SERVICE-LEARNING AND THE CONSPIRACY OF COURTESY

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Abstract

Service-learning in higher education has successfully focused on its advantages as a rigorous academic pedagogy for student learning. While the benefits of service-learning for students and faculty enjoy wide acclaim, the impact on recipients of service has not received as much attention. This paper explores barriers to service-learning success, described as the "conspiracy of courtesy": interaction dynamics whereby participants courteously, politely, and silently disrupt or even render useless the service project by declining to share vital information.

KEY WORDS: Service-learning, service credibility, reciprocity, conspiracy of courtesy, assets, strengths, higher education, humanitarian leadership

INTRODUCTION

The objective of service-learning in higher education is academic teaching and learning. The definition of service-learning used in this article is as follows:

“Service-learning is an academically rigorous instructional method that incorporates meaningful community service into the curriculum. Focusing on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility, service-learning involves students in organized community service that addresses local needs, while developing their academic skills, respect for others, and commitment to the common good” [DiPadova-Stocks 2005, p. 345].

This definition, like other definitions of service-learning, emphasizes academic rigor. Clearly, the first priority of service-learning is to provide a means for students to master the substance of a given course in which they are enrolled.

For over a decade, service-learning faculty have asserted the benefits of this method for helping students learn subject matter. These faculty argue that learning from a service experience is just as credible—and in some ways more so—than learning from listening to lectures, writing term papers, or taking examinations. At the same time, service-learning as an innovative pedagogy has been (and still is, in some circles) decried as “soft”, “giving credit for volunteer work”, and “not truly academic”. However, by and large faculty are increasingly successful in academic scholarship related to service-learning, presenting it to their colleagues as an intellectually rigorous instructional method—a method made even more challenging by the chaotic and often unpredictable demands of real people in real circumstances.

As service-learning faculty continue to assert the inherent academic quality and rigor of service-learning, it is enjoying increased currency and credibility in higher education as a legitimate instructional method. Today, service-learning courses proliferate on college and university campuses in the United States. Most institutions now have an office for service-learning programs staffed with a full-time director. These service-learning offices range from university-wide centers devoted to service-learning and community engagement, to service-learning centers within schools/colleges of business, public affairs,
and other professional fields. Many universities have created centers for teaching and learning, some of which may house a service-learning office. University service-learning offices are very helpful in linking faculty and the university to community partners, and in bringing consistency to the quality of service-learning course offerings. Lately, academic departments have begun to include service-learning responsibilities in the job description/requirements for new faculty.

The increasing number of service-learning courses raises a vital concern with respect to this instructional method: service credibility. With the battle for academic credibility effectively won, the challenge now is to ensure service credibility; that is to say, to ensure that service is rendered in such a way as not to exploit those being served. Service credibility draws attention to the importance of enhancing the strengths and dignity of recipients of service efforts and not reinforcing a sense of earned privilege and pity in those rendering the service.

Service credibility is possible when reciprocity, a fundamental principle of service-learning, is understood and implemented. In brief, this principle draws attention to the needs of recipients of service, and recognizes that students learn from those recipients [Jacoby, 1996; Mintz and Hesser, 1996]. This principle is critical as it ensures that engagement of faculty and students with the community being served does not take advantage of those receiving the service. As Jacoby points out, following the principle of reciprocity “...avoids placing students into community settings based solely on desired student learning outcomes and providing services that do not meet actual needs or perpetuate a state of need…” [Jacoby, 1996, 7].

Attempts to adhere to the principle of reciprocity may be disrupted when any participants decline to share vital information, or when they give answers to questions that they “think are wanted” [Gill, n.d., p.9], think they are expected, or appropriate. This refusal to be candid and share information is widely known among humanitarian relief workers as the “conspiracy of courtesy”. For example, those who receive service may consider it rude to be assertive about the nature of their needs. In gratitude to those providing service, recipients try to please them by going along with whatever the service providers seem to want to do. The recipients may trust the providers more than they trust their own experiences and judgment. Also, those who render the service might be uncomfortable with their role, and not find ways to press the recipients for needed information. This conspiracy of courtesy, which occurs in interpersonal interaction, nullifies reciprocity and destroys the service credibility of the experience.

The challenge of mastering service credibility is more difficult to address than academic credibility, as service credibility deals directly with the service aspect of service-learning. Students in geology or history, for instance, may find that they must master skills outside of their academic area. In contrast, students in fields that study interpersonal interaction dynamics find that the skills they study in class are the ones that they must use in the service experience.

