

Rethinking the Theoretical Underpinnings of Critical Service-Learning: Extending Freire via Bourdieu

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As an ideal, “critical service-learning” is presented as a progressive pedagogical intervention that disrupts social hierarchies.¹ Yet, in practice, things are more complicated. We argue that the theorization of social hierarchy needs to be more nuanced. By connecting the work of two seminal theorists guiding contemporary approaches to service-learning, Freire and Bourdieu, we illustrate the challenge that complex social hierarchies pose on the transformational potential of service-learning and postulate a theoretical remedy. We argue that, while Freire provides a useful approach to challenging social hierarchies, his articulation of social hierarchy—a conception that is widely undergirding most approaches to service-learning—relies heavily on neat distinctions of “oppressor” vs “oppressed” that do not correspond to the intersectional ways in which social hierarchies actually manifest.² Bourdieu’s work on social reproduction offers a useful extension to Freire’s work such that, read together, these works provide a way to address the conceptual and practical dilemmas confronting much of service-learning in American universities.³ Drawing on examples documenting the field experiences of undergraduates in a service-learning program, we illustrate how the concept of social fields enables us to see micro processes of difference in university classrooms and community settings. We conclude by positing strategies of conducting service-learning in a manner that deepens social transformation.

Since the early 2000s, service-learning programs have become increasingly popular on many college campuses on the basis of a perceived positive transformational value to both college students and the communities.⁴ The increase in service-learning programs has been associated with a growing body of literature that argues that this engaged pedagogy can address social

inequalities. For instance, in making the case for the positive social function of service-learning, Marullo asserts that “if implemented properly, service-learning should be critical of the status quo and should ultimately challenge unjust structures and oppressive institutional operations.”⁵ Here, he characterizes this kind of social transformation to denote the perceived “revolutionary potential” of service-learning.⁶

In recent times, however, the claim of service-learning’s transformational capacity has increasingly been challenged by scholars who are critical of the ways it reproduces the social hierarchies that it seeks to address. For these scholars, service-learning can be “forced volunteerism,” “reinforce established hierarchies”⁸ and “paternalistic.”⁹ Against a background of competing claims about both the character of service-learning and its concomitant utility in social transformation efforts, we evaluate a key theoretical tenet shaping most service-learning programs—the ways in which the writings of Paulo Freire have been taken up as a theoretical foundation. We argue that Freirean theory, in the hands of some scholars, creates a reductionist form of social change discourse that is not attentive to the multiple ways in which privilege and difference manifests when university students interact with communities during service-learning placements. We suggest that the work of Pierre Bourdieu represents both an extension and corrective to the literature. His work on social reproduction, particularly as it relates to micro-interactions, holds promise for service-learning practice that is attentive to the ways in which social dynamics shape transformation efforts.

FREIRE AND CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING

Tania Mitchell is credited with coining the concept of “critical service-learning.” Though not the first to use the term, Mitchell’s 2008 article, “Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models,” crystallized various critiques over the years into a summative conceptualization. The article powerfully draws clear and sharp contrasts between critical and traditional service-learning. There are three dimensions to critical service-learning: a social change orientation, a commitment to redistribute power, and a dedication to authentic relationships. Each dimension is

then analyzed in terms of its classroom and community components. Critical service-learning offers a philosophical vision, approach to pedagogy, and orientation to practice unified towards social justice and social change. In sum, critical service-learning interrogates the very practice of students working and learning with community, the relationships between universities and communities, and the dynamics of teaching and learning. This interrogation aims to create more authentic partnerships that trouble power relations and lead to social change. The literature on this line of inquiry has expanded dramatically since 2008—pursuing questions of civic identity,¹⁰ public impact,¹¹ ethnic and racial identity¹² and teacher education.¹³

A foundational source for critical service-learning in the United States is the philosophy of Paolo Freire, which is often cited for its dialogical, emancipatory, and transformational vision. Education, Freire reasoned, is a practice of freedom through which “people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation.”¹⁴ Freire has been instrumental in a) centering criticality and social change – dimensions that have progressively moved the field from “traditional” to current “critical” approaches and b) serving as a useful lens to conscientize white students working in communities of color. As critical service-learning scholars note, some of the key ways in which Freire’s philosophy shapes the service-learning practice include, but are not limited to, facilitating the development of an acute awareness of one’s personal power,¹⁵ fostering criticality and reflection,¹⁶ promoting empathy and solidarity across social differences,¹⁷ and prioritizing the primacy of action through praxis.¹⁸

