



Activism and Service-Learning: Reframing Volunteerism As Acts of Dissent

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What are we going to do differently when we get up tomorrow?

—Gloria Steinem (1983: 355)

Students in a sophomore-level English class were discussing the community service component of the required, one-credit course introducing them to the university. Some reported completing this component on their own; others had done group projects. One student was particularly pleased with her experience: her group had gone to a local beach and picked up litter. The instructor asked her, “Don’t you think it would have been more effective if your group had targeted the source of the pollution on the beach, perhaps by picketing at the local businesses that contribute most to the need for beach cleanup?” This student balked at the idea. When asked about performing environmental activism, she claimed immediately and emphatically that it “would go against my beliefs.”

This young woman was very keen on community service but almost offended at the idea of activism. What is the difference, and where does this attitude come from? What caused this student’s enthusiasm for community service but her discomfort with activism? We are interested in these questions because students asked to participate in forms of service have preconceived

notions of these terms or concepts. Does activism have such negative, radical connotations in our culture that young people want to distance themselves from it, even as students are increasingly committed to service?

Performing service is just one of the many connotations of the related terms *service-learning*, *community service*, *volunteerism*, *field education*, and *internship*. Into these terms we want to introduce the concept and model of activism. We do not intend, necessarily, to privilege activism over service-learning, because an artificially constructed and rhetorically reinforced binary between service-learning and activism is not productive or useful. However, we do want to reclaim the activist potential of service-learning, which the process of institutionalization obscures. A review of the literature illustrates that while some people use the terms interchangeably, *service* standing for everything from service-learning to community service, volunteerism, field education, or internship, others insist on very precise distinctions between these terms and what they represent—distinctions that are nevertheless often conflated in the literature.¹ Entering this conversation, then, requires careful negotiation among competing terms (although we cannot help but notice that *activism* is rarely one of them).

Many who work within and write about the discourses of service-learning, at least in the field of composition, share a discomfort with *activism*, a term far more likely to be used in women's studies. Even those who do not shy away from it (Schutz and Gere 1998; Cushman 1999) tend to conflate it with *service*. Thomas Deans (2000: 10) lists under the “broad umbrella” of service-learning the terms “community service writing, community-based learning, literate social action, activist research, or academic outreach,” and does little to distinguish these very different categories. Lumping them together, moreover, may dilute some of their potential for social change.

In this article we revisit the concern that service-learning, while it can be activist, is too often infused with the volunteer ethos, a philanthropic or charitable viewpoint that ignores the structural reasons to help others. We want to intervene in the literature on service-learning in two ways: by claiming activism as a name and a practice that works *with* service-learning and by situating service-learning within place-based studies and social science fieldwork. Both interventions will contribute to models of citizenship that combine critical consciousness with action and reflection. In general, we argue that a more historical and geographic approach to activist learning projects will give learners a broader understanding of dissent and will encourage them to envision themselves as actors or agents in political arenas.

The Challenges

Service-learning initiatives in composition studies have developed as a practical companion to theories of critical pedagogy and liberatory education. Intent on “walking the walk,” literacy educators have come to believe that they must do more than read Paulo Freire, that a social contract obliges them to do more than teach the academic essay, and that white, middle-class, college-aged students, in particular, need lessons in reading the world. This broader awareness of service-learning in composition dates back to Bruce Herzberg’s (1994) article “Community Service and Critical Teaching.” Today a growing literature in service-learning and related areas outlines both the promise and the problems of college coursework designed to forge interaction with community members or organizations. While these designs vary widely in scope and purpose, many are intended to cause an assigned encounter with difference. How students respond to that difference will depend on whether the designs have emerged from a belief in service or in activism: roughly speaking, service addresses people, and activism addresses structures. One of service-learning’s biggest limitations, admittedly, is that it induces students to ask only, “How can we help these people?” instead of the harder question, “Why are conditions this way?”

Readers just venturing into the literature on service-learning will notice that a chain of daunting challenges accompanies these programs or activities. Alongside the growing enthusiasm for service-learning, there is a strong tradition of sharing the problems, anticipating the weaknesses, and critiquing the premises of these educational endeavors. Emphasizing the activist potential of service-learning is not likely to solve all of these problems, but we offer the following review of the literature to demonstrate how easy it is to fall into a binary opposition, either “us versus them” or “service versus activism,” and how difficult it is to work toward a more activist model even though activism expands our ability to engage in effective social change.

Students Do Not Choose to Go

While advocates of service-learning will testify to its transformative nature—students are changed and enlightened, and many serve in their assigned and then adopted communities long after the required part ends—the starting point is, nevertheless, a requirement imposed by an authority; that is, students have to go to get course credit. If many students, not to mention most academics, are too comfortable, too safe, and too invested in the status quo, how do we give them educational opportunities that will make them decidedly uncomfortable, and therefore might cause learning to happen, without creat-

ing a “punishing pedagogy”? As Kathryn Forbes et al. (1999) point out, community service programs backfire or are hugely problematic when students, like criminal offenders, are forced to take part in them. A prevailing attitude in many communities is that those who serve others might be righting a wrong rather than working to change the status quo. Eileen E. Schell’s (1999) students, enrolled in a section of “Writing and Learning in the Community,” discovered that Syracuse, New York, residents were not particularly welcoming to students who delivered their meals: “One resident even confronted John [a student] . . . about what ‘he had done’ to warrant his service. . . . This community resident thought of service as ‘forced restitution,’ as a sentence the student had received for bad behavior at the university.” In addition to the sometimes unacknowledged burden that students with service requirements may present to local organizations, residents and “the public,” as Schell’s anecdote illustrates, may think of community service as a type of punishment. One of the challenges, then, is to educate the community as well as the students.

