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Sense(making) & Sensibility: Reflections on an Interpretivist Inquiry of Critical Service Learning

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Abstract

Critical service learning, as outlined by Mitchell (2008), highlights the importance of shifting from the charity- and project-based model to a social-change model of service learning. Her call for greater attention to social change, redistribution of power, the development of authentic relationships, and, more recently with Latta (2020), futurity as the central strategies to enacting "community-based pedagogy" has received significant attention. However, little research has occurred on how to measure the effectiveness of these components. This reflective article expands upon and calls into question the ways in which critical service learning can be assessed. Utilizing focus groups, we ask the following questions: How do engaged scholar–practitioners operationalize Mitchell's (2008) three tenets of critical service learning? What are ways to measure the outcomes and impacts of Mitchell's three tenets of critical service learning?

Keywords: critical service learning, traditional service-learning, focus groups, collaboration, reflections

Mitchell's (2008) seminal work highlighted the differences between traditional and critical forms of service learning, while adding her voice to those calling for a shift from the charity- and project-based models to social change models (e.g., Boyle-Baise, 1998; Butin, 2005; Cruz, 1990; Furco, 2011; Herzberg, 1994). She called for greater "attention to social change, work to redistribute power, and the development of authentic relationships" as the central strategies for enacting "community-based pedagogy with explicit aims toward social justice" (Mitchell, 2013, p. 263). These components have become known by many as the three tenets (or Mitchell's three tenets) of critical service learning.

Recently, Mitchell and Latta (2020) have added a fourth tenet that calls for those engaged in critical service learning to "consider how (or if) critical service learning should be concerned with futurity" (p. 4). Futurity, or the "ways that groups imagine and produce knowledge about futures" (Goodyear-Ka'opua, 2019, p. 86), challenges scholars and practitioners to reflect deeply on how the operationalization or application of each tenet might produce changes for the future. For instance, when we focus on creating authentic relationships between all stakeholders, what types of outcomes might these relationships create? Or how might an equally distributed power dynamic change who is driving the decision-making within the project? Mitchell and Latta (2020) reminded us that "we should not lose sight of the future we hope to build" (p. 5), and it is here that their fourth tenet begins to take shape, thus prompting our own imaginings to more deeply understand how the tenets of critical service learning work in tandem to change systemic inequities.

The purpose of this reflective article is to expand upon the ways we, as community-engaged scholars, consider assessment in critical service learning (CSL). When differ-

entiated from traditional service-learning (SL), the means to evaluate if and how CSL projects are successful in confronting social injustice are predicated upon stakeholders' implicit understandings of Mitchell's (2008) three tenets: *authentic relationships*, a *social change orientation*, and *power relations*. To make sense of how these conceptual tenets are understood or measured, we engaged other community-engaged scholar-practitioners in formal conversation to decipher the degree to which their theoretical grounding or practice of CSL informs their scholarship. Through this discourse we hoped to collect examples of purposeful measurement of Mitchell's three tenets as implemented in the field. We also intended to explore ways to expand upon current practices of CSL by introducing *futurity* as a conceptual tool to further interrogate injustice and to open the door to greater opportunities for transformative change.

Through the utilization of a collaborative inquiry methodology, we sought to develop an understanding of how CSL is operationalized and assessed by other scholar-practitioners. We were guided by the following questions:

- How do engaged scholar-practitioners operationalize Mitchell's (2008) three tenets of critical service learning?
- What are ways to measure the outcomes and impacts of Mitchell's three tenets of critical service learning?

The Fellows—A Collaborative Collective

The engaged scholars (Fellows) in this project were brought together as part of the Indiana Campus Compact (now known as the Community-Engaged Alliance) Faculty Fellows Program, a yearlong faculty learning community enabling participants to "learn from and with one another" (Stevens & Jamison, 2012, p. 20) while examining "issues from *within* and *across* courses, disciplines, institutions, and the field" (Latta et al., 2018, pp. 33–34). As a collective, we represent three institutions of higher education in Indiana—two large public universities and one small private institution. In keeping with the tradition of the 24 cohorts of Indiana Campus Compact Faculty Fellows that have come before us, we seek to spark further conversation and exploration in all areas of community engagement. Influenced by a recent editorial by Mitchell and Latta (2020) focused on critical service learning and its call for the consideration of futurity, we have removed the hyphen from between *service* and *learning*, when referencing the critical manifestation, to represent an attention to the power balance between all stakeholders. This change indicates the shift from providing service to/with organizations and accomplishing learning outcomes, to advancing social change within communities and creating authentic relationships absent power-over models. Mitchell and Latta's (2020) thought-provoking editorial has pushed us to imagine new ways of approaching critical service learning.

Traditional Service-Learning, Critical Service Learning: An Overview

As engaged scholar-practitioners from various institutions, we recognize the nuanced differences in the ways that our individual campuses define and operationalize community engagement and service-learning. As we began this project, we felt it was important to establish a common nomenclature to frame our understanding. Bringle and Clayton (2012) defined service-learning as a "course or competency-based, credit-bearing educational experience" (p. 105) through which students in higher education use reflection to develop a deeper understanding of the discipline and a greater sense of civic responsibility while participating in serviceable acts that are mutually identified by and beneficial for the community. CSL is an explicit response to traditional forms of service-learning. Though structured similarly to service-learning, CSL explicitly locates social justice as central to the interactions embedded between students and community members (Butin, 2015; Mitchell, 2008, 2014). Further, practitioners of CSL deliberately integrate pedagogy centered on social justice frameworks used to raise critical consciousness in order to take purposeful action (praxis) against structural injustice or violence (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2017). This pedagogy is not discipline-specific but rather helps students recognize their own implicit biases as they make sense of their academic discipline(s) in relation to community members and community organizations.

