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An Expectation of Care: Flexible Emergence of Students' Critical Consciousness in a Community-Based Writing Project

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Abstract

This study examines the development of critical consciousness in service-learning students at an institution emphasizing solidarity, kinship, and social justice. Building on Cipolle's (2010) framework, which describes a progression from charity to caring to critical consciousness, we explore how students often embody multiple stages simultaneously. Our findings reveal that students express both charity and solidarity in the same reflections, indicating that the shift to critical consciousness is not linear. We propose the concept of *flexible emergence*, suggesting that students transition in and out of critical perspectives as they navigate prior experiences and biases. Rather than expecting students to fully abandon a charity mindset within a semester, we argue for an approach that acknowledges the fluidity of their development. By adopting this perspective, educators can better support students' evolving understanding of service-learning as a tool for social justice, rather than viewing progress as a rigid or binary process.

Keywords: critical service-learning, flexible emergence, critical consciousness, charity vs. solidarity, social justice education

Students participating in service-learning projects often view their role as simply "helping" others or gaining "real-world skills" through community engagement. However, shifting their perspective toward service-learning as an act of justice, solidarity, or dismantling systemic inequities presents a greater challenge (Allahwala et al., 2013; Butin, 2015; Cippole, 2010; Clark-Taylor, 2017; Clifford, 2017; Coffey & Arnold, 2022; Endres & Gould, 2009). Like many teacher–researchers who emphasize the value of critical service-learning, we hoped to promote "a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50) as the foundation for our approach. However, like most critically focused service-learning advocates, we found that our students did not always fully grasp or meet this goal, or did so in uneven or contradictory ways. To explain this phenomenon, we propose examining student mindsets toward service-learning from the perspective of flexible emergence of critical consciousness that is in the process of development. This model expands upon previous research and provides a nuanced understanding of how critical consciousness emerges in uneven, surprising, or even contradictory ways.

This 4-year project was conducted through a Professional Writing course at a Jesuit university with a social justice–based mission, working with MORTAR, a community partner whose mission focused on supporting and promoting minority entrepreneurs, conditions we hoped would encourage students to view their service-learning work as solidarity rather than charity. Although we had hoped that anchoring our work in the values expressed by our institutional mission statements and overarching shared principles would support these goals, the results were more complicated and less straightforward, creating a tension between

a desire for care and solidarity on one hand, and reinforcing preconceptions about charity on the other.

In our work, we show how a more fluid approach to developing critical consciousness may both complicate and augment assessments of students' attitudes toward service-learning as social justice. The work of Cipolle (2010) focused on developing critical consciousness on a continuum that often begins with a charity mindset, then moves toward caring, before developing a critical perspective focused on social justice. We build upon that work and examine our findings through a lens of flexible emergence, showing how even the same individual may display attitudes of all three stages at once, complicating the idea that for critical service-learning to "succeed" students must move beyond one stage—for instance, letting go of preexisting ideas of the value of charity—before being able to experience genuine care or solidarity with others.

Cipolle (2010) noted that a stage of critical consciousness develops over time and is not a place one "arrives at" and then is perfectly there, done, and developed, so by reframing the goals of critical service-learning through flexible emergence, we may be better equipped to guide students and mediate expectations. Instead of trying to move students to a place where no one completely arrives anyway—which is almost too much to ask over the course of a single semester, especially among the competing goals of course learning outcomes and students' other responsibilities—we instead support observing emergent states of care as students move toward "solidarity with," seeing these fluid changes in a more charitable light while still pushing and complicating students' underlying assumptions about power relations. This shift in perspective requires us, as teachers and researchers, to apply the same lens of care and solidarity toward our students that we hope they develop in relation to their community partners, offering our students a model for how care and solidarity might manifest. Viewing this process of development as a fluid continuum allows individual students to embody multiple stages at once, an outcome we saw repeatedly in our research. By acknowledging that the development of critical consciousness does not occur in discrete stages, we may be better equipped to recognize the natural emergence of charity as it moves through care to promote ideals of social justice, solidarity, and political activism.

