THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SERVICE-LEARNING: ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN IMPORTING A PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATION

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One of the fastest-growing forms of pedagogy in the United States - with half a dozen organizations, a listserv, and a couple of journals devoted to it, and with 428 books or monographs in the various libraries of the Indiana University system on the topic - is service-learning.

What is service-learning, why is it popular in the United States, and does the fact that it is popular in the United States mean that it is an appropriate pedagogy for universities in Kyrgyzstan, particularly for one called "the American University in Kyrgyzstan"?

Service-learning is the uniting of volunteer service with academic learning. As Barbara Jacoby writes (5), Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning.

Or, as one student said (Eyler and Giles, 195), "I think people will do more thinking once they have felt."

Service-learning is situated in the broader context of theories of student intellectual development (see McEwen), experiential learning (see Kolb, 1984), problem-centered learning (see Conner-Greene, 10; and Wilkerson and Gijselaers), multiple learning styles (see Fuhrmann and Grasha, Chapter 5; Kolb, 1981; and Sternberg) and learner-centered educational reform (Ehrlich, xiii), but the issue of reciprocity distinguishes it from other forms of pedagogy (as well as from the "praktika" that Kyrgyz educators are familiar with, in which the primary recipient of something of value is the student) and also connects it with education for democracy and a civil society (see Bok; Bringle et al; Lempert; Lisman; and Kenny et al). Reciprocity means that the student is not the only beneficiary of the educational process; as Howard Berry and Linda Chisholm write (107), service-learning "addresses human needs that would otherwise remain unmet." But service-learning, as Berry and Chisholm note (ibid), is also "a powerful means of learning." It is distinguished from simple service by its emphasis on reflection and on linking the service with academic learning about the issues connected with clients’ need for the service. Kwame Nkrumah has said, "Thought without practice is empty; practice without thought is blind" (quoted by Kielsmeier, ix). Service-learning attempts to obviate both the emptiness and the blindness. (Albert 190-199; Berry 1990a and 1990b, Conrad and Hedin; Duley 610-611, Eyler and Giles 193-204 and passim, Hursh, Kendall (vol. 1) passim; Kolb, 1984 passim; Zimmerman et al.; and others discuss reflection as a means of learning, but by far the most complete source [with structured questions and readings to motivate student thought and a particular emphasis on
intercultural service-learning] is Linda Chisholm's Charting a Hero's Journey.

To give some examples of what service-learning might involve:

- Students in a horticulture class created sustainable backyard landscapes for a low-income community in Clemson, South Carolina, and in the process learned about not only the plants and wildlife habitats native to the area, but also the social service agencies in the community (Haque, Tai, and Mey, 23ff)

- Students in a course in Abnormal Psychology created guides for families who needed information about print, electronic, and community resources available for relatives suffering from specific psychiatric disorders (Conner-Greene, 9ff)

- Students in the departments of medicine, architecture, and environmental studies from the Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Ecuador are working together to build a clinic in an Andean mountain village (Berry and Chisholm, 30)

- Accounting students at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, "teach their skills to village artisans and entrepreneurs so that they turn a profit sufficient for a living wage" (Berry and Chisholm, 33)

As noted in the examples above, service-learning takes place in a variety of countries and cultures. In their book, Service-Learning in Higher Education Around the World: An Initial Look, Berry and Chisholm provide examples of service-learning in 32 countries, and at an April 2002 meeting in Prague, Czech Republic, of the organization they co-founded, the International Partnership for Service-Learning, 23 countries were represented. Yet in the United States, service-learning developed out of a particular historical and cultural context. Kenny and Gallagher (16-23) discuss three broad characteristics of US culture that have contributed to the development of service-learning in US colleges and universities. These are (1) the traditional commitment of US higher education to "public purpose;" (2) service-learning's intellectual and philosophical roots; and (3) traditions of volunteerism and social activism in the US.

The commitment to "public purpose" in the United States dates from the founding of the country. Interestingly, Kenny and Gallagher (quoting Altman) state (16) that a purpose of colleges in colonial America was "preparing students for leadership for the new nation" - something that certainly resonates with contemporary Kyrgyzstan. As Kenny and Gallagher mention, and both Lucas and Rudolph discuss in detail, the history of US higher education has been one of greater and greater inclusivity - public universities were added to private and religious ones; women's colleges were founded in the late nineteenth century (Cohen 69-70 and 111; Lucas 154-158; Rudolph 124-125); "land grant" universities created to serve the needs of their particular states, particularly in agriculture and other applied fields, with "extension centers" to help local farmers; colleges for African-Americans expanded in the post-Civil War era (Cohen 110-111; Lucas 158-165; Rudolph 148-149 and 167-169) and community colleges, with their close focus on the needs of their surrounding areas, proliferated in the 1960's and 1970's (Cohen 312-314; Rudolph 284-286). Kyrgyzstan, of course, shared a similar history during the Soviet period: higher education
became both secular and more inclusive (Pennar et al, Ch. 14; Popovych and Levin-Stankevich, 5-8). In the US, the expansion of education to new student groups generally was accompanied with the expectations that these groups would serve the needs of their demographic or geographical communities. In addition, "service" has traditionally been one of the three responsibilities of faculty at US institutions (see Merrill in the Business Seminar Journal #3). Moreover, universities in the US are seen as having responsibilities to the broader society. A figure with the stature of a Derek Bok, for example, who was president of Harvard University for twenty years, can devote his time to writing a book titled Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University, examining issues ranging from the role of universities in remedying racial inequality in US society to ethical questions in research to whether or not universities should be involved in technical assistance projects abroad when those projects may benefit governments that are unjust.