Attention to the dynamics of rendering service requires self-awareness on the parts of faculty and students, respect for recipients of the service, and considerable interpersonal skill. These skills are tested when service-learning experiences require students to interact with people who are different from themselves. If they are uncomfortable with the situation, students and faculty can unknowingly revert to the conspiracy of courtesy as an avoidance measure, and be reluctant to encourage interaction beyond the safe and superficial or expedient. As a result, they might resort to performing only the minimal requirements of the service rather than becoming fully engaged in the task.

Self-awareness for faculty involves recognizing that they can engage in scholarly research that benefits faculty goals rather than helping those being researched. For example, one of the authors supervised research on the impact of welfare reform on a Native American tribe in a Western state in the United States. When meeting the researchers from the University for the first time, the tribal leaders refused to cooperate. They informed the researchers that for over half a century, faculty from universities had come to the reservation, conducted research, written articles and books, and been awarded tenure, but nothing ever changed for the tribe. The tribal leaders complained to the researchers that they were tired of being used. The researchers offered to arrange monthly meetings on the reservation with tribal leaders and state and local government officials in order to address the tribe’s concerns and needs. At that point, the tribal leaders agreed to work with the researchers, and the meetings commenced as planned.

This paper argues that service-learning as a field has yet to confront the necessary reciprocity issues involved in service, and that service-learning can benefit from the experience of people who lead humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian work provides needed service while identifying the strengths of
those being served, and developing their assets—or resources. When embarking on the task of providing service to others, it is important to candidly discuss and clearly define the goals and expected outcomes.

The “conspiracy of courtesy” interferes with the candid quality of interaction described above. The conspiracy reinforces service providers’ presumptions of their own knowledge about what others need. This conspiracy denies providers important accurate information about the recipients’ situations. Without this firsthand knowledge from recipients about their situations and desires, service providers may fail to recognize the strengths of those being served.

This paper sets forth three assumptions that constitute the foundation of the conspiracy of courtesy interaction dynamics: First, professionals who have formal education possess all of the knowledge relevant to helping people not so advantaged; second, those who have formal education have little of real value to learn from people in need; third, people who are in need lack strengths, assets, and resources. Acceptance of these foundational assumptions prevents acknowledgment, confrontation, and disarmament of the conspiracy.

Using the professional experience of the authors in humanitarian work and service provision, this article draws on the literature from international development, social work, and sociology, to explore the following:

- Cultural and educational myopia of faculty. This cultural myopia is grounded in the first assumption element listed above. The myopia focuses faculty on their academic expertise and ability to judge what recipients of service need. It prevents faculty from recognizing what those being served actually want from the service. The result is that faculty awareness of possibly exploiting recipients is inhibited.
- Recognition of the strengths and assets of recipients;
- Identification of conspiracy of courtesy issues;
- Strategies to employ to defuse conspiracy of courtesy dynamics.

Confronting conspiracy of courtesy issues is necessary if service-learning faculty and students are to preserve the dignity of those being served. Attention to these issues can be critical to helping students develop the skills they need to learn from others.

CULTURAL MYOPIA OF THE EDUCATED

“If poor people behaved rationally, they would seldom be poor for long in the first place.”—Professor Lawrence Mead, quoted in Kozol [1995, p. 21].

Everyone makes assumptions. Humans necessarily learn to create categories through which to view others; this is part of socialization into society. Individuals learn assumptions about those who are different—whether those differences surround gender, race, ethnic and regional differences, class, income, education, or religion. One’s abilities to conceptualize, make distinctions, and draw conclusions are part of how individuals learn to simplify and order the world around them. Certain conceptualizations can construct barriers that inhibit interaction and learning from people who are different from those with whom one is comfortable.

Scholarly research can assist in addressing cultural myopia issues, described above. One useful framework for such issues is Burns’ notion of “Transforming Leadership” [Burns,1979]. A political scientist, Burns’ conceptualization addresses cultural myopia in his comparison of “Transactional Leadership” and “Transforming Leadership” [p. 4]. Transactional leadership occurs when there is a quid pro quo between the leader and the follower; that is to say, the leader (having status and privilege) agrees to give the follower (lesser status and privilege) rewards if the follower performs certain behaviors. An example is the employer-employee relationship whereby the employer provides payment for work.

