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STIMULATING SOCIAL JUSTICE THEORY FOR SERVICE- LEARNING PRACTICE

2

David Schultz

The last of those qualities which make a state virtuous must be justice, if we only knew what that was.

—Plato's *Republic*, Book IV, paragraph 16
(410 BCE/1937, 10th ed., p. 695)

“With liberty and justice for all,” six familiar words of a morning mantra rehearsed throughout American schools and encapsulating an essential American precept. Justice is invoked in a wide array of cultural products from inscriptions on legal tender to cartoon caricatures. Social justice is so central to American political consciousness that pundits invoke its ideals across the political spectrum in support of their point of view. As David Miller (2001) points out, social justice has become an “animating ideal of democratic governments” (p. xi).

Increasingly, the general public has focused its attention on the social value of universities, particularly those that are funded with public monies. As Plater (1995) elaborates, “Communities now believe universities and colleges not only have an obligation to apply knowledge and expertise to the solution of problems, but they have to do so in a timely fashion with immediate and demonstrable results” (p. 32). The academy thus faces a continuing challenge to demonstrate the fruits of its labors. As Maureen Kenny (2002) and her colleagues remark, “Indeed, perhaps the most consistently identified ‘problem’ in higher education, as reflected in the comments and behavior of taxpayers, legislators, governing boards, funders, parents, students, and businesses is that the academy is not playing a visible role in contributing to

the improvement of the lives of people in the community as their lives are lived on a day-to-day basis" (p. 3). And as Carol Vincent (2003) points out, "the educational system, through its organization and practices, is implicated in the realization of just or unjust social outcomes" (p. 1).

This volume offers sites for reflecting on social justice. The contributors provide exemplary case studies useful for the design and implementation of social justice projects into one's own curriculum through service learning. Observations from my experiences incorporating social justice-infused service-learning assignments in speech communication courses are intended to help readers avoid potential roadblocks while maximizing the benefits of service learning. In particular, I draw from service-learning experiences in courses such as *Persuasive Messages*, *Intercultural Communication*, and *Advanced Presentational Speaking*. While the subject matter for these courses is different, each course asks students to demonstrate their mastery of course concepts through applied presentations both in the classroom and in the surrounding community.

Many of my courses begin with discussions, readings, and exercises that explore the meaning of the term *social justice*. Joining Miller, I believe that without an understanding of its first principles, justice can never be realized. To undertake this exploration, I have my students read and discuss a range of social and political philosophers, from ancient (Plato c. 427–347 BCE) to modern (John Rawls). Together we explore the importance of social justice as both an ideal worth pursuing and a pursuit worthy of repeated practice, beyond the semester and graduation. Contemplating Plato's query (p. 23) illuminates what we know of justice, how it relates to the social, and why this inquiry matters to the academy.

In what follows, I outline a contingent theory of social justice as well as offer general tactics for implementation. My experiences using service learning in communication studies courses offer readers both theoretical and community-based applications.

The Meaning of Social Justice

Over the years, opposing ideologues have leveraged the phrase "social justice" for radically different ends. During the 1930s, Father Coughlin, a famous radio demagogue, published the first periodical on social justice and headed the National Union for Social Justice. The anti-Semitic nature of

Coughlin's public addresses would, for many, seem to pervert the spirit of social justice. Similar examples abound today, including noted conservative Patrick Buchanan's (1998) book, *The Great Betrayal: How American Sovereignty and Social Justice Are Being Sacrificed to the Gods of the Global Economy*. Buchanan theorizes social justice in terms of a cost-benefit calculus that many would find inimical to the concept. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, many progressive groups conflate social justice with everything from environmental causes to animal rights. Through such conflation, well-intentioned supporters invite critics to caricature their causes as an unrealizable "cosmic justice" (see Sowell, 1999).

Justice has become something of an empty set, a referent pointing to so many different ideals and ideas that it has lost currency and shared meaning across communities. Both conservative and progressive policy makers claim allegiance to "social justice" because the phrase has political cache, but when pressed for what justice means, each offer drastically different accounts. Therefore it is useful to review historical theories of justice in order to appreciate the many layers of meaning attached to it. Such genealogy is not designed to affix a central meaning to the concept of social justice, but instead to demonstrate a general and minimalist (or thin) theoretical consensus of first principles.

Justice is not an object but an ideal that has invited contemplative reflection since humans organized themselves into societies. Generations of theorists have borrowed something from their predecessors' thoughts on the subject. In my rhetorical theory and persuasive messages course, for example, I begin each semester coaxing students to contemplate the first principles of justice. I frame theoretical discussions as ongoing conversations and encourage students to join these conversations in the hopes that they personalize justice in their semester projects.

