

Our approach, which is grounded in volunteerism, requires that students pick a social issue to study, form a relationship with an organization working on that issue, volunteer for that group or organization as a form of participant observation, and design and conduct an ethnographic research project on that issue using their volunteer site as a field site. Students are encouraged to ask research questions that are also of interest to their partner organizations, but students do not design programs and interventions to address the issue they are studying within the time frame of one academic semester. Instead students are encouraged to continue their research and collaborate with the community after the initial completion of the course requirements of an ethnographic research paper. This approach allows students to engage in service learning while designing and implementing an individual research project on a social issue of their choice but avoids the temptation for them to design 'quick fix' and unsustainable interventions and projects that would be uninformed by in-depth familiarity with the participating community or organization.

Ethnographic Service-learning Pedagogy

We both teach undergraduate classes where we dedicate a substantial amount of time to ethnographic methods--using a service learning model when appropriate--and students are responsible for carrying out a small but fairly complete ethnographic project. Through our experiences as instructors and a review of literature on service learning pedagogy (Hunt 2007, Village 2006) and ethnographic methods (Janesick 1983, Sells et al. 1997) we have developed a comprehensive and rigorous combined curriculum in ethnographic service learning. The approach is structured around five key components.

The first component of the ethnographic service learning pedagogy is *theoretical comprehension*. An emphasis on the application of knowledge should not diminish the importance of reading assignments that cover theory, as well as explanations of methods and other skills, examples of ethnographic texts, current debates in the field, texts highlighting fieldwork experiences, and ethics. Course reading assignments and lectures on methods are a necessary component of teaching ethnographic field methods; but they are not the only component. Integrating reading assignments on methods with readings on ethics, as well as ones on anthropologists' accounts of fieldwork experiences, reflexive ethnographies, and critical commentaries increases student engagement with the material, as well as improves student discussions in the classroom.

The second tenet is *engagement with a field site community*. Engagement with their field site communities requires that students spend several hours a week at their field sites volunteering and conducting participant observation, as well as the additional time necessary to collect other forms of data (e.g. interview, maps, visual). In order to increase student willingness to devote themselves to their field sites and their communities, it is preferable that students select their own field sites. We have experimented with establishing field sites for students before the start of the course. Students in the course had a choice between volunteering for an organization that offered health services to the homeless or an organization that built homes for low-income families. The benefit of this course design was that students were able to start volunteering and conducting participant observation within the first two weeks of the course. Once students had made their initial visits to their sites, they were asked to develop research questions and objectives that were compelling to them. Although in theory, students were able to select research questions that interested them, in some cases students argued that due to relative disinterest in their actual field sites, their research topics and questions were not ones they would have focused on if given a more open choice of field sites at the beginning of the semester. The disinterest of some students in their field sites and topics was reflected in classroom discussions on their research, as well as made the process of designing their research and writing their ethnographic research papers more challenging. Therefore, we now strongly advocate that students select a research topic on a social issue, select and gain entry into a field site of their choice, and subsequently volunteer and conduct participant observation that informs their research design. The trade off is that students may spend several weeks at the beginning of a course establishing a field site and have less time overall for volunteering and gathering data. However, we believe that genuine student enthusiasm for their research topic and volunteer experience ultimately outweighs this loss of time in the field.

The third aspect is *training in research design and research skills*. Students should be taught research skills in the classroom and then required to use those skills at their field sites. The direct application of methods and theory is at the nexus of a successful ethnographic field methods course. Through the practice and application of methods and theory, students learn practical skills, such as how to organize and implement a research project as well as how to design and conduct interviews, and engage in intellectual processes, including practice with challenging one's own preconceived notions about a group of people (Dean, 2014). Thus, students learn more than the application of ethnographic field methods, they learn how to interact with others in a way that is compassionate and empathetic, as well as to question the social processes that affect certain groups of people.

The fourth tenet is *reflection*. Students should be guided through the process of reflecting on their service experiences and research as often as is feasible for the duration of the course. Through the use of field journals, field reports and time set aside for in-class discussions, students are able to make sense of their fieldwork experiences. This practice of reflection also gives them an outlet for discussing the challenges of fieldwork, and brainstorming solutions. The reflection component of a service learning ethnographic field methods course contributes to the transformational quality of the student's research by allowing them to process and contextualize their experiences.

