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Picturing Service-Learning: Defining the Field, Setting Expectations, Shaping Learning

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Abstract

This study used content analysis and audiencing to understand how service-learning is presented visually by institutions of higher education and interpreted by college students. Data included 834 photographs from the service-learning web pages of 63 four-year institutions in California. The majority showed a narrow range of direct service including engaging with young people in out-of-classroom activities, tending gardens, tutoring, and working at a building site. Looking at a selection of these photos, a sample of 14 college students questioned definitions and power dynamics of service and noted a pattern of those serving being White and those served being people of color. Images were perceived differently by viewers depending on their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. If service-learning is to draw on the talents of students from diverse backgrounds and develop the knowledge, skills, and commitment to engage with society's complex problems, then the visual representation of service should reflect those aims.

Introduction

An internet search for images of "service-learning" may lead the seeker to ask, "Why are there so many pictures of young people gardening?" Photographs of young people pushing wheelbarrows, wielding shovels, planting tomatoes, and pulling weeds appear repeatedly online as representations of service-learning.

Service-learning is a pedagogical strategy that employs community service and reflection on service to support students in meeting academic learning goals and developing greater community and social responsibility (*Eyler & Giles, 1999; Jacoby & Associates, 1996*). Faculty consider it a way to bridge theory and practice, encourage active learning, and develop students' skills in leadership, communication, cultural understanding, and critical thinking (*Burbach, Matkin, & Fritz, 2004; Deeley, 2010; Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003*). Service-learning projects can connect to any community issue or social problem through direct or indirect forms of service, and a critical service-learning approach advocates these projects be aimed toward social justice (*Mitchell, 2008*). Given all

the possible ways to reach these goals, why are images of gardening used so frequently to represent service-learning?

Certainly, gardens make for aesthetic images. They beautify cities, turning abandoned lots into lush oases. Gardens also connect to compelling stories. They yield fresh fruits and vegetables and bring young people together with others in the community (*Dyment & Bell, 2008*). They provide opportunities to learn about growing cycles and nutritious foods (*Williams & Brown, 2012*). They give students, particularly in K-12 schools, the chance to break away from passive learning at desks and work collaboratively in fresh air (*Williams & Brown, 2012*) and significantly increase their academic self-efficacy and self-esteem (*Hoffman, Wallach, Sanchez, & Carifo, 2009*). These reasons might lead one to conclude that gardens are a wonderful representation of service-learning practice.

However, gardens also present a relatively apolitical, noncontentious view of service, learning, and community life. Agencies of the United States government like the Corporation for National and Community Service that fund service-learning require that service be politically nonpartisan and avoid advocacy-oriented work such as "attempting to influence legislation" or "engaging in protests" *(Corporation for National and Community Service, 2014, p. 20)*. To those who worry about real and imagined accusations of community service-learning as indoctrination (*Speck, 2001*), images of gardens may assuage such concerns and help to build a broad constituency for service-learning. Even in an era of standards and accountability in education as measured by high-stakes tests, many schools have gardening programs (*Williams & Brown, 2012*). Generally, images of gardens portray community life as a place without disagreement over substantive issues, where point of view is less important than a readiness to get one's hands dirty. In an era when political discourse employs bare-knuckled rhetoric at best and devolves to name-calling and misrepresentation at worst, images of civic engagement without conflict may seem comforting and reassuring.

As the example of gardening indicates, photos of service-learning may be more than aesthetically pleasing images; they can hold social, cultural, and political meanings that are easier to understand when the viewer brings more knowledge of the context of schools and society where service takes place. Writing about visual literacy, or the ability to "read" or make meaning of images, Natharius (*2004*) wrote, "The more we know, the more we see" *(p. 238)*. Visual images shape our understanding in the same way as words in a text *(Arnheim, 1974*). In numerous books and journal

articles, service-learning is defined, critiqued, and reframed; however, the photographs of service-learning in brochures and on websites also inform how service-learning is defined, implemented, and understood, particularly by college and university students engaging in service-learning who are less likely to read critical studies of service-learning as pedagogy and more likely to log on to the website of their institution's center for service-learning or community engagement. In this way, photos are performative (*Holm, 2008*). They serve to communicate a message about what service-learning is and can be for the audience viewing those images.