Students (and Instructors) in Search of Otherness

Take Their Subject Positions with Them

A more insidious problem is that the assigned encounter with difference often “devolve[s] into a cultural safari into the jungle of ‘otherness’” (Forbes et al. 1999: 158). This problem has many names, but Lorie J. Goodman (1998: 59–60) probably identifies it best as a question asked by a woman who was a “guest” at a mission in downtown Los Angeles. Eyeing the students suspiciously, she said, “Why are you doing this?” Goodman, like all of those engaged in service-learning, had to do some soul-searching about her own pedagogical motivations and ethical reasons for requiring service at a homeless shelter. On campuses that, like Goodman’s Pepperdine University, are populated by a large percentage of white, middle-class, traditionally aged people, it is tempting to give students, often sheltered by their home cultures, neighborhoods, or regions, the experience of seeing some exoticized other. To students who claim never to have seen a homeless person, Goodman admits, many instructors feel the urge to respond, “Let’s go, and I’ll show you some” (59–60). If courses require volunteer work without also requiring a critique of volunteerism, “community service [becomes] at best an exercise in observing otherness and at worst a missionary expedition” (Forbes et al. 1999: 162). The push to include volunteer work in the curriculum tends to ignore the work that has been done in women’s studies on grassroots organizing and coalition building.

Ethical questions such as those raised by Forbes et al., and by similarly strong critiques of service programs, constitute a large area of concern in service-learning studies. Deans (2000: 21–23) cites the power differential between the “‘server’ and ‘served’” and the “do-gooder” mentality that poses demanding challenges to service-learning designs. He concludes, however, that one cannot simply sit around and contemplate these thorny ethical issues—that service-learning is primarily a call to action. But when people do turn to action, they cannot step out of their own subjectivities.

Even if students prepare responsibly for their encounter with difference, they necessarily take with them their preconceptions, media-driven images, and packaged stereotypes. Designing encounters to avoid this uncomfortable “othering” is extremely difficult. One strand of literature in service-learning, for example, has to do with tutoring, “one of the most common forms of service-learning” (Schutz and Gere 1998: 132). After imitating Herzberg’s tutoring-based literacy project at Bentley College, Aaron Schutz and Anne Ruggles Gere conclude that the “caring” model of tutoring can limit students’ engagement “with other, more ‘public’ dimensions of their experiences” (133).² Students who tutor must understand the communities of their tutees, and such understanding develops from participation in, not just visits to, a community.

Even in carefully designed projects like Herzberg’s (see Deans 2000), sending students off campus magnifies the cultural difference between the college student and the homeless person, illiterate factory worker, or community center director he or she has been assigned to encounter. How students interpret this difference tells us a great deal about their understanding of the social-ideological workings of culture. Their experience, when accompanied by reflection, makes them better writers, better learners, or better citizens, so the theory goes, *if* it does not make their social and cultural biases further entrenched. But the danger of such entrenchment is precisely Herzberg’s point: he rejects the idea that community service raises critical consciousness. When we ask the students we send out to do fieldwork only or mainly to “observe differences,” we not only limit their understanding of ideological practices but give them the impression that their view is the norm. This “arrogance of believing ourselves at the center” (Rich 1986: 223) results from the ignorance at the core of privilege. Thus students and instructors see themselves as “liberal saviors” (Schutz and Gere 1998: 133). What these attitudes overlook is the structural mechanisms that make difference different in the first place.

*Service-Learning Projects Are Difficult to
Start, Manage, Sustain, and Make Reciprocal*

Much of the literature addresses the logistical challenges, which prove so formidable that many publications include contacts or networking information to facilitate service-learning startups (Adler-Kassner et al. 1997; Deans 2000). Most service-learning advocates see a continuum of projects on which volunteerism is the least likely to effect social change. Work at the level of volunteerism has been so pervasive, of course, because it is the easiest to organize and carry out. But it is simply ineffectual, and possibly unethical, to do a “hit-and-run” on a community or group of people. How much understanding can develop from one afternoon’s visit to a homeless shelter or a food bank, even if students do write reflectively about it afterward? “Limited engagement, a superficial encounter,” warns David Sibley (1995: 29), “might result in the presumption of knowledge which could be more damaging than ignorance if this knowledge were in the province of state bureaucracies or academia.” Avoiding superficial encounters begins with the recognition, already in place among service-learning advocates, that one assignment, one semester, is not enough; this is why it is important to make long-term commitments to communities and to create sustainable projects.

Writing about the community, which keeps insiders and outsiders at some distance from each other, solves the problem that Sibley identifies but creates another one: student outsiders form no attachments with the community and so cannot understand it as fully as they could through long-term contact. Writing *about* the community does not require the depth of understanding that writing *for* or *with* it does (Deans 2000). Writing *with* is the most difficult but also the most preferable, because it supports the idea that public service is an effort not to help others but to join them “as relative equals in a common project of social change” (Schutz and Gere 1998: 146). Realizing such a project in one semester, however, is next to impossible.