Literature Review

This project is informed by previous research into critical service-learning, and thus carries some of the concerns, limitations, and aspirations of community-engaged learning that tends toward "justice learning" rather than traditional notions of service (Butin, 2007). Further, our community partner also has a mission underscored by "a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships . . . to deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled" (Mitchell, 2008, pp. 52, 50), a goal that was shared by the researchers and community partner, and which we sought to measure within our students. As noted in other studies, White students are the most likely to participate in service-learning programs (Mitchell et al., 2012; Shiller, 2022), and although we promoted an "assets-based perspective" regarding the site community and attempted to create a mutually beneficial partnership with the community members with whom we worked, like Shiller, we observed mixed results when our (predominantly) White students ventured into communities of color, from raising racial consciousness and promoting solidarity, to reinforcing stereotypes and charity-based mindsets. We were also conscious of the pitfalls of this type of dynamic as potentially replicating conditions of White supremacy, such as identifying certain communities as underprivileged or "at risk" and reinforcing the assumption that White students are or should be in a position to provide service to those communities. Additionally, we were aware that students may focus on individual rather than structural forces when they encounter privilege disparity, including how systemic racial issues often underlie disproportionate poverty levels. Without wider context, students in some service-learning situations may "blame" individual communities for that inequity, rather than larger social forces that lead to poverty (Houshmand et al., 2014).

Furthermore, we understood the potential limitations to developing critical consciousness across racial lines for our students and the challenges they would likely bring to their service-learning projects. Taking the

cautionary advice of Mitchell et al. (2012), we were mindful that

> service learning projects based on a pedagogy of whiteness have minimal impact on the community and result in mis-educative experiences for students, such as unchallenged racism for White students and isolating experiences for students of color, and missed opportunities for educators to make their own instruction more transformative. (p. 613)

Given the current product-based neoliberal climate in much of education that privileges the professionalization of students over social justice initiatives, even seemingly benign concepts like reciprocity can be "code for an exchange of goods and services that reinforces unequal practices" rather than a genuine investment in, and solidarity with, an extended community (Clifford, 2017, p. 12). Despite these challenges, like many other researchers who endeavor to support critical service-learning projects, we believed that the potential benefits to both students and our local community outweighed the myriad obstacles we were likely to encounter during this 4-year project.

In addition to situating our research within the context of critical service-learning, we also wanted to measure how student perception might be shaped by institutional mission and a recognition of this work as an extension of their educational goals and values more broadly. Sapp and Crabtree (2002) argued that service-learning projects in professional writing courses are "a worthwhile component in serving many universities' missions to prepare students to be responsible community members" (pp. 411–412). Unlike those at many campuses, students at Xavier and other Jesuit institutions are generally very aware of campus mission statements, and courses regularly cite those values as integral to course content and teaching approaches.

Jesuit institutions share similar specialized language in many of their mission statements, and previous research has demonstrated that students' experience with service-learning at Jesuit institutions is strongly influenced by adherence to attitudes expressed in these statements. These values include solidarity and a recognition of "unearned racial and economic privilege" (McCunney, 2017, p. 65), working in the community to disrupt racial and socioeconomic disadvantage (Houtz & Kosoko-Lasaki, 2006), men and women for and with others, contemplatives in action, unity of heart and mind (Streetman, 2015, p. 36), and magis (interpreted as working for the greater good and striving toward excellence), cura personalis (a term that means care of the whole person, an ethic that is extended to all members of the community), and a commitment to diversity (Gross & Maloney, 2012). Additionally, when students internalize the mission and consider themselves part of the campus community, a state Torres-Harding et al. (2015) termed a psychological sense of community (PSOC), then these students may be even "more likely to agree with the university's social justice–related mission statement" and see service-learning as an extension of that mission (p. 89). Furthermore, students with a strong sense of community based upon sharing a set of perceived values with the institution's social justice mission may be more likely to engage in ongoing social activism as the result of service-learning, more so than from taking traditional or diversity-related courses without a service component (Torres-Harding et al., 2015).