We also recognize, however, that many issues, voices, and perspectives are involved when taking, selecting, and publishing images. From gaining permission to proper lighting, from resolution to composition, a number of factors are involved in producing the images that come to represent service-learning on the web pages of colleges and universities. "Images work by producing effects every time they are looked at" *(Rose, 2007, p. 10)*. This research seeks to explore these effects by documenting the predominant images of service-learning on the websites of service-learning centers at California colleges and universities. We asked: What meanings about service-learning might be conveyed by those images? This two-part study used content analysis and audiencing (*Rose, 2007*) to help practitioners and advocates of service-learning in higher education determine whether the visual messages selected are consistent with the goals of service-learning, particularly goals around creating learning opportunities that are inclusive of students from diverse backgrounds and that prepare students for participation in democratic community life.

Visual Culture and Negotiating Meaning From Images

This study draws on literature at the intersection of visual culture and Hall's (*1980, 1997*) model of encoding/decoding images. Understanding visual culture, the visual environment that surrounds us, is important because as Anderson and Milbrandt (*2004*) pointed out, "people are formed by their culture, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our culture is overwhelmingly constructed and overwhelmingly visual" *(p. 56).* Visual images do not stand alone as containers of messages. Instead, the meaning of images is created in a "third space" (*Stevenson & Deasy, 2005*) between the image and the person observing it. In that third space, factors such as the cultural context; intentions of the image's cre-

ator; and personal experiences, beliefs, and values of the image's viewer shape the meaning-making process (*Evans & Hall, 1999*).

Because these personal experiences and cultural contexts are multiple, so are the meanings that can be made from a visual image. Developing the capacities to think critically in this third space about the multiple meanings of images is crucial to visual literacy. Critical visual literacy includes interrogating images with questions such as what is present and what is absent in an image, what is at stake in the way an image represents people or events, who is framing an image, and how is an image's meaning affected when we place ourselves inside the image?

Hall's *(1980)* model of encoding and decoding messages is situated in this understanding that images have multiple meanings that are shaped by cultural and personal contexts. Images are encoded with meaning by their creators, and meaning is decoded by viewers of images. In some cases, the encoded and decoded meanings are the same, a situation Hall describes as "perfect hegemony." In other cases, the encoded and decoded meanings are different—for example, when an image is encoded with a message of a dominant group or ideology in society and decoded by a viewer from a different group or holding a different ideology. The process of meaning making from images is active, not passive, and this is particularly true when the encoded meaning of an image is different from the viewer's cultural context or ideology *(Rose, 2007).*

Hall described three social positions for the viewers of images: dominant, oppositional, and negotiated. The *dominant* position describes a viewer accepting the dominant or intended meaning of a message, while *oppositional* describes not accepting such intended meanings; *negotiated* refers to something in between. "The negotiated position is a completely open category for viewers who primarily fit into the dominant ideology but need to resist certain elements of it" (*O'Donnell, 2005, p. 527)*. Negotiating images is what most people do most of the time—for example, when they make meaning from the imagery of a patented drug advertisement or fast food commercial (*O'Donnell, 2005*). These social positions are not predetermined or unvarying. Writing about the viewers of images, Fiske *(1996)* stated, "People are neither cultural dupes nor silenced victims, but are vital, resilient, varied, contradictory, and as a source of constant contestations of dominance, are a vital social resource, the only one that can fuel social change" *(p. 220).*

Dominance, opposition, and negotiation are particularly relevant to photographic images of service-learning, which may

include persons from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds engaged in work that is not without political meaning. As Smith and Price (*2005*) noted, "photographs… have the ability to portray the roles that are appropriate for different types of people" *(p. 128).* Those roles can indicate perceptions of those serving and those being served in a service-learning relationship. The expression types of people can refer to any number of dimensions of identity, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. In each case, photographs can shape understanding of different types of people in various roles, reflecting, for example, who is *privileged* to serve and who *needs* the service. In addition, photographs may illustrate the assumptions, conscious or not, of service-learning programmers.