The fifth and final major component of an ethnographic service learning pedagogy is *public dissemination of findings*. Students should be expected to keep field journals, audio record interviews, and transcribe at least some interviews. They should then be required to analyze their data in order to write an ethnographic research paper that presents their research findings. The ethnographic research paper is modeled after a scholarly research article, and students are strongly encouraged to present their research at conferences, as well as to consider submitting a revised version of their research papers for publication in a student journal, such as the *Student Anthropologist*. Our campus hosts an annual one-day event where students from across campus present findings from their independent and collaborative research with faculty. Events like this can be an ideal venue for undergraduates conducting small-scale ethnographic projects. Students are also encouraged to submit their papers to the community leaders with whom they worked in the field. Through this process, students learn that scholarship is also a form of service.

Student Feedback

In order to understand students' perceptions about their own learning following their participation in ethnographic service learning, we reviewed our students' responses to course evaluations and a brief post-course survey about their experiences in conducting an ethnographic project. We identified several themes that emerged in student comments. One theme related to student experiences of discomfort as they entered a new setting and learned to participate in an unfamiliar milieu. Students noted, for example, that it was valuable to 'get out of my comfort zone' and 'put myself out there.' Together with these observations about feeling out of place, students

noted that working at their field sites required them to bracket their assumptions and be open to new ideas. As one student acknowledged, it was hard to 'leave previous ideas or biases at the door.' These patterns in student perceptions reiterate the importance of pre-emptively alerting students to anticipate and recognize their discomfort as they participate in ethnographic service learning as well as providing for students to communicate about culture shock or other emotional responses to an unfamiliar setting, especially following early site visits.

A second theme we found in student comments related to a well-known maxim that highlights how ethnography 'makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange' (Spiro 1990). Student uptake of this idea was reflected in several written comments. According to one student, 'Having little knowledge about the people of my study and their way of life, I was able to change my idea of the presupposed stereotypes, making 'the strange familiar.' Another student echoed a similar sentiment that ethnography had helped dismantle stereotypes, 'I was able to take something I was unfamiliar with and see it for what it is. There are a lot of stereotypes associated with what I studied, so being able to see what it was really like made me realize how unfair the people I studied are viewed.' These students' observations coincide on the idea that their involvement at their field sites prompted them to question stereotypes and develop new knowledge about the groups of people with whom they worked. Students' comments about this new knowledge was often framed as a process that helped them to view a situation or group of people more accurately, as one student noted, 'I learned how to perceive people in a more accurate way. At first I was quite opinionative (sic) and had an image of my subjects that I wanted to present. I learned to let my subjects be in control and I did my best to let them tell the story.' We have found that one way to encourage students' active reflection about this array of issues spanning from stereotypes, preconceived ideas, and openness to new knowledge is to ask them several times over the course of a semester to write about how their understanding of the people they are working with is changing. These writing tasks can be given at the beginning of class sessions and subsequently used to facilitate discussion about how learning is processual. Toward the end of ethnographic service learning projects, these kinds of critical dialogues can also help students conceptualize their written reports as a vehicle for reframing readers' perceptions.

Ethical Considerations

Our last point in this article is that service learning approaches to teaching ethnographic field methods must also be problematized to ensure that in our efforts to establish a service learning agenda we are in fact serving communities and our students. Butin (2007) warns against a social movement around service learning that prioritizes community engagement but does not include academic rigor. He also argues that institutions overestimate the ability for service learning programs to lead to social transformation, asserting that they are not a panacea for ills at the level of the higher education institution or social ills. His solution is to emphasize the learning portion of service learning, to value academic rigor, and to treat service and community engagement as an exploration and study of possible solutions rather than a solution in itself. Alternatively, emphasis could be placed on service, and designing a sustainable service project.

Hyatt (2001) and Herbert (2008) bring up another issue: that service learning volunteering reifies popular ideas of social problems existing at the individual or community level, and neglects an analysis of the structural issues leading to social inequality and social ills. She encourages educators and institutions who use a service learning approach to make sure they pair it with education on structural inequality and the limitations of individual and community level 'self-help' interventions as solutions to social problems. Thus, students will learn to challenge stereotypes and self-help tropes by having interaction on a local level that reflect broader social processes.