Although there are many advantages to working in a service-learning course with students who are familiar with service, support social justice, and expect their education to contain both, there are potential drawbacks as well. Because students who attend a Jesuit institution are often previously acquainted with the idea of "service," it can be problematic to decouple the idea of service-learning from charity, or as Gabor (2005) described it, to move from "volunteerism" to more transformative learning. Preconceived ideas about service based upon past experience can lead students to approach service-learning as acts of goodwill or charity, which can become narcissistic and self-serving for the person performing the service, either to "feel good about themselves" or to achieve a certain grade, but not with a genuine investment in righting wrongs in the world (Seethaler, 2014). Seethaler noted, too, that the narrative of White people of privilege "saving" people of color is one that often underlies, consciously or unconsciously, service-learning programs, instead of using service-learning to actually change and challenge systems of oppression. This observation is echoed in Green's (2016) research, where she asserts

that students may also lack the critical awareness of their own racial identities and privilege to address systemic oppression, as well as the vocabulary and awareness to view their community partners in light of systemic injustice so that they are unable to deploy the language of advocacy and solidarity (pp. 361–362). Additionally, students may fail to see the writing that they perform as part of their service-learning as a political act or as political engagement, even when that writing is direct advocacy with and for community partners (Gabor, 2012).

With this background and potential student expectations in mind, we took a multipronged approach to challenging student beliefs about service-learning as charity, a mindset that many students had upon entering the course based in previous experiences with service. Like Gabor (2005), we "front loaded" our courses with readings and terminology addressing ethical concepts in order for students to grasp the deeper implications of service-learning, as well as practiced cross-cultural communication skills prior to meeting with clients. We also encouraged "language for reflection and discernment" (Green, 2016, pp. 361–362) for students to explore and challenge their ideas of service as charity and to focus on systemic issues of inequality in the communities they visited. Although our data suggests that student attitudes about service-learning did alter over the course of the semester and that they were able to see the university's social justice mission carried out through their work with MORTAR, an area that we could have explored more was to embed a critical feminist lens within the course (Clark-Taylor, 2017; Seethaler, 2014) so that students might have been better equipped to understand the roots of systemic injustice they encountered in the lives and challenges of their clients. Offering students this perceptual lens may have allowed them to ground their classroom studies prior to the community-based portion of the course in critical theories of Whiteness to avoid the propensity of students to "rehearse and affirm White privilege" noted by Endres and Gould (2009, p. 418).

Our goals for this research were to ascertain whether combining what was known about critical service-learning and applying it in a location with a strong focus on a justice-based mission would lead to greater levels of solidarity from our students. Results from this endeavor were predictably mixed. Additionally, we hope to contribute to the conversation around service-learning by suggesting a model of flexible emergence as students begin to develop critical consciousness while still attempting to situate new understanding and solidarity alongside previous experiences, expectations, and biases.

Organizational Mission(s) and Project Background

This study was conducted in a required Professional Writing course for our English majors with a Writing Concentration that is also open to all students at Xavier. A major component of this course is a long-term collaboration with a community partner, a startup for historically marginalized entrepreneurs in Cincinnati, Ohio. For the assignment sequence in our course, alumni of an entrepreneurial academy are the clients for student teams who work to identify a "writing need" for their business.

Our approach to developing this assignment was guided by three principles: First, we wanted whatever our students created to be immediately useful for clients; second, we wanted to build in as much flexibility as possible to match student strengths and interests with client needs; and third, we wanted to create a sustainable model for community engagement that could be revisited every time one of us taught the course. For this project sequence, groups of students are assigned to work with individual entrepreneurs to identify a writing need and develop materials from a set of 20+ possible options broken into five categories: website design and content creation, marketing materials, branding materials, documentation, and social media presence. Deliverables range from web editing and usability testing to press releases, brochures, business cards, grant/proposal writing, and social media plans, depending on the client's goals and existing infrastructure. Importantly, our community partner has an explicit social justice mission to help historically marginalized entrepreneurs start and run successful businesses. As outlined on their website: "MORTAR aims to create diverse communities by enabling historically marginalized entrepreneurs to access the resources needed to start & run successful businesses" (MORTAR, 2022, para. 1). Like most large cities in the Midwest, Cincinnati has a long legacy of gentrification, and many of the businesses in popular neighborhoods

are not owned by the people who live in those same neighborhoods, a condition that MORTAR works to counteract.

A primary challenge of this project, then, is balancing two competing goals: (1) to have our students deliver a writing-based product that our community partner(s) will be able to use in their business, while also (2) engaging students in the social justice mission that drives our community partner. We hoped to achieve these goals within the tradition of critical service-learning, which focuses on "a social change orientation, working to redistribute power, and developing authentic relationships" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50), goals that are likewise congruent with MORTAR's mission.