Mitchell (2008) asked scholars and practitioners to take into account all members of the partnership—the campus faculty, students, staff and administrators, com-

munity organization representatives, and community members—when "see[ing] themselves as agents of social change . . . and respond[ing] to injustices in communities" (p. 51). She also pushed faculty (and institutions) to "recognize and problematize issues of power" as a way to work toward redistributing power across all partners, including community members (p. 56). Lastly, she called for an explicit focus on developing authentic relationships, ones that go beyond reciprocity aimed at identifying needs since such an approach is, as Collins described, "rooted in relations of domination and subordination" (quoted in Mitchell, 2008, p. 58); instead, we should seek relationships built on genuine connection.

Drawing from Indigenous epistemologies, Mitchell and Latta (2020) proposed a fourth tenet centering on futurity, a conceptual construct reflective of a cosmology of understandings rooted in Indigenous wisdom and histories (Smith, 2021). This construct considers ways that colonization and settler colonialism have been destructive forces for not only Indigenous, First Nations peoples, but also for other racialized and minoritized populations, including, but not limited to, Black populations whose cultural–historical legacies and identities are connected to slavery (Patel, 2016; Tuck & Habtom, 2019). Futurity opens possibilities for a conscious redress both of historical wrongs and of current, continued reproductions of oppression of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) and others whose identity intersections have been marked by dominant White culture as subaltern (Goodyear-Ka'opua, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Importantly, futurity affirms Indigenous epistemes and honors relational interactions, nonlinear temporal and spatial considerations, contextual dynamics, and process-oriented structures (Rifkin, 2017; Wilson, 2008).

Mitchell was hardly the first scholar to call into question how service-learning was traditionally being implemented, nor was she the first scholar to apply critical theory to the field (Hernandez & Pasquesi, 2017; Latta et al., 2018). Indeed, many community engagement scholars and community activists have incorporated critical dialogue and praxis throughout their work (Hernandez & Pasquesi, 2017; Hicks Peterson, 2018; Latta et al., 2018; Mitchell & Latta, 2020; Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2017). As the field of critical service learning continues to gain momentum, there has been an increased call for further research that examines the broader implications of the practice (Irwin & Foste, 2021).

Current State and Assumptions of Assessing Traditional and Critical Service Learning

According to Bringle et al. (2017), assessment should be an integral part of service-learning. Assessment provides opportunities to develop deeper engagement, transformative relationships, and better synchronized transactional programming, all of which will enhance student learning, deepen relationships with community partners, and improve the overall service-learning experience (Clayton et al., 2010). Assessment literature within the traditional model of service-learning is robust and offers the researcher and practitioner alike the ability to gauge the various ways in which traditional service-learning can have an impact on the stakeholders.

However, within the published work of CSL, there is a gap in the understanding of how to operationalize and assess Mitchell's (2008) three tenets and the newly added fourth tenet (Mitchell & Latta, 2020). Recent research has examined the implementation of CSL projects and found the model to create lasting change (Santamaría Graff & Boehner, 2019; Warren-Gordon et al., 2020), but there is limited research on how to operationalize each of the tenets and how to measure the impact and success of implementation. For example, when findings suggest that CSL implementation produced a transformative experience for all individuals involved in the project, how do we determine if one tenet contributed more to that success than another? The assessment of each tenet of CSL and its implementation is crucial to the continued evolution of the model and the overall continued advancement of the discipline of service-learning. Understanding the impact of each tenet will allow for a deeper understanding of the model and will expand our understanding of the best ways to utilize CSL.

Interpretivist Inquiry to Conceptualize Sensemaking

To understand better how to operationalize and assess the four tenets, we employed an interpretivist inquiry model through the lens of Mitchell's (2014) social justice sensemaking process, and we intentionally ap-

proached this project as *inquiry* rather than *research* in order to emphasize the process and emerging conceptualizations of critical service learning. An interpretivist approach assumes that those who are actively involved in the inquiry process interpret and coconstruct knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretivist inquiry responds to the social and interactional conditions that affect the sensemaking process. Mitchell (2014) described social justice sensemaking as a process of invention that enables individuals and groups to create meaning and build context around complex concepts that emerge through social action. Social justice sensemaking requires active and intellectual engagement, combining authorship and interpretation, and it consists of six properties (Mitchell, 2014):

1. *Identity:* understanding implications of social group membership on meaning construction;
2. *Retrospective:* reflecting on past beliefs and reevaluating alongside new understandings;
3. *Referencing:* utilizing sources to expand and enhance comprehension; providing integrated referencing;
4. *Contradiction:* reconciling vision with actual condition and using contradiction as a source of inspiration;
5. *Social:* communicating and interacting with others to facilitate meaning construction; and
6. *Driven by plausibility:* developing confidence to take action and comfort in ambiguity.