Since designing, contributing to, and completing “a common project of social change” is logistically difficult, one challenge is to strive toward that goal while allowing for alternatives or adaptations on the way. For example, since different communities with different histories and agendas are found on most campuses, students do not need to go far from the classroom to participate in social change movements or grassroots activism. The college or university environment has plenty to offer in terms of mapping “geographies of exclusion” (Sibley 1995), and large-scale, long-term projects are not the only ways to introduce students to acts of dissent.

What Students Should Read and Write in Service-Learning Courses

If learning is to be the priority, or if learning and service are to be tightly woven together, this question requires careful consideration. Those who are new to the area of service-learning may suppose that students write a lot of journal entries about their observations and experiences, a form of writing to learn. Especially in a paradigm of volunteerism, students may be asked to write only about their reactions or their experiences. Instructors who wish to give more attention to structuring the service-learning experience will go beyond journal writing and will ask students, for example, to reflect on or to analyze both their experiences and their reactions to them, a form of answering the question “Why are we doing this?”

While a great range of possibilities exists for reading and writing in these classes, there has been a recent trend toward formulating research and writing projects around a set of issues related to the service-learning experience; for instance, students conduct research about an issue and then write proposals, policy statements, or editorials for a public arena. Writing *about* the community often leads to research papers or other types of academic discourse, and writing *with* the community often engages students in the creation of pamphlets, brochures, Web sites, letters, surveys, or whatever will benefit the community organization most. Although the works of John Dewey, Cornel West, and Paulo Freire are widely cited in the service-learning literature, readings, which will depend on the service-learning design, vary greatly. Herzberg’s students, for example, read Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary* and Jonathan Kozol’s *Savage Inequalities*, along with other essays on literacy. But it is a challenge to combine reading material about social change, say, with the course “content,” which may be American literature, secondary education methods, or business writing. Service-learning, like any other form of liberal pedagogy, must strive for balance between discipline-related content and a literature on activism, critical consciousness, or social change.

In pinpointing the best situation for service-learning assignments in composition, Paul Heilker (1997: 71) makes a case for writing “beyond” the curriculum, outside the classroom, where students cannot encounter “real rhetorical situations in which to understand writing as social action,” indeed where they “have suffered for too long in courses . . . that are palpably unreal rhetorical situations.” The lack of content in composition makes students desperate for “the real,” and the composition instructor, then, should focus on providing them with “real” audiences and “real purposes” that move writing

instruction into the realm of service-learning (72). It hardly benefits student writers and their instructors to cast writing and the work it does as unreal or as less real than in fact they are in the “real world.” “Using service learning to traverse the boundaries separating the academic from the public or the ‘community,’” says Bruce Horner (2000: 70), “can reinforce the academic/real world binary, leading again to the derogation of student writing as somehow less ‘real’ than work more recognizably ‘public.’” Given its ideological power in sorting students, given its institutional stamina, and given all of our efforts to redefine literacy, it would be more effective to study the writing classroom and the institution it serves as intensely real. The composition class, from its content to the classroom itself, is one site among many where literacy practices circulate. Heilker’s argument inadvertently contributes to the very perception that service-learning tries to undo: the university as an ivory tower, a place apart from the real world, an environment immune to injustice and structural biases.

*How Students Should Encounter a
Community to Which They Do Not Belong*

Schutz and Gere (1998: 147), who use the terms *public* and *private* to examine service-learning, conclude with a passing reference to method: “Despite our best intentions, if we are not careful we may end up reinforcing ideologies and assumptions that we had hoped to critique. *How* we step outside the classroom, how we enter into service-learning relationships with communities beyond our own, will be crucial in determining our success.” While they give a nod to the importance of method, however, they do not explore it in their article, at least not in a practical sense.

Although they emphasize that public service would require students “to enter relationships with *communities* and not with easily isolated individuals” (145), Schutz and Gere offer nothing in the way of practices for doing so. It is a well-known principle in cultural studies and postmodern theory that our immersion in culture makes perspective difficult to achieve: only distance or a jolt of unfamiliarity gets people to see how culture operates. But this jolt must be accompanied by a set of tools to help students analyze what they witness—and from what perspective—and not simply record their impressions.

This review of the literature in service-learning suggests the daunting challenges that face those who would send their students out into communities and cultures only to observe and reflect. If students are asked to engage in confrontation, tackle problems, and take action as well, the challenges increase greatly. But this review also suggests that most publications on service-

learning (at least in composition studies) avoid the term *activism* or steer clear of the traditions of activism or grassroots political organizing.

Although many service-learning theorists and practitioners recognize the importance of attempting structural social change, they acknowledge that service-learning experiences rarely lead students in this direction. One of the stumbling blocks is the relationship between students engaged in community service and recipients of such service. Robert A. Rhoads (1997: 2) observes that “postmodernism’s exhortations for communities to organize around difference come with little substance in terms of how or why people should enter into relationships with diverse others.” Scholars have suggested the need for reciprocal relationships and have proposed that designing service-learning projects to cultivate them helps students challenge their own preconceptions about difference more easily and effectively (see Morton 1995; Rhoads 1997; Foos 1998).

