

Shumer, R. (Ed.). (2017). *Where's the wisdom in service-learning?* Information Age Publishing. 204 pp.

Review by Monica M. Kowal



In *Where's the Wisdom in Service-Learning?*, Robert Shumer and a dozen or so of his colleagues share with readers, through personal accounts, the wisdom garnered during their early experiences as service-learning practitioners. The purpose of this volume, as stated in the opening chapter, is to share their collective wisdom with the next generation of professionals in the field so that we might “apply this wisdom to ensure that service learning is a viable program and a thriving initiative that will continue to accomplish its goals of social change and community improvement” (p. viii).

The challenge in writing a collection that aims to serve as a beacon for future practitioners is the sheer volume of wisdom—in the form of rigorous research and applied practice—that has been generated since the time about which the authors are writing. The majority of the case studies within this text reflect on programs launched in the mid to late 1960s. The authors do little to take into account that, since their heyday of launching service-learning initiatives, more than 50 peer-reviewed journals have been established within a wide variety of disciplines that either focus entirely upon or give intellectual space to service-learning as a pedagogical practice, a field of research, and a global movement. Additionally, hundreds of higher education institutions and K-12 school districts now embrace the practice of service-learning within their programs. There are hundreds of books on the topic and dozens of organizations and associations that support service-learning and related community engagement practices. In short, a great deal of wisdom has been generated over the past 50 years, and the field is continuously changing in ways that reflect new generations, new academic cultures, and changing communities.

Suffice to say, I was skeptical about how one more book dedicated to the reflections of service-learning’s “early pioneers” (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hoppe & Speck, 2004; Stanton

et al., 1999) could compare to the plethora of current literature on the subjects of service-learning pedagogy, civic engagement, and the institutionalization of community engagement. Although there are moments of illumination nestled within these narratives, this compendium of reflections may be best understood as a historic record of the philosophy, strategies, and values of the authors. As Shumer states in the opening paragraph, the book was inspired by “the realization that many of us are getting a lot older and that our ability to live, to share, and to interact is diminishing and/or declining” (p.vii).

Although the format and focus of each chapter varies according to the author—some are short memoirs about their introduction to service-learning, others are essentially annotated vitae of the author’s career—there are several consistent themes throughout. First, each author talks about how they “stumbled” into service-learning, usually as a result of being a college student or recent graduate looking for work and finding opportunities that mixed their developing and deepening involvement with the civil rights movement. Second, each author spends significant space outlining their resume during the early part of the service-learning movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Third, each of them describes how their service-learning initiatives thrived at a time when local, state, and federal governments were investing significant funding into programs that utilized service-learning (or service-learning-like) programs. Fourth, very few of the authors cite any sources published after 2010.

The first chapter chronicles the history and precursors of service-learning—lore that any of us who do research in service-learning or contribute to the field through writing journal articles or books are already familiar with: Dewey, Gramsci, Tocqueville, Kolb, Oak Ridge, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Southern Regional Training Board, the Association for Experiential

Education (AEE), Campus Compact, and the Corporation for National and Community Service are all present. The problem, however, is that this definitive history of service-learning ends in 2007. Has no wisdom been generated in these past 13 years that could have contributed to the “wisdom” therein? Indeed, much of the narrative is significantly dated, which poses challenges in that the authors and the editor fail to include the missing link: What is it about this compendium of wisdom that still informs current practice? What in current practice suggests roots in these early years of the field?

Following this retelling of the field’s history, each chapter is written by an individual contributor who begins by explaining at what point in time and during what life experience they adopted service-learning as a practice in their academic work. Although there is certainly value in each of these vignettes (for example, Chapter 11, “The Wisdom of Bobby Hackett,” on the Bonner program, and Chapter 8, in which Terry Pickeral gives salient advice for building networks and finding advocates for service-learning in local and state governments), there is a lack of uniformity in their purpose. One would expect a consistent thread that binds the chapters together, but what lies herein amounts to a tapestry of disjointed narratives framed and colored by the varying perspectives of each individual author. Even more so, there is some indication that—along with no recommended structure for each reflection—very little was done in terms of editing and feedback for revision (the use of the word “Negro” is but one glaring example) that would have contextualized these narratives and offered some acknowledgment that the United States is now a very different place. Not only are the narratives dated in terms of their reference to the field, many of them are also outdated in that they fail to associate the challenges that racial division, political unrest, and systemic poverty played in the formation of the field to date, and indeed in their respective authors’ formation as service-learning practitioners at that time.

