A Critical Approach to Service-Learning Criminal Justice and Criminology Courses

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ABSTRACT

This case study provides an analysis of the utilization of critical service-learning (CSL) pedagogy in an upper-division Criminal Justice and Criminology course. Although service-learning is frequently used in the pedagogy of Criminal Justice and Criminology, critical-service-learning has yet to be examined as an effective teaching tool within the discipline. This paper highlights the benefits of utilizing a critical service-learning pedagogy within the field of Criminal Justice and Criminology while focusing on the role of the community partner.

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Service learning has become an integral part of Criminal Justice and Criminology courses in higher education. Service learning offers faculty the opportunity to teach in ways that bridge the gap between the community and student learning. Within the discipline of Criminal Justice and Criminology, service learning offers students the opportunity to develop an understanding of various aspects of the criminal-justice system, community members (the client), and the overlap between the two (Burke & Bush, 2013; George et al., 2015; Love, 2008). Service learning also allows for students to develop community-based problem-solving skills that go beyond the traditional arrest-and-prosecution criminal-justice approach (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Inherent to the service-learning experience are intentional serviceable acts created to enrich communities and society at large (Boyer, 1996; Hammond, 1994; Longo, 2012). These acts, coupled with reflection and development of civic leadership, are fundamental to service learning. In other words, students participating in service learning are encouraged to think deeply about the community in which they are engaged and to understand their own roles and responsibilities in creating reciprocal, long-term, and sustainable change with community member stakeholders (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Karayan & Gathercoal, 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Though service learning is gaining traction in university programs and courses, there are scholar-practitioners who are interrogating the degree to which traditional service-learning models are truly *serving* the community and are creating transformative experiences for students (Butin & Saud, 2013; Cruz & Giles, 2000). According to Mitchell (2008), traditional service learning often fails to create transformative learning opportunities that lead to "students who are more tolerant, altruistic, and culturally aware" (Mitchell, 2008, p. 50) due to the lack of a social-justice orientation and the failure to develop reciprocal relationships with community partners. In Tania Mitchell's influential article, "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models" (2008), she raises the question: Is the service-learning experience between students and community stakeholders reciprocal? In other words, are community members' needs and desires given *equal* importance as they participate in projects deemed community-oriented or community-centered?

Mitchell's (2008) question spurs her on to further develop the relatively emergent field of Critical Service-Learning (CSL), which, at its core, has a social-justice orientation (Rice & Pollack, 2000; Rosenberger, 2000). Specifically, Mitchell (2008) posits that CSL is different from traditional service learning in that CSL focuses on a social-change orientation, working to redistribute power and develop authentic relationships, whereas traditional service learning is a "course-based, credit bearing educational experience" (Bringle & Clayton, 2012, p. 105) in which students develop a greater sense of civic responsibility while participating in serviceable acts that are mutually identified and organized to benefit the community. CSL becomes *critical* when faculty and students engaged in service learning situate their orientation to the experience through a social-justice lens and participate in serviceable acts that are intentionally meaningful, beneficial, and sustainable for the community and the community stakeholders for whom the experience is intended (Butin, 2015).

In accordance with these studies on service learning, and Mitchell (2008) in particular, I argue that university faculty, staff, and students participating in CSL must first examine their own biases. They must take time to reflect honestly upon their own identity and positionality in relation to the community stakeholders with whom they are entering into collaborative relationships. This examination of self in relation to one's position (e.g., how one understands who they are—regarding race, gender, nationality, socioeconomic status, educational background, etc.)—is critical to unpacking underlying prejudices and analyzing assumptions of *others* as one enters into community partnerships or projects. As the literature reveals, CSL scholars disrupt the notion that social justice in community-engaged work means the same to university stakeholders as it does to community members (Butin, 2015; Dempsey et al., 2011).

CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND CRIMINOLOGY CONTEXT

The purpose of this paper is to consider CSL from a Criminal Justice and Criminology practitioner lens and to find ways in which to embed a social-justice framework into an upper-division Criminal Justice and Criminology course. Specifically, this paper is being written by a faculty member who has integrated service-learning from a *critical* lens into her course. Currently, there are "how-to" examples for setting up and implementing service-learning courses (e.g., Kelly, 2013; Luquet, 2009). Little exists, however, on how to infuse a justice-oriented approach while ensuring sustainable, mutually respectful community partnerships. In providing concrete examples and applications of this CSL project, I also attempt to address CSL scholars' concerns that "what educators do and say lacks conceptual clarity, research rigor, or community impact" (Butin, 2015, p. 8).

As the only Black professor in the Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology, teaching predominantly European American students, I find myself constantly

having to confront issues of racism and stereotyping of the "other." For most of my students, I am the first person of color who is in a position of power that they have had to interact with, and my very presence in the classroom challenges their ideas of who should hold a Ph.D. in the field of Criminal Justice and Criminology. This challenge is layered with the fact that I teach my courses from a social-justice perspective, which complicates students' ideas as to how crime is operationalized and what is viewed as criminal. Many of my students have career aspirations of becoming police officers, and this pedagogical position often contradicts their inherent thinking as to what policing is and how it should be approached.

It was this set of challenges that prompted me to implement CSL into my course and to expand my ongoing work with the Whitely community, a neighborhood of just over 1,500 residents situated in Muncie, Indiana, in order to initiate a service-learning partnership based on Mitchell's (2008) principles of CSL. Although CSL had not previously been acknowledged as a pedagogical approach in the field of Criminal Justice and Criminology, traditional service learning has been found to be an effective teaching technique therein. Criminal Justice and Criminology departments across the country have recently begun to recognize the benefits of community engagement and service learning in Criminal Justice and Criminology education (Burke & Bush, 2013; Gutierrez et al., 2012). For many instructors, this pedagogical tool offers the ability to introduce concepts and theoretical perspectives that would otherwise be very difficult or impossible to teach in a classroom environment.

The following case study examines my Criminal Justice and Criminology course, which is situated at a large, publicly funded university in the Midwest, where the components of CSL, as envisioned by Mitchell (2008), have been embedded. This course expands the utilization of service learning in the disciplines of Criminal Justice and Criminology by introducing CSL, which allows for the creation of authentic relationships between community partners, students, and instructors. On the basis of these deeper relationships, CSL used in teaching Criminal Justice and Criminology courses further allows for the students and community partner to focus on equity and social-justice issues.

HUMAN SERVICES IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE: A CASE STUDY

The Human Services in Criminal Justice course was developed as a 16-week upper-division course intended to help students understand the many ways in which social-service agencies interact with those who are supervised by the justice system and provide various forms of support to individuals who are at risk of taking part in crime. The course objectives and learning outcomes lent themselves nicely not only to incorporating traditional service-learning pedagogy within the courses, but also to taking the next step towards Critical Service-Learning (CSL). There are three course objectives/learning outcomes that the CSL component addresses: 1) understanding the organization and functions of public and private social-service agencies, 2) understanding how criminal-justice professionals deliver social-service support, and 3) understanding the impact of social problems on individuals, families, and communities.

Understanding the ways in which crime has been associated with historically minoritized populations, the course emphasizes the importance of rethinking *crime* as a concept and practice and focuses on changing students' negative dispositional attitudes toward minoritized groups in the local area, specifically African Americans who reside near the university. Aware that this population is disproportionately represented in the local criminal-justice system in arrests and incarcerations, the course recognizes the need for students to understand the role that structural racism and inequitable local policies play in criminalizing these residents. Making these connections, students learn to understand social problems that exist in such communities. This course places emphasis on how various types of social-service agencies can serve as agents of preventing and reducing crime.

THE WHITELY COMMUNITY COUNCIL

I worked with the Whitely Community Council as the community partner for this course. The community has been overwhelmed with crime, unemployment, and a lack of trust in social-service-agency support. I first became familiar with the Whitely community in 2014 when I was approached to serve as a member of their Safety Council. For two years prior to codeveloping a service-learning course, I worked with community members to understand the community's safety concerns. This time allowed me to develop relationships with members of the community and to establish trust, which is crucial for implementing CSL (Mitchell, 2008).

