“Effects of Service Learning”

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“Service” is increasingly and consequentially embedded in commonsensical understandings of what universities do. From student email signatures, which frequently detail five or more service activities and organizations with which a student is engaged, to university mission statements—those primary public opportunities for representing an institution to prospective clients and competitors—“service” now constitutes a core feature of university life. It is a way for institutions to brand themselves (as at once unique \textit{and} normative), an administrative category into which resources are increasingly channeled, and, finally, part of the curriculum (in the form of “service-learning”). Significantly, its rise coincides with broader changes, most notably neoliberal forms of governance and the concomitant decline of the liberal arts. While the humanities and social sciences were formerly construed to offer students broad and theoretically-rigorous insight into the human condition, for many of today’s students, enrolled as they are in pre-professional programs, “service” fills this niche, but in visceral rather than academic ways. Further, the rise of “service” indicates a broader move away from the collective forms of political activity that characterized campuses from the 1960s until near the turn of the millennium. As faculty who have watched these shifts, we have been alarmed by how much time is spent in service groups strategizing fundraisers, and how little strategizing collective action.

Such far-reaching changes in the life of the academy bear scrutiny, particularly given the centrality of higher education for training, socializing, and educating the bulk of America’s middle and elite classes. How has “service” come to wield so much discursive power, to come to be represented as both self-evident and self-evidently “good?” How does “service” reconfigure previous understandings of the nature of labor and its anticipated forms of compensation? What are the implications of the eclipse of “politics” by “service” on college campuses, and how does
this speak to incipient modalities for citizenship? We explore these questions through an analysis of university materials, namely mission statements and viewbooks, and ethnographic research among students participating in service projects and service groups.

How service obtains meaning: Mission statements and viewbooks

At our research site, in 1991 the mission was “to be a respected community of teachers and learners in which able students are prepared well to live productive and reflective lives.” “Service” was added to this statement in 1995 as part of a newly articulated trinity of goals, where “able students are prepared well for productive and reflective lives of achievement,
leadership, and service.” In 2012, this became: “[Susquehanna] educates undergraduate students for productive, creative, and reflective lives of achievement, leadership, and service in a diverse and interconnected world.” Over the span of these twelve years, “service” thus not only enters the formal university mission, it becomes linked to “leadership” and “achievement” (and a sense of the global), and its presence increases across a number of different public venues. As Bonnie Urciuoli has articulated elsewhere, “leadership,” achievement,” and “service” work as strategically deployable shifters—words whose meanings are context-dependent. This allows us to think carefully about how contexts are created to cradle “service” in particular sets of meanings as active, shifting sites for powerful sets of assumed knowledges: service is an unquestioned and self-evident good; service “gives back”; and doing service productively places one outside of one’s “comfort zone”—another powerful set of assumed meanings. “Service” increasingly saturates university catalog and promotional materials as well, all the while serving as a strategically deployable shifter. Viewbook and other public materials from 1995 to 2013 devote an increasing amount of space to promoting service as a student activity. Service transits from being a “personally satisfying and fun” activity that can “sometimes … provide valuable academic or career experience” (1995), to a “norm” of “giving back” (2011), to a “foundational component of a Susquehanna education” (2012). As a student practice, “service” gradually shifts over time from volunteerism to a component of the “college experience.” Additionally, the meaning of “service” is sometimes conflated with other practices (service learning, service as a calling, or service as the fulfillment of a paid position). Finally, the space devoted to explaining service at the university grows from less than a half page in 1995, to a four-page spread featuring the caption Serve and Evolve, with a sub-caption encouraging one to “grow through social engagement” (2012).
More specifically, the 2012 book features profiles and statements from students participating in the program, including observations about working to “benefit the community,” to “serve the community,” and to “give back.” The latter is an increasingly indeterminate referent: who is giving back what to whom, for example; what is the object of transformation, the self or the subjected other? Service not only “gives back” but, in the process, transforms. “Hard work to benefit the community has nothing but positive results. When I graduate, my résumé will so attractive because of everything I’ve done with Susquehanna” (student in Viewbook 2012).

While résumé-building is recognized as one outcome of doing service (with clear connections to a neoliberal imaginary), “service” provides an array of possible meanings through the promotional literatures; “transformation” is an equally indeterminate referent. Indeed, this indeterminacy is a significant component of service-oriented public literature, as in the following examples: “sometimes the greatest growth comes from serving others”, and “[s]ervice…is about
growing through service to others” (Viewbook 2011). The 2011 Viewbook also asserts: “A variety of programs, from on-campus recycling to supporting youth in Northern Ireland, are meeting a clear need at a local, national, or global level.” This is a remarkable illustration of the flattening of difference between programs as disparate as on-campus recycling and a program for Northern Irish youth; the assertion that such programs respond to “a clear need”; and that local, national, and global needs are equally interchangeable.
Viewbook text and images reflect the growing role of Susquehanna Engaging in Regional Volunteer Experiences (SU SERVE), a large umbrella of service and volunteer opportunities also featured on the university’s website. SU SERVE set as a goal, and surpassed, 10,000 service hours in April 2012. (By May 2014, total tallied service hours exceeded 25,000—these are hours collected and reported across an array including faculty, students, staff, and alumni.)