The Data Collection Process

As a means of gathering data, we engaged participants who were attending the Indiana Campus Compact 2021 Annual Summit, a conference devoted to furthering knowledge around and best practices of community-engaged work. Prior to the start of the inquiry process, all procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Ball State University. The project also received approval through a double-blind peer review as part of the submission process for the Indiana Campus Compact 2021 Summit. Participants were engaged in a 90-minute interactive workshop featuring a brief overview of critical service learning, followed by three embedded, concurrent 35-minute focus group sessions, each devoted to one of Mitchell's (2008) three original CSL tenets. Due to the virtual nature of the conference, the sessions took place via the web conference system Zoom. At the start of the workshop, and in accordance with the approved informed consent procedure, participants were informed of the session's structure and that it would be audio and video recorded for transcription purposes. The questions for our focus groups, conducted via Zoom breakout rooms, were developed through a review of the literature examining how Mitchell's (2008) original three tenets are operationalized and assessed. Following the 35-minute focus group session, the workshop concluded with a discussion among all session attendees that provided a summary of each focus group's conversation and allowed participants the opportunity to ask questions of the facilitators and other participants. Throughout the workshop, participants were able to verbalize responses to the focus group questions, and they could also type responses and pose questions to facilitators using the platform's chat function.

The Participants

The participants in this inquiry were drawn from the attendees of the Indiana Campus Compact 2021 Annual Summit. Attendees self-selected to participate in the session. Sixteen individuals representing midwestern institutions of higher education participated. Participants primarily self-identified as a faculty member, a community engagement professional—a university administrator who is responsible for overseeing or supporting community engagement efforts (Dostilio, 2017)—or a combination of these roles. In addition, one participant self-identified as a retired faculty member and university administrator who devoted their career to service-learning and community engagement, another as a nonaffiliated practitioner–scholar, and one as a graduate student focused in student affairs. Five or six participants were randomly assigned to each of the three focus groups, which were each facilitated by two Fellows.

Data Sensemaking

All of the recordings from the Zoom focus groups were transcribed using a professional transcription service. The transcripts and recordings were then compared by one Fellow as an extra layer of accuracy assurance. Once accuracy of the transcripts was

confirmed, the Fellows independently coded the transcript of the focus group session they facilitated. Each Fellow analyzed the transcripts using an open coding thematic analysis scheme at the sentence level, which provided flexibility for individuals to interpret the focus group discussions based on a sensemaking approach (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010). To ensure consistency, a second round of coding was performed by a trained graduate research assistant, who took a broader approach by coding overall conceptions. Despite the different approaches, there was strong alignment between the three interpretations when the coding results were compared. Once each dyad and the graduate assistant completed the independent coding for themes, the Fellows discussed the findings. The following sections represent the findings and interpretations of each focus group, as reflected upon by the facilitators of those groups.

Making Sense of Emergent Themes

The four focus group questions coconstructed by the Fellows centered on either the conceptualization, implementation, or assessment of each of Mitchell's (2008) three tenets.

Developing Authentic Relationships

As discussed, Mitchell (2008) emphasized the need to further the community–campus partnerships developed as part of traditional service-learning programs into deeper and more authentic relationships. Session participants were asked to (1) reflect on how they operationalized authentic partnerships, (2) articulate the ideal outcomes that would result from an authentic partnership, (3) identify how to measure whether a partnership is authentic, and (4) share how they operationalized and assessed Mitchell's conceptualization of authentic relationships. Coding yielded five independent themes related specifically to this tenet: collaboration, communication, power and trust, continuity, and measuring authenticity.

Collaboration

Authentic relationships are fully collaborative. As one faculty member noted, authenticity requires "a genuine assessment of needs and ability to serve" so that the institution is "able to provide a partnership that's meaningful based on what [the community partner] need[s] and not just what you want to do." Importantly, true and deep collaboration—the kind that creates authenticity—means being vulnerable, as another faculty member noted: The community partners and the students "must be vulnerable to share parts of themselves that . . . may redistribute the power or how people are actually seeing themselves; we want them to create understanding on purpose." An ideal collaboration has a certain "vibe" to it. In an authentic relationship,

> as the kids say, you just vibe. There are some community partners that I just click with them really well because of our personalities, our shared passions, and I know that I can talk to them honestly just once a year, when we do our once-a-year project and it's fine, and I would consider them to be someone who I could count on and vice versa, whereas I couldn't do that with all community partners. (Community engagement professional)

That "vibe" of the partnership can be disrupted by a number of factors, the most common of which is the departure of a key collaborator at either the institution or the partner organization. The focus group participants pointed to the importance of centralized support at the academic institution to ensure that the collaboration between the community partner and the institution can continue despite staffing changes. Such centralized support is equally important to ensure that the community partners are not overwhelmed with requests from separate entities at the same institution. A faculty member indicated that in previous years,

> our community partners were a little bit annoyed because there was no central communication in doing partnerships within the university. . . . [There was] no central place to like find interns, find volunteers, find all these things, and then you have multiple people contacting them, then you have the general education 101 classes where they're like, "you must do 10 hours of service-learning." And the faculty members just send students off, no offense to people who have to do that, but then we know that community partners like legitimately hate that practice.

Truly collaborative, authentic relationships help prevent such frustrations.

Communication

For the partnership to be successfully collaborative, good communication is essential (Jacoby, 2015). One participant explained that it is difficult "to keep that communication going" from one iteration of the partnership to the next, especially in programs where there are leadership transitions or where students who are continuing with a partnership are slow to respond. Good communication requires having candid conversations when needed to ensure collaborations can continue. As one campus administrator charged with overseeing community–university partnerships described, "I feel like anybody in this capacity has to have that ability of authentic relationship, candid conversations, and really attempting to kind of get the lay of the land" because "one department that has that one faculty member that has one student . . . may have just really ruined our relationship because of a three-hour service that they did" that resulted in an upset community partner. If the relationship is truly collaborative and good communication has already been established, then they "can pick up the phone and talk to that person and it's squashed, hopefully in a respectful way so that we can maintain the relationship."

