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Book Review: Social Problems: A Service Learning Approach by Corey Dolgon and Chris Baker

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Corey Dolgon and Chris Baker. Social Problems: A Service Learning
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Reviewer: Benjamin Shepard 1

In recent years, we have witnessed a widespread debate about civil life,
democracy, and education (Putnam, 2000; Jacoby, 2009). Part of this
debate is result of a new breed of education called service learning. The
purpose of service learning is to engage students in meaningful service
that impacts the community. The goal is to cultivate ethical citizens with
a reflective awareness of the interconnections of local practice in a glo-
balized world. Schools around the country have taken to using this ap-
proach to learning; students are sent out into the world to compare the
theory they are learning in the books with the realities of practice in the
streets, clinics, ambulances, trading floors, and disaster relief efforts tak-
ing place around the world. The practice is rooted in the work of early
twentieth century philosophers, John Dewey and William James, as well
as social work practitioner and Hull House founder Jane Addams.

"Hull House integrated service provision with community organizing.
It became both a place for neighborhood political activity and a laborato-
ry for applying social research to social problems," note Dolgon and
Baker. Addams tapped into the passion of student volunteers who
brought, "a fatal want of harmony between their theory and their lives, a
lack of coordination between thought and action. ...The settlement house
is an outlet for that sentiment of universal brotherhood." By connecting
education with service, theory with practice, Addams would become a
pioneer of social work, applied sociology, and service learning. Learning
takes place as one develops skills, the "habits of mind" to borrow De-
wey's words, to observe one's self in interaction with the community.

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Here, academic training connects the formal knowledge of the academy with the practice wisdom of those running programs, business, and other community endeavors. More than this, service learning is an approach to citizenship. Its core assumption is that we all have something to give and learn from participating in community life. Yet, such engagement takes its fullest dimension outside of the context of military service. "The martial type of character can be bred without war," argues psychologist and philosopher William James (2006). "Strenuous honor and disinterestedness abound everywhere. Priests and medical men are in a fashion educated to it, and we should all feel some degree of its imperative if we were conscious of our work as an obligatory service to the state." While we may not see a call for mandatory community service, we have seen presidents from Roosevelt to Kennedy, Clinton to Obama establish programs for community service.

Enter Corey Dolgan and Chris Baker, whose primer Social Problems: A Service Learning Approach integrates an innovative case study approach into a comprehensive introduction that helps students understand how they can address social problems in their communities by applying basic theories and concepts. Dolgan and Baker begin with a simple definition. "A social problem is a condition that harms a significant number of people or results in the structural disadvantage of particular segments in any given society," they explain. "Many sociologists would add to this definition that such problems exist "when there is a sizable difference between the ideals of a society and its actual achievement... Herbert Blumer (1971) argued that social problems are "a product of a process of collective definition," not the "objective conditions and social arrangements" of a society. Many social problems have been around for a long time, but only gained recognition as problems after social movements educated the public and put pressure on public officials to recognize their existence. In thinking about the composition of a social problem, Dolgon and Baker look to C. Wright Mills' distinction between, "personal troubles of milieu and the public issues of social structure." "Troubles,"

according to Mills, "occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others," while issues "transcend the local environments of the individual and ...involve crises of institutional arrangements and larger structures." Inspired by Mills, a generation of sociology students connected their personal experience with questions about civic life. And gradually, these questions made their way into a new form of collaborative, problem-solving research called, participatory action research. Here, those in the community are asked: What needs to be done? And what information do we need to do it? Lis-

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tening to the resulting stories, academic researchers linked their research efforts with grassroots social change efforts.

