



## The interplay between service learning and the ideological becoming of aspiring educators who are “marked” as different



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Service learning can create hybrid “third spaces” linking communities and schools.
- Service learning helps aspiring teachers develop internally persuasive discourses.
- Service learning supports aspiring teachers' struggles towards ideological selves.

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### ABSTRACT

Through a Bakhtinian lens of “ideological becoming”, we investigate the impact of service learning on two aspiring educators enrolled in a course exploring the intersections of race, class, gender, ability, language background, and sexual orientation. In particular, we explore how embodying “markers of difference” (Kerschbaum, 2014) assists aspiring educators in thinking about who they are and what they see as the potential for learning of youth from varied backgrounds.

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Globally, a critical issue in teacher education is making more enduring and robust connections between programs for teacher education and communities and schools (e.g., Bills et al., 2008). Zeichner (2010) proposes the field experience as a hybrid space in which such connections between the “campus and school-based components of [teacher education] programs” (p. 89) can be strengthened. Zeichner (2010) argues that teacher educators have tried various approaches to strengthen the ties between a university and communities and schools, from creating laboratory schools on university campuses to in-class simulations of teaching methods and classroom situations. Zeichner concludes, however, by asserting that in order for a strong and enduring relationship to exist between institutions of teacher preparation and local communities and schools, teacher educators must strive to create a hybrid, “third space” in which “school and university-based teacher educators and practitioner and academic knowledge [are brought together] in new ways to enhance the learning of prospective teachers” (p. 92).

Service learning, he proposes, is one such way to create a hybrid “third space,” in which boundaries between theory and practice, knower and known, are blurred.

As U.S.-based teacher educators, Mary Louise and Shameka discovered the potential of service learning for creating such a hybrid, “third space,” when teaching a course primarily enrolled by aspiring educators (those not yet admitted to teacher education programs). The course, *Critical Aspects of Teaching, Schooling, and Education*, intentionally was designed to bridge a gap between the university and the local community by offering aspiring educators opportunities to read, hear guest speakers' presentations, watch videos, debate critical social topics (e.g., reasons for homelessness, child poverty, the school to prison pipeline, what underlies the achievement gap among Whites and people of color, the rights of First Nations people, and complete a 25-h service learning component, often fulfilled as tutoring at a school or community center. Together with aspiring educators' reading, viewing, and talking, service learning became a vehicle for altering what aspiring educators see as possible for youth with whom they may work in the future. In teaching this course, [first and third authors]

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witnessed firsthand the transformative potential of service learning for altering aspiring educators' views about youth whom they mark as different from themselves in one or more dimensions of race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and/or language background.

While we respect the transformative potential of service learning for aspiring educators, one issue often encountered within service learning opportunities is that service learning is overly focused on the learning of mainstream and privileged participants (Jacoby, 2009). In short, “Service learning is premised on full-time, single, non-indebted, and childless students pursuing a ‘liberal arts education.’ [It] may be a luxury that many students cannot afford, whether in terms of time, finances, or job future” (Butin, 2006, p. 482). While we respect Jacoby (2009) and Butin’s (2006) criticisms of service learning, we take a different approach for understanding difference. We recognize that while White and middle class might be privileged identities in the United States, they are neither monolithic nor stable categories. As we looked at our data, we noticed, in fact, how aspiring educators who differed or embodied “markers of difference” (Kerschbaum, 2014), from their peers in some way, were able to integrate more fully what they gained from service learning into their identities and potential careers. We choose specifically to present the life histories of Kaylee Smith,<sup>1</sup> a biracial (African American and White) female, and David Gates, a bisexual White male who has endured a lifelong illness (requiring multiple surgeries) to illustrate how they thought and talked about youth who differed from them on various dimensions. Both of these aspiring educators were marked as “different” from many of their classmates in ways that differently intoned the insights they gained from service learning. Through life history interviews conducted with these two aspiring educators, we investigated the following questions:

1. How do understandings of people embodying and enacting markers of “difference” from people seen as White, able-bodied, and/or heterosexual support Kaylee and David’s thinking, talking about, and understandings of people many aspiring educators see as unlike themselves?
2. How does Kaylee and David’s sense of being “different” interact with the service learning experience to foster their “ideological development” (Bakhtin) as aspiring educators?

## 1. Conceptual framework

To address these questions, we engage with Kerschbaum’s (2014) re-envisioning of the concept of difference within the field of writing studies. Defining difference “as a relation between two individuals that is predicated upon their separateness from one another, or what Bakhtin refers to as noncoincidence in being” (Kerschbaum, 2014, p. 67), Kerschbaum proposes a view of difference that is dynamic and shifting based on social context and interactions. Rather than being a static and stable identity that people embody, Kerschbaum approaches difference as being discursively marked within social situations. That is to say, difference is something that people do as they interact with others. At times, a person may mark him or herself as different from other persons, or other persons may mark someone as different from themselves. This more dynamic approach to understanding difference is critical, specifically for this study, as it opens up possibilities for persons’ transformation, change, and processes of “becoming” (Bakhtin, 1981). Kerschbaum grounds her argument on difference in the

work of Mikhail Bakhtin who wrote that turns in communicative practices are bounded by a change in speakers that respond to previous exchanges in an ongoing dialogue. Utterances always are oriented toward an imagined response from one individual to another.

Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account. Therefore, each kind of utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91).

Utterances take place in particular social milieu in which we interact and are embedded within multiple social languages each person speaks. As Clark and Holquist (1984) explain: “The scenario of any utterance must contain the same three *dramatis personae*: the speaker, the listener, and the topic. All utterances are born, live, and die in the interaction between these participants” (p. 205). Utterances include what is said, the verbal or the “text of the statement,” the immediate or “extraverbal context” in which it is spoken, and the intonation with which it is spoken to a particular person about a specific topic (Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 203). Individuals speak multiple, often conflicting “languages” and must select from these when addressing others or themselves. Through the use of conflicting languages and discourses persons literally “mark” themselves as different.

We see this process of “marking difference” (Kerschbaum, 2014) as happening through the discursive struggle of two kinds of discourses (Bakhtin, 1981). The first is authoritative discourse that we assume to be “true” either because it has been passed down through time as traditional knowledge, is asserted through available science, or governs our thinking through religious, political, or economic doctrine. It is what he (1981) called the “words of the fathers” (pp. 342–343). A second type of discourse is internally persuasive and consists of those arguments that each person considers convincing for herself. As Bakhtin (1981) wrote:

Internally persuasive discourse ... as it is affirmed through assimilation ... [is] tightly interwoven with “one’s own word” ... the internally persuasive word is half ours and half-someone else’s. Its creativity and productiveness consists precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is ... developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts (p. 346)

That is, internally persuasive discourse constantly is in flux as we learn, change, and develop as persons, and as we encounter more and differing viewpoints. Ultimately, these struggles lead to one’s ideological becoming or ways in which we view the world. Ideological becoming is best characterized as “an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 346). Ideological becoming is born of tensions and conflicts individuals face every day, in every hour, around choices we make about what we think, do, and say. Our ideological selves are influenced both by a “process of selectively assimilating the words of others” in various contexts (1981, p. 341).

Because many of the university students whom we taught aspired to be teachers, we especially were interested in if and how they were responding to ideas we were presenting about the intersecting dimensions of persons’ identities—their race, social

<sup>1</sup> All names of people, geographic places, and institutions have been given pseudonyms.

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