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SOCIAL JUSTICE, SERVICE LEARNING, AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer

Abstract

This essay highlights the need for research that can deepen our understanding of the relationship between service learning, citizenship education, and justice in colleges and universities. In particular, we discuss the need to understand the relationship between different approaches to service learning and different conceptions of the "good" citizen such as the responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice oriented citizen. The vast majority of large service learning initiatives emphasize voluntarism and charity but do not teach about social movements, analysis of social and economic structures, and systemic change. Accordingly, research has concentrated on a conception of citizenship that privileges individual acts of compassion and kindness over social action and the pursuit of social justice.

SOCIALNA PRAVIÈNOST, UÈENJE S SLUÈENJEM SKUPNOSTI IN VISOKO·OLSKA IZOBRAZBA: KRITIÈEN PREGLED RAZISKOVANJA

Joseph Kahne in Joel Westheimer

Povzetek

Prièujoèi prispevek pojasnjuje potrebo po raziskovanju, ki bi poglobilo na‰e razumevanje odnosa med uèenjem s sluèenjem skupnosti, drãavljsko vzgojo in praviènostjo na visokih ‰olah ter univerzah. Obravnava posveèa posebno pozornost potrebi po razumevanju razliènih pristopov k uèenju s sluèenjem skupnosti ter razliènih konceptov "dobrega" drãavljana, na primer odgovorni drãavljan, sodelujoèi drãavljan in pravièni drãavljan. Velika veèina obseènih pobud za izobraãevanje s sluèenjem skupnosti poudarja prostovoljno delo in dobroteljnost, vendar pa ne zagotavljajo pouka o druãbenih gibanjih, analizah druãbenih in ekonomskih struktur ter sistemski spremembi. Zaradi tega se je raziskovanje osredotoèilo na koncept drãavljanstva, ki daje prednost posameznim dejanjem soèutja in prijaznosti pred druãbeno akcijo ter iskanjem socialne praviènosti.



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SOCIAL JUSTICE, SERVICE LEARNING, AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF RESEARCHⁱ

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With support from the federal government, foundations, corporations, and the public, colleges and universities are significantly expanding community service and service learning opportunities for their students. For example, over 600 public and private colleges and over 150 community colleges are now members of the Campus Compact, a coalition of campus presidents committed to advancing the civic purposes of higher education through community service opportunities linked to the academic curriculum. Drawing on a rich history of progressive educational and social ideals such as those of John Dewey and Jane Addams, service learning engages students in real-world problems and social issues. As part of a course on economic policy, students might volunteer in a local homeless shelter; students in an ecology course might study the level of toxins in a local river; students in a course on immigration might work with a legal aid organization. Accompanying this growth in activity has been a substantial increase in related theoretical and empirical scholarship.

Many of these curricular efforts are promoted on the grounds that they will support the development of committed and thoughtful citizens who in turn will provide a solid foundation for democracy. The importance of this agenda—to reinvigorate civic life—has been detailed by many scholars and in varied ways (see, for example, Putnam, 1993; Barber, 1984; Verba, 1995). Collectively, these efforts and related academic studies of these efforts demonstrate the fundamental ways engaged citizens support and enable democracy, equality, and economic development.

As we detail in this article, early research on service learning and higher education provides some support for this curricular direction. At the same time, research that explores the relationship between service learning and citizenship is only just beginning to address many of the most interesting and important questions. Indeed, issues of social justice—the theme for this special issue of *The School Field*—rarely receive much attention. In this essay, we describe the need for research on service learning, citizenship, and social justice in higher education. In particular, we highlight the importance of distinguishing between different conceptions of the "good" citizen and different ensuing program designs and outcomes.

What We Know

We know a great deal about the potential of service learning to support the development of citizens. These understandings derive in large part from a wealth of literature on service learning and its forebears, democratic and curriculum theory. However, this literature is generative rather than definitive. No single "correct" understanding emerges concerning the attitudes, skills, and knowledge that citizens require (Conrad & Hedin, 1991). Nor is there agreement regarding the ways different curriculum approaches might support the development of citizens, however defined. Still, the careful thinking of political and educational theorists provides a foundation for service learning and its rationale.

As a result of the multiple definitions of service learning and its aims, research focusing on different programs and priorities take several forms. In simple methodological terms, there exist both qualitative and quantitative studies. Among these, some studies concentrate on particular initiatives; some treat service learning as a single curricular approach; and others focus on differing conceptions of the attitudes, skills, and knowledge associated with developing citizens. In our attempt to describe "what we know," we do not provide a comprehensive review, but rather discuss relevant studies representative of the broader literature.