It is fruitful at this point to consider the connections between activism and service-learning based on relationships. In most service-learning situations, relationships are clearly based on difference: I’m homeless; you’re not. Activism argues for relationships based on connection. It does not valorize uniformity (i.e., we are all the same), and it does not naively assert that difference does not exist or matter. All of us, as members of a society, are in relationships that produce difference. There are two possible points of connection here. The first is that the structures that produce difference produce each one of us as different. In other words, both self and other are produced as different, separate, and separable by social and institutional structures. One’s implication in a politics of difference is therefore a common experience, although the impact of that difference will be different for each of us. The second lies in a shared goal of creating social change. We each inhabit different social positionalities, with different resources, advantages, and privileges. As we join together to change the social structures that produce inequality, our different positionalities may be assets—or they may be irrelevant. We may be able to negotiate through our differences, or we may be able to ignore them. Our activist relationships are based on common desires. Rhoads (1997: 44) bemoans our lack of “an effective language for deciphering the relationship between the self and the other.” Activism may be one of the conceptual frameworks that help us understand these relationships.

It matters whether students see what they are doing as service or as an activist project contributing to social justice, in terms both of how (or whether) we can explode the self-other binary and of how (or whether) we can achieve substantive structural change in society. Since service-learning

advocates are usually good at confronting contradictions head-on, we urge service-learning leaders to situate their programs in the context of a history of activism and consciousness-raising.

Activism and Consciousness-Raising

Service-learning practitioners build on a rich tradition. Histories of community service commonly cite Jane Addams, John Dewey, and Dorothy Day as early-twentieth-century models (Morton and Saltmarsh 1997; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999) and Paulo Freire as a more recent one (Rhoads 1997). However, these histories (and the service-learning endeavors inspired by them) seem less willing to acknowledge the implications of these models for activism. Little attention is paid to assessing the accomplishments and failures of these people in the struggle to achieve social justice. This suggests a lack of understanding of what activism is, as well as a general ignorance of the history of social change movements.

We argue that activism is a (perhaps) competing but (more often) complementary framework that expands the intent of some models of service-learning. Activist efforts seek to change the social climate and structures that make volunteerism necessary. Although some service-learning practitioners theorize about and advocate a more activist model, few students understand their service as a contribution to structural social change (Morton 1995; Rhoads 1997; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999).³ Few of the students Morton (1995: 25) surveyed, for example, see changing society as a primary goal; they also do not consider advocating for social change necessary, effective, or interesting.

Activist frameworks ask not “Why are [those] people poor?” but “What causes poverty?” not “Why can’t Johnny read?” but “What causes illiteracy?” Many of our students appear to recognize activism only as participation in huge events planned by global or national organizations: marches, rallies, and the like. They imagine activists as heroes, courageous and dedicated in ways that seem impossible to emulate.⁴ They do not recognize grassroots efforts as activism, and they do not see themselves as potential actors in either local or larger arenas. They also cannot identify actions they take in their daily lives as activist, for example, their challenging a friend’s use of sexist language. Thus they need a broader understanding of activism to see both that they are often activists already, albeit unwittingly, and that they can *decide* to be activists—that activism consists of acts of dissent in which they can and sometimes do engage.

Students need to understand the power and necessity of activism in

achieving social change. For many traditional college-aged students, the passionate activism of the civil rights era (which helped spawn powerful movements for women's liberation and gay and lesbian rights, for instance) is ancient history. They are often completely unaware of earlier social change movements. Indeed, "for most of us," Loeb (1999: 36) observes, "the past is a foreign country." Students seem to make sense of activism and activists in a decontextualized way. They may recognize names, primarily through media references and representations; they recognize Martin Luther King Jr. as an icon, for example, and the Million Man March as an iconographic moment. But they seldom appreciate what drives social change movements (in terms of needs, impetus, and historical specificity), know how to assess their accomplishments and shortcomings, perceive what still needs to be done, and so on.⁵ Their lack of historical awareness leads students to figure social change as some natural process that occurs without human intervention and intentionality.

It is important to notice that service-learning itself has become viable and popular in a specific sociohistorical context. This is the era of the codification of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993; by 1997 Colin Powell had become a visible spokesperson for a national volunteer movement.⁶ Thus service-learning models that ignore the need for activism—or that mute their own activist potential, consciously or not—are also created in this context.

Our effort here to raise questions about the potential and place of activism in conjunction with service-learning endeavors has a historical trajectory as well. One movement to which we can usefully connect is that of second-wave feminism, where creating methodologies for effective social change and ways to understand the function of social change work is seen as an important and necessary use of activist energies. The similarities between second-wave debates about strategies for achieving social change and the questions we are raising about the intent of service-learning projects become apparent when we look closely at the phenomenon of consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising (CR) emerged from the radical arm of U.S. second-wave feminism as a method of teaching a politicized awareness.⁷ Women share their experiences in focused small-group discussions, an understanding of the commonality and causes of oppression results, and the women are galvanized into political action. A frequent criticism of U.S. feminist CR, in the early stages of the second wave, was that it often failed to result in such political action or that its focus on gaining knowledge and awareness came at the expense of action. Kathie Sarachild (1978: 147), a major force in

developing feminist CR as we know it in the United States, explains that it “was seen as both a method for arriving at the truth and a means for action and organizing. . . . it wasn’t seen as merely a stage in feminist development which would then lead to another phase, an action phase, but [was seen] as an essential part of the overall feminist strategy.” It seems clear that CR was intended as a contribution to both awareness and action. Sarachild’s vision, transcending the binary exclusivity of *either* awareness *or* action, moves to *both* awareness *and* action. She is careful, however, not to conflate the two; the emphasis on the need to act remains. This is precisely what service-learning projects often lose sight of as they focus on exposing students to difference by attending to individuals who suffer the effects of social problems.