Power and Trust

In addition to potential communication and collaboration challenges, it is important to consider power—and the redistribution of power—when operationalizing authentic partnerships. At times, issues of power can manifest in the trust and distrust of our collaborators. One university administrator stated, "If somebody new comes into our space and is working for [the Center], I kind of vet them a bit to see [they] don't jeopardize what I've put in place." They went on to say that they feel "some ownership of what time and effort and trust and relationship building I have formed." Additionally, a faculty participant commented,

> If I come across to a community partner that I have no existing relationship with, and I ask them about ways that we might be able to work together, that's . . . going to ring a bit tinny to organizations that might be really great partners. If, on the other hand, I've been involved in a community and I've worked with nonprofits in the area and I have a certain amount of, let's just say social currency, if you will, that approach . . . comes across as more authentic.

A different professor pointed out that developing these authentic relationships can be especially "hard when you're newer to the community."

To ensure a balance of power, institutions of higher education must earn and continually build the trust of their community partner stakeholders. One community engagement professional conveyed a recent interaction they had where a local community partner shared, "We've learned not to really trust what [the University] is gonna do. . . . [It's] just like a lot of broken promises. So no offense if we're not really going to take what you have to say super seriously." This participant went on to say,

> The hard part is, I'm just one cog in this machine, and there's like just this history, decades of oppression, just many broken promises. . . . The most difficult part to combat is trying to build whatever that trust looks like when you have people doing different things.

One faculty participant equated this power balance to the stakeholders engaging in a process of shared vulnerability and reciprocity, stating that "both partners and the student and themselves must be vulnerable to share parts of themselves . . . [as it] may redistribute the power or how people are actually seeing themselves, so we want to create understanding on purpose, if you will."

Continuity

Community-engaged scholarship has often focused on the importance of partnership sustainability (Watson-Thompson, 2015), but the focus group conversation revealed that *continuity* is a more accurate term than *sustainability* since *continuity* puts the focus on people and relationships, rather than on the projects themselves. Participants described the importance of continuity when it comes to administrators and faculty at the university, as well as when it comes to the partner organization staff. It is difficult to

maintain long-term authentic relationships between institutions and community partners if any of the coordinating stakeholders—university professionals overseeing and supporting community engagement, faculty, or community partner organization staff—leave their positions, if the institution eliminates the office charged with cultivating community partnerships, or if a program depends on student leadership that changes from one semester to the next. One member of the focus group, a community engagement professional, noted that because their position has existed for 15 years, they are able to more easily manage potential difficulties when they arise:

> When something comes up, and inevitably something will come up, and it could be very, very important, or it could just be a quick chat, you know, "Hey, I heard something went down at your site, or I have a student that acknowledged this. I wanted to bring this to your attention." And those kinds of opportunities provide more growth for that authentic relationship.

Another community engagement professional described how if a "person at [an] organization leaves, all of a sudden, I no longer have a partnership with that specific organization, and we know that there's a high turnover with nonprofits." Their words capture how a potential disruption in continuity can be a recurring challenge for authentic relationships.

Measuring Authenticity

When participants were asked how they measured or assessed the level of authenticity in their community engagement partnerships, there was consensus that such assessment was necessary, yet difficult. Many discussed aspects of the themes noted above—collaboration, communication, power and trust, and continuity—that could be evaluated, with the easiest of those to measure being continuity due to being able to identify beginning and ending dates of programs and the relative ease of tracking staffing changes. However, the other elements of authenticity are challenging to assess. Focus group participants acknowledged that it's "critical" for us to measure authenticity, but that, as one faculty member described,

> measurement is always really difficult. I feel like it's incredibly subjective, and you know or you don't, the vibe thing. But also, effectiveness feels like that would innately be more objective, that'd be easier to measure in some way, because at the very basic you could say, "Was this an effective program for everyone involved?" And of course, "How do you determine effectiveness? Did we complete our mission, our objectives? Are we furthering the relationship? Are we helping the relationship?"

In short, measuring effectiveness is objective; measuring authenticity, however, is subjective and consequently more difficult. Assessing authenticity is difficult because critical service learning is not standardizable and therefore, by its very definition, goes against the nature of assessment.

A Social Change Orientation

In considering Mitchell's (2008) social change orientation tenet for our second concurrent focus group, we asked participants to focus on the following: (1) sharing examples of social change, (2) describing what social change looks like, and (3) providing ways in which they measure social change. Due to time constraints of the focus group portion of the session, participants did not have enough time to address the fourth prompt that focused on the rewards and challenges experienced in trying to measure social change. Five independent themes emerged that informed the ways that a social change orientation was conceptualized: hierarchy, responsibility, listening, time, and definitions.

Hierarchy

"Everyone has power and the moment that we talk about empowering somebody, we've just set up that whole hierarchy." This quote by a participant identifying as a community engagement professional encapsulated one of the key ways participants conceptualized a social change orientation. For another of the participants, also a community engagement professional, hierarchy interacts with power to create uneven power relations within higher educational settings. Uneven power relations privilege certain stakeholders over others and create infrastructures of codependency, whereby stakeholders' (e.g.,

community stakeholders) "empowerment" is dependent upon another's (e.g., university administrators/faculty). Hierarchies "can actually create an even greater divide between the notion of higher ed and academia and the folks" who represent organizations and entities with whom community-engaged faculty or administrators typically wish to partner.