Whether they are encoded with messages representing the ideology, assumptions, or stereotypes of the dominant racial group or political ideology or decoded in a manner drawing on those same ideologies, assumptions, or stereotypes, images have power. "Visual imagery is never innocent; it is always constructed through various practices, technologies and knowledges"*(Rose, 2007, p. 26)*. Images of service-learning, in particular, have the potential both to reinforce ideas about the inherently unequal positions of people based on their identity and to challenge such inequality. Similarly, images of service-learning can reinforce notions of what are considered acceptable forms of addressing social ills. Such images may also carry messages that limit viewers' ability to think about what a different, more equal and just society might look like and how citizens could work to achieve it.

This research took a critical approach to visual images. Using content analysis and audiencing, this research responds to Rose's *(2007)* call for a visual methodology that "thinks about the agency of the image, considers the social practices and effects of its viewing, and reflects on the specificity of that viewing by various audiences" *(p. 26).*

Content Analysis

The first part of this research used content analysis, which involves "counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images" *(Rose, 2007, p. 61)*. Analysis is focused on the image itself and particularly the service work (i.e., the work being done), the service activity (i.e., direct versus indirect service), and the issue addressed by the service activity (i.e., political or apolitical).

This research began by looking at the website of each of the 148 four-year institutions of higher education in California for information about their service-learning programs. Information about these programs was found under various headings including service-learning, community service-learning, community engagement, and civic engagement. Some colleges and universities included no information about service-learning online. We found 63 college and university websites with information about service-learning: 36 private institutions (half of which were religiously affiliated), 18 California State Universities, and nine University of California campuses. Where websites included photographs, those images were captured for analysis along several dimensions. We found and captured a total of 834 photographs: 29% ($n = 243$) from private institutions, 54% ($n = 131$) of which were from religiously affiliated colleges and universities; 46% ($n = 383$) from California State Universities; and 25% ($n = 208$) from University of California campuses.

All images were coded according to the service activity featured. Service was categorized by type of activity (e.g., gardening, serving food in a shelter, cleaning up a park or creek). These activities were also coded as direct or indirect. Service where students worked directly with persons or in environments affected by social problems—for example, serving food to the homeless or cleaning up a polluted creek—was defined as direct. Service where students worked to alleviate a social problem, but without coming in contact with people or environments affected by those problems—for example, organizing a fundraiser for an environmental group—was defined as indirect. Captions helped identify instances of indirect service.

Service, as represented in the images, was also coded according to the issue addressed as explicitly political and contentious or apolitical and noncontentious. Political and contentious service was defined as participating in activities of a partisan nature or activities that made a statement about an explicitly political issue such as the Affordable Care Act, or an issue where social and political consensus is lacking, such as marriage equality for same-sex couples. Activities that are generally considered charitable were defined as apolitical. This definition included pictures of beach clean-ups, food drives, and gardening. Of course, any activity—even gardening—can be political and contentious. For example, a garden may grow on land expropriated from an absentee landlord, or it may be used to make a statement about the economic inequities of food deserts in large cities or the dangers of agribusiness and genet-

ically modified foods. Absent banners or captions proclaiming such intentions, images of gardens, and other charitable forms of service were considered to be neither political nor contentious.

Of the 834 photographs captured from service-learning websites, 47% (n = 391) illustrated some kind of service. The most common forms of service included engaging with young people in out-of-classroom activities like athletics, art, or holiday celebrations (n = 85); tending to a garden or restoring a habitat (n = 72); tutoring or reading to young people (n = 69); or painting or hammering at a building site (n = 60). Service in communities overseas (n = 22) as well as service with the elderly (n = 21), in soup kitchens and food banks (n = 15), in response to disasters (n = 8), or with animals (n = 6) trailed considerably. Some photos of service (e.g., students with packing boxes) could not be categorized.

Interestingly, more than half (53%, n = 454) of the photographs curated from the websites did not portray service at all. Rather than showing engagement in some type of service activity, these photos included group portraits of college and university students posing at service sites. Other common types of photos that did not portray actual service included portraits of student service leaders and various award ceremonies celebrating service. This breakdown between photographs of service and those not showing service held steady across all categories of institutions. On the websites of private institutions, 53% illustrated service (51% for religiously affiliated schools). Of the photographs on websites of public institutions, 48% of the photos from the California State Universities and 38% of the photos from the University of California campuses included some aspect of service.