Sarachild is contemptuous of the later versions of CR created by *Ms.* and the National Organization of Women (NOW), which, she claims, focused only on change in personal lives and attitudes and did not seek to change the status of women as a whole in the United States. Some personal interpretations of the CR experience give credence to Sarachild’s concerns (e.g., Pogrebin 1973; Ephron 1975). However, many others dispute them. Calling into question Sarachild’s blanket condemnation, Jo Freeman (1975: 86) describes the reversal in NOW’s attitude to CR groups, which it had originally “viewed . . . with disdain”: “NOW chapters soon became convinced of the value of rap groups. They saw [that] they helped women put their personal conflicts into political perspective and thus increase their awareness and understanding of feminism. . . . Rap groups served the function of feminist education as a prelude to feminist activity.” Thus even more “mainstream” practices of CR concentrated on the need to engage in activism. CR’s goals, then, extended beyond a sharing of experiences; its force lay in uncovering and analyzing structures of oppression so that effective action for change could occur.

Current debates about the function and effect of service-learning revisit concerns that have been expressed about the function and effect of CR. Deans (2000: 109), for example, implicitly confirms the need to emphasize action when he argues that even service-learning courses that do attend to the development of a critical consciousness assume that it automatically moves one into “concrete civic action.” The “‘public’ model of service-learning” designed by Schutz and Gere (1998: 141–44) also, for them, “represents a form of action.”⁸ The parallel between these debates and those concerning the CR experience helps us see the interrelationship between the achievement of critical awareness and the ability to take effective action for social change.

Social activism is not necessarily a more “mature” form of service

(Foos 1998: 15). Activism and service-learning achieve different, but perhaps complementary, goals. However, even when service-learning activities highlight a social justice–social transformation approach, activism is considered an inappropriate or immaterial model. Selden Holt (2000: 18) insists that “whether the individual chooses to think of that work as activism or service is largely irrelevant. Service—work with individuals or groups in their current situation—is certainly part of activism, which has the larger, perhaps more ambitious, goal of social change.” But we believe that it does matter how we label and conceptualize our activities. We agree with Elisabeth Hayes and Sondra Cuban (1997: 77), who argue that it is essential to ask, “How are problems framed and what assumptions do they reflect?” The way we frame projects and activities impacts both what our students do and how they understand it (i.e., whether it contributes to “change” or just “helps” someone). The frameworks within which we think of our work are not “irrelevant.”

Fieldwork and Place-Based Encounters

In addition to operating in a historical vacuum, service-learning programs at times ignore methodology altogether or fail to consider how students should approach unfamiliar communities. How will they “enter relationships” in ways that help destabilize hierarchical relations and encourage the formation of more egalitarian structures? Another approach to these activities might include methodologies drawn from geography, feminist research, and women’s studies.

Students may be tempted to consider their service-learning or community service mere volunteerism if the learning takes a backseat to the service. But any assigned encounter should address methodology, or *how* students are to approach an unfamiliar community. For these projects to be seen as intellectual work, methodology needs to be fully integrated into them. Service-learning components can and should introduce or reinforce the skills of collecting and analyzing data, testing hypotheses or assumptions, and contributing to an ongoing conversation about a topic. If students are asked to observe, they will see trash on a beach; if they are asked to “do something about it,” generally speaking, they may pick it up. The next step must be to ask them to figure out where the trash came from and why it is found on the beach. Collecting and analyzing data or pursuing a methodologically responsible approach to this activity may help more students make connections between, for example, a polluted beach and capitalist means of production. To analyze data they have collected, students need appropriate tools with which to conduct a structural analysis of culture that, in turn, will encourage

them to make connections beyond the site of their encounter. Such a set of tools can be developed from the social sciences (sociology, psychology, anthropology, geography), which put such a high value on fieldwork.

Feminist research methods, in particular, can help students become aware of the pretense of objectivity and the importance of situating oneself in the research process. Feminist researchers try to involve willing “participants” rather than examine “subjects,” and they try to remain conscious of the problems associated with imposing one’s own agenda on them. From a critique of positivism, feminist researchers attempt to generate questions and conduct analyses from the perspective of women’s experiences, or from the location of the other. Ideally, feminist research also has a “consciousness raising component” (Gilbert 1994: 90).

Ellen Cushman (1999: 332), who brings many of these principles to bear, outlines “activist fieldwork” as the cornerstone of a service-learning course, a model that combines “postmodern ethnographic techniques with notions of reciprocity and dialogue.” We want to build on Cushman’s call for praxis research in service-learning by importing from cultural geography the example of a place-based encounter that insists on accounting fully for where the research project originates and develops. Borrowing an example of “streetwork,” we suggest that activist learners analyze the politics of space, the effects of the built environment, the complexities of being the insider or the outsider, or the functions of surveillance and control in public or semipublic spaces. Streetwork, the name of a project created by cultural geographers Jacquelin Burgess and Peter Jackson (1992), begins from the premise that if cultural and social differences are constructed in actual and material places, then we need to understand these processes. How is difference constructed through configurations of space, the built environment, or myths about places? How are these differences maintained or reproduced?

Burgess and Jackson assert that firsthand experiences in unfamiliar landscapes can reveal sociospatial logics and the cultural codes that shape neighborhoods or cities. Indeed, a geographically framed methodology shifts our perspective from individuals to places. This approach complicates people’s understandings of the scope of boundaries, including the relationship between public and private spaces and between culture and identity, and equips students to analyze their experience, not just reflect on it. In short, we should ask students to analyze the workings of place rather than their own experiences only.

