



Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement

Stoecker, Randy
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Book Review

Tags: community based learning | service learning | student learning

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The double entendre in this book's title may be clichéd but it is often apt, and in this case Randy Stoecker makes a strong argument that service learning and the rest of higher education civic engagement ("service learning" functions as a catch-all term) is in need of liberating so that it can *be* liberating. Stoecker accuses "institutionalized service learning" (ISL), as he calls the prevailing practice, of reinforcing an oppressive neoliberal political-economic order. As a faculty member of the University of Wisconsin, he speaks from experience.

What keeps most service-learning practitioners captive, Stoecker asserts, is a failure to theorize about how service learning does and/or could operate. He offers a theoretical view that enables him to (1) reflect on and criticize ideas in current practice and (2) project alternative ideas as points of articulation for liberating service learning – in both senses alluded to above.

Stoecker develops his vision in twelve chapters divided into three parts. A "prelude," "interlude," and "postlude" provide other vantage points, ironizing Stoecker's implied authority on the matters at stake and illustrating metaphorically the problems and promises of service learning. An index of names and topics is also provided.

Part I, "The Problem and Its Context," surveys the current state of ISL. In chapter 1, beginning with a critical incident from September 2013 – a disciplinary hearing for students who, in support of labor unionization efforts at the University of Wisconsin, occupied the Chancellor's office – Stoecker explicates his worries about who ISL truly serves. In chapter 2 he recounts the emergence and eventual institutionalization of service learning in U.S. colleges and universities from the late nineteenth to early twenty-first century, emphasizing evidence that

suggests ISL has come to serve bureaucratic requirements rather than community initiatives. Chapter 3 makes a preliminary analysis of the avowed and actual theoretical commitments of current practice, pointing to a need for sustained examination of the meaning of four core concepts: learning, service, community, and change.

Part II deepens the analysis. The author argues that ISL supposes “learning” is for students to accrue from service. “Service,” then, means charitable giving, rather than helping communities learn how they might wield their own power. So concepts of “community” in ISL neglect political-economic issues of structural injustice. Accordingly, “change” comes to be seen as a matter of advancing individuals within an unquestioned neoliberal order.

Part III re-envision the core concepts. The crucial move is to start with a critical theory of “change” as social change. In this light “community” may be grasped not as a vague given but as a goal; “service” is seen not as charity but as casting our lot together to form community and effect change; and “learning” means learning to be learners in service to a shared struggle for change – in short, learning to be liberated.

Although Stoecker offers something to annoy everyone, I still recommend *Liberating Service Learning* for its challenging examination of the spirit of service learning, in its present state and as it might be in future.

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