In contrast is “transforming leadership”. Burns frames “transforming leadership in terms of an interpersonal relationship. He uses the student-teacher relationship as an example and describes how both leader and follower are transformed to a “higher level of motivation and morality” [Burns, 1979, p. 20]. For such a transformation to occur, the leader (who by role definition has superior knowledge over the follower) recognizes that there is something of value to be learned from the follower and both leader and follower benefit. In much the same way, faculty and students in higher education can learn from service recipients. Often service recipients have challenging circumstances, extensive coping experience, and unique knowledge.
Service-learning proponents often turn to the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire [1970] in their efforts to compare traditional pedagogical methods with service-learning. Freire describes the traditional method of education as a “banking” concept in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” [p. 72]. He further states, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” [p. 72]. Freire argues for education grounded in dialogue and praxis, in which “teachers and students become Subjects of the educational process” [p. 86]. Like Burns’ transforming leadership, Freire’s views articulate the value of mutual learning across class, educational, and other differences.

The key concepts found in Burns and Freire suggest that individuals at all status and role levels can learn from each other. Burns’ notion of transforming leadership is consistent with Freire’s anti-hierarchical concept of problem-based education grounded in dialogue. Both concepts invite participants to abandon status differences while maintaining role responsibilities. Both concepts encourage participants to learn from each other, regardless of relative advantage or status. These concepts of Freire and Burns, when described and implemented in service-learning settings, provide frameworks with which to avoid the conspiracy of courtesy.

A potential outcome of service-learning is for students and faculty to experience the creative and transforming power of these concepts. That said, all too often, service-learning projects reinforce providers’ sense of superiority and privilege. Service experiences can support the view that recipients are people with no knowledge and skills. Service experiences also can suggest that the only value of recipients is to allow providers to “feel good” about the act of providing service [DiPadova-Stocks, 2005, p. 351]. This paper suggests that in order for service-learning to be morally legitimate, the pedagogy must conform to the best practice of meaningful learning from individuals and organizations that are served.

“STRENGTHS AND SURVIVORS”

“I pray that someone in my family will not die.” --Jeremiah, age 12, resident of the South Bronx, in response to an inquiry if he has difficulties sleeping when hearing gunshots in the neighborhood [Kozol, 1995, p. 34].

The conspiracy of courtesy can be avoided by adopting the Strengths Model of case management in the field of social work. Developed by Kisthardt [in Saleebey, 1997], this model is grounded in ideas that are consistent with the work of Burns and Freire. Coming from a social work perspective, Kisthardt’s model recognizes that people who are dealing with challenging life issues have strengths. These strengths, once identified, can be used as a foundation for improving the life of the person seeking help.

Kisthardt’s Strengths Model teaches that service recipients, who by definition are disadvantaged as compared with those providing the service, are properly and accurately viewed as individuals who have survived in the face of trying circumstances. These survivors often face “external enemies of poverty, public apathy, and even hostility...they are resourceful, knowledgeable, resilient, and courageous” [Kisthardt, 1997, p. 98]. Like Burns’ transforming leadership and Freire’s dialogic and praxis, the Strengths Model frames an interpersonal relationship based on “mutuality, collaboration, and partnership” [Kisthardt, 1997, p. 98]. This concept should be familiar to service-learning faculty as it is consistent with the principle of reciprocity, widely held as a key tenet of designing effective service-learning programs [Mintz and Hesser, 1996, p. 35-37].

Kisthardt also points out the importance of acknowledging that people make decisions regardless of their circumstances and that all individuals “possess the inherent capacity to learn, grow, and change” [Kisthardt, 1997, p.99]. The Strengths Model is aptly illustrated by the experience of one of the authors of this paper, Victor Brown (hereafter quoted as VLB). In this situation, he was working with a non-governmental organization (NGO) in a large Midwestern city in the U.S.A. He recounts the following:

“The single mother answered the knock and in a monotone voice invited in the service-learning instructor and employee-trainees. They followed her past walls of missing plaster and exposed lath, a kitchen with torn linoleum flooring, and a bathroom with dishes stacked by the tub where she knelt to wash them because the kitchen sink leaked. Asked why she had not asked the landlord to repair the sink, she said that such complaints had gotten other tenants evicted.”
“An emotionally disturbed teenaged son sat on the rumpled bed; his younger high-
school-dropout brother lounged on a rickety chair. As the mother sat down on the bed
near the older boy, her body drooped to match the room and mood of poverty, mental
illness, lack of education, and substandard housing. Where to begin? A conspiracy of
courtesy would condemn this forlorn family to remain in desperate circumstances. The
mother’s weariness bordered on clinical depression. The troubled son was unable to
communicate. The dropout son was wary of the visitors. Continually affirming the mother
as head of the family, and tapping into the younger son’s desire to assist his mother, the
service-learning team helped them learn to use their own, as well as private and public
resources that eventually included a Bar Association’s pro bono committee for community
service, volunteers from the family’s church, the field work instructor and NGO
employees, school officials, and other tenants. Assets (and morale) were regained,
created, or added to by immediate repairs to the apartment by church volunteers,
enrollment of the younger son in a GED (General Education Development Diploma)
program that included mentors, acceptance of the older son by a treatment autism
program with a support group for the mother, Bar Association help that coached the
mother as she organized other tenants to take action that severed the slumlord’s title to
the building.”