The social justice focus of MORTAR and the tenets of critical service-learning align with Xavier's mission and center the importance of social justice as a goal for engaging students with a community partner. Through this project, students were aware of the larger goals of MORTAR as well as the link between those goals and the institutional mission of Xavier. Many service-learning projects arise from campus prerogatives and a desire to challenge systemic inequalities; however, Jesuit institutions have a particularly strong historical alignment with the goals of service-learning (Fleming, 1999; Gross & Maloney, 2012; McCunney, 2017; Streetman, 2015), and students often arrive on campus with an expectation of community-based service as part of their educational experience. This expectation presents advantages for enlisting enthusiastic students with prior experience in service projects as well as challenges in expanding their view of community-based learning beyond a charity mindset (Green, 2016; Seethaler, 2014).

Our work in the classroom sought to promote justice, solidarity, cross-cultural communication, and reciprocity with community partners, rather than approaching client work as either charity-focused (primarily for the partner's benefit) on one hand, or professionalization-focused (primarily for the student's benefit) on the other, with an attempt to disrupt a product-based, transactional model for one focused on process and solidarity (Clifford, 2017). Our goal with this study was to ascertain student perceptions of service-learning at the beginning of the course and then again after completing projects with the community partners at the end of the course. We were curious how student attitudes might shift as a result of this work and whether the shared institutional mission might influence student perceptions.

Methods

Methodology

This study employs a modified grounded theory approach using the methods described by Charmaz (2006) and Stern and Porr (2011) as its foundation. This methodology allowed the data collected through our study to guide the direction of the research and to expand our study based upon iterations of the course as it was taught over multiple semesters. In addition, the coding procedure was supplemented with the process described by Saldaña (2021) where open-ended survey responses and focus group transcripts were examined by multiple researchers to find patterns and themes that indicated mindsets we sought to examine.

Grounded theory was selected for several reasons: First and foremost, the iterative and ongoing nature of grounded theory fit well with our multiyear study and gave us "consistent yet flexible guidelines" for data collection where findings were "'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). We knew that one of the primary researchers for this project would be teaching this class every year due to curricular requirements, which made it easy to collect data over an extended period and allowed us to adapt our questions and methods as the data suggested. Second, we also knew we wanted to make changes to the assignment sequence between semesters when it was taught as we sought to improve assignments and the learning outcomes of the course. The iterative nature of data collection and analysis in grounded theory worked well with our goal of revisiting the project, making revisions to how it was taught, and using what we learned from the study to make improvements. Finally, we conducted this study as a research team with the help of two undergraduate research assistants and found that the methods of grounded theory proved especially effective for collaborative research. Members of the research team completed coding of transcript and survey data and wrote analytical memos separately; then, as a team, we came together for collaborative coding sessions where we went through each transcript and survey question by question, compared our codes

and memos, and recorded patterns, outliers, questions, and concerns. This process proved to be extremely fruitful and allowed for multiple perspectives to be included in our research process.

Approval

All procedures in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards set by the Xavier University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and approval was granted under IRB Protocol #19-011. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited using purposive sampling, with all students enrolled in the course invited to participate. Students were recruited by email and invited to fill out the consent form and complete the precourse survey within the first 2 weeks of the semester. Recruitment for the postcourse survey began during the final weeks of the semester and was again open to all students enrolled in the course; participation in the precourse survey was not required to complete the postcourse survey. Recruitment for the interviews was conducted in person during the final two weeks of the semester by a member of the research team who was not also the professor for the course. In total, 50 students were recruited to complete the precourse survey, 20 were recruited for the postcourse survey, and seven were recruited for the interviews.

Data Collection

We collected survey data from two survey instruments: a precourse survey conducted at the beginning of the semester and a postcourse survey conducted at the end of the semester. The precourse survey included 15 questions: seven open-ended questions, three follow-up questions using branching logic, three Likert-scale, one multiple choice, and one ranked choice. The postcourse survey had 13 questions: seven open-ended questions, one closed-ended, three Likert-scale, one multiple choice, and one ranked choice. Though direct comparison of individual participants' results between the pre- and postcourse surveys was not possible due to the data being anonymized, broader comparisons between results of the pre- and postcourse surveys were useful for making observations about changes in student attitudes, perceptions, and experiences. Toward this end, the following six questions from the precourse survey were asked again in the postcourse survey:

1. What is your current attitude toward service-learning?
2. How important do you think that the service-learning experience you had in ENGL 305 will be to your own educational experience and learning?
3. How important do you think that service-learning projects are to the communities they serve?
4. In service-learning projects, whom do you think benefits most from the interaction and why?
5. When you think about service-learning, what are the most important ideas, attributes, or concepts that come to mind?
6. In your view, how do you think that a service-learning course aligns with Jesuit values or the mission of Xavier University?