Lastly, for students from privileged backgrounds, service learning raises a particular set of issues to consider. It can help them to reflect on their position in society, as well as on issues surrounding social inequality due to race, class, and gender in ways they may not have faced in the past. This is yet another reason service learning can be transformational, if such experiences are paired with student reflection and classroom discussion. Allowing students to acknowledge and process their privilege creates a focus on reflexivity that improves their ability to work with their communities and is reflected in the quality of their research.

Conclusion

An ethnographic service learning approach may not be perfect, as there are ethical issues surrounding the use of local communities as training field for students. We argue, however, that if students and educators are aware of these issues and work towards mutual understanding with local communities, students' research experiences can

be mutually beneficial. Our students' comments about participating in ethnographic service learning highlighted the ways that it challenged them to enter an unfamiliar setting and facilitated a reshaping of their points of view about the communities with whom they worked. This outcome reflects the ideals of the transformational model of learning, which requires that 'learners become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions' (Mezirow 2007:10). In this article we have laid out a set of key components--theoretical comprehension, engagement with a field site community, training in research design and skills, reflection, and public dissemination of findings--that we believe are crucial to building successful ethnographic service learning programs that can afford transformational learning for students. We encourage educators who adopt and adapt this model to share their experiences and feedback for further development of the approach.

References

- Association of American Colleges & Universities (2011), 'The LEAP vision for learning: Outcomes, practices, impact, and employers' views', Report, Association of American Colleges & Universities, Washington DC.
- Beck, B. (2006), 'Community service learning: A model for teaching and activism', *North American Dialogue*, 9(1): 1-7.
- Berrett, D. (2015), 'The day the purpose of college changed', Retrieved 29 July 2015 from: <http://chronicle.com/article/The-Day-the-Purpose-of-College/151359/>.
- Blumenstyk, G. (2014), *American Higher Education in Crisis?: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butin, D.W. (2007), 'Justice-learning: Service-learning as justice-oriented education', *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 40(2): 177-183.
- Colligan, S. (2001), 'Building a 'multi-sited imaginary': Case studies in service learning from the Berkshires and beyond', *Anthropology of Work Review*, 22(2): 14-18.
- Dean, E. (2014), 'The value of ethnographic methods classes', *Anthropology News* May/June, 4.
- Deresiewicz, W. (2014), *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Felten, P. and Clayton, P.H. (2011), 'Service-learning', *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 128: 75-84.
- Hathway, W. and Kuzin, J. (2007), 'Engaged ethnography: Student engagement as a means for creating change', *North American Practicing Anthropology Bulletin*, 27: 40-63.
- Hebert, M.K. (2008), 'Teaching research methods through service learning', *Anthropology News* September, 15.
- Horton, M. and Freire, P. (1990), *We Made the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hunt, R. (2007), 'Service learning: An eye-opening experience that provokes emotion and challenges stereotypes', *Journal of Nursing Education*, 46(6): 277-281.
- Hyatt, S.B. (2001), 'Service learning, applied anthropology and the production of neo-liberal citizens' *Anthropology in Action*, 8(1): 7-13.
- Ivy, J. (2011) 'Service-learning research', *Pediatric Nursing*, 37(2): 74-83.
- Janesick, V.J. (1983), 'Reflections on teaching ethnographic research methods', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 14(3): 199-202.

- Mezirow, J. (1997), 'Transformative learning: Theory to practice', *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1997(74): 5-12.
- Mezirow, J. (2000), 'Learning to Think Like an Adult: Core Concepts of Transformation Theory', in J. Mezirow J (ed), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, pp. 3-34.
- Roth, M.S. (2014), *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sells, S.P., Smith, T.E., Newfield, N. (1997), 'Teaching ethnographic research methods in social work: A model course', *Journal of Social Work Education*, 33(1): 167-184.
- Spiro, M.E. (1990), 'On the strange and the familiar in recent anthropological thought', in J.W. Stigler, R.A. Schweder, G. Herdt (eds), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 47-62.
- [College Name] (2013), 'An overview of [College Name]', Retrieved 29 July 2015 from: [College website] (accessed 29 July 2015).
- Village, D. (2006), 'Qualities of effective service learning in physical therapist education', *Journal of Physical Therapy Education*, 20(3): 8-17.