From a communication studies context, social justice is an ongoing *process* that necessitates, even demands, vigilant attention to both its precepts and practices. If we are to avoid social justice becoming cliché, it is essential to invite students to see justice as an endless journey and not a destination. In order to help students comprehend social justice and possibilities for its continued practice it is important to reflect on the scale of our enterprise.

Classroom conversations about justice typically begin with some metaphor, analogy, story, or picture that supplies thinkers with a ready referent for a subject that eludes a simple grasp. When asking students what justice

represents. I receive a wide range of responses reflecting cultural imagery, current events, and/or personal experiences. For example, when pressing students for what justice looks like in practice I receive replies such as “the American flag” and “scales balanced by a blindfolded woman.” The image connotes a legal arena where justice is objectively adjudicated. Justice has also been envisioned as a sunlike symbol bringing light to dark places. Some African cultures use two interlocking diamonds to depict justice’s essence, while other cultures picture justice as a torch.

Classroom consideration of such culturally prominent justice metaphors serves as entry points in discussions with students. In communication courses (such as Rhetorical Theory and Persuasive Messages) I return to the Greeks in general and Plato in particular in order to provide students with the long-standing intellectual tradition informing our current conceptions of justice.

Plato’s interest in and impact on theories of justice cannot be overstated. In Book I of *The Republic*, when he pits Socrates against Thrasymachus, Plato explores the *practice* of justice. Thrasymachus contends that the strong use of brute force establishes what is and what is not just. Justice becomes something *made*. Using Socrates as his mouthpiece, Plato refutes this characterization, advancing a metaphysical notion of justice as something *found*. Justice thus conceived develops into an *a priori*, existing *before* human society. It is not something seized through force but rather something *discovered* through contemplative thinkers and their ability to balance reason, spirit, and appetite. The many students who enter my Persuasive Messages course anticipating that they will learn persuasive skills for exerting power *over* audiences are reflecting Thrasymachus’s view of justice. The cited Platonic dialogue provides a method of critiquing the “justice as force” worldview. Students are encouraged to conceptualize justice as something discovered through partnerships with others, and many students work to apply this conceptualization of justice in their semester projects. For example, a number of students in my Persuasive Messages class opted to partner with high school and community leaders in an anti-gang coalition. Service-learning projects have ranged from mentoring at-risk youth programs to the creation of a dynamic anti-gang lecture series that visits local high schools. Such projects foster unique perspectives on the impacts of social injustice when left unchecked, and they encourage students to devise persuasive strategies with at-risk youth to provide alternatives to gang life.

Plato is not the only earlier philosopher informing my students’ understanding of social justice. A differing perspective was proffered by Epicurus (341–270 BCE), who denied the possibility of justice existing before or inside of the contemplative individual. Epicurus was one of the first thinkers to develop a theory of justice founded on the notion of a social contract. Rather than existing *before* humans, Epicurus suggested that people working in mutual associations *created* justice. He wrote, “[justice and injustice do not exist in relation to beings who have not been able to make a *compact* with the object of avoiding mutual harm” (Benn, 1967, p. 300). Here justice was conceptualized as an agreement between the state and individuals to neither harm nor be harmed. For Epicurus, justice amounted to a compact between the state and its citizens to guard against unjust actors and actions. The Epicurean view of justice provides us with an alternative to the Platonic idealized form of justice. Epicurus equips us with a vocabulary to discuss the contingent nature of justice that reflects the ever-changing compact between states and their citizens. Students have commented that such discussions help them see that justice can be proactive (versus reactive and punitive). Representative service-learning campaigns have included public debates where teams of students contemplate both sides of local issues in public forums and switch sides between debates to engender appreciation of both sides of enduring societal issues.

Another ancient voice informing students’ view of justice is that of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), whose views cut a middle path between Plato and Epicurus. Aristotle wrote that justice consisted of treating equal parts equally and unequal parts unequally, with a third party (an impartial judge) consisting parity. For Aristotle the concept of “blind justice” encapsulated the idea that justice is not a respecter of person, wealth, or status. Justice is an entitlement of citizenship. Aristotle extended the theory of justice in his *The Nicomachean Ethics* to include distributive justice writings:

[E]quality for the people involved will be the same as for the things involved, since [in a just society] the relation between the people will be the same as the relation between the things involved. For if the people involved are not equal, they will not [justly] receive equal shares; indeed, whenever equals receive unequal shares, or unequals equal shares . . . that is the source of quarrels and accusations . . . (1980, p. 123)