Semistructured interviews were conducted at the end of the semester after students completed the service-learning project. Participants were not required to have completed either survey in order to participate in the interview. All interviews were conducted by a researcher who was not also the teacher of record to reduce bias and ensure students felt their participation would not affect their grade in the course. Interviews were completed in person during the first round of data collection; due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in subsequent rounds of data collection participants were given the option to complete interviews either in person or remotely via Zoom.

Prior to beginning the interview, students were asked to read and sign a consent form; interviews were halted if students decided not to consent. One participant who filled out the consent form for the precourse survey declined to give consent for the project and was not included in the study. Interviewers worked from predetermined questions but asked follow-up questions when appropriate. In total, one group interview and four individual interviews were conducted for this study. Individual or group interviews were chosen based on the number of participants who signed up for an interview slot. Audio recordings of all five interviews were transcribed by undergraduate research assistants, all identifying information was

removed, and transcripts were prepped for analysis.

Analysis

Survey data were analyzed in spring 2022. Presurvey (n = 49) and postsurvey (n = 20) data reports for all three rounds of data collection were compiled through Qualtrics. Analysis of survey data began after the third round of data collection.

Interview data analysis began after the completion of the first interview in early 2020. This first recording (of the only group interview in the data set) was transcribed by hand, and an initial round of open coding was conducted to identify general concepts that emerged and to sort these concepts into broad categories. A second round of interview data analysis was conducted in summer 2022 by a team of three researchers. The transcript of the first interview was analyzed again, and codes and categories were compared across an analysis from all four researchers in order to generate a list of common concepts and categories from the first transcript. All three researchers completed theoretical memos after their individual analysis and again after the group discussion. This second round of analysis then informed the approach to coding the remaining interview transcripts, which proceeded in the same order: All three researchers separately coded the transcripts; wrote theoretical memos to capture individual thoughts and perceptions of the data; met to compare, contrast, and discuss the codes, concepts, and categories generated; and wrote a second set of theoretical memos based on this discussion.

Once this process was completed for all four transcripts, the team of three researchers met again to (1) compile a master list of concepts and categories that emerged during analysis, (2) complete axial coding based on this master list and the collected theoretical memos, and (3) generate another round of theoretical memos based on discussion of the initial and refined categories. A final research meeting was held to discuss the axial coding process and begin selective coding.

Analysis proceeded after the initial data collection phase in fall 2019 and again after the second and third phases in 2022 and the fourth phase in 2023. After the first phase, a transcript was produced of the first group interview and an initial round of open coding was completed. After the second phase of data collection, three additional transcripts were created based on individual interviews, and a second round of open coding proceeded from where the first round left off. A fifth and final interview was conducted after the fourth phase of data collection in 2023. Once open coding had been completed for all five transcripts, a round of theoretical coding was completed to weave together all of the codes and reduce categories. At this point we also began comparing coding from the interview data with coding from the survey data.

Results

Although we had hoped that leveraging and referring to the university's mission would be one way that students could access a more justice-based mindset, our precourse survey captured the polyvalent meanings that students took from that mission. Where some students focused on concepts such as cura personalis, solidarity, and service rooted in justice and love, others interpreted the mission in more charity-based terms, with a few respondents demonstrating both interpretations of the mission in the same statement. Many students (38%) mentioned some type of "helping" in their statements, phrasing it as "doing good," "service," "charity," "selfless," "beneficial to others," and "giv[ing] back" to others in their response to a question about how service-learning aligned with Jesuit values or the mission of the university. More students (60%) identified broader, justice-based parts of the mission and used the specific terminology from that mission to describe this relationship, noting concepts like "magis," "cura personalis," "being in solidarity for and with others," "service rooted in justice," and "being men and women for others." A subset of the justice-based responses may not have used the specific wording from the mission statement but used descriptions indicating those ideas, such as "to take care of the person as a whole," "go out into the world and promote the common good," "work all together for one common good," and "understanding and kinship." Somewhat surprisingly, by the end of the semester in the postcourse survey, fewer students were able to specifically articulate wording from the mission, with only 20% mentioning "magis," "justice," "standing for and with others," or "solidarity." Although there were still answers indicating a charity mindset (25%) and helping as the outcome,

most responses were vague and contained no concrete concepts from the mission at all; answers like "it just does" and "it aligns well with Jesuit values" were common on this question after the course concluded. We noted that we had fewer respondents in the postsurvey than in the presurvey; we also postulate that when we were recruiting at the end of the semester, students were less likely to respond during a time when they were studying for multiple exams and/or finishing major projects. This circumstance may account for both our lower response rate and the vague generalities occurring more frequently on this question about the relationship between the university's mission and student service-learning projects.