Perhaps most commonly referenced, a significant and helpful body of empirical literature draws largely on surveys of student participants. These surveys assess a broad range of issues frequently associated with citizenship, by measuring characteristics of personal, social, and civic responsibility. For example, a study by Alexander Astin and Linda Sax assessed students' commitments to "participating in community action programs, helping others in difficulty, participating in programs to help clean up the environment, promoting racial understanding, and developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (Astin, 1996, p.16-17). The study amassed freshman and follow-up survey data from over 3,000 students - 2,000 of whom participated in service and 1,000 who did not - hailing from 42 different institutions. Astin and Sax (1998) found that the programs achieved their desired effects: "Participating in service during the undergraduate years substantially enhances the student's academic development, life skill development, and sense of civic responsibility" (251).

Astin's study is consistent with other major national studies linking service learning with increased evidence of personal, social, or civic responsibility on the part of students (Melchoir, 1997; Rand Corporation, 1996). Between 1993 and 1998, for example, Eyler and Giles (1999) conducted two national research projects, one for the

Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and another for the Corporation for National Service (CNS). They surveyed more than fifteen hundred students and interviewed 120 including 67 "problem-solving interviews" that explored changes in students' understanding of social problems and in their critical thinking abilities. The authors found that "participation in [high quality] service-learning leads to the values, knowledge, skills, efficacy, and commitment that underlie effective citizenship" (164). Among the program characteristics that they found made a difference in education for effective citizenship were: placement quality, application, reflection, diversity, and community voice (166-180).

These outcomes also match the results of smaller studies that target particular programs. These smaller studies affirm the positive effects of service learning on indicators of personal and social responsibility, compassion towards the disadvantaged, commitment to an ethic of service, sense of agency as a community leader, and acceptance of diversity (Fenzel and Leary, 1997; Batchelder and Root, 1994; Giles and Eyler, 1994). Studies that examine students' use of reflective judgement as related to specific social problems also find positive effects. Students who undertake more extensive service experiences, as well as those whose experiences are well integrated into the curriculum, tend to approach social problems in a more complex and thorough way than non-participants or students who participate in fleeting or discrete service opportunities (Eyler, Lynch, & Gray, 1997).

Benjamin Barber and colleagues adopted a somewhat different approach in studying the impact of service experiences (Barber, et al., 1995). In addition to examining the ways service learning influenced student commitment to the kinds of indicators noted above, they also examined how service altered students' views of democracy. Specifically, they asked students questions that distinguished between four perspectives of democracy: participatory, Madisonian, individualist, and interest group. Among their findings, they learned that service experiences tended to increase students' preference for a participatory view and that this preference was stronger for women and whites than for African-Americans and males. From our perspective, this work has two valuable features. First, unlike most survey research on service learning, these authors connected their work to the disciplines of philosophy and political science thereby bolstering the significance of their arguments by placing them in the context of accumulated work in these fields. Second, the researchers took care to consider issues of race and gender and to problematize survey items. For example, questions related to acceptance of the Ku Klux Klan's right to march are often used to assess "tolerance"—which is defined as "good." But, as the authors point out, tolerance of the Klan means something dramatically different to those who are threatened by the Klan than to those who are not.

In addition to the commonly referenced survey data derived from quantitative studies, qualitative studies have also attempted to assess the impact of service learning. In general, these studies highlight instances of success. Taken in conjunction with broader studies, those "instances" can serve as valuable windows into the potential of service experiences to impact participants' attitudes, skills, and knowledge. A few also explore complexities associated with service experiences and the multiple meanings students bring to such experiences. One particularly interesting study (Gibboney, 1996) examines how involvement in a senior honors seminar, "Altruism, Philanthropy, and Public Service," influenced participants' thinking and actions two years later. The longitudinal nature of this work, as well as its focus on future actions, make it relatively

unique. The author's explicit use of theory also distinguishes the study. In considering the degree to which student narratives about the course and its significance in their lives aligned with theorists' discussions of service learning goals, the researcher found an interesting contradiction. While theorists emphasize a distinction between charity work and social action, participants described a "dynamic interaction between charity and justice and between self and community" (523).

To date, research provides clear indications that engaging students in service learning may support the development of individuals who are more committed to civic involvement. However, the field lacks a deeper, more discriminating sense of what such commitment implies and of the differing impact of particular service learning approaches.ⁱⁱ

What We Need to Know

Although, questions about citizenship, democracy, and social justice have long been of interest to philosophers, sociologists, political theorists, and educators, the literature on service learning currently lacks the conceptual complexity associated with those disciplinary inquiries. To be sure, the research that exists is helpful. Moving the field forward, however, demands more detailed exploration and analysis of the many concepts that inform our understanding of service and its effects.