Those who have taken up Freire as a foundation have also offered several critiques and extensions of Freire in applying his thought to the context of higher education in the United States.¹⁹ While important, these critiques have largely focused on translating Freire to the U.S. context, rather than addressing foundational limits in pursuing a critical service-learning agenda that is fundamentally Freirean. These limits surface in two main ways. First, this work merely overlays social identities such as “students of color” and “whites” onto an already bifurcated *oppressor/oppressed* dichotomy, thereby (re)creating a

simplistic social change agenda that is vague on how students of color—an increasingly growing constituency in service-learning programs— can engage with communities in a manner that is truly transformational.²⁰ This is in part because the current framework frees non-white students from the excesses of the *oppressor* label and positions them as equivalently *oppressed* as the communities in which universities tend to conduct service-learning. Take for instance, the manner in which Mitchell, Donahue and Young-Law frame the challenge of service-learning in one of the seminal works in the field. Whiteness, they write, is a social construction that is particularly important to service-learning because it remains invisible to white people. Given that white students and instructors make up the majority of service-learning programs operating within communities constituted by people of color and low-income groups, their intervention is to provide strategies for challenging whiteness that are geared toward white instructors and students. In an even more explicit overlaying of social identities onto *oppressor/oppressed* categories, Allen and Rossatto represent the ways in which critical pedagogy—an influential paradigm in service-learning—has applied Freire to issues of race:

Even the most radical White student, for example, is an oppressor because they still benefit (relative to people of color) from the social context of Whiteness. While it may be difficult for well-intentioned people to accept themselves as the oppressor, moving beyond denial is a key first step towards building a humanizing social order.²¹

While we agree with the general thesis of these works, in Mitchell, Donohue and Laws words, “that service-learning, lacking a critical focus on race, can reinforce these socially constructed understandings of whiteness,” we take exception to the narrow and simplistic social change agenda that is bred by this approach.²² The explicit conflation of white with oppressor and framing of interventions that largely focus on white students creates a reductionist form of social change discourse that is not attentive to the multiple ways in which privilege and difference manifests among undergraduates and community partners during service-learning placements.

Relatedly, the second challenge is that the conflation of oppressor and whiteness in dominant service-learning discourse runs counter to contemporary intersectional understandings of privilege, as well as the emerging shifts in the demographic profile of students in service-learning programs. The field is witnessing an increase in research that points to the significance of other social categories such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and class in shaping service-learning programs.²³ While there is no doubt that such students of color may have similar experiences of racial marginalization as their community counterparts, there are important class, gender, and status differences that ought to be accounted for in order to engender more critical forms of social change that are attentive to the various ways in which privilege manifests in social encounters.²⁴ This is especially true for elite universities which enroll students of color from high-income households with significant class privilege compared to the communities they conduct service-learning in. The frame of oppressor and oppressed may block these students from reflecting on how they too, participate in and perpetuate a pedagogy of whiteness.

To engender practices that facilitate deeper social transformation, especially in light of shifting demographics among university students, there is an urgent need to rethink the theoretical underpinnings of critical service-learning. Sharpening the current conceptual tools for advancing transformation can enable a social change agenda that is robust to the myriad ways in which social hierarchies continue to (re)manifest. Even more, we believe, such an exercise can facilitate better alignment between the practice of service-learning and the transformational ideals originally espoused by the turn from traditional toward critical approaches.

REVISITING THE CENTRALITY OF FREIRE TO SERVICE-LEARNING

Freirean philosophy distinguishes between three groups of people: the oppressors (elite), the oppressed, and those that are not oppressed but are in solidarity with the oppressed (conscious elite). Given the diametrically opposed class interests between oppressors and the oppressed, Freire reasoned that critical pedagogy could transform the social structure via the “awakening of

critical consciousness.” Such consciousness, Freire reasoned, had the potential to transform unjust systems by facilitating solidarity between oppressors and the oppressed through a shared sense of commitment to the humanity of all.²⁵

Importantly, Freire insists on the primacy of emancipatory education (critical pedagogy) because he perceived antidialogical forms of education—the kinds that critical service-learning seeks to counter—as a mechanism that oppressors use to maintain unequal power structures. He writes,

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity and since dialogue is the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants.²⁶

The essence of this dialogical approach is that it rejects a conception of education that is shaped by the interests of elites in favor of a more democratic pedagogic in which the creation of knowledge is undergirded by a commitment to humanity that transcends class boundaries. Such an approach—which rejects a top-down pedagogical approach to education—is in itself a revolutionary conceptualization of how to organize education especially because, as Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez show, the American education system tends to be hierarchical and elitist in character. Moreover, the idea that non-elites are central to the remaking of social reality is profound in that it allows for the remaking of the social order in ways that can meaningfully deal with social injustices that have been perpetuated through the silencing of a particular class of people.²⁷ For, if the oppressed can actively participate in the remaking of the social order, then it is in their interest to advocate for a just social order rather than higher standing in an unjust system. Indeed, at a theoretical level, the similarities between much of the ethos guiding service-learning programs and what Freire perceives as a decolonial approach to education are quite apparent.