We were curious, too, about students' perceptions of which party benefits most from a service-learning relationship—the community partner, the student, or both equally—and whether experience with community partners would shift that perception in any way. Given our students' past experiences with "service" as volunteerism or charity (85% of students in the precourse survey indicated past experience with service as charity), it is not surprising that before the course began students were fairly divided in thinking that the community partner (24%) or the student (31%) benefited most, with nearly half of students (45%) already believing that the relationship was mutually beneficial to both parties. However, the biggest shift we saw was a move away from viewing the community partner as the primary beneficiary, so that by the end of the course, only 11% of students still selected that option, whereas nearly two thirds (63%) believed that both parties benefited equally.

Responses to the "why" part of this question yielded interesting perspectives from students: Some optimistically focused on social justice, whereas others were still very much steeped in a charity mindset. For instance, on the precourse survey, one student believed that students benefited the most from these interactions, specifically because working with a community partner could help that student figure out ways to learn more about social justice with the goal of intervening in meaningful ways. This student wrote,

> I think that the people who serve benefit the most from learning from community members because they better understand social justice issues facing members of the community and how they can apply their own skillsets or professional experiences to benefit and positively impact the community.

This response still contains elements of a "professionalism in exchange for real-world experience" mindset; however, it also acknowledges the expertise of community members to better educate students about how to effectively engage social action at a community level.

This response can be contrasted to students who, even in the postcourse survey, were still clearly in a charity-based mindset. One respondent (one of two who believed that community partners benefited most in the postsurvey) said, "Those being served because sometimes others cannot help themselves as best as you could," which demonstrates the complications of students who come from a place of privilege seeing themselves as those "who were providing charity, instead of acting as students and allies" (Endres & Gould, 2009, p. 419). Another student who thought students benefited most expressed the importance of professionalization as part of the student learning aspect of service, saying, "I think in this case, students benefited more. For a lot of students [this] was their first time working for a client and meeting deadlines outside of a classroom." This same student then followed up with a statement indicating that the service experience may not have coincided with the student's expectation of the role of "helping others" through service-learning by saying, "However, I feel like some clients may not need our help very much." This complex response illuminates the way that a charity in exchange for professionalization mindset can commodify reciprocity (Clifford, 2017) but with a type of disappointment that community members did not "need help" as much as the student might have expected.

Comparing the pre- and postcourse surveys on questions about how much each party (students and community partners) benefits, students perceived strong value for both parties, though they consistently rated the impact for community partners slightly higher than the impact on their own learning. In the precourse survey (n = 45), students rated the importance of service-learning projects to their own educational

experience/learning relatively high (M = 7.76, SD = 1.80, 1–10 scale: 1 = *not at all important*; 10 = *very important*; observed range = 3–10) and rated the importance to the communities they serve slightly higher (M = 8.16, SD = 1.56, observed range = 5–10). In the postcourse survey (n = 20), students again rated the importance to their educational experience/learning as high (M = 7.55, SD = 1.75, observed range = 3–10), while ratings of importance to the communities served remained slightly higher overall (M = 8.25, SD = 1.64, observed range = 3–10).

In both cases (pre- and postsurvey) students rated the benefit to the communities served slightly higher than their own benefit. Notably, in the presurvey all students rated the benefit to the community as at least moderately high (range = 5–10), whereas in the postsurvey there was a wider range (3–10), indicating that students had less certainty about the benefits to the community by the end of the semester than they did at the beginning. Although students rated the perceived benefit to both parties fairly high (all means were above 7.5 out of 10), their ratings nonetheless indicated that they believed community members accrue at least marginally more benefit in service-learning projects. However, the increased number of responses toward the lower end of the scale indicates that optimism about community benefits declined during the semester. This change in perception may reflect the individual experiences of the students who rated the benefit to the community as potentially lower than they had believed at the beginning of the term, perhaps because their particular project did not go according to expectations or because they found that the "need" of their community partner was not as great as they had anticipated, as evidenced in student comments below.