Understandably, the variety of activities that “count” as service is vast, as are the methods for counting service hours, and the way service is articulated and represented in the public materials. Embedded in the online materials promoting service are a number of video clips, including one of the university’s president, L. Jay Lemons. In it, President Lemons states that he “serves” as the university’s president, and that the service component of the university’s mission is something “near and dear” to him and his wife. He goes on to locate service to one another, neighbors, the larger community, and the world as an enduring practice, one established at the school’s founding. Further, it is something that “makes him tick.” The presentation of service as enduring and institutionally autochthonous, extended across a net of increasing distance (self–others–neighbors–community–world) is worth noting, if only for its beginning at the self. The way service is understood throughout the materials allows the president to collapse his serving in a paid executive position with serving others as a component of imagined selflessness, further illustrating the elastic properties of the discursive work “service” does as part of the university’s public imaginary.

Of course, if taken literally and as intended, as, no doubt, many students, parents, and alumni do, the representation and normalization of “service,” to the tune of 25,000 hours during the month of April, has interesting implications for how the audience is supposed to understand labor. As we know, service is a form of affective labor (see, for example, Muehlebach 2011
Salazar Parreñas 2012) which encompasses an array of activities, many of which entail some form of sweat equity and elbow grease. Indeed, service as a way of uniting the high and the low (Turner 1967) is a recurring trope in university texts. Images and videos of students (or alumni) frequently feature them picking up trash, digging weeds, cleaning dirty rooms, removing debris from storms, and washing dishes. However, the activities the volunteers perform are also activities normally performed by low-wage workers (who are never shown doing these tasks), and thus raise a number of questions about what it means to staff these positions, even temporarily, with America’s elite. One student at our research site presciently noted that her assigned task during first-year student orientation—a mandated day of service for all new students not playing on fall athletic teams—was weeding the campus. She was disturbed to be assigned a task normally performed by the university’s grounds staff. What did this say about her labor? What were the implications for the people who were normally paid to do this work?

Citing the research of S. J. Ellis, Kevin D. Lyons and Stephen Waring offer a cautionary tale about the increasingly non-negotiability of undergraduate service activities. As they argue, “conceptually, these experiences can be considered a form of . . . mandated or coerced volunteering, which also describes transition to work schemes and court ordered community service” (2012:90). They further decry that “so little consideration in the literatures [has been] given to volunteer experiences that emerge from contexts where there is little choice” (2012:90).

Citizenship

Not only does the hegemonic status currently enjoyed by “service” reconfigure the logic of labor, it further provides students with a particular modality for citizenship, at once yoking what is presumed to be the inevitability of government malfunction to the consequent necessity
of individual action, while further delineating the democratic self from “the occluded inside--
…the poor, particular races, ethnicities, or religions…” as well as “a constitutive outside…---the
‘barbarians’” (Brown 2011:51). The serving citizen exerts individual effort—even if she has
been organized into a group—the impact of which is best measured by individual
“transformation.” Her efforts are to be appreciated at the personal level, concomitantly obviating
systemic endeavors to address or transform inequality.

**Government malfunction and individual action**

Because service projects and trips, by definition, take place in sites of need, students have
visceral experiences of lack and failure. To what to attribute the breakdown, however, is rarely
considered, and most frequently students land on what strikes them as obvious: a government
conjured as ineffective, inefficient, bureaucratic, and remote. As one student said about her
spring break service trip to the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans, “So it was really difficult to
think of this as a place in my country where, you know, where our government is supposedly so
reliable and you would never think that something like that would happen” (student interview, 1
November, 2011). Another young woman, who had also participated on the trip, commented
similarly: “I am more skeptical of everything now, especially more skeptical towards the
government” (student interview, 11 December, 2011). To these students, the natural solution to
government failure lies in the individual, the volunteer willing to pitch in and make a difference.
As the second speaker added, “…if it wasn’t for groups like HRT [The Hurricane Relief Team,
of which she is a member] and Habitat and Brad Pitt and those things, I don’t know where they
[Hurricane Katrina’s victims] would be” (student interview, 11 December, 2011).
Similar to this were our findings from an exploratory survey (56 respondents) which we distributed to students at our research site. Among other questions (some of which we address below), we asked students to rank seven possible outcomes of service activities. The option which ranked highest overall, which 55% of students identified as “most important,” was “recipients were given things they didn’t have before (for example, food, medicine, clothing, or shelter). Conversely, the option which ranked lowest overall, which 59% of respondents identified as “least important,” was “volunteers or recipients learned how to lobby their politicians to make desired changes”; indeed, not a single respondent considered this option “most important.”
Citizen-volunteers and the “occluded inside”

The service paradigm also distinguishes between and assigns different values to the citizen-volunteer (the server) and the “occluded inside” (the served) (Brown 2011:51). In our survey, when asked what they valued in service projects, students ranked developing “strong bonds” with recipients only fifth in a field of seven. Our interview data support this as well. For example, one young woman, an elected official in a college chapter of a national group that supports minors, differentiated extensively between the college volunteers and the parents of the minors. Parents of the minors were characterized by their lack—their alleged inability and incompetence to care for their children and their failure to perform particular tasks like return phone calls—while volunteers were characterized by their surplus—their willingness to make time during their busy weeks to improve the lives of children.