Overwhelmingly, when service is portrayed, it is direct. Of the 391 photos of service, 98% (n = 382) portrayed direct service. Images depicting indirect service were rare, and these photos included shots of students staffing tables at service fairs for various organizations or engaging in fundraising drives. None of the private institutions included photos of indirect service and of the few that were found, two came from California State Universities and seven from University of California campuses.

Equally striking was the lack of partisan politics or democratic contention in the photos. We identified eight photos, just 2% of the photos portraying service, that could possibly suggest anything partisan or contentious about service, and those few examples were spread across types of institutions. These photographs included a picture of a flyer encouraging students to "Educate, Agitate,

Organize," which hints that service-learning might have the potential to trouble inequity and support systemic change. Another photo showed students working on a panel of a mural titled "Who Was Homer Plessy?" which could suggest challenging racial injustice. Another photo showed young people picking crops in a field—not a community garden. This photo without caption could be read as students organizing or standing in solidarity with farm workers. Two photos from different institutions showed students marching behind a banner. Although the photos might have documented a parade, they could also be read as representing a protest march or rally. In a different photo, one student in a group portrait is wearing an Obama t-shirt, which could lead one to perceive this photo as a group portrait of campaign volunteers. A photo of another student under the banner "I Pledge" showed her holding a sign saying, "to be involved with Bulldog Pantry and Food not Bombs"—the latter is an organization known for direct action. Another photo showing a college student working with two adults at a volunteer legal center could be viewed as supporting those who are accused of breaking the law or expanding legal protections for the accused. Yet another photo captured comic books with LGBTQ themes from the Queer Comics Project organized by students at an art college, potentially representing advocacy for greater representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. Although it is not possible to generalize from such a small number of images, it is interesting that six of these eight photos were from private institutions. Public institutions, which are more dependent on public funding, are perhaps careful to avoid images that could be construed as partisan or contentious.

In describing these photos, we have suggested how they might be read, especially in cases that lacked supporting captions to provide a frame for interpreting the image. Without these captions, we do not know if our interpretation, in fact, described what students would have described themselves as doing. For example, we assumed that a photo of students with trash bags at a beach was a clean-up activity. Had we assumed a critical service-learning approach, we might conclude that students had bags of props for an Earth Day demonstration; however, this is a less likely alternative. Similarly, we made commonsense assumptions about the presence or lack of political service in photos. For example, photos of gardens without captions could be read as contentious, but only if one made assumptions about gardening as squatting on unused urban land or gardening as protest against genetically modified crops. Such assumptions would be a stretch for most service-

learning projects, where gardens are more typically opportunities to grow food for soup kitchens or teach young people about science and nutrition *(Williams & Brown, 2012).* In reading these photos, absent context suggesting otherwise, our analysis looked to the "social effect of an image's meaning" (*Rose, 2007, p. 78),* and we concluded that most of the images of service represented in our sample showed people helping individuals rather than addressing root causes of social inequities as a critical service-learning pedagogy would suggest *(Mitchell, 2008)*. The images portrayed service as an action for which students can be rewarded and celebrated. Absent context or captioning, reading the photos as representative of a more transformative service activity would require assumptions and inferences from the research team that felt inconsistent with the images curated.

Audiencing

Audiencing studies in visual methodologies recognize that audiences, in this case people viewing the images of service on college and university websites, are actively involved in making sense of the media they consume *(Rose, 2007)*. Audiences decode the significant messages by "bringing their own knowledges and understandings to bear" *(Rose, 2007, p. 200)*. Employing this poststructuralist view of active and personal meaning making from images, the second part of this research used audiencing as its method. In this case, the participants were in a course at Mills College called Social Change Leadership Seminar: Theory and Practice. These 14 students served as the audience to decode service-learning images from our content analysis database. The course description stated, "This course will examine diverse approaches to civic and democratic leadership with special attention to the roles of race, class, and sex/gender expression identity in various realms of social change" (*Mills College, 2014, para. 1*). The course is part of a larger program where students engage in course-related community projects and study multiple perspectives on various social issues and the role individuals and groups can play in addressing those issues.

College classrooms are frequently sites of audience studies *(Rose, 2007)*, and in particular this focus on college students' sensemaking is appropriate as college and university service-learning websites are frequently marketed toward current or prospective students. These 14 students were an interested and savvy audience for college and university service-learning web pages. They were also a diverse group. Six identified as students of color and the same number as LGBTQ. Half were first-generation college students.