“As the mother and younger son gained control of their situation, not only their
circumstances changed, but their appearance and demeanor changed, as well. She
started to fix up her hair and wear newer used dresses provided by her church. The
younger son’s confidence grew as he returned to school and learned study, work, and
social skills from mentors. One member of the NGO team who was absent for several
weeks scarcely recognized the mother when he returned.” [Interview with Victor Brown,
February 22, 2006, Salt Lake City, Utah]

Examining this situation from Kisthardt’s Strengths Model perspective, notice how hopeless the
family’s situation seems. Yet the family was able to deal with very difficult and challenging circumstances
over time without completely collapsing. Middle and upper class families typically have more available
resources than do lower income families. Even with their resource advantages, economically privileged
families might be challenged by any one of the circumstances facing the mother above: being a single
parent, having teenagers, having a troubled child, having a child drop out of school. This mother had
none of the economic resources typically available to economically advantaged families, but she had
strengths. She had survived difficult situations, had coped, was resilient over time, and ultimately
prevailed.

The NGO team helped this woman identify her strengths and proceeded to help develop her assets.
The team accomplished this by avoiding the conspiracy of courtesy in their interaction with her. The team
showed respect for her and her sons, obtained their trust, and learned what the mother wanted for her
family. As it turned out, one key asset or benefit that the family had was the bright younger son whose
motive for dropping out of school was to help his mother with his brother’s care. Working collaboratively
with the family, the team focused on what the family wanted (rather than assuming what they needed) by
helping identify community resources (including relevant government programs) that might be helpful to
the family. The identification of relevant resources gave the family options that the mother had not known
was available to them. The family was then able to make decisions.

The entire process was transformative for all concerned. The NGO team saw the mother’s personal
courage and perseverance as she coped with enormous challenges; her intelligence as she accepted and
implemented new ideas; and her capacity for growth as she allowed other people and organizations into
her life. In the end, she persevered to attain a major leadership role in her community.

MYTH: THE DISADVANTAGED HAVE NO ASSETS

“A 30-year old woman whom I met once on the train, who was returning with
her daughter from a trip to Sing Sing, where she had been visiting her husband, a
life prisoner, told me she’d attended Taft and felt it had prepared her well for her
employment. I asked her what she did, and she replied she was a cook and
household maid in Riverdale.” [in Kozol, 1995, p. 203].
Property, income, employment, wealth, savings accounts, and other investments (e.g. stocks, bonds) are typically regarded as assets, or physical capital. Human capital refers to individual strengths and properties, such as intellect, education, and employment. Social capital refers to “connections among individuals”, support networks and reciprocity [Putnam, 2000, p. 21]. Human capital, as well as social capital, can be developed into assets and resources. Intellectual properties are assets and have value, if they can be protected from theft or encroachment. What assets would Hewlett-Packard or Google or Microsoft have without the legal and social support of copyright and patent protections? In this paper the authors put forward that personal strengths are also assets, that such assets require legal and social support, and that identifying these assets should be a component of service-learning field work.

As is clear from the above case of the U.S.A. Midwestern family, individuals may have strengths and assets that are unrecognized and frequently underutilized. Service-learning experiences can be enhanced by viewing service recipients through the lens of their strengths and what they want, with the goal of identifying and developing assets. Coming from environments of relative privilege, students and faculty may find it a challenge to recognize assets that are different from their own. The keys are respecting the person as a unique and valued individual, acknowledging the difficulties of the circumstances that the person is in, and learning how the person has coped with and handled those circumstances. These steps aid in identifying the person’s assets and allow learning from the person.