As a starting point, we believe that if social justice is to receive explicit attention that scholars need to carefully consider the conceptions of "good" citizenship that drive various service learning programs. For example, some attention has been brought to bear on the need to distinguish service learning activities aimed at promoting charity and voluntarism from those concentrating on root causes of social problems, politics, and the need for structural change (Eyler and Giles, 1999; Kahne and Westheimer, 1996; Boyte, 1991, for example). However, the difficult theoretical and practical questions associated with these differences, as well as their political significance and relationship to varying conceptions of citizenship, have gone largely unexamined. Another important distinction could be made between notions of citizenship that emphasize actions of individuals and those that focus on collective action and social movements. Related to this are distinctions put forth by Boyte and Kari (1996). They eschew both liberal and communitarian conceptions of citizenship in favor of a third possibility that considers the role of public work in forging civic unity. By public work, they mean "patterns of work that have public dimensions (that is work with public purposes, work by a public, work in public settings), as well as the 'works' or products themselves" (202). This perspective, they argue, can diminish civic fragmentation and rebuild our sense of common civic purpose. The focus on experience in public work makes their conception of citizenship particularly relevant for those interested in promoting service learning on college campuses.

Attending to multiple—and at times conflicting—conceptualizations of citizenship requires careful consideration of questions such as (1) What kind of citizens do service learning programs aim to develop? (2) What conception of themselves as citizens, capacities, and commitments do students develop? In short, what conception of "good" citizenship is fostered by participating in service tied to an academic curriculum?

We know that citizenship is understood in a wide variety of ways. For example, in our recent national study of programs emphasizing the development of effective citizens, three conceptions of citizenship emerged that can help us make sense of the variation (Westheimer, Kahne, 2001). One common conception portrays a *responsible citizen*—someone with a job, who votes, pays taxes, gives blood, and obeys the law. Another, which we refer to as the *participatory citizen*, describes someone who is active in community affairs—planning community events and participating on local boards, for example. A third image that emerged was that of a *justice-oriented citizen*—someone who seeks to understand the causes of societal problems and address them at the root. These programs might engage participants in critical analysis of social and economic structures in relation to power and varied interest groups. We know that even among those who share the common belief that citizens should be active participants in community life, many differences exist. Some advocates stress the importance of personal responsibility and individual effort on the part of citizens while others focus more on the key role of collective efforts. Each of these conceptions of citizenship (and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive) requires a different focus for research.

An example of this "under-conceptualization" is instructive. A decade ago, Fred Newmann and Robert Rutter (1989) studied a wide cross-section of community service programs. They found these programs supported students' individual personal development, but not their sense of civic responsibility. Interviews with the students suggested that the service experiences were interpreted in terms of individual rather than public goals. For instance, many students enjoyed the opportunity to take on leadership roles or explore possible future careers.

When Newmann and Rutter uncovered this lack of a "public" orientation in service, they complicated and broadened the possibilities of service, and made new questions pertinent. How do students think about and act on their role in furthering the public good? How do the experiences change the way they think about civic duty and civic engagement? Partly owing to this study, service learning research and program implementation over the intervening ten years have sought increasingly to consider civic duty and a sense of social responsibility.

Citizenship and the idea of what a good citizen does, however, continue to be narrowly construed (Westheimer & Kahne, 1998). While service learning programs have increasingly responded to what Newmann and Rutter identified as the lack of civic duty among participants, the form and content of such civic participation can be broadened still further. For example, as the literature testifies, the vast majority of large service learning initiatives emphasize voluntarism and charity but do not teach about social movements, analysis of social and economic structures, and systemic change. Accordingly, research has concentrated on a conception of citizenship that privileges individual acts of compassion and kindness over social action and the pursuit of social justice.

Program evaluation—by far the most prevalent form of service learning research—has emphasized the contribution of service learning to individual growth in areas like self esteem, willingness to volunteer, and personal responsibility for the environment. Far less investigated is the degree to which service learning programs contribute to participants' understandings of organized movements, both historical and contemporary, and the ways government and corporate sectors constrain and enable solutions to social problems. Consider the following commonly-asked questions on surveys of participants in K-12 service learning programsⁱⁱⁱ:

- (1) Taking care of people who are having difficulty caring for themselves is (everyone's responsibility, including mine/is not my responsibility)
- (2) Being actively involved in community issues is (everyone's responsibility including mine/is not my responsibility)
- (3) Keeping the environment safe and clean is (something I don't feel personally responsible for/is something I do feel personally responsible for)

These questions (and many more like them) emphasize individual actions or a vague sense of individual participation. They ignore the fact that social movements, government policy, and corporate behavior, for example, represent important concerns for citizens who hope to improve society. Another question from this same scale further illustrates this point:

- (4) The problems of pollution and toxic waste (are not my responsibility/are everyone's responsibility including mine).

This question exemplifies the way in which social action and corporate or government responsibility (reasonable levers for substantive change) are obscured by the narrow focus on the individual. Toxic waste, of course, is rarely the responsibility of individuals but rather the result of industrial pollution, corporate greed, and inadequate legislation protecting the environment. The focus on personal responsibility obscures corporate or collective responsibility and the ways social movements and collective action might work to combat toxic waste.

