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Critical Perspectives

The promotion of social justice: Service learning for transformative education

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the scenario and ontological reasoning behind three social justice projects developed by the authors. It is followed up by an exploration of service learning as a tool to be used to disrupt the traditional in-class learning approach. Service learning is connected to transformative education as a framework to enhance the reflections regarding the three activities. The paper concludes by presenting a model signifying our counternormative pedagogical approach. The linkage between service learning and transformative education aims to co-engage educators with our students and co-enhance our view of social justice within our communities.

1. Introduction

Facilitating opportunities for university students to reach their full potential requires exposing them to a wide range of experiences, both in and out of the university environment. Students need to be challenged intellectually, as well as creatively, innovatively, politically in areas such as social justice so that they can go out into the world with their eyes, hearts and minds wide open to make it a better place. Inspired by the work of [McGuire, Tucker, and Mainieri \(2013\)](#) the question that guides this study is what are our *responsibilities* as facilitators of education? We further query what can be done to improve the educational process? And further, how can we use our educational philosophies to guide us in this process? The scholarly contribution of this study is to contribute to the research exploring the confluence of service learning and transformative critical pedagogy and how this transforms students as social agents.

This paper is the story of two scholars from different backgrounds who crossed paths during their PhD studies in New Zealand. Since then, we have been working together, specifically in challenging and better understanding our role in education, as well as our responsibilities to society. In [Boluk and Carnicelli \(2015\)](#) we briefly explored our crossroads, backgrounds and focused in on the initial projects we developed with our students. However, since this publication we have developed a peer support approach where we rely on each other to review and challenge our educational philosophies, discuss ideas, and consider how to implement them. This continuous reflective approach on our individual educational philosophies has led us to reconsider experiential learning in higher education (as per the title of our previous publication *Activism and Critical Reflection through Experiential Learning*). Accordingly, in this paper we concern ourselves specifically with considering service learning as a way to facilitate and mobilize a transformative education focusing on social justice.

The shift in our personal views is likely the result of our interaction with the different educational worlds in which we are currently engaging (United Kingdom and Canada), as well as based on the projects and experiences including *Academics for a Better*

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World discussed previously in Boluk and Carnicelli (2015). Our work reflects the collective imagination of two young untenured scholars and the possibilities that can emerge when working together on generating opportunities for our students outside the confines of university lecture halls. Together our teaching philosophies are grounded in ‘*counternormative pedagogy*’ (Howard, 1998, p. 28) as such, our paper outlines what is possible when we collectively challenge the dominant discourse in education. In this paper we present a further development in our educational position as individuals, friends, and research partners. The first part of this paper will review the development from thinking about experiential learning through service learning to transformative education as a core part of our educational philosophies. At the heart of our understanding of transformative education lies a focus on social justice using critical pedagogy as a theoretical approach. This paper does not aim to present traditional empirical research but instead, a reflective piece based on the activities we created and the conversations, feedback and reflective diaries of students engaged in the projects. As such, the ‘voice’ of students presented here are not considered data and have been extracted from the reflective feedback provided by students during or after their engagement in the projects we have facilitated.

2. Educational philosophies and their crossroads

Academia as a working environment is currently heavily reliant on peer-support. Academics review papers for journals, they can be part of the validation of courses in other institutions, collaborate in research and consultancy, deliver guest lectures in other classes, faculties and institutions. Furthermore, they take part in tenure and promotion processes, hiring panels and they can also act as external examiners. In this collegiate environment scholars should engage with each other, share practices, understandings and collaborate in order to develop educational practices. However, it is also important to consider scholars as unique human beings with different backgrounds, stories and education and it is important to remember that people can see the world using ‘different lenses’, in some case sharing similar beliefs but at the same time disagreeing in other essential views.

The authors of this paper are in essence different. One is from Brazil, the other from Canada; one has a degree in Physical Education while the other in Tourism; two people coming from two different paths, with different inspirations, family backgrounds, and life/educational experiences. Although our differences are evident, we share a similar view about higher education and collectively challenge our *responsibilities* as facilitators of education. What bonds our projects and this reflective piece of work are the commonalities in our educational philosophies. It is the crossroads of our *beings-in-education* and the transmutation from theory to action that have been leading our journey. This journey in our educational philosophies means promoting interesting and stimulating opportunities (both in and out of the lecture theatre) that will encourage students to engage in a process that leads to critical, reflective and transformative learning. Also, mutual in our philosophies is the focus on a dialogue-based learning process that facilitates the two-way communication of critical discussion between the people stimulating students to use creativity as a way to discover and share knowledge.

Our work co-creating alongside our students *Academics for a Better World* (AFBW) (Boluk & Carnicelli, 2015) at the University of the West of Scotland (United Kingdom) and Dalarna University (Sweden) between 2012 and 2014, was developed in line with our own personal values, as a way to activate our educational philosophies and provide meaningful opportunities for our students seeking citizen engagement opportunities and professional insights. Below we outline the projects that are the concretization of our thoughts, ideas and beliefs about the engagement with our students in events and tourism supporting social justice learning.

Academics for a Better World (AFBW) started as an extra-curricular forum for a group of students in the Events Management Program at the University of the West of Scotland and from the International Tourism Management Undergraduate Program and Masters in Tourism Destination Development Program at the University of Dalarna in Sweden to engage with local communities and charities and develop events and activities based on a service learning approach (Boluk & Carnicelli, 2015). These activities were not directly associated with specific modules/units/courses but external activities aiming to develop opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and engage with the community (Boluk & Carnicelli, 2015). AFBW started in Scotland and involved activities such as tree planting, micro-economics activities for fundraising, as well as engagement with local charities and community groups. Similarly, the Swedish team led by Dr. Karla Boluk (faculty member responsible for the projects), organized multiple events to fundraise for local community organizations. The activities carried out were not predetermined in either of the AFBW groups but were rather a result of several dialogues that took place in partnership with the students.

The work with the AFBW and emergent student-professor ideas led to the development of two new projects: the *Volunteering Academy (Scotland)* and the *Big Ideas Challenge (Canada)*. In these projects the focus was more directed on aiding marginalized community members and addressing health and well-being. In both groups the activities were followed by critical reflective practices and a continuation of exchanging experiences between faculty and students.

The *Volunteering Academy* established in Scotland had the aim to bring marginalized, long-term unemployed people from the community into the university environment and provide assistance with the articulation and development of soft skills. Students of School of Business and Enterprise at the University of the West of Scotland involved in the *Volunteering Academy* engaged with long-term unemployed people helping them to develop skills that they have learned themselves as part of their degree. In addition to supporting and engaging the local community the objective of the project is to develop the critical thinking capability of students using a service learning approach; and encourage students to reflect on the skills they have, their own ‘self in the world’, and their responsibilities towards tackling social injustice. During three weeks students keen to engage in the project were meeting with Dr. Sandro Carnicelli to design the activities, discuss expectations and objectives to be achieved. This operational design became a weekly discussion group where students could reflect on their own self presence and engagement with the community and well as the best ways they could contribute to social justice.

The 2015 *Big Ideas Challenge for Health and Wellbeing* is a platform designed to encourage students to consider their

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