“When I was pregnant, I went to God, ‘I want a healthy child. I want a pretty little girl who has long hair and I don’t want no dummy.’ He gave me exactly what I ordered! For what you want, you got to be specific. One time I asked Him for a handsome man and that’s exactly what I got: a handsome man and nothin’ else. No brains, no money, no religion. I cannot deal with an ignorant man who don’t believe in nothin’. So I said, ‘Next time I got to be specific…”” [in Kozol, 1995, p. 202]

Some of the most destitute around the world have assets; most have remarkable strengths. Hernando de Soto [2000], documented the assets among the world’s poor in many nations stating: “Even in the poorest countries, the poor save. The value of savings among the poor is, in fact, immense—forty times all the foreign aid received throughout the world since 1945” [p. 5]. He continues, “The poor have accumulated trillions of dollars of real estate during the past forty years. What the poor lack is easy access to the property mechanisms that could legally fix the economic potential of their assets so that they could be used to produce, secure, or guarantee greater value in the expanded market” [pp. 47-48].

One of the authors saw the use of assets to rectify dependence when he worked for an NGO in the U.S.A. Appalachian region and in the Philippines. At an Appalachian consolidated school, an NGO instructor circulated among impoverished school children and their parents (who were in most cases mothers of the children). The families had come for a used clothing distribution, jointly sponsored by the school and the NGO. One mother and two teenage daughters were dressed in worn but clean clothes and spent time selecting a few articles of clothing. When asked if they needed more, the mother replied that they wanted only what they could use for work, school, and church. Used clothing for them was an asset, which could be leveraged to help the mother obtain a better job. A group of mothers from the hollows and hills of Appalachian Kentucky, living in barely habitable dwellings, began conducting autumn back-to-school workshops. With their own assets of money, materials, and ingenuity, augmented by NGO, state, and federal assets, these mothers helped their children become well nourished, adequately clothed, and prepared for school.

In the Philippines, while evaluating micro-loan projects, the author found similar appreciation for, and leveraging of assets. Local business owners not only raise and slaughter pigs for sale in the village, but also craft and sell leather products for Manila department stores, bake and sell sweet pastries on street corners, and tailor or refurbish women’s clothing for sale in the neighborhood. These entrepreneurs had used their own resources to start their businesses, and would later seek micro-loans to add value to their businesses. Their strategy was to leverage their original assets to create opportunities to gain greater assets over time.

Studies by Brandeis University’s Institute on Assets and Social Policy address the need for public policy to support asset building.
“While the term asset policy is relatively new, the concept is not. It combines the liberal objective of reducing poverty and inequality with the conservative idea of individual wealth building. Through asset policies such as the Homestead Acts and the G.I. Bill, government has helped to build a broad middle class. Today, similar governmental policies such as pre-tax retirement accounts and home mortgage deductions represent investments in the strength and independence of individuals and families” [Venner, et al., 2005, p. 42].

Service-learning, as an academic pedagogy, has the potential to create a link between higher education and public policy in important activities of community based strength identification and asset building. Identifying strengths and assets requires sharing information among all participants, a process that can be disrupted by various means, one of which is the conspiracy of courtesy.

IDENTIFYING CONSPIRACY OF COURTESY ISSUES

“As a responsible social being the participant is open to new ideas that could help improving conditions of living of her family, friends, and community. But there is also the risk that the ideology so dearly held and shared with the group may be ignored, discredited, or even discarded by those distant others.” —Syed A. Rahim [in White, Nair, and Ascroft, 1994, p.119].

To identify mutually desired assets that can be leveraged to achieve outcomes, everyone involved must communicate fully and freely with each other. Participants must also agree on what is wanted and what is to be achieved. A variety of communication obstacles can delay or prevent reaching agreement. These obstacles, as detailed above, are known as the conspiracy of courtesy. Experienced humanitarian and development workers

“...take it as a rule of thumb that any program that fails to maintain a continuing flow of feedback...will fall far short of its potential....The real challenge is not so much to collect enough information, but rather that it be candid. In many...cultures, people avoid ever saying anything unpleasant or critical to anyone else, especially [to] an outsider or a professional. This ‘conspiracy of courtesy’ means that [local participants] often know of poor employee [or student] performance, serious operational flaws, corruption, or even the imminent demise of a program months or even years before the program’s leaders find out.... All program personnel must constantly ask questions that may prove embarrassing to themselves, such as why innovations have not been accepted or meetings not attended....Good feedback will best be achieved when [participants] find out that they can openly criticize the program without giving rise to bad feelings or repercussions, and that their suggestions will be acted upon” [Bunch, 1982, pp. 67-68; emphasis in original].

Service-learning participants may have converging motives and the best of intentions in bringing about good and noble ends. That said, legitimate differences regarding means, perspective, methodology, philosophy, culture, results, and identified assets may distort or hamper the process and the outcome of the experience. Dynamic, productive tension between everyone involved is to be expected and welcomed. Its absence might indicate a project’s irrelevance. Denying differences, or allowing them to simmer below the surface, can often destroy a project’s potential.