Students were also asked what they hoped to get out of the service-learning portion of the class and then, once the course was complete, to articulate the most valuable aspect of the service experience. Because students sometimes named multiple hopes or takeaways in a single response, these open-ended responses were coded into overlapping categories rather than mutually exclusive ones. In the precourse survey, responses clustered across four primary categories—charity, solidarity/community, political activism, and professional skills—with political activism appearing only rarely and the other three categories occurring in roughly similar proportions. In the postcourse survey, however, responses concentrated almost entirely in two categories: professional skills (approximately 75% of responses) and solidarity/community (approximately 25%), with charity not appearing at all and political activism likewise absent.

In these results, we can still see some of the tensions between professionalization on one hand and solidarity or community on the other. A representative example of this tension comes from one precourse survey respondent who hoped to gain "a better understanding of the world and local communities along with real world experience to strengthen my knowledge," showing how an interest in both community-building and solidarity might coexist with the expectation of also gaining professional skills. One of the interesting outcomes from comparing these two surveys is that at the beginning of the course more students expected that the benefits they would gain would have to do with charity and "helping people who need it" or would "broaden my view of what it means to serve others and how I can be a better servant in the future," whereas charity is not mentioned once in the postcourse survey. Instead, by the end of the course, students mostly noted the professional skills (~75%) they had gained, although some (~25%) focused on community and relationships. Although many respondents before the course hoped to develop deeper connections with, and understanding of, the community they were entering, only one expressed an expectation of service as a way to gain "a better understanding of systematic injustice." It is unfortunate that we have no way of following up with that particular student, or even knowing which student it was, as it would be interesting to know how that expectation developed prior to the class and/or if that benefit was realized as part of the service interactions.

Conclusion

In much of the literature, the goal of service-learning is to develop critical consciousness and shift students away from either a charity or a transactional mindset, and it is often considered a failure if students are not able to step beyond charity through these projects. Although solidarity and critical consciousness are certainly noble goals, we also wonder if we are asking too much of

our students in a short amount of time, as well as questioning whether it should be considered a "failure" to inspire students to care or want to help others. Cipolle (2010) posited movement in the stages of critical consciousness that occurs over time and where one never fully "arrives" once and for all. Critical consciousness begins with a desire to help people, after which loftier goals built in critical awareness of systemic injustice and privilege can take place. This shift in perspective requires considerable reflection on positionality, power, and privilege on the part of the student, as well as knowledge of systemic injustice, work that takes more than a semester to enact. Although our study is limited to the sample population we surveyed and interviewed, it is clear from other research in this area that failing to meet the goals of critical service-learning in terms of shifting student perceptions is an issue for many studies. Even though our students were "primed" by our institutional mission to seek solidarity with others and driven by a desire to enact social justice, they, like so many other students involved in service-learning projects, often do not shift fully away from a charity-based mindset into caring, and ultimately critical consciousness, during the course of a semester.

In our studies of student perceptions in service-learning over the years, we posit that the desire to help and care is an important starting point, rather than a failure, on the part of our students, and that what we see in the sometimes-contradictory responses of our students is the flexible emergence of this critical consciousness. As researchers, we also turned this question back upon ourselves and asked: If we are expecting our students to reframe how they look at the systems that lead to inequality, shouldn't we also have that same kind of growth mindset in how we perceive our students' attitudes? Meaning, as instructors, perhaps we should understand our own positions of privilege in relation to our students and avoid directing a "charity mindset" toward their efforts not only to expand their communication and writing skills in an arguably challenging environment, but also to simultaneously uproot and transform their ideas about power, systemic injustice, privilege, and their own complicity. For us, too, this attitude emerged in a recursive, flexible way over the course of this study, pushing us to ask deeper questions about our own position relative to our students, community members, and the research itself.

To help students shift into critical consciousness, we have to make them aware of what we are trying to get them to understand in order to develop critical civic empathy through recursive reflection (Coffey & Arnold, 2022). Perhaps if we describe the tension between various mindsets to students and are more transparent in those goals, we can engage in metacognitive reflection with our students to help them recognize the false binary between professionalism and caring or justice. A justice-oriented professionalism is not going to be developed instantly, or even by the end of the academic semester; but by introducing this concept, we may enable it to take root in some small way that will grow and nurture in the future. This flexible emergence of critical consciousness is a more achievable goal and one that, rather than being a failure, indicates steps toward a more justice-oriented future for our students and communities.