Because of its small size, this sample does not lend itself to generalizations about how college students interpret service-learning imagery but from a qualitative standpoint, it does lend itself to raising important questions about the potential for variability in how such imagery is interpreted.

To understand the meaning students make from service-learning images, we created a Prezi (using presentation software at http://prezi.com) with 15 photos from three institutions of higher education to show students for the audience study. We used images from the institution with the most photographs on its website from each of three categories: private institution, California State University, and University of California campus. These were, respectively, a private, religiously affiliated college with 22 images; a California State University with 78 images; and a University of California campus with 55 images. We intended to show all photographs to students in our focus group but because the needs of the class that day meant the instructor gave us much less time for this activity than what we originally planned, we showed only the first two, three, and three images for each school. While not ideal, the photos in the full Prezi were only a small subset of those on each school's service-learning web page.

For each photo, we asked students to respond individually in writing to three prompts: (1) whether the image portrayed service and to explain their thinking; (2) what they noticed about the identities of persons in the photos, prompting for race, class, and any other relevant aspects of identity in the photos; and (3) why they thought the photo had been included in a service-learning website. Students had about three minutes per image to answer these prompts and after they finished writing about each photo, we spent approximately 15 minutes discussing the images overall with students.

In asking students to ascribe identity to people in the photos, we do not claim that the focus group students accurately coded how persons in the photos would describe themselves, nor did we ask them to try to achieve this. Instead, we stressed the perceived nature of identity and asked them to code based on how they "read" the photos. Race, gender, and other aspects of identity are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Photos of service are chosen with intention by those creating the websites (those encoding the images) and interpreted by each viewer (those decoding the images). Considerations of identity such as race and gender shape the meaning given to images when website creators—the image encoders—determine which ones to publish online and

when website viewers—the image decoders—read websites. This part of the study was designed to "consider the voices constructing the lenses used to view and study service-learning" and explore such constructed meanings *(Gilbride-Brown, 2011, p. 34).*

The students brought multiple perspectives to reading these images, representing the "different subject positions" students brought to the class and to their experiences of service *(Green, 2003, p. 283)*. In some cases, their readings probably aligned with what the creators of the web pages intended to convey, such as the idea that service makes everyone smile and service brings people together. In other cases, the students brought a more critical reading that questioned potential assumptions behind the photos. In these cases, the students' readings departed from what we assume was most likely intended by the service-learning web pages' creators. Students noted a pattern of those serving being White and those served being people of color. Many questioned whether these photos were intended to convey messages about who serves and who needs service. And because the sample included only one unambiguous picture of people of color serving, some students ascribed cynical intentions to this photo, implying that web page creators included it to show that not all students in the serving role are White. Other students, however, appreciated the way such photos challenged stereotypes of people of color and the dynamics of service-learning relationships.

One photo from a private Catholic liberal arts college illustrated these divergent readings. The image shows a White female college student holding her arm around an elementary school-age African American girl. Some said the image portrayed service as mentoring or giving attention to young children. One student commented that the photo portayed how service "could make a difference for youth of color" and pointed out that the participants' smiles indicated a positive impact. Picking up on those smiles, another wrote that the photo showed how people from different backgrounds can work together. A third student wrote that the photo "potentially illustrates the bonds that can be formed through service learning" and that service can be "multicultural and transcend difference." Yet another suggested that the photo could illustrate two family members, "an aunt and niece hanging out," rather than service.

Other students took a more critical stance and questioned what the photo portrayed. One student wrote, "Honestly the words 'white savior' jumped to mind, but I'm not sure if that's what they [the web site creators] were going for." Two other students used the term "white savior" to describe this photo. Another three students

put the words "serving" or "helping" in quotation marks when writing about the image, indicating their questioning of the relationship between the White woman and African American child. One wrote that the image played on a "stereotype of who serves and who NEEDS service" (emphasis in original). Two students asked some version of the question "Is it service because it's a White student with a young Black girl?" One of these two students answered that the assumption seems to be that White females do service. A different student wrote in frustrated response to this picture, "Why is it only 'people of color' being served, not 'white people'? Why is it never *clear* what service 'people of color' are providing? Where is the *context*?!" (emphasis in original). One student thought the photo probably illustrated how the college lacked diversity.