Without trying to gain full access to or be accepted by a place they have chosen, students investigate and analyze it through a series of heuristics. They

work in groups and produce “*an interpretive account* of [their] chosen place, conveying [their] experiences as a traveller and explorer” (Burgess and Jackson 1992: 153). The methodology includes site visits, descriptions, interviews, and/or historical research, and in their final reports students must move beyond description to a critical analysis of their encounter. Streetworkers look for evidence of boundaries and borders, of insiders and outsiders, of surveillance and control. The purpose of streetwork is not to glorify the streets or to pretend that “real” consequences of space can be revealed if only we get the methodology right. But demanding a methodology for which students must be accountable can help keep the emphasis of their work on the structural formations of communities rather than on their individual members.

Streetwork as conceived and practiced by cultural geographers may or may not address Herzberg’s legitimate concern that students’ experiences in community literacy centers, for example, do little to give them a social imagination. Despite well-designed projects and responsible guidance, students may remain convinced that misfortune can always be overcome by a bootstraps attitude or that homelessness is inevitably the result of individual circumstances. However, attention paid to the forms of alienation that people face in the everyday can contribute to a richer, deeper awareness of how place constructs or reproduces these forms of alienation, for example, how the built environment of a downtown financial district can exclude those who are not dressed in power suits, or how the design of park benches prevents people from lying down on them (Davis 1992: 161). Even for nongeographic forms of fieldwork, our focus must shift away from “identity”—that is, “how these people differ from me”—and toward questions of boundaries, status, and place.

This method of geographic analysis need not be limited to street or urban environments. Since people can feel alienated from many environments, it is important to acknowledge that structural forms of exclusion are built into neighborhoods, factories, parks, and college campuses. While mapping assignments are common in composition courses as a part of invention, mapping neighborhoods or other areas can create a bridge between methodology and structural change. For example, an assignment that asks students to map the college or university might concentrate on “geographies of exclusion” (Sibley 1995). Where do students feel comfortable and welcome on campus, and where do they feel like outsiders? How do they know where the boundaries are? How does a two-dimensional map fall short of representing their experiences as they move through different buildings, quadrangles, or parking lots? Students are welcome in classrooms, lecture halls, libraries, and

cafeterias, but how are they treated when they enter the hallways of faculty offices or wander into research labs? Where are they allowed to park as residents and/or as commuters, and how are these two groups of students treated differently by the administration or by the layout of the campus? Are there houses of worship for all of the major religions and any minor ones? In what states of repair or disrepair are the buildings on campus, and what does this say about the value of the work that goes on in them? Finally, in the student-centered cafeterias, does anyone notice the glaring segregation as all the African American and other students of color sit together, not a white student among them?

In short, the assigned encounter with difference need not, and should not, *require* students to go off campus. There are plenty of opportunities for students to experience geographies of exclusion right on campus. In fact, sending students away from the university may simply reinforce the notion of the ivory tower for them or lead them to believe that, while the community may need their services, the university does not. When we ask students to go into the community either for a service-learning experience or for a community service internship, we underscore the separation of campus from community rather than emphasize their interconnectedness and mutual dependence. Furthermore, students may be left with the assumption that all is well in the college environment but there are real problems outside, where cultural difference “really” exists.

Students do not need to leave the college or university to engage in acts of dissent. Neither do they need to take part only in large-scale, long-term projects to learn something about social change practices that we might call activism. Steinem (1983: 355) calls for each of us to “do at least *one outrageous thing* in the cause of simple justice” every day. Margaret Randall (2001) argues that there are many ways of engaging in activism; for some of us, everyday encounters with friends and neighbors can be performed with activist intent.

Most important, what do students learn from activist work in class? It should be clear that we are not necessarily calling for “Histories of Activism” courses but instead are proposing that social justice work be made part of the educational project. Eleanor M. Novek (1999: 233) argues that “many students leave school behind without learning how to affiliate with others or how to take collective action for systemic change.” Marjorie Agosín (2001) calls for developing the capacity to understand activism as a process. We agree with both Novek and Agosín, and we believe that a college or university education should produce an understanding of the processes of social change.⁹

Students are not the only ones who need to learn about these processes.

Florence A. Hamrick (1998: 450) suggests that when student activism does exist, college and university faculty and staff must begin to recognize it *as* dissent, in part to interpret it accurately and in part to see it as productive and important in a learning environment: “Students who engage in principled dissent and active protest on campus are participating in a different, yet equally valuable, democratic citizenship experience that is worthy of attention and appreciation.” Hamrick asserts that more minority students are engaged in activism than white students (457). We find this observation especially provocative in view of our wish to decenter the self-other dichotomy. What might this suggest about new models for or structures of relating across difference through activism? Who is claiming ownership of (or is willing to claim responsibility for) issues and problems that require social change work?

If we are to incorporate activism into higher education successfully, we must delineate multiple ways to engage in it. We need to appreciate not only the more formal, organized dissenting acts that Hamrick alludes to but also daily practices of dissent. Like Steinem, Chella Courington (1999: 79) calls for educators “to help students discover and redefine activism as a complex, dynamic process with many manifestations.” Just as we model good work habits and scholarly practices for students, so we must model dissenting practices aimed at achieving social justice. As Eden E. Torres (2000: 244) notes: “While our grandmothers, as well as our contemporaries, may practice relatively small rebellions, the example is filled with potential. When observed over a lifetime, or witnessed daily in the community, these gestures compose a significant body of resistance.” Educators who consciously and intentionally engage in activism or “everyday rebellions” embody this engagement for their students.