One of the most instructive outcomes from this project is that students' reflections did not become uniformly "more critical" in a straightforward or linear way; instead, they became more grounded in the lived realities of partnership work, revealing how professionalism, care, and solidarity can emerge unevenly over time. Rather than reading these patterns as evidence that critical service-learning was unsuccessful, we interpret them as evidence of flexible emergence where students move recursively among orientations—care, professionalism, solidarity, and, for some, activism—depending on context, constraints, and their developing sense of accountability to a real partner. Pedagogically, this framework encourages instructors to treat early expressions of charity or professional motivation not as endpoints or missed opportunities, but as openings for more sustained reflection and learning, especially because students may reject charity language in one context while still relying upon it in another, as evidenced in the contradictory responses in two different parts of our postcourse survey. Although charity largely disappeared from students' postcourse accounts of what they found most valuable in the service experience, it persisted in some postcourse explanations of who benefits most and why, an unevenness that underscores how students can hold competing orientations toward reciprocity, impact, and need at the same time.

As researchers and instructors, we know that we can integrate critical service-learning concepts into the classroom more effectively when we resist expecting immediate or total transformation within a single semester, especially since our previous efforts did not lead to consistent outcomes of solidarity and critical awareness for our students. One pedagogical insight from this 4-year grounded theory study has been to acknowledge the flexible emergence of critical consciousness we've observed, resulting in the slow accumulation of better ways to teach the course with that iterative process in mind. Today we more clearly articulate the goals of solidarity, justice, and critical consciousness to our students and name the common tensions students experience between charity, professionalism, and justice-oriented commitments. Rather than hoping students will navigate these tensions and arrive at a state of critical consciousness on their own, we make those goals explicit by asking students to connect their rhetorical choices to questions of power, positionality, and community expertise. The tools of critical service-learning that we have encountered during this project give us a better framework for helping students achieve a justice-oriented professionalism, a mindset that they will hopefully take into the workforce as they leave the university.

We have also had to recognize that students' past experiences will inevitably shape how they approach service-learning, as well as their broader ideas of "service." We often ask our students to think about how lived experiences impact their clients, and we should also be asking students to reflect upon how their own experiences shape their perceptions of "service" as well. Our students do not see themselves as part of the system that creates oppression in the first place, but rather as people who are fighting against oppression. Although this sentiment isn't wholly incorrect, these students are largely unaware of how they contribute to reproducing those systems of inequality by being (predominantly) White students at an expensive private liberal arts college "serving" a community that traditionally has access to fewer resources. Nevertheless, through working with and alongside community members, students create deeper bonds of genuine caring for their neighbors, a broadened perspective that allows for the flexible emergence of a more critically honed consciousness.

We also postulate that we could frame our work in Professional Writing in a more overtly subversive way, meaning that part of our goal is to share the fruits of a privileged educational space with community members who are otherwise kept outside our institution. As educators, we need to guide students in more productive ways to confront their own privilege in these situations, and we need to find strategies that include students in creative subversions of traditional power structures. In a community-based project that includes both professional writing and a service-learning component, part of what we are doing is sharing the knowledge of how to navigate linguistic systems of power (e.g., "professional writing") with community members who may have been denied access to those tools. What students need to understand is that we aren't doing this "for" the community, but with and alongside them, passing on and sharing tools freely so that our neighbors in the community can use them for their own benefit once the course has ended.

By making this subversive purpose more explicit and inviting students to reflect on how professional writing can function as a shared tool rather than privileged credential, we have found it easier to guide students toward solidarity without dismissing their desire to build skills. In this sense, flexible emergence becomes not only an analytic framework but also a pedagogical orientation where students are supported in starting where they are, often motivated by professionalism or a desire to help, and moving unevenly but meaningfully toward reciprocity, accountability, and justice. Perhaps if students can view what they do as subverting the traditional exclusions of power and understand their writing as a shared tool that challenges these systems, they may be more prepared to sustain solidarity as an ongoing commitment beyond the semester and into their future professional and civic lives.

About the Authors

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