Since studies rarely measure other aspects of citizenship, such as a group's ability to accomplish a task or an individual's capacity to organize a group, surveys that rely on the kinds of questions described above are incomplete. In addition, these surveys rarely examine the impact of a curriculum on students' ability to analyze the roles played by government and industry. Thus a study that demonstrates no gain in students' interest in volunteer work or recycling may be missing important program gains in students' ability to identify root causes of problems and begin to work with others toward ameliorating them.

Fortunately, recent empirical research on service learning in higher education has begun considering some of these issues. Eyster and Giles' recent study (1999) examines the transformational potential of service learning experiences. They surveyed and interviewed college students who participated in a broad range of service learning experiences to consider these questions. They found statistically significant, though sometimes modest, changes associated with students' emphasis on systemic problems, specifically the importance they placed on political structures, on social justice, and on changing policy. They were also able to identify programmatic features that promoted greater impact such as placement quality, opportunities to link classroom and service experiences, opportunities for reflection, and exposure to individuals of diverse backgrounds.

The importance of scholarship that focuses on students' commitment to systemic analysis and action is also made clear by recent findings from the 1999 Freshman survey of over a quarter million college students. Sax et al (1999) found that while a record 75.3% of freshman reported performing volunteer work as high school seniors, that interest in social activism is declining. Only 35.8% felt it "very important" or "essential"

to “influence social values” (its lowest point since 1986) and students desire to participate in community action programs fell to 21.3% (its lowest point in over a decade). Thus, one must question the assumption that students who volunteer will necessarily participate in other crucial civic arenas.

To date, findings indicate that service learning has potential to foster analysis of social structures and commitment to working for social change, but such outcomes are not guaranteed. Indeed, some programs in our recently completed study of 10 service learning initiatives produced statistically significant and sizable strides in this regard, while others did not (Westheimer & Kahne, 2001). As a result, there is a need for studies that focus more fully on varied goals in relation to citizenship and provide a finer grained analysis of the curriculum to better understand program qualities and how they can enable or constrain varied results.

Of course, for many relevant questions regarding citizenship and social justice there are no right or wrong answers. We are not arguing that one conception of citizenship is necessarily better than another; only that research on service learning as it relates to citizenship must attend to different beliefs and capacities regarding citizenship, improving society, and social change (Barber, et al., 1997; Westheimer, Kahne, & Rogers, 2000). Future empirical research can enrich our understanding of service, citizenship, and social justice by focusing not on the question “Are they better citizens or more committed to social justice after completing this program?” but rather on the question “Have participants’ beliefs and capacities regarding citizenship and social justice changed?” And if survey research continues to be a principal component of large-scale investigations into program efficacy, we would encourage a broader repertoire of questions such as:

- In the next three years I will work with others to challenge unjust laws
- Government should fund social programs for those in need
- Employers should pay employees a living wage

Even with more varied items included, surveys alone—now a common practice in evaluations of service learning programs—continue to be informative but insufficient. Detailed qualitative work that includes interviews and observations have the potential to surface multiple, even discrepant, rationales that might otherwise go undetected.

* * *

The civic purposes of education and broader goals of citizenship, democracy, and the pursuit of social justice have long been central concerns of educators and of scholars. Examining the implications of different notions of the “good” citizen such as the *responsible citizen*, the *participatory citizen*, and the *justice oriented citizen* provides an opportunity to engage scholars in both education and the disciplines. This area of inquiry would broaden the focus of service learning research, moving it away from questions of whether service learning “works” and towards richer conceptualizations of service, of learning, of citizenship, of social justice, and of the relationship between them.

In a nation increasingly obsessed with standardized measures of academic success and economic outcomes, the challenges for those who believe in the democratic purposes of schooling are substantial. Research on service learning—and specifically on

the relationship between citizenship, justice, and service experiences—can provide support. It can focus our attention on democratic ideals and on strategies for supporting the development of informed, thoughtful, active, and just citizens.

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Notes

ⁱ This article is adapted from Kahne, J., Westheimer, J., and Rogers, B. (2000). "Service Learning and Citizenship in Higher Education." *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*. Fall, pp. 42-51.

ⁱⁱ There are exceptions. See, for example, Keith Morton (1995) and Gerri Perreault (1997). Morton argues that there are distinct models for community service including "charity," "project," and "social change" and that these models each have their own logic, strengths, and limitations. Similarly, Perreault compares three approaches to service: charity, service learning, and citizen leader.

ⁱⁱⁱ These survey questions are from the Search Institute's National Learning Through Service survey scale on "Personal and Social Responsibility" (which was adapted from Conrad and Hedin's scale).