According to the focus group participants, part of the challenge of applying social change as a disruptor to uneven power relations is the lack of a universal or cohesive definition. Not understanding fully what social change is or looks like in practice makes it difficult for those in nondominant positions in specific contexts (e.g., community stakeholders, students) to ascertain their own power. Accordingly, hierarchies that position certain individuals *over* others in community-engaged work meant to be "collaborative" or "democratic" in nature not only are disempowering, but also reproduce structures that can silence rather than support. Therefore, hierarchies that go unaddressed become obstacles to social change and orient stakeholders unequally or inequitably.

Responsibility

Focus group participants indicated that social change affiliated with critical service learning generally occurs sequentially; in other words, certain things have to be in place first before others can occur. Specifically, the participants seemed discontent with their respective institutional frameworks—ones that were either excluding dialogue attuned to social change topics and/or ones that allowed for the absence of introspection and conversation. As conveyed by one faculty participant, who primarily works with master's-level education students, "We're not talking about social change in the school districts," elaborating that perhaps the community partner's knowledge of and attention to social change may not be in alignment. "[T]he principal who runs the program or is a partner in the program . . . that's [social change] not [their] goal. It's, I got these kids, I got to do blah blah blah. . . ." Participants were also acutely focused on individual responsibility. "I'm doing my own internal work, and I think we all individually need to do that" (community engagement professional). But, in terms of a crude model to exemplify this sequence, it seems that the participants identify that *institutional* responsibility must first create a framework or culture that permits the possibility of social change—within students, faculty, and community partners. Once this framework or culture is in place, then it seems that *individual* responsibility can and will occur—but only if granted the time, permission, and/or resources for internal and external development. Once listening, talking, contemplating, and evaluating are encouraged, then social change can emerge as an iterative, evolving, and gradual process.

Listening

The importance of listening emerged repeatedly in the session. Four focus group participants mentioned this word explicitly, and some more than once. One community engagement professional commented,

> So we can enter the conversation around social change [by asking] who's involved in the conversation, what voices are we hearing and listening to, which voices are being completely ignored right now. We may not intend to, but we really examine things, and we think, "Oh, this voice just may not be part of the conversation." And so how do we bring them in? And how do we listen and not be defensive—but really listen?

The topic of conversing with others also surfaced in participants' responses. Another community engagement professional expressed that they would "look to other folks that have engaged in these conversations" as a way of working together to effect change. This engagement with individual citizens in addition to community organizations is yet another way that CSL can differ from its traditional manifestation. In connection with another theme representative of this tenet, participants' responses also implied that the sequencing of communication is crucial for social change to occur. Remarks such as "revisit them [conversations] often" and "following up [on]" indicate that social change is an iterative, ongoing process.

Importance of Time

Time within the conversation around social change translates to mean the importance of *taking the time* to create mechanisms in education, specifically in higher education,

geared to challenge students to recognize and facilitate concrete, material changes needed in society. These mechanisms were described as embedded course activities such as "poverty simulations and sensitivity-training-type things" to prepare students to begin discussing social justice and social change in meaningful ways. There were three focus group participants who, in reference to the ambiguity around a definition of social change, inferred there is a need for preconversations on social change. In one faculty participant's assessment, most people are unprepared to dive into a meaningful discussion around social change without having had the opportunity to "back up and start with other things before we get to social change. . . ." This participant continued, expressing that the time needed to truly address social change had to begin with instructors asking themselves questions: "How are they going to . . . teach their syllabi, their curriculum? . . . [How] are they going to embed some things in their curriculum . . . [to] address power and racism?" For the majority of participants, taking the time to ask such questions related to social change was a crucial first step to understanding what social change truly is within the context of community-engaged teaching. This integration of pedagogical considerations provides students with opportunities to reflect upon and engage in self-questioning and therefore is more likely to promote social justice sensemaking (Mitchell, 2014).

Definitions

One community engagement professional pointed out social change is a "really charged term" that can be perceived as "positive or negative." The same participant warned that "it's really easy to fall into the trap of thinking the community is going to have a cohesive definition" of social change. Indeed, identifying a succinct definition for social change is something that others might find challenging, too. One faculty member commented, "What does [social change] mean for the way [instructors] teach their syllabi, their curriculum?" That same faculty member suggested that students should also have a voice in defining fairness and equity in service-learning endeavors. In short, the participants believed the stakeholders involved in each situation should take the time to discuss their conceptualizations of social change.

Attention to Power

In our third concurrent focus group, the participants considered how they operationalized and assessed Mitchell's (2008) conceptualization of attention to power. Session participants were asked to (1) share examples of how power had manifested in their community engagement work, (2) describe strategies for ensuring equitable versus uneven power dynamics, (3) discuss ways to measure if or how power has been redistributed, and (4) imagine the new features or terrains that will be produced when power is redistributed and describe how this will look or be different. Four key themes emerged during the focus group: location, active community voice, relationship building, and challenges in assessment.

Location

A consistent theme throughout the discussion regarding power was the location of community engagement. All of the participants within this focus group discussed the importance of the physical locations or venues where service-learning takes place. This notion was articulated by a retired faculty member and university administrator who had devoted his career to community engagement and service-learning:

> Almost all of that work took place in the community. Meetings, advisory groups, so forth, very little of it took place on campus. And I think venue matters to someone leveling the inherent power issues of academics and the university students and administrators interacting with residents of a community. It's hard to say we're all equal when that occurs, but it's easier to say that when it occurs in the community than when it occurs on campus.