Given that many service-learning programs have largely white college students from high-income households who often work with low-income com-

munities of color, there are considerable hierarchical challenges that can hinder the ability of such programs to live up to the progressive ideals they espouse.²⁸ Indeed, Freire anticipated such challenges when he wrote that “true generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the ‘rejects of life’, to extend their trembling hands.”²⁹ Here, Freire points to the challenges that emerge when the *oppressed* and the conscious but *non-oppressed* class attempt to build solidarity and challenge the oppression of the social system. It is this practical challenge that emerges when college students from a higher socio-economic class attempt, through acts of generosity or “service,” to forge solidarity with communities from lower socio-economic class that this paper seeks to bring to the fore. This is the dominant model of service-learning, especially in predominantly white institutions, and one that critical service-learning is trying to resist.³⁰ We worry that the paradigm of oppressor/oppressed limits the ability to think expansively about the many different types of service-learning in the higher education landscape. Indeed, service-learning at historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic serving institutions, urban commuter universities, and community colleges looks differently than the dominant model. Moreover, given the salience of the concept of class in Freire’s work, these categories might not apply so neatly to contemporary American higher education. We share Santiago-Ortiz’s critique that Freire’s theories miss key dimensions of hierarchical power relations at play in service-learning.³¹ To extend Freire as a foundation for critical service-learning, we draw on an unlikely source—the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu.

USING BOURDIEU TO EXTEND CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING

Bourdieu’s work on social reproduction, particularly as it relates to micro-interactions, holds promise for service-learning practice that is attentive to the ways in which social dynamics shape transformation efforts. For Bourdieu, interactions are a central mechanism through which social actors (re)produce social structure. This is because, for him, they are shaped by “present and past positions in the social structure that biological individuals carry with them, at all times and in all places, in the form of dispositions which are so many marks of

*social position.*³² Bourdieu's theorization of interactions and their role in social structure advances critical service-learning's vision to address power, privilege, and oppression in two important ways.

First, by explicitly acknowledging the power dynamics at play when actors from different social positions come together, Bourdieu helps us to be attentive to the ways in which *well-intentioned* interactions could become sites of social reproduction. As numerous scholars have observed, critical service-learning practice continues to feature interactions in which social hierarchies are reified even as such programs exhibit genuine commitment to pursue Freire's call for solidarity across social groups.³³ We believe that a key reason for this otherwise unintentional social reproduction is that the prevailing application of Freire often treats solidarity as both an inherent good. Bourdieu's concept of habitus addresses this challenge by pushing service-learning practice to interrogate all interactions, especially those undertaken in service of solidarity. There are two very important and related concepts in Bourdieu that can help make sense of these interactions—habitus and field.

As Bourdieu reminds us, even the most benign of interactions, such as sympathy, friendship, or love, are shaped by social hierarchies because of each individual's durably installed dispositions, or what he calls habitus. Habitus is defined as "a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices."³⁴ There are a couple of key points in this definition. At a basic level, habitus refers to our habitual ways of being, acting, thinking and feeling. Importantly, habitus is not just personal habits, it reflects our social positions within the worlds (structures) in which we grew up. Habitus is also an active (structuring) force which organizes how we perceive and act in the world. Habitus do not exist *ex nihilo*, but always in relation to an individual's circumstances and contexts. In our experience as instructors of community-based courses, we have seen numerous instances where students demonstrate an academic understanding of the concepts of race, class, and privilege in papers and class discussions. However, in community placements, they act in ways that perpetuate hierarchies. This speaks to the power of habitus as an embodied way of being and the challenges of developing students' critical practice. Simply put,

enacting practices of solidarity is more than a cognitive exercise.