Examples of avoiding the conspiracy of courtesy are found in the recollections of one of the authors (VLB) working as a NGO evaluator in South India:

“At NGO sponsored schools, monsoons regularly flooded the school yards and buildings...breeding malaria-carrying mosquitoes. This rendered the community’s major property assets useless for weeks at a time when the slopes of the school grounds prevented drainage. This degraded the education assets by which poor parents hoped to qualify their children for India’s rapidly expanding technological economy.”

“During several days prior to the school visits, the NGO evaluator had made it clear that he was listening and learning more than he was commenting and the school officials responded in kind. The NGO administrator’s offer to arrange a $15,000 grant for a pump was met with silence until the principal explained that maintaining the pump would not be financially feasible or practical because of
the daily disruption of electricity. A practical solution would be to use NGO funds to hire laborers to dig a drainage ditch from the school-yard to the nearby canal. At another school the NGO representative raised the possibility of paying for costly grading and cementing of portions of the grounds. The principal invited an experienced retired groundskeeper to assess the problem, which led to a decision to slope, smooth, and seal the low part of the grounds. Laborers and locally available materials (including cow dung) were used at a cost of $1,500, which the NGO allocated.

“A conspiracy of courtesy would have given one school a pump they could not operate or maintain and which would have become a useless monument of the community’s futile attempt to protect its most valuable asset. (The NGO leader later visited a vocational training school where just such a forlorn asset existed. Modern machine tools stood idle because there was no money to maintain or repair, i.e., regain, the German-made donated assets). At the other school the work project became a symbol of effective problem solving by local people, assisted by outside assets.”

In another international example, the author describes his experience with college administrators.

“As the sun sunk toward dusk, the college president, in her gray sari, courteously and subtly suggested to the visiting American vocational educator that his proposed curriculum wouldn’t do. Undaunted, the visitor pressed ahead and the already long meeting slid toward an impasse.”

“Fearing disaster, the American NGO leader accompanying the American educator, asked the president’s permission to leave the meeting to tour the campus before it grew dark. The president agreed and asked the academic dean to guide the two-man tour while she and the vocational visitor continued.”

“As soon as they were outside, the NGO leader asked the dean about the president’s objective. The dean answered that the president was trying to tell the vocational man that his proposals were too costly, too structured, and incompatible with the local culture. The consultant asked why the president didn’t just say so plainly.”

“The dean’s response was to invite the American to continue to walk around the grounds. As they strolled, the NGO leader listened, observed, and asked while the dean described programs and facilities, adding gentle insights into how they did things at the college. By the time the tour ended, the American understood that the president was being gracious, not evasive. Her subtle, indirect approach represented highly skilled communication in a culture where confrontation was inappropriate and avoiding insult was valued.”

“Detouring around water buffalo in the dimming evening light, they returned to the administration building. The dean proposed to the president and the vocational educator that they all reflect on the issues overnight.”

“The next morning, the Americans, assisted by the dean’s occasional comments, presented a revised proposal that met the president’s approval because it was culturally feasible and would create, regain, and add value to the college’s educational assets." [Interview with Victor Brown, February 22, 2006, Salt Lake City, Utah]

In this instance the college officials were communicating in a way consistent with their non-confrontational culture. The American vocational educator, while not confrontational, was assertive. A conspiracy of courtesy was developing. Workable solutions were reached by taking a break, informally exchanging views outside of the main meeting, listening, and adapting.

Another example from VLB occurred in Guatemala. As he describes the situation:

“A micro-lending project’s local leader was under pressure from out-of-country NGO staff to include men more actively in applying for and obtaining some of the small loans. The discussion veered toward breakdown as one of the NGO visitors grew apprehensive about what seemed to be the local director’s feminist agenda.”

“Sensitive to the dangers of a conspiracy of courtesy, the NGO visitor asked the administrator about the history of men in the program. This gave the administrator a forum to explain the project’s troubled history. Many of the men had used their loans as spending money for gambling and drinking; whereas many of the women had used their loans to improve family circumstances. As a result, the NGO visitor and the administrator decided that women would continue to receive most of the loans, and men would be trained in appropriate ways to leverage assets.” [Interview with Victor Brown, February 22, 2006, Salt Lake City, Utah]

The examples demonstrate how NGO team members learned by listening, without compromising their original agendas.
STRATEGIES TO EMPLOY IN DEFUSING CONSPIRACY OF COURTESY DYNAMICS

“People are not mere recipients of development services. They are a development program’s most important asset.” —Benjamin V. Lozare [in White, Nair and Ascroft, 1994, p. 243].