One example appears in the third chapter, in which William Ramsay, former dean of labor and vice president of student life at Berea College, relates the wisdom he garnered at various “work colleges” that had a labor requirement for all students. This labor requirement was evidently meant to

equalize across the socioeconomic divide between privileged students and those who came from far more meager means. Twice Ramsay relays stories that he frames as laboratory experiences for wealthier students, but in his lack of critical reflection he fails to see how systems of oppression can be perpetuated (and in this case, were perpetuated) even in the most well-conceived educational experiences. In one instance, Ramsay tells of a student who, in responding to visitors asking why the poor students serve as janitors while the wealthier students work in community outreach, says: “You don’t understand! The work of the student who is cleaning my residence hall is doing community service. If he didn’t do his job, I couldn’t do mine” (p. 60). The second instance comes when Ramsay tells of another student who, when assigned to the bathroom cleaning crew, protests her assignment, claiming that at home she had “servants who did such things.” The student later observed that the other girls took pride in their work (apparently chatting joyously about the effectiveness of certain cleaning products and methods). “She went back to college and worked enthusiastically,” Ramsay writes, “eventually becoming the student manager of all the cleaning crews. She said it changed her life” (p. 65).

I’m sure it did.

Chapter 5, penned by Timothy K. Stanton of the Haas Center at Stanford University, begins with promise but, like the other chapters, concludes with the sharp timbre of displeasure with where he sees the field is heading. Stanton briefly reflects on his genesis as a community organizer—not unlike most White college students who were thrust into their developmental years amid remarkable civil unrest in the United States—and touches on the ongoing debate over the means and ends of college education. Stanton posits that there is still a divide between the traditional view of “college” versus educating for the “real world.” His recollection of having a professor disapprove of using social issues as fodder for a writing assignment still rings true today. As much latitude as we give students today to use their personal experiences and political issues as acceptable material for essays, are there still ways in which we continue to use curriculum, student learning outcomes, and other forms of evidence of learning to create proverbial straight-cut ditches of all these free, meandering brooks (Thoreau,

2009, p. 42)? Despite this early experience, Stanton persevered and ascended in status within the field by helping Stanford University develop its Center for Public Service and contributing to the establishment of Campus Compact. It is ironic, then, that he concludes his chapter by lamenting the “pedagogification” of service-learning, arguing that the process “favors the academy’s value of student development over community development goals” (p. 90). He further claims that he and colleagues from this era have come to wonder whether current practitioners and scholars are more concerned with

taking steps on a career ladder developing in higher education, rather than as institutional community organizers and change agents sitting in institutional margins with feet in both campuses and communities, which is how many of the field’s so-called early pioneers viewed themselves. (p. 90)

It is difficult to ignore the subtext here: I built the ladder, but how dare the next generation of scholars and practitioners endeavor to climb it.

In Chapter 6, Jane Szutu Permaul chronicles her time at the University of California–Los Angeles before segueing into a call for more public policy and policy research connecting the work of service-learning in higher education to local, state, and federal policies. Although Permaul’s argument is not fully fleshed out, one can guess what she is stating. Given that over the past 30-plus years many public universities have spent a great deal of time constructing experiential learning programs and requiring their students to participate in them—service-learning being one such type of experience—it would make sense that state departments of higher education would invest in policy research about the need for such programs and their impact on the broader community. Similarly, Chapter 7 by James Kielsmeier offers an outline of his career, including the creation of the National Youth Leadership Council, and ends with a heartfelt plea to reinstate federal funding for Learn and Serve America, the federal program that funded service-learning for more than one million students in K–12 schools, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions for 21

years until it was eliminated by the House Appropriations Committee in 2011.

In Chapter 8, Terry Pickeral, former executive director of the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States, echoes Permaul’s stance that as considerable growth and adoption of service-learning have taken place in secondary and higher education, more effort should be made to create and adopt policies at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure that these practices are sustained and continue to positively impact students and communities. Chapter 10 by Cathryn Berger Kaye outlines how, when faced with a lack of curricular resources for using service-learning, she developed her own to great success. And Chapter 11 by Bobby Hackett chronicles his ascension to overseeing one of the most successful and sustainable civic engagement programs in the United States, the Bonner Scholars Program, and makes concrete and achievable recommendations for “fully realizing higher education’s potential for preparing civic leaders and playing an active role in community problem solving” (p. 166). In the final chapter, Shumer states: “There was no master plan. Only a series of chance occurrences that connected people with a feel and sense of what it means to serve others and to learn from those service experiences” (p. 176)—those who went from “happenstance to happening.”

Unfortunately, those of us who are active and deeply committed to sustaining this work today know that we can no longer wait upon chance to enact change. The field is in a different phase than it was 50 years ago. The world is in a different state than it was 50 years ago. Our students are different than students were 50 years ago. Wisdom alone cannot be used as a finish line. Perhaps the most useful piece of wisdom that emanates from this volume is the need to, as Terry Pickeral states,

cultivate the next generation of advocates ensuring long-term and large-scale implementation and sustainability. Too often, we rely on the initial champions . . . and fail to move beyond them. This is a delicate dance, but a necessary one if service-learning is to thrive in our schools and communities. (p. 124)

Hear, hear, my friend. Hear, hear.



About the Reviewer

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