Kenny and Gallagher's second topic, the intellectual and philosophical roots of service-learning in the US, are considered by many observers to originate with Alexis de Tocqueville and his concerns about the possible selfishness of individualism and, particularly, with John Dewey and his theories of experiential learning (Bellah 8-10; Bringle et al, passim; Eyler and Giles, 7-8 and passim; Giles 257-260; Giles and Freed 352; Kendall et al, 137-138; Kenny and Gallagher 18-19; Kolb 1984 passim, Rhoads 74-75 and 210-211; and Smythe 296-301). De Tocqueville, in his famous book, Democracy in America, worried about the rampant individualism in American society (as excerpted in Bellah et al, 12-13):

As social equality spreads, there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands.

This theme of the isolation and lack of social concern that can be a feature of individualism has been basic to the work of those who see one of the purposes of US higher education as being the engendering of the connections with others, the understanding of lives different from one's own, and the sense of social responsibility that are essential to the functioning of a democratic society that is just as well as free.

Kyrgyzstan, with its history of extended families supporting each other and, during Soviet times, of a governmental social support system, comes from a different tradition, one of connection rather than individualism, but in the last decade social support networks have become more tenuous, and non-governmental organizations, many not yet sustainable, have tried to step into the breech (see Cooper).

In experiential learning, as Morris Keeton and Pamela Tate write (quoted by Kolb, 1984, 5):

... the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied ... [He or she has a] direct encounter with the phenomenon being studied, rather than merely thinking about the encounter or only considering the possibility of doing something with it.
Beyond this, as Dewey notes in his book *Experience and Nature* (quoted by Kolb, 1984, 161):

...the ways in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect on what we believe and expect. ... we discover that we believe many things not because the things are so but because we have become habituated [to them] through the weight of authority, by imitation, prestige, institution, and unconscious effect of language, etc.

Dewey's philosophy involves much more, of course, but the connections of just these two points with US culture are evident. First, the self-reliant individual is capable of learning through an encounter, and indeed may learn better as a result of interacting with reality rather than only imagining it. Second, each person has his or her own truth (see William Perry for more on this point), and authority may be a "weight" which prevents an individual from perceiving things in a new light. These ideas resonate in a society that values individualism and self-expression, as the US does; on the other hand, they may seem "out of sync" in cultures which value the collective and in which elders and authorities traditionally have been given deference. However, it is possible that if a society has chosen change, it may also need to choose forms of learning that generate new ideas. In such cases, the individualized experience/reflection model may have something to offer.

The third aspect of US culture that has contributed to the growth of service-learning and that is discussed by Kenny and Gallagher (19-20) are traditions of volunteerism and social activism. Concomitant with the individualism and inner-directedness that de Tocqueville lamented, and with the idea of the validity of a personal vision that Dewey and later writers such as William Perry have advanced, are the ideas of initiative and personal responsibility. If a school's library in the US needs more books, the parents of the children are likely to hold a "bake sale," selling cakes and cookies that they have baked, and donating the proceeds to the library. To reach the highest level in Boy Scouting in the US, a young man must identify a community problem, design a remedy, and carry it out. After the September 11 tragedy in New York, a community bookstore in the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn overnight, at the initiative of staff, became a drop-off place for bottled water, bandages, clean socks, and other items needed by rescue workers at the World Trade Center site a few miles away. Service-learning draws upon this tradition of individuals seeing a problem and taking the initiative to do something about it. To the extent that people are used to looking to government, to authorities, to strong individuals, rather than to themselves to resolve problems, volunteering service to private groups may be an unfamiliar way of finding solutions. (Alisher Khamidov's recent article, "Cult of Personality May Undermine Kyrgyz Civil Society," has some trenchant points to make in this regard.) Moreover, the concept of volunteering may be distrusted among those who have experienced volunteer subbotniks and volunteer cotton-picking that were, in fact, not volunteering at all. However, as noted above, the different circumstances of a different decade may call for different pedagogies. This is something for Kyrgyzstani educators and students, who know both their own contemporary society and their dreams for its future, to decide.
Service-learning in the United States, then, comes out of a particular culture and a particular set of traditions. That does not mean that it can not exist in other societies and in other conditions. In the Philippines, for example, service-learning is frequently practiced at colleges and universities which have a Christian mission. In India, it grows out a vision of national self-reliance in the post-colonial era (see Jacob, in Berry and Chisholm, 122). In Denmark, a society that traditionally has been ethnically homogenous, there is a sense that service-learning can help people understand and empathize with new immigrant populations (Berry and Chisholm, 16). Service-learning thus can meet different needs in different societies.

A society’s educational system is designed to produce people who can function well in that society - socially, culturally, and economically - either as the society exists, or as educational planners would like to see it transformed. The Soviet educational system had remarkable strengths in terms of producing people who would function well in Soviet society, and produced some remarkable changes in Central Asian society (see Medlin et al). Contemporary Kyrgyzstan needs to decide what elements of Soviet society are worth keeping, and it needs to keep the elements of education that produced them. Yet it is clear that it is impossible to recreate the past, and that Kyrgyzstan, now and in the future, needs to make decisions about its directions. If those directions call for independence of thought, initiative, self-reliance, compassion, connecting with those different from oneself and feeling a sense of responsibility for them, learning how to learn from one’s own experience, an ability to analyze social issues, and for connections between universities and the broader society, then service-learning may indeed be an appropriate and even necessary pedagogy for Kyrgyzstan’s future, regardless of the fact that it also is appropriate and necessary in the very different context of the United States.

Students learn by reading in both New York and in Naryn, although what they read and why their professors give the reading assignments may be different. Similarly, as different as the US and Kyrgyzstan are, there may be a place for service-learning as a pedagogy in both.

Works cited


"Service-learning in International and Intercultural Settings" in Jane C. Kendall and Associates, Combining Service and Learning: A