Citizen-volunteers and the “constitutive outside”

Similarly, “service” distinguishes between the student and the “constitutive outside” (Brown 2011:51). “Service” shifts from a college-connected setting to an affirmation of changing the world and helping organizations on a global level. This connects to the university’s recently mandated study-away program, but it also affirms that changing the world is something best imagined as happening “elsewhere.” Included student text in the Viewbook clearly speaks to imagining a world “getting smaller,” “a place where we can act to take … development in a positive direction,” and that such a desire is best fulfilled “face to face, with people from different cultures and different walks of life.” Imagining a shrinking world as filled with “elsewheres” that benefit from direct, face-to-face student service engagement disconnects student participation from a critical analysis of how such “elsewheres” come to be, or what the
role of privileged and serving students have to take for granted and un-interrogated, which deeply questions the project and delivery of service learning.

Indeed, “development speak” and “service speak” shift across different domains of indicated, shared knowledge and good intentions. The world is a place where “development” is seen as an under-defined but powerful inevitability, where desires to serve and “give back” are in and of themselves a performance of good, unquestioned. As in other documents, a connection between need—local, national, or global—is never connected to the exercises of politics or economics.

Service as self-transformation

Last, even when participating in groups, service is largely an individual activity, premised on the additive benefits of more hands to dig, build, paint, collect trash, and so forth, rather than the multiplicative benefits of thoughtful citizens collectively pondering (and engaging with) the life of the polis. Similarly, because colleges are institutions of higher education, they are compelled by a number of forces to ensure that some sort of benefit accrues to the serving student. For example, one student, recounting a brief service trip to a poor neighborhood in a major metropolitan area, explained that for the first day of the trip students were charged with finding their way to the neighborhood without the use of their cell phones or public transportation. They had to talk to people and navigate the streets until they arrived at the designated meeting area. She said this really brought her outside her “comfort zone,” once again distinguishing the citizen-volunteer from the needy recipient, and having the paradoxical effect of making a poor neighborhood seem even more remote. It also left open the question of the
degree to which these trips are actually about helping others, even superficially, and how much they are about the individual transformation of the student.

Results from our survey similarly suggest that students consider “emotional growth (for example, increased confidence or empathy)” of primary import in terms of what they expect from service, with 55% of respondents ranking it highest; of least import was “understanding politics,” with only 3% of students rating it as “most important.”

In this configuration, the self is understood as both the vehicle for, and the receptor of, change (the “face-to-face” interaction invoked above). It is interesting to again consider the image on the screen, captioned “Volunteer. Help those in Need. Change the World.” This photo of a white male student holding out a handful of grass to a fenced-in llama is one of the more enduring images in recent years’ service-oriented materials. It speaks, in many ways, to some of the recurring themes of service—performed by white students, informed by a sense of wonder and pleasure, to a constrained, appreciative, and non-threatening exotic other unable to speak for itself.

_Tentative conclusions_

Service conjures a particular kind of citizen who, on one level, seems ideally suited to neoliberal forms of governance. She is a citizen with few expectations of government, a citizen in whom Margaret Thatcher’s oft-quoted assertion about the primacy of the individual has seemingly taken hold:

[W]ho is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first….There is no such thing as society. [Thatcher 1987]
However, this model of citizenship is not without its contradictions, for as we have seen service also conjures a subject acclimated to laboring without compensation, disrupting the very logic of responsibilization and the free market. When followed to its logical conclusion, the imperative to manage on one’s own while offering one’s labor free of charge may be untenable.
Sources

Margaret Thatcher from an interview in Women’s Own in 1987, cited from The Guardian


\[1\] My name is Jay Lemons and it is my honor and privilege to serve Susquehanna University as its president. It is hard for me to imagine that I’ve just begun serving my twelfth year here at Susquehanna. One of the things that helped to attract Marsha and me to Selinsgrove and Susquehanna was the clarity of the university’s mission. It calls out its hallmarks: achievement, leadership, and service. The service component is something near and dear to both of us. We come from a family where service is an important part of tradition, and it is a cherished part of what it means to be a member of the community. Here at Susquehanna, from the very founding, there has been a commitment to serving one another, serving one’s neighbors, serving the larger community and, indeed serving the world. I am so very proud and grateful for the ways in which Susquehannans demonstrate their own commitment to service. As for me, there is just no question that the importance of being called to serve others is a part of what makes me tick. I hope that others will follow the lead of the great Susquehanna tradition here, and join in in supporting that tradition as we have in Service Day in April here at Susquehanna University. For all of these reasons, I want you to know I value service, we value service, and we are grateful for the Susquehannans who will serve this April.