During the spring and summer of 2017, I worked with two members of the Community Council, the President and Executive Director—community partners who now serve as co-teachers—to develop the CSL course based on the needs of the community. They requested that the course work to identify the safety concerns of the community as well as issues that might prohibit community members from becoming involved in the community. Throughout the summer, I worked with my community partners to develop the course syllabus, with my community partners being instrumental in determining and setting the schedule of the community-engagement activity. My community partners and myself all felt it was crucial that students spent time in Whitely

to develop an understanding of the people and history of the community before engaging in the CSL activities. The resulting activities included a tour of the community and attending Safety Council and Community Council meetings, all of which were outlined in the course syllabus as required activities for students to attend. Additionally, all activities were led by community members. Students were also offered extra-credit opportunities for volunteering at the one of two afterschool programs that operate in the community. Community partners were given the opportunity to read all the assigned texts for the course and to preview all writing assignments as part of contributing to and assisting with the development of the course syllabus.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND COURSE DELIVERY

During the Fall 2017 semester, twenty students enrolled in the class. Seventeen of the twenty self-identified as White or European American, and sixteen of the students stated that they had never spent any time in a predominantly African American community. Three students self-identified as African American or Black, one of whom indicated that they lived in the Whitely community for five years. The course met twice a week during the 16-week semester. During the first week of the course, the community partners were introduced to the class as co-teachers. Students were provided with the contact information of the co-teachers, and I discussed the role of the co-teachers as individuals who would facilitate the CSL component of the course. Students were informed that the co-teachers would work with me and have a hands-on role in the class and the process. Allowing community partners to take on the roles of co-teachers provided the students the opportunity to witness the redistribution of power (following Mitchell, 2008), and, given that the community partners were African American and that the vast majority of students had never had a person of a minoritized status in a position of authority over them, this prompted the students to challenge their strongly held thoughts and beliefs about those who they consider to be the "other" (Mitchell, 2008).

For the first eight weeks of the course, the students spent time touring the Whitely community, meeting with community members and leaders and working to understand the problems that the community wanted to rectify. The community had identified four specific areas that they wanted to have addressed: 1) lack of street lighting, 2) lack of sidewalks, 3) getting more people involved in the community, and 4) dogs running loose in the neighborhood. During the second eight weeks, the students worked in four groups of five to address one of the four problems that the community had identified. The students also worked to understand how these problems related to crime in the community. For example, the lack of streetlights in certain areas created opportunities for

crime. Although the students could not physically do anything themselves to install lights in the community, they identified a nonprofit organization that would install bright porch lights and other safety features, such as handrails, to the homes of residents 55 years of age and older. Given that the majority of Whitely residents are over the age of 55, the community partners felt this was something that could aid in community members feeling safer in their neighborhood.

The students working to address the issue of the lack of sidewalks quickly realized that not having sidewalks in the community created an environment where community members did not feel safe letting their kids play outside, or to simply let them walk their neighborhood as an act of socialization, because of the dangers inherent in walking in the street. The students identified a grant that community leaders could apply for that would support the community in getting sidewalks. Although writing the grant went beyond the scope of the class, the students set up a meeting between themselves, community partners, and city leaders to see if the grant was something that the community and the city could pursue. Students recognized that getting more people involved in neighborhood events not only supports the overall well-being of the community but also creates opportunities for community members to feel a sense of belonging.

Those working to get more community members involved in their neighborhood met with various groups in the community and realized that many people did not attend community gatherings simply because they did not know they were occurring, or only found out after the event had occurred. The neighborhood had a very limited social-media presence, but after speaking with community members, the students determined that many people in the community in fact did use social media in their daily lives. Accordingly, they worked with community leaders to develop a more powerful social-media presence and trained some members of community to maintain this social-media presence after the class was over.