Placing community engagement and interactions in community spaces enables community-centered relationship building, deepening of trust, and reciprocity. As one faculty member described, "By being part of that conversation, and being present, it helped [the researcher] build that trust." At the same time, the participants recognized inherent differences that exist between university and community spaces and described how accessibility to university and community spaces differs. "So in terms of the power differentials and who's hosting and [has] the knowledge and the expertise,

just the whole way that is framed is different in the [community] Center, than I think it is on our campus," commented a community engagement administrator. A tenured faculty participant reiterated that "universities are rather intimidating. . . . The faculty and student collaborators go to their [community] meetings rather than expect people to come to campus. It's much more friendly." Another faculty participant reinforced this point by stating,

> I helped facilitate a Girl Scout troop, and for a while we were trying to use the [university] library as a space . . . and it just was so challenging. We ended up using a church locally instead. . . . Not always is the academic space friendly to others.

One faculty member spoke of the important transformation of a historically racist university space into a civil rights museum and community gathering space:

> It's a space where community members can gather and talk about civil rights issues, both in terms of history but also in terms of the present day, and one of the things that's been important about it, I think, is the fact that it's in a umm community that is not connected to campus, and it is . . . somewhat of a struggling community, but the members really have a lot of human capital, umm a lot of uh energy uh to share, umm a lot of insights to share, and they really have taken on that space and really see it umm, as theirs. And in terms of the way events are facilitated and posts them, etcetera, it's often the community members themselves who are [there] with just like technical support and uh the building space and help advertising the events from the Center, but it really allows community members to take ownership of uh, the things happening there and it does seem to make a difference that they're not going to campus to participate.

The focus group participants clearly connected the physical location of events to representations of power and ownership, which are essential to consider when building trust and relationships.

Active Community Voice

With regard to the second theme, active community voice, participants emphasized the importance of centering relationships and goals on the community, rather than on the university. University representatives can achieve this recentering by listening, engaging community members' voices, and finding active ways to prioritize community goals. One community engagement professional described the importance of "making sure that community members' voices are heard and designing whatever that experience or research or . . . community engagement looks like." Participants in the focus group described individual-level and structural-level manifestations of maximizing community voices. Listening to community input and understanding stakeholders' priorities and goals were identified as essential processes of community engagement. Additionally, participants discussed institutional strategies to open and maintain communication with community stakeholders. In describing institutional strategies to engage community voices, one administrator commented,

> [The university] created a form; most of the organizations in the county could basically fill it out . . . it was essentially a project proposal form. And so this way we could be really informed about what our partners are looking for . . . from volunteering, to research, to service learning courses, to internships . . . just making sure that [the projects] do happen and [the partners] are connected in a reciprocal fashion.

Participants recognized the inherent power imbalances between university and community partners. As one faculty member stated,

> The notion of listening and setting program goals together or letting the community lead those program goals is really huge, because so often the power is held in the academic world . . . until you listen and hopefully hear what the community's asking for, things can be exploitive because you work to serve your own students' needs and your own needs.

All of the respondents alluded to the redistribution of power that results in critical service learning endeavors when relation-

ships are centered on the community partners. Ownership by the community, actively engaging the community, and listening to the community's voice were all reflected by participants as means of maintaining successful engagements that promote shared power. As stated by a faculty participant, "As people's voices are honored and they claim the power that they hold in the relationship, all kinds of opportunities will show up."

Building Relationships

The third theme that emerged from the focus group on power was building relationships. Participants described the relationship-building process as moments where power manifests in service-learning. Each respondent emphasized the importance of building relationships that are based on trust and authenticity. As one faculty participant described how power is manifested in their community engagement work, they noted that having "trust and a mutual beneficial relationship [creates] a long-term relationship and . . . strength of partnership." This theme highlights the time and investment in relationship building that is required of community-engaged scholars to facilitate shared power and the authentic give-and-take between university and community partners. Historical contexts, particularly the histories of the relationship between the university and the community, were salient to this theme. Three participants described the acknowledgment of past problems and the restoration of trusting relationships as integral to relationship building between the university and community. One university–community engagement administrator commented that

> developing authentic relationships, something that our office has really worked on, umm, our [university] has a tough town-and-gown relationship, we're working on that. . . . To help push that in the right direction . . . each of us [in our office] started joining committees held in the county and eventually started inviting others from the college to join in on committees. And we got to a point where local groups were actively seeking out [university] faculty and staff and even sometimes students to join in on these committees that really get these relationships, these trusting relationships going. . . . That built to not only a better relationship between the college and the community, but also created more opportunities to partner.

A different faculty participant reinforced the importance of the town–gown relationship, commenting, "I think the relationships [in a particular town] are really strong and, and lasting for many years, so it's good that . . . it's becoming more solid."

Another key element of this theme is that of time and duration. Participants described relationship building as a process that needs to occur early in service-learning endeavors, often before the scholarly work even begins. For example, one faculty member described relationship building that researchers undertook prior to community-engaged studies: "Another [scholar] studied a housing program down in Kentucky . . . she also spent almost a year building relationships before she went down to interview them."

Relationships in service-learning may evolve over time, and participants highlighted not only the dynamic nature of relationship building, but also that power across partners may change. One former faculty member and university administrator emphasized the dynamic nature of power, stating,

> I think it's also important to be able to track power over time, like you just mentioned, because how a relationship starts can be very different than how it evolves into a umm, what we call a reciprocal partnership eventually. And [it will] have different characteristics at that stage.