Many teachers at my college have turned to service learning as an approach to engage questions about the ethics of citizenship. After all, in recent years, we have seen countless examples of predatory citizenship, unethical business practices, and corruption. And the message becomes: it is only wrong if you get caught. "Many of the students want to be Bernie," a professor of business recently noted in a conversation about the life of our college. He was of course referring to Bernie Madoff, the man responsible for a ponzi scheme which set off widespread debate about ethics, the financial crisis, and civic life in the US. The professor's statement also highlighted a truth about life and education in US life. Across disciplines, a consensus is forming that business cannot go on as usual. From the environment to human health to the financial sector, current models do not appear sustainable. I would propose this thinking must be integrated into education across disciplines. Many educators at CUNY have already embraced this spirit. From Hunter's Nick Freudengerg to Brooklyn's Richie Perez, the Graduate Center's Frances Fox-Piven to John Jay's Rev. Luis Barrios, there is a long tradition of engaged scholarship, supporting citizenship (Freeman, 2009). Many such teachers ask students to enter their communities and contribute their skills and talents as community practice. Here, students identify a community issue or need, critically engage with the issue, and strive to address it in collaboration with those already involved in this endeavor. Students of business support community banks; human services students help grow community gardens, and so on.

Dolgan and Baker argue that through a service learning approach, stu-

dents learn about and understand social problems. "[S]ervice learning has proven to be an effective mechanism for integrating intellectual inquiry with civic engagement and social action," argue the authors. "As such, service learning is a 'natural' for teaching social problems, especially from a sociological perspective. Service learning facilitates the teaching of sociology's theoretical emphasis on themes of structure and agency by promoting a 'praxis-based' curriculum." Such an approach builds on a spirit of setting out to create a better world and actually building it through a student's education and passion.

Throughout disciplines, students are required to take a number of courses in community organizing, service projects, development, and volunteerism. "[A] curriculum based in service learning or civic engagement breaks down those dichotomies of classroom and community even more by recognizing that theory, history, and politics can also be

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learned in the field." This thinking is part of a long tradition of humanist sociology. Timothy Black argues:

The humanist-scholar activist eschews the arm chair model of re-search, but also the objective field researcher model, and instead works together with progressive groups struggling to create alterna-tive economic and social forms of existence and writes from a pers-pective that confronts power and nurtures social change. The hu-manist scholar-activist doesn't simply "study" disadvantaged groups, but interacts with them in an effort to understand the processes that foster social inequality and the psychological conse-quences that result from [them], all in the effort to better inform human struggle. (Dolgan and Baker)

Such activities take on a powerful dimension when linked with social movement and community organizing activities.

Why should students participate in service learning efforts? For Tho-mas Ehrlich (2000), the answer is simple: through service learning stu-dents become not only better citizens, they become stronger students. It is good for learning, citizenship, and civil society. Here, students are

charged to go out into the community to identify capacity, seek out possible collaboration, and roll up their sleeves and help make their communities richer, more democratic spaces.

Perhaps the most important dynamic of service learning is its emphasis on collaboration, rather than paternalism. By linking campus- and community-based approaches to education, it highlights participant action research as a vital element of the service learning endeavor. Rather than immediately identifying a deficit, students are charged to identify community issues, engage in dialogue with stakeholders about their assumptions, and contribute. Students make it clear they are charged to find out where they are most needed, and support areas of campaigns already taking place. Students take an action research approach to investigating community issues, collaborating in organizing, basing strategy on local knowledge, and using their time and efforts to contribute to local campaigns. Throughout the process, students are asked to build their work around the expertise of those in the community (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). Most importantly, participants are asked to reflect on the community change process.

This model begins with a dynamic view of community building, which links education with local and transnational communities. It proposes that participation in civic culture can be a joyous endeavor (Shepard,

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2005a, 2005b). Such an ethos keeps community-building going even in the face of stiff opposition. The world has changed, and so has education. This understanding can and should be reflected within the service learning environment. The challenge for researchers and students alike is to make sense of these shifting conditions of urban living and education and help contribute to solutions. Service learning supported via participant action research is an ideal pedagogical approach with which to make sense of the myriad challenges faced by students and educators, citizens and their schools. Yet, this does not just happen. To take advantage of the potential of service learning involves a complicated interplay between theory and practice. The enterprising scholar would be well served to look to Dolgan and Baker's model as a primer.

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