Habitus are enacted within social fields—the social spaces in which interactions, transactions, and events occur.³⁵ Each person inhabits a particular position in relation to the others. Their positioning is a product of their social, symbolic, cultural, and economic capital in relation to others. One analogy to think about a field is a soccer pitch—it is a bounded space with explicit and implicit rules of the game. Each player exists in relation to others, differentiated by skill, position, and team. Equally important, the soccer pitch is located in a larger social milieu or constellation of fields defined by conditions, geography, populations, histories, and so on. While it is still football, a game played on a dirt street in Johannesburg is very different from a game played on the manicured fields of an academy. For our purposes, we feel that Bourdieu helps explicitly acknowledge power asymmetries that shape micro-interactions and locates these micro-interactions in larger structures of reproduction. Thus, Bourdieu provides a more nuanced approach to attend to the ways in which power and privilege continue to undercut service-learning's transformational potential. In another example from our teaching, undergraduates working with local high school students on social justice projects often begin their sessions with an icebreaker. These games were a key pedagogical feature designed to intentionally break the ice, *foster solidarity and community* among the group, inject playfulness in learning, and facilitate full participation of students. We have observed that despite the intention to foster solidarity and community among the group, games often served to reify class differences between relatively more affluent undergraduate students and their high school counterparts. In one instance, two white women college students relayed that they had been to Paris as part of a school trip. The high school students were astounded—“what kind of high school takes trips to Paris?” It was clear that this episode exacerbated social distance between college and high school students. Conversely, a Latino undergraduate related that he had been abroad with his soccer team. The high school students were equally amazed, but this episode did not exacerbate differences. The experience of going abroad with a soccer team fits into the cognitive frames of the high school students. This field of practice was also constituted by the fact that the high school

students and undergraduate shared a similar racial and ethnic identity. Here we have similar stories, but because the social fields were different, produced very different effects in terms of reproducing asymmetrical power relations.

Second, and relatedly, Bourdieu offers a way to expand Freire's categorization of *the oppressed* and *the oppressor* in ways that dynamically map onto the complex ways in which power, privilege, and oppression manifest. As many critics of the Freirean approach to critical service-learning have argued, this paradigm is not attentive to numerous, and at times, overlapping forms of oppression that shape contemporary social structure, such as, race, gender identity, and sexuality. While we concur with these critiques, current attempts at addressing these challenges remain unsatisfactory because they, too, invariably rely on rigid conceptions of power that characterize the Freirean approach. Rather than merely focus on the identities of social actors that make up the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy as many have done, we believe that a more productive approach must focus on the mechanisms of social reproduction. Bourdieu offers exactly the kind of conceptual precision required for this task. Social reproduction, he argues, is a function of the complex interplay between structures, habits, and practices. He writes that,

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structures predisposed to function as structuring structures.³⁶

Given that this conception of social reproduction attends to the ways in which each agent's durably installed dispositions (habitus) shape practices, Bourdieu enables us to account for varying forms of oppression that shape contemporary social structures. Importantly, by recognizing that dispositions are dynamic across space and time, Bourdieu offers the kind of conceptual precision necessary to move beyond the fixed oppressor/oppressed dichotomy that has come to be associated with the Freirean approach. Indeed, service-learning practice is often confronted with overlapping and fluid forms of oppression and privilege that do not neatly reduce to static depictions, such as oppressor or oppressed.

CONCLUSION

We locate our work at the intersection of theory and practice. For this reason, we organize the implications of our findings in two categories: theoretical and practical. This is not to suggest a dichotomous relationship between theory and practice. Rather, we aim to show how the utility of this work transcends beyond the domains of either/or categories. Regarding theory, our findings underscore the need to move beyond the dualistic categories that undergird much of the “Freire-inspired” approaches to service-learning. Given the contextual particularities of the United States, we illustrate how Bourdieu’s social reproduction offers more conceptual precision to understand and address contemporary social asymmetries. Thus, we propose that while Freire’s offers an important starting point, Bourdieu’s more nuanced approach allows us to see how different identity positions interact in ways that both reproduce and disrupt hierarchies. For practitioners, we suggest two strategies. First, training undergraduates to be more aware of and to be able to reflect on how everyday micro-interactions can reify or disrupt hierarchies. Second, a differentiated curriculum based on students’ levels of awareness of issues of power and privilege better equips students to recognize micro-interactions of difference. Thus, future research on service-learning should be attentive to the ways in which the practice of service-learning is constituted by actors from diverse and asymmetrical backgrounds. Such future research, we argue, should dispense with monolithic and static theorizations of social hierarchy in favor of nuanced conceptions of how privilege manifests in contemporary service-learning practice. For this task, Bourdieu offers *one* important remedial path that can productively move contemporary service-learning theory and practice toward deeper forms of solidarity and transformation.

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