Challenges of Assessment

The challenges and difficulty of assessment repeatedly emerged throughout the focus group session. The consensus among participants was that assessing power is multidimensional and complex. As articulated by a retired faculty member and university administrator, power carries numerous connotations, and different stakeholders may differ in their conceptualizations of power:

> When measuring aspects of relationships . . . one of the issues that we faced is lumping under power a whole bunch of different dimen-

> sions. And so it could be power with regard to resources or finances or expertise or communications or time. . . . And so it presents a real challenge because you can divide that pie lots of different ways in terms of components of power, and assess them, and it could go on forever. In a reductionist sense, so umm most of our strategy has been to identify different aspects of relationships, resources, decision-making, power, and communication.

In other words, CSL needs dynamic and fluid processes for assessment that respond to the context. The discussion additionally pointed out that assessment is an intervention and that we still have many areas to examine and understand:

> Multi-faceted engagement . . . involves lots of stakeholders, umm residents, students, university staff, NGO staff. And they each have a different perspective on that measurement question . . . what are those different perspectives? What sorts of understanding is there of my perspective? And what I assume to be one of my partner's perspectives? And how can we have a discussion about that and maybe enhance the clarity, umm sustainability, and satisfaction with the relationship? So in that regard, I like to think of assessment being an intervention. That it's a way in which, when we get those different perspectives represented, then we can have conversations about similarities and differences. (Retired faculty member and university administrator)

Another faculty participant commented that "it's good to have some kind of a visioning project in the beginning and maybe even continue that—that umm, dynamic assessment throughout the different phases of your project."

Making Sense Across Mitchell's Three Tenets

As we examine the themes that emerged from the three focus groups, we are able to see how they are interrelated. Common threads emerge, such as the ability to communicate effectively with and across stakeholders (Jacoby, 2015), as seen in the collaboration, building relationships, listening, active community voice, responsibility, and communication themes that were identified across the three tenets. Upon further examination of the data, the term *vibe*, used by a community engagement professional in the authentic relationships focus group, seems to cohesively tie these themes together: "As the kids say, you just vibe." In fact, when we examine the literature related to each of these six independent themes, we find these themes can be combined to make up the essence of *vibe*, which is most often found in context with musicking theory (e.g., Mark, 2017; Rodger, 2016) and human resource development (e.g., Anand & Oberai, 2018; Blithe, 2014). Vibe "implies a place-based, holistic, ecosystemic, and even cosmic view of what is going on" (Mark, 2017, p. 76). In all of the focus group sessions, participants drew connections among these aspects when discussing the ways in which they conceptualized and operationalized each of the tenets.

The focus group participants consistently pointed out that the vibe of a partnership is intertwined with power dynamics. According to Mitchell (2008), power differentials exist within every aspect of service-learning; however, they are rarely recognized and addressed. The very nature of traditional service-learning creates power differences as college students who take part in service-learning engagement are often from greater privilege since they can enroll in classes that focus on service. CSL requires that a focus on the redistribution of power and the examination of power dynamics should occur at various points in the service-learning endeavor (Butin, 2003; Mitchell, 2008), and Osman and Attwood (2007) suggested that power relationships should be examined in both "service and learning and between community and university" (p. 16); in other words, the examination of relationships must occur in order to move toward more balanced relationships. Osman and Attwood also suggested that power relationships within service-learning should be viewed from a Foucauldian perspective, recognizing that power is fluid with varying dynamics, rather than a one-dimensional "fixed source" existing within various aspects of service-learning engagement. Similarly, Ngui (2020) suggested that campus–community partnerships exist along a spectrum of community involvement, shared leader-

ship, communication flow, and decision-making.

Some scholars have gone beyond noting the importance of considering power dynamics to call for specific aspects of power that should be examined. Fouts (2020), for example, argued that collaboration with community partners should address inequalities and the structures that allow for the continued marginalization of women and BIPOC individuals. The identities of scholars and university administrators must be considered with regard to power and privilege in service-learning, scholarship, and dissemination of research. Indeed, privilege awareness is an important ethical consideration for service-learning scholars in their relationships with intended community partners (Hugman et al., 2011), as is the active promotion of nonhierarchical connections between university and campus partners (Campbell & Wasco, 2000). Postcolonial and feminist scholarship have highlighted the disparity of position and power between the researcher and the researched; this point is also salient to service-learning and university–campus collaborations (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). Importantly, critical examinations of power may involve intersecting aspects of individual-level and structural-level dimensions of privilege and oppression.

Although the need for addressing power dynamics within the CSL model has been established, the focus group results highlight the need for further discussion as to how to understand the impact of power structures on student learning, the university and community relationship, and other factors that influence power dynamics in the CSL experience.

Problematizing Assessment

Traditional service-learning can provide uniformity within its assessment models. For example, the educator can pick which tool(s) they want to use to assess the intended outcome(s) of the project (e.g., Bringle et al., 2017; Finley, 2011; Gelmon et al., 2018; Giles & Eyler, 2013; Nelson Laird, 2005; Terry et al., 2014). However, these existing tools are not able to measure the complexities of CSL. Understanding the "how" and "why" of CSL suggests that there is a need to create a model of standardized assessment, which was confirmed by our sensemaking interpretation of the focus groups. However, we argue that the idea of a standardized model of assessment for CSL is, in fact, counterintuitive to the very nature of its goals.