As described earlier in this paper, there are several assumptions that underlie the conspiracy of courtesy. Creating positive and productive service-learning experiences for all parties involved requires actively addressing these assumptions at the beginning of a project.

The first assumption is that formally educated professionals possess all the knowledge relevant to helping recipients of service (termed the cultural myopia of the educated, above). The second assumption is that professionals with formal education have nothing to learn from service recipients. Freire [1970] addresses this assumption at length, describing the view that students are ignorant and it is the teacher’s job to convey the knowledge required to reduce their ignorance. For those who have worked hard in structured educational settings to earn degrees, abandoning the assumption of knowing more than others with less formal education may be challenging at best. Even though people with formal education can legitimately lay claim to considerable knowledge and expertise in their disciplines, individuals with little or no formal education have valuable knowledge from their life experiences. This knowledge is important to consider in the service experience.

One consequence of the first assumption is that policies and procedures are developed without consultation or dialogue with those whose needs are being addressed. An example, drawn from the work of Joseph Ascroft [1994] in the international development literature, discusses the origin of the concept of ‘people’s participation’ [p. 248], and illustrates the difficulty of recognizing the need to work across class lines and differences:

“This [dynamic] was abruptly brought to the attention via a speech made in Nairobi by Robert McNamara, then president of the World Bank. He had come to the realization that peasant farmers of the Third World, though ostensibly the benefactors of development programs, were being systematically excluded from the processes that decided the nature and direction of this development. Such exclusion was militating against the efficacy of development programs. “No program,” said McNamara, “will help small farmers if it is designed by those who have no knowledge of their problems and operated by those who have no interest in their future.”

‘People’s participation’ soon became a popular phrase for people working in development agencies. The phrase became a key part of policy statements, project formulation cycles, and national five year plans. It has, to this day, “endured as one of the hottest buzz words” [p. 248] of the international development business. What the phrase did not do, however, was change the reality of the lives of the peasants it was designed to include. There were no people in need participating in planning sessions in Washington, D.C., New York, Geneva, Paris, or Rome. There were no people in need included in the planning of technical aid assistance programs and projects located in their own countries. If there was participation taking place, it certainly was not where the peasant farm families were. Nothing changed—the peasants remained unquestioned and unheard and the policy makers remained experts working in a vacuum of their own ideas. Notice that although the involved policy makers endorsed McNamara’s mandate, “People’s Participation” did not happen. A lesson from this example is that assumptions of superior knowledge are tenacious and require diligent effort to defuse.

The third assumption is that people in need lack strengths and assets. The research and experiences described in this paper, point to the contrary. Acceptance of this assumption may require a deliberate decision to abandon one’s pretense of superiority, and a willingness to learn from others regardless of differences.

Within the context of addressing the above assumptions, the following interaction techniques are presented as specific strategies that implement the concepts of Burns and Freire. The interpersonal communication strategies are detailed in Kisthardt’s Strengths Model. These strategies provide a way to avoid the conspiracy of courtesy. The model helps students to learn from those regarded as having fewer advantages in life. Kisthardt’s principles can assist service-learning faculty in guiding students to learn from service recipients.

Kisthardt’s strategies [1997, 102-103], with number four added by the authors, are listed here:
1. “Talk with people; do not interview them.” Have a conversation of value with someone, not simply a data-gathering experience. Service providers need to listen carefully without planning what they are going to say next.

2. “Try to help people see that you are not there to judge them, or even to change them, but rather to accept and validate them.” Consciously take yourself out of the role of expert, and place yourself into the role of learner.

3. “Talk about things you have in common.” This is a critical step for the service recipient, in that it enables the service-provider to identify personal common ground and exhibit empathy.

4. Consciously look for what you can learn from each person. In your mind, seek to describe and feel his or her context, environment, and world, and determine to learn something of importance to your life from this interaction.

5. “Look for opportunities to help people with immediate wants and needs.” Service providers must go beyond their judgments of what people need. They must inspire trust and learn what others want. It is imperative to go beyond safe and distant interaction to identify effectively what the other person wants and needs.

6. “Be sensitive to their culture, gender, age and other factors of their distinctive being.” Service providers must be aware of these differences so that they can check themselves for bias. Finally, service providers must reflect on what they are learning from those they serve. Service providers should write down the strengths and assets they discover in the communities they visit. All of the steps above, when taken together, will assist service providers in overcoming assumptions that lead to the conspiracy of courtesy.