After having a few meetings with community partners, the students working to address the issue of dogs roaming the neighborhood realized that many people used dogs as a layer of security for their homes and property, and, as a result, the dogs lived outdoors on their owners' property. At times this meant that some of the dogs would escape from the property. The students decided to create a pamphlet detailing city ordinances regarding dog ownership and the responsibilities and legal consequences of failing to comply, including places where dogs could be surrendered and other important information about dog ownership. The students realized that having dogs roaming the neighborhood led to members of the community often feeling unsafe, and that this resulted in some community members not allowing their children to play outside out of fear.

At the end of the sixteen weeks, the class hosted a neighborhood gathering to share the outcomes of their projects with the community. Each group presented their findings and articulated their understanding of the importance of focusing on issues that prevent crime, creating opportunities for members of the community to engage in discussion and thus to feel a further sense of belonging. Students also discussed their own gratitude to the community for providing them the opportunity to work with them.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the 16-week semester, I met with the community partners to debrief and to talk about their perceptions of the course and their overall feelings of their role as co-teachers. The community partners expressed that they valued the goals of CSL within the partnership. The redistribution of power allowed for the community partners to play a part in the development of the course, as well as articulating what type of service project would take place during the semester. They noted that this allowed them to feel as though they were integral to the course and not just a "second thought." The collaboration was something that both the community partners were very comfortable being part of in developing the goals of the course. Working with the community partners to establish the service-learning project ensured that they would then be able to fully invest in the project. Working together also ensured that the project was something that will continue to be beneficial to the community and that, upon completion, would have ongoing resonance for the community.

Utilizing CSL in turn opens up a space whereby the project was something that unlocked the potential to create social change (another important aspect of Mitchell's CSL model [Mitchell, 2008]). This demonstrates that having students and faculty develop authentic relationships builds trust and offers students the opportunity to unpack biases that they may have of others. Students were assigned weekly reflection questions to aid them in reflecting on their positionality and biases how they may have had an impact on their engagement with community partners and the central aspects of CSL. Assessing students' reflection assignments, many spoke of valuing such direct contact with the community partners. They also appreciated the community partners acting as co-teachers throughout the semester. Moreover, the students highlighted their own reconceptualizing of what crime is, the causes of crime, and how to prevent crime. In Criminal Justice and Criminology, this is very important because many of these students aspire to become law-enforcement officers or to pursue a career that will put them in a position of power and authority over others. Allowing

these students to work one on one with people from diverse communities challenges them to address their own biases and to create meaningful relationships.

Certainly, the success of one-on-one relationships between the community partners and students is also due to the established trusted relationship between the instructor and the community partners setting the example. It is important to recognize that if the community partners do not feel as though they are part of the planning and implementing of the project, it will not offer lasting change. Giving the community partners the role of co-teaching the course further allows for the students to understand the trusted and important role that they have in it. For example, the group working to address the problem of dogs roaming the neighborhood assumed that the best way to combat the high number of dogs running loose was to construct a dog park without consulting the community members. Upon finding this out, I instructed the group to contact the community partners. Community partners strongly stated that having a dog park would encourage more dogs to come into the neighborhood when, instead, the community wanted the dogs that were already in the neighborhood to be better contained. With the community partners having the greater knowledge about neighborhood needs, they were able to educate the university students in regard to the criminal and legal ramifications of not having control of one's dog(s).

CSL provided students in this course the opportunity to have a transformative experience that would stay with them beyond the semester's end. The students were able to address their positionality and understand how it frames how they view what is a crime and who is a criminal. For the community partner, the CSL model addresses many of the concerns that community partners express in regard to the service-learning model. For example, one criticism of the traditional model is that the instructor and students are not invested in the community and that as a result they will work with a partner once and never provide the results or outcomes of the project (Mitchell, 2008). Establishing authentic relationships takes time, and it is incumbent upon the faculty member to understand that establishing those trusted relationships falls to them. Taking part in activities within the organization that are separate from the service-learning component will allow for the partner to see that the faculty member's commitment goes beyond just the course. Consequently, this will allow for trust to develop—a trust that then has the potential to foster equity and social justice for everyone involved.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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