What would activism look like in our English studies classrooms?¹⁰ The literature on service-learning offers many models and programs, but our goal is to suggest ways to give them a more directly activist intent. Some instructors might choose to design, or to assist a class in designing, a group activism project so the entire class participates in the same act of dissent. However, individually focused possibilities are also productive and often easier to manage. There are advantages to insisting that students design their own activist projects or to allowing them to do so. When we ask students to propose their own activism, we encourage them to connect course content to their own interests and philosophies—activities long valued in the educational process. Students must then take the initiative in selecting an issue to address and in determining what contributions they can make toward resolving it. This often requires researching local, national, or global organizations,

in addition to investigating the issue. It also challenges students to frame their activism in connection with course content and goals.

With activism, as with service-learning, there are potential trouble spots. Students may have emotional reactions to social change work, including anger, outrage, pity, and contempt. Educators need to deal with these reactions in a way that encourages students to continue their work.¹¹ We must also deal with the question of assessment. How do we evaluate the success of our students who are engaged in activist work? Most social issues do not have a definitive answer, although some activist projects have measurable goals. Thus acts of dissent demand a more process-oriented method of evaluation, which includes the framing of the activity in advance as well as reflection on its level of success once completed. For example, in an “Introduction to Women’s Studies” course, students might choose to write letters of protest for a liberating-action project to businesses, legislative bodies, and other institutions. But what if no one receives a response? Students might be discouraged, apathetic, or outraged. It would be unfair to judge them on the measurable effect of their letters on other people; it is important to judge them on their ability to outline their intent as well as on the clarity and persuasiveness of the arguments expressed in their letters—on their *efforts* to bring about social change.

We walk a fine line. How can we expect our students to engage in activism without imposing our own ideological agendas on them? Students must be free to choose the arenas in which they engage in social change work. Although we may hope that our students are or will become progressive thinkers, we must accept the possibility that a student will support an issue or cause we find abhorrent. We only educate; we cannot insist that a student’s ideological affiliations match our own. Of course, we might ask the student to justify his or her choice based on course readings. By exploring students’ rationales for activism projects, we might also help students recognize and claim their own assumptions and ideologies. This might be a particularly powerful exercise when those hidden patterns of thought clash with the students’ conscious, intentional political statements.

Other more specifically literary projects might center on issues of exclusion, in terms of curriculum and canon formation or in terms of censorship. As many instructors realize, tremendous connections can be made between literature and social change (see the appendix for one example). Many literary texts deal with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant and immigration, aging issues, and so on. There are numerous ways to design activist projects around themes in the texts we already assign. For

example, Thoreau leads naturally to environmental issues; Hemingway's war novels could prompt work on the restrictive nature of military service (women in combat, gays and lesbians in the military) or on antimilitaristic peace efforts; Mary Wilkins Freeman's "A Church Mouse" lends itself to attempts to eradicate discrimination in the workplace as well as to discussions about community responsibility, which in turn invites work on issues such as homelessness and welfare reform; Susan Glaspell's "Trifles" calls attention to domestic violence as well as to community responsibility; Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" might encourage work on reproductive rights. The links continue to expand once activism and social change work become a framework for reading and discussion.

In addressing the tendency of service-learning to individualize social problems, we do not want to be read as suggesting that individual effort is unimportant; on the contrary, activism relies on it. Nor do we want to further rigidify divisions between service-learning and activism, or between knowledge and action, in demanding that attention be given to the need for structural change. Loeb (1999: 11) provides a useful framework in which to negotiate these distinctions: "No individual is solely to blame for homelessness, toxic waste, the collapse of family farms, or the growing divide between rich and poor. But at the same time, we can remember that institutions and societies consist of individuals. And that anything done on behalf of a group is also done on behalf of its members." We are, ultimately, invested in recognizing the effects of structures on the lives of individuals, and on focusing student attention on the need for activist work and daily practices of dissent that are committed to changing those structures, for two reasons: these commitments encourage students to understand and negotiate difference in ways that force them to see their own complicity in the structures that reproduce discrimination, and social change work is crucial to achieving justice and equality, ends to which we all must contribute.

The question that remains is why service-learning has been embraced in the university setting, while activism makes people uncomfortable. Why do we fear the term *activism* and the acts of dissent that activism comprises? It is the responsibility of progressive educators dedicated to social justice efforts to insist that our classrooms become places where students examine their resistance to activism and consider what is at stake in recognizing the power of and the need for dissent.

Appendix: Activism Project

It has become a common feeling, I believe, as we have watched our heroes falling over the years, that our own small stone of activism, which might not seem to measure up to the rugged boulders of heroism we have so admired, is a paltry offering toward the building of an edifice of hope. Many who believe this choose to withhold their offerings out of shame. This is the tragedy of our world. For we can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet, a destructive one, without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile.

—Alice Walker

A raised consciousness that goes nowhere is painful to the possessor and not particularly useful to the future of womankind.