Given what we have learned about Mitchell's (2008) three CSL tenets through this reflective process, we advocate that practitioners stop using the term *assessment*, as it does not adequately represent the fluidity of relationships and the evolving nature of critical service learning. Other synonyms for *assessment* that may also be viewed as inconsistent with the goals of CSL include *evaluation*, *measurement*, *grade*, *deduce*, *validate*, *rate*, *appraise*, and *value*. Interestingly, each of these terms stems from Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Instead of using these terms, practitioners of CSL should focus on creating tools that *review* partnerships and that can evolve as relationships and programs are developing, based on the changes and deepening of relationships. The assumptions that are held within the traditional service-learning model—those that focus on quantitative, summative, end-of-program, student-centric, and standardized assessment metrics—do not adequately translate to the CSL model. Traditional assessment metrics also often have a fixed achievement "bar" that indicates success versus failure. By contrast, the three tenets of CSL advocate for less focus on numbers and a more formative than summative approach to address concepts associated *with* and *across* each of Mitchell's three tenets. By shifting from a standardized to an idiosyncratic approach, the achievement "bar" is able to shift based on the longevity of the relationship.

How this approach might look is very individualistic, which is compatible with the ideas of CSL. However, because standardization is counternormative to Mitchell's (2008) conceptualization of critical service learning, postsecondary institutions will likely never be able to institutionalize its practice. Instead, we argue that the practice should not be institutionalized, but rather that institutions continue to emphasize its values—*fostering authentic relationships*, *striving for social change*, and *calling attention to power relations*—through a lens of liberation.

Limitations to Our Understandings

Our data collection resulted from unconventional tactics, specifically the implementation of focus groups at a regional

conference with a discrete amount of time. We ultimately had no control over the demographics or total number participants. Even though we had an evenly split number of faculty and administrators, future research might benefit from more insight into faculty perspectives, as faculty members are generally responsible for putting the tenets of CSL into praxis. Additionally, focus groups can limit response opportunity for individuals. In other words, we did not have time to allow every person to answer every question; thus, triangulated methods (e.g., surveys, in-depth interviews) could have demonstrated further support or could have refuted initial findings from our focus group analyses. To elicit further responses, we attempted to repeat the focus group process on multiple occasions; unfortunately, participants' schedules or perhaps feeling unqualified to participate further in these subsequent sessions might have deterred people. An additional potential limitation is that we noticed in our group data analysis that we individually coded based on different units of analysis. For example, some initially coded by sentence/words/phrases, but others focused instead on overall concepts of transcribed "chunks" or paragraphs.

The composition of our focus groups is another important consideration. Because CSL is still relatively new, there are few outright experts on the model, though there are many practitioners. Most participants in this study expressed familiarity with CSL's tenets, but they still struggled to identify strategies to measure those tenets in educational settings. We made assumptions, given our own collective immersion in literature and application of CSL, that other academic peers had similar understandings, but our findings make it clear that deeper study into the idiosyncrasies of conceptualizing the CSL tenets may be necessary before scholars can gainfully examine assessment of those tenets.

Due to these limitations, we have not fully explored the interconnectivity of the themes that emerged across Mitchell's (2008) three tenets of CSL. Future researchers should explore these relationships further. How do the connections between the tenets impact individuals' and institutions' abilities to fully embrace the CSL model?

Calling on the Field

This article represents our exploration of the ways in which CSL is conceptualized and assessed. Although Mitchell (2008) presented tenets to address and dismantle inequities in service-learning through a more critical approach, focusing on systemic oppressions rooted in dominant understandings of traditional service, we, as community-engaged scholars, have found the tenets challenging to apply without concrete guidance on how to do so. Mitchell's (2014) article on social justice sensemaking does provide explicit detail about her students' more critical ways of reflecting on service-learning experiences, but how these experiences were evaluated or assessed for either success or effectiveness were vague. Consequently, we considered assessment in our own work through futurity and asked ourselves if the purpose of assessment in traditional service-learning, which typically centers on college/university students' evolving growth as civically minded leaders (Bringle et al., 2019; Bringle & Wall, 2020; Hudgins, 2020; Steinberg et al., 2011), was applicable to our own CSL projects. The unanimous answer among us was "No," as we all agreed that *to do* critical work *with* and *alongside* community members means to consider *community ways of knowing* and *doing* that exist and operate outside service expectations implicit within White-dominant norms.

Based on our inquiry, we conclude that the complexities of CSL require continual review regarding the ways in which the tenets manifest for stakeholders—faculty, students, administrators, and community partners—from one institution to the next. From our data, we believe that individuals practice CSL to varying degrees in their context-specific endeavors; however, confidence in how to measure the tenets of CSL remains low. In fact, it seems that further conceptualization is necessary in order to move CSL forward with an eye toward effective, albeit innovative, measurement strategies pertinent to the original needs of the CSL project. We call on practitioners to move away from traditional epistemologies of service-learning that center White-dominant, Eurocentric norms and to draw from their own projects and experiences to determine best practices regarding their CSL engagement and the relational contexts in which these engagements occur. Relying on community epistemic knowledge and wisdom in concert with community-engaged practitioners' expertise in determining how to move CSL projects forward will allow for the continuation of the fluidity that exists

within CSL. This fluidity is in alignment with futurity's nonlinear approach in that the time and space through which mutually beneficial agreements are established and implemented with community stakeholders may not adhere to traditional timelines met through measurable goals driven by outcomes. We furthermore call on administrators to consider less standardized tactics and metrics in their respective reviews of critical service learning endeavors, valuing the originality of such endeavors and the stakeholders involved in them.

What our sensemaking ultimately reveals is that Mitchell and Latta's (2020) addition of futurity as a fourth tenet allows us to consider CSL's authentic relationships, social change orientation, and power relations not through a lens of rigid definitions but through a lens of expansion. This expansive viewpoint enables the field to more deeply interrogate injustice and systemic oppression and to open the door to lasting, transformative change.

Author Note

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