A photo from the state university showing a young White male reading with two middle school-age youth of color evoked similar responses from the audiencing group. Some students noted the seemingly positive relationship between the college student and the younger people, but other students commented that it reinforced the notion that White people teach or "help" (in quotation marks) people of color and that service reinforces notions of the "white savior" (*Cole, 2012*). The students in our audiencing study were naming the power relationships they perceived and making explicit, as Green (*2003*) contended is necessary, "how whiteness and class privilege function in the service-learning paradigm" *(p. 277)*.

Another photo from the University of California campus showed a man of color being immunized in a medical clinic by two White people. This photo, more than the others, seemed to spark the most cynicism, with one student noting that it might be meant to "boost the ego of college students" who can get "direct medical training in the real world." Another wrote, "Service in your intended field = Bonus! Looks good for graduate schools, medical schools." One student wrote that the photo sent the message that "white students or students who can be perceived as white are the key to fixing racial oppression by providing services which eliminate the need for people of color to exhibit agency." Another wrote that "medical attention is legitimate service," but Whites are "active leaders/participants/helpers, people of color are receiving service." Such strong responses speak to a variety of perceptions: that service can do more harm than good, can fail to address problems leading to the need for service, or may be used to derive individual benefits for those serving *(Peterson, 2009)*; it may also reflect mistrust of medical research and care among communities of color *(Brandon, Isaac,*

& LaVeist, 2005). Many photos on websites are displayed without captions or stories, and one student described what might happen in such cases with her comments on this photo: "There is a clear power dynamic. [College] students/faculty giving/immunize poor people of color. This picture makes me assume people of color are poor. I create my own story." This student's comment is a powerful reminder of Holm's (*2008*) assertion that "how a photograph will be interpreted cannot be entirely controlled or predicted" *(para. 9).*

The students constructed different messages when people of color were seen as more than recipients of service in photos. One image from a California State University showed a male college student who was perceived to be Asian American planting in a garden. One student wrote, "I think this photo was used to show someone other than a white person in service." Another student noted that the person of color in the photo was not clearly serving someone, writing that the picture showed "you can serve your community without working with other people." More explicitly, another student wrote, "It's interesting that it's the only person of color (appears to be Asian) thus far that is in an active role (vs. getting a service) and it doesn't involve people (plants)." Two other students commented on this same dynamic.

In the one photo that included only people of color all sitting around a table in a school setting, suggesting tutoring or after-school activities, students inferred a different dynamic. None of the students ascribed cynicism to the persons included in the photo. One student wrote, "This photo shows a happiness, sense of ease and enjoyment." Another wrote of the college students, "I like how they are sitting down with them and the youth seem to be having a good time." Another wrote that the photo "suggests that people of color can help other people of color." More exuberantly, one student wrote, "I like this one! It's ambiguous as to who the service people are and it's truly diverse in ethnicity." Another student picking up on the same ambiguity wrote, "I guess there's not a clear power dynamic in this photograph. Who is serving who? I like that!"

The audiencing study reveals that images do indeed "produce effects every time they are looked at" *(Rose, 2007, p. 10).* The 14 students in this audience thoughtfully considered their position in relation to the selected photos and made meaning of the images they viewed. In their readings, power dynamics were revealed, definitions of service were challenged, and the intentions of those who selected the images for the websites were questioned.

Discussion

Taken together, the photographs on the web pages of California colleges and universities present an aggregate visual portrait of service-learning. Whether this portrait reflects the totality of service-learning as practiced across diverse institutions of higher education is uncertain. What is more certain, however, is that these images reflect how higher education faculty and staff responsible for service-learning choose to represent it to the public. These images also have the power to shape who is attracted to service-learning and why. This aggregate visual portrait suggests that service-learning is mostly about charity, is not clearly connected to working for social justice, serves individual achievement as much as community needs, and does little to facilitate students' connection to political processes.

Almost two decades ago, Kahne and Westheimer *(1996)* outlined a conceptual framework that considered the moral, political, and intellectual domains of service-learning along two orientations—charity and change. Since the construction of that framework, service-learning has grown and become more widely embedded in the fabric of higher education. This research shows that the images currently on college and university websites present service-learning as direct service or charity. Photographs of tutoring, gardening, and building houses may predominate because they are the easiest forms of service to document, but they are also the most common expressions of service seen in higher education community engagement experiences (*Mitchell, 2013*).