—Claudia Dreifus

The activism project consists of an act of dissent and a reflective essay. Many of the authors we will read describe their writing as an activist project. Many of the protagonists in the novels are themselves involved in acts of dissent, acts designed to achieve social change. This assignment is intended to allow you the opportunity to imagine and participate in the connection between literature and social change, to offer your own “small stone” to our world. I ask you to engage in an act of dissent and reflect on it in a 1–2 page essay. My hope is that your choice of activism will spring from your own interests. You may be inspired by the texts we read, or you may already have some ideas about how you can contribute to a more just and equitable world. Thus, the following examples are intended only to demonstrate the range of what might be available, not to limit your choices in any way. You might think of organizing a letter-writing campaign to protest a social injustice either locally, nationally, or globally; you might become involved in an event to honor Women’s History Month in March; you might spend time in a community-based organization which works on problems of literacy, homelessness, immigration issues, domestic violence, etc.;¹² you might organize a public presentation to introduce others to some of the authors we are reading; you might participate in a public protest—and so on. You may choose to work individually or you may form a group with some of your classmates. You must submit a proposal describing your project to me at least *two weeks* before you plan to complete your act of dissent. This dated and approved proposal must be attached to your reflective essay, which is due within one week of the completion of your activism. This postactivism essay allows you the opportunity to reflect back on the experience. How did performing the act of dissent make you feel? Was the act successful or not, in your opinion? What, if anything, did you learn from it?

Notes

1. See Rhoads 1997 for further discussion of this issue. We follow convention in this essay by relying on the term *service-learning* as representative of several related practices; following others, we hyphenate it to emphasize the connected nature of its two elements.
2. The topic of “caring” is studied by Rhoads (1997) and Novek (1999), who see it very differently from Schutz and Gere. This is yet another split that is hard to reconcile.
3. Hayes and Cuban (1997: 78) observe that even when “service-learning educators” are engaged in social change efforts, “the connections to action beyond the classroom remain vaguely specified or taken for granted.”
4. For instance, Sparks (1997: 91) points out that “the story most people ‘know’ about Rosa Parks is remarkable primarily for its individualistic spin” and that learning more about the historical context of her refusal to move to the back of the bus is crucial: “Her action consequently emerges as a principled dissenting act rather than simply a spontaneous, impulsive, or fatigued one.” Loeb (1999: 34) adds that “the story’s standard rendition [strips] the Montgomery boycott of all its context.”
5. For example, many students recognize Cesar Chavez’s name, and some know that he did something about migrant labor. But the issues of pesticide contamination, state encouragement of and then punishment of illegal immigration, lack of schooling for the children of migrant laborers, pay scales that violate minimum-wage laws, conditions that violate worker-protection laws, the grape boycott, union activity by or for the farmworkers, the brutality of the police and/or the law in attempting to stop it—none of these factors appears on their radar screen.
6. The text of the National Community Service Trust Act of 1993 can be accessed at thomas.loc.gov.
7. The effectiveness of CR as a means of educating and as a move toward political activity is not limited to the beginnings of second-wave feminism; CR continues to be relevant today. See Miranne and Young 1998: 157 for an example of how strategies derived from it are employed with victims of welfare reform “to produce knowledge in the context of action.” Schild (2000: 27) describes calls from Latin American feminists to revisit CR techniques in the struggle against the many official discriminatory and ill-named “gender-equity agendas.”
8. Both Deans’s and Schutz and Gere’s formulations, however, perform rhetorical gymnastics to avoid using the word *activism*. Similarly, in proposing his “critical community service,” Rhoads (1997) calls for structural change but nevertheless carefully avoids the word *activism*.
9. Steinem (1983: 352) describes the process of social change as follows: “naming the problem; speaking out, consciousness raising, and researching; creating alternate structures to deal with it; and beginning to create or change society’s laws and structures to solve the problem for the majority.” The impact of service-learning appears to be limited to this second stage.
10. Carey-Webb and Benz’s (1996) *Teaching and Testimony* is one of the few explorations of the connections between activism and literature. This collection describes classes in a wide variety of educational settings that use Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* to enable student activism. Similarly, Courington (1999: 78) envisions her class in women’s literature “as a place for promoting activism,” although she does not assign activist

projects. Comstock (1994: 83) encourages attention to the connections between service-learning and literature, since both service and literature highlight “the social context of the text.”

11. Steinem (1983: 359) notes that “we must be able to choose the appropriate action from a full vocabulary of tactics,” including recognizing “those who are burnt out and [who] need to know that a time of contemplation and assessment is okay.” Loeb (1999), who sees activism as part of a lifelong civic commitment, observes that it is enacted differently and with varying intensity at different stages in life.
12. This may sound suspiciously like the volunteer efforts we have critiqued. However, it is often the thoughtful framing of the action that distinguishes activism from service-learning. For example, two of Bickford’s students participated in a program that brought literacy tutors from the University of Rhode Island campus into local elementary schools. They saw their efforts in terms of volunteering. What, they asked, would make these efforts acts of dissent appropriate for this assignment? They were asked to consider questions like this: What does it mean that the schools must rely on volunteer labor to achieve their educational mission? What does it mean that they are designed in such a way that teachers cannot give sufficient individual attention to students? What does it mean that some students do not belong to families that encourage them to read? What are the social problems to which your efforts respond? One of Bickford’s students researched the problem of illiteracy in the United States and found out who and how many in our society suffer from it. She decided that when her elementary school stint was done, she would turn her attention to efforts to alleviate adult illiteracy.

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