**SERVICE-LEARNING AND RESULTS**

Service-learning offers tangible results to participants, not just to the educational process. Results can be measured in assets (e.g., property, livestock), people, or ideas, which are regained, created, or to which value is added. One of the objectives of successful service-learning experiences is to enhance communication between the service provider and recipient. Another objective is to assist students and faculty to develop effective critical reflection skills. When these objectives are met, service-learning has been found to be a value-added experience by all involved participants [Lester, et al., 2005].

On a final note, the assumptions that underlie the conspiracy of courtesy are always present. This is true for even the most experienced teachers and administrators. After decades of field work experience, one of the authors recounts confronting his own conspiracy of courtesy:

“An NGO vocational training center in West Africa was a haven for Liberian refugees. Despite surrounding poverty, the Center’s impressive curriculum included: home construction, development of business skills including computer training, auto repair, and other marketable skills.

As the visit began, a little girl in a white dress attached herself to our group. I could not guess her age; children’s ages are not easily estimated in places where malnourishment stunts growth. She carried a cardboard box of what appeared to be chocolate tarts, but could have been mud pies. Her stubby pencil and little note pad were evidence that she wanted to sell tarts or was playing at selling mud pies. The girl trailed us everywhere.

As we walked away (we were on a tight schedule and needed to go to another camp), I smiled back at the girl. At the van, I gave one dollar to our host and asked him to give it to the girl. It would be difficult to exaggerate the value of one American dollar in such an economy. More importantly, the action of handing-out one dollar might be considered to be condescending and inciting jealousies.

I don’t regret leaving only one dollar; I could easily have given her twenty, but unintended consequences might have caused her harm when others heard of her fortune. My regret is that I didn’t permit her to engage me in a business transaction, real or play.

“Imagine, as I have many times, the effect on her dignity and future ambitions, had I added value to her assets by encouraging her to sell me a tart, mark the sale in her book,
and go home to tell her family and friends of her business success. Had she sold mud pies, I could have admired them and asked her questions about her ambitions.

I failed to demonstrate what DiPadova-Stocks [2005] stated, that ‘Service-learning, properly designed and implemented, is grounded in the value of the human dignity and the inherent worth of the individual….None of us as faculty is exempt from preparing students for their moral, ethical, and social responsibilities’ [p. 352]. My own conspiracy of courtesy blocked an impulse to ask my local associates to teach me the appropriate response to an intelligent, industrious African child – a child who represented children I had seen in Asia, Eastern Europe, Central America, Native People’s reserves in Canada, and inner-cities in the United States. It also prompted a resolution I made to embrace any such future opportunities and never succumb to or create the conspiracy of courtesy.” [Interview with Victor Brown, February 22, 2006, Salt Lake City, Utah]

**CONCLUSION**

Service-learning activities have the potential of bringing about life-altering changes for students, faculty, and service-recipients. Results can be measured in tangible and intangible assets regained, created, or increased. One of the most powerful barriers to service-learning success is the conspiracy of courtesy. The hierarchical nature and situational constraints inherent in classroom instruction can stifle vigorous feedback and dynamic dialogue between teachers and students. Students who seek to develop real-world analytical and problem solving skills must experience the real, unpredictable, fluid world of the people they seek to help. Faculty who aim to prepare students for the real world must help them explore within the context of supervised, but not stultifying, discovery and practice. Learning that introduces students to transforming service, identifies assets to be regained, created, or added to those served, and works through communication barriers such as the conspiracy of courtesy, prepares students to become contributory members of society.

Gerald J. Gill, of the International Institute for Environment and Development, stated the following in one of his policy papers regarding his extensive work in Nepal:

“Finally, I would like to anticipate the possible protest that, in listening to the above features of Third World rural communities and strengths, I am in effect painting an idealized or romanticized picture. Far from it. Such people are no better and no worse than the rest of us; they have their strengths and their weaknesses, their saints and sinners, their geniuses and their dullards, just like any cross-section of humanity. However, they do have the singular advantage of living in a particular place (as often their families have lived for generations), earning a living from a frequently hostile and unforgiving environment, faced with the ever-present prospect of paying the price of failure in a way that few of us with formal qualifications and professional salaries are ever called upon to do” [Gatekeeper Series #38, p. 16].

**REFERENCES**


Gill, G. “O.K., the Data’s Lousy, But It’s All We’ve Got (Being a Critique of Conventional Methods” Gatekeeper Series #38, (Swedish International Development Authority), n.d.