Pictures of charity may also reflect the orientation of college students, staff, and faculty toward service-learning. Morally, a charity orientation favors *giving* over *caring*. Although nothing in the images suggests a lack of care, that they portray students giving time and resources remains the more straightforward interpretation. Politically, charity promotes responding to problems rather than participating proactively to bring about change. Images of tutoring and hammering nails suggest responding to inequitable education and inadequate housing. Intellectually, charity supports engagement in experience over more critical inquiry about experience. Images more easily capture doing—engaging—over reflecting, and thus addressing current problems over imagining different worlds.

Images on college and university websites may also reflect the response of faculty and administrators to tensions within service-learning. Analyzing the limits of service-learning, Butin *(2006)*

pointed out the political tensions inherent in the pedagogy when it is framed as a universal, transformative practice. He saw service-learning in a "double bind," noting that if service-learning "attempts to be a truly radical and transformative (liberal) practice, it faces potential censure and sanction. If it attempts to be politically balanced to avoid such an attack, it risks, losing any power to make a difference" *(pp. 485–486).* This double bind comes about because the advocates of service-learning present it as politically neutral while also making claims for its power to transform individuals and create dispositions toward achieving social justice.

Indeed, a recent *Time* magazine cover story *(Klein, 2013)* described how service "saves" veterans with posttraumatic stress. One veteran quoted in the article said, "Nobody can argue with helping to paint a wall for a disabled or homeless kid. That's just good. There's no bad in that" *(p. 26).* The purpose of service-learning in higher education, however, is not "saving" students, but equipping them with intellectual skills such as critical thinking and methodical inquiry. Unfortunately, as Kahne (quoted in *The New York Times*) noted, "most service programs do not examine causes of social problems or possible solutions" *(Tugend, 2010, para. 11)* and therefore leave students ill-prepared to examine causes and engage in solutions to critical community concerns.

The photographs on college and university websites represent, in the words of the veteran quoted in the *Time* story, service "that's just good." The photographs do not capture intellectual transformation or work for social justice that may be more politically contentious—and admittedly harder to represent—than service "that's just good." Just as Davis *(2006)* warned that the failure to complicate the conversation about service may have a detrimental effect, the failure to present a more complex view of service-learning through the images on program websites may lead to a complacent and celebratory view of service that denies the critical concerns communities face. Butin (*2007*) used the term "dilution" to describe this process of making "difficult practices amenable to all" and noted the irony of "undercutting and avoiding the very difficulty originally meant to be engaged" *(p. 2).*

We encourage service-learning practitioners to use the imagery illustrating their work as the starting point for interrogating the nature of service-learning in their classrooms and institutions. We appreciate the difficulty of capturing critical perspectives and concepts from service-learning in images. We believe, however, that images can be important starting points for questioning processes and outcomes from service-learning using a critical perspective.

Does service-learning go beyond direct service as a form of charity to include indirect forms of service, activism, and political participation to address root problems? Does it create opportunities for developing more critical understanding from multiple perspectives on social problems, as well as the social and economic systems that perpetuate those problems? Does it allow for more equitable participation, blurring binary identities of those serving and served or teaching and learning? Does it deconstruct or reimagine unequal relationships of power, including along lines of race and class? If the answers to these questions are positive, then addressing the limitations of the images is important. If the answers are negative, then addressing the limits of the service-learning initiatives becomes necessary.

A picture may be worth a thousand words according to the adage; however, images need context, and we encourage service-learning website designers to provide that context in writing so that when those images are decoded by viewers, service is not "diluted" to being "just good" or simply a paternalistic gesture exercising race and class privilege. We also encourage those designing service-learning web pages to examine their own assumptions about the messages encoded in photos of service and to consider multiple perspectives as they imagine how images are decoded. Recognize the influence of different subject positions *(Green, 2003)* and how images will speak differently to viewers depending on their backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. If service-learning is to draw on the talents of students from diverse backgrounds and to engage students in the type of community work that might develop the knowledge, skills, and commitment to engage with society's complex problems, then the images selected to represent those aims should be reflective of those intentions.

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