In Aristotle we see emerge a concept of equality based on *fairness* that contemporary theorists (Hume, Rawls, and Miller, to name a few) develop more

completely. David Miller (2001) synthesizes preceding theories into three essential components of social justice: need, desert, and equality. Theorists from Plato through Rawls contribute to a conversation suggesting members of civil society are entitled (desert) to the fair (equality) distribution of the basic goods necessary for survival (need). Important to remember is the *human* circumstances in discussing all three components of justice so as to keep our subject from becoming unwieldy in scope. Classroom discussion, directed readings, and/or individual papers incorporating each of these three characteristics promise to keep students and instructors focused on realizing some semblance of justice's *social* potential.

It is difficult to characterize social justice without some discussion of basic social needs. Needs are those vital components necessary for a person to subsist in society. We can (and should) differentiate needs from wants. (Common standards for basic human needs exist, and many people often turn to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, focusing on the lower two levels (physiological and safety needs) as the minimum rights of citizenship in the United States. Whatever standard is used to assess minimal needs, it must be "recognized and applied across the whole society . . .," says Miller. "[T]he best way to understand this is in terms of the set of functionalities [sic] that together make up a minimally decent life for people in the society in question" (2001, p. 247). In my experience, there is always some student challenge to the idea of basic needs as a *right* of citizenship. The objection often goes something like "people's bad decisions should not entitle them to basic needs that hard-working Americans end up subsidizing." Such objections are valid and rich sites for further discussion. Directed readings and class debate can help students reflect on basic needs students often take for granted that remain unrealized for millions of Americans.

A second facet joining theories of social justice is consideration of how distribution of social resources (primarily economic) is determined, or the principle of *desert*. Used in different contexts, desert connotes a variety of meanings. In the context of social justice discussions desert concerns "how people are rewarded for the work they perform, taking work in its broadest sense to encompass productive activities such as innovation and management as well as labor" (Miller, 2001, p. 248). Desert theoretically corrects the arbitrary allocation of resources, providing an official justification for *why* resources are distributed as they are. Educators and students alike who ostensibly work for social justice cannot overlook the integral role of *how*

and with what rationale resources are allocated. Desert reminds us that what joins diverse peoples together into a society is the tacit agreement about how the whole provides for its constituent parts. The cohesion of this fragile agreement is only as good as the rationale guiding the institutions commissioned to ensure social order. Prevailing logics of desert offer educators ways of interrogating institutions and practices in need of change. For example, the fact that women get paid less than men for the same work exemplifies a violation of desert. Discussions do not have to be abstract, esoteric, or lengthy. If our aims are to address issues such as homelessness, critical pedagogy, and cultural competency, then the principle of desert figures prominently in addressing how and why current unjust structures endure.

Equality is an equally crucial element of social justice. In terms of justice, equality is only possible when individuals are members of the "social." When members of a society are identifiable (generally through citizenship), then the equal distribution of legal, political, and social rights promised through membership can be assessed and corrected (Miller, 2001, p. 250). If we wish to confront racism, poverty, and many other societal problems, we must begin with a rubric of inalienable rights promised to all. As Miller (2001) puts it:

[t]o achieve social justice we must have a political community in which citizens are treated as equals in an across-the-board way, in which public policy is geared toward meeting the intrinsic needs of every member, and in which the economy is framed and constrained in such a way that the income and other work-related benefits people receive correspond to their respective deserts. (p. 250)

When the above conditions (need, desert, and equality) are identified as unmet, we can begin to devise strategies for change.

Perhaps the most prominent contemporary thinker on the concept of justice was John Rawls (1921–2002). His many writings on justice serve as an entry point for contemporary thinkers. Rawls argued that human nature committed us to act justly by virtue of our interconnected and complementary basic needs. Through such insights Rawls contributed the most pragmatic theory of social justice, namely, that justice means distributing benefits equally to serve *common*, versus *individual*, needs. I find Rawl's theory of social justice most applicable in my Intercultural Communications course,

where students' service-learning projects focus on devising ways to meet the basic needs of culturally diverse groups. For example, some students opt to complete their service-learning hours at a Hmong resource center in Modesto, California, called "The Bridge," where students provide tutoring services to Hmong refugees. Students are asked to deliver oral reports of their experiences to the class, sharing lessons of social justice learned through practicing theoretical precepts in the field. Other students opt to spend service-learning hours working at the United Samaritans or Salvation Army and report back newfound empathy for the area's most impoverished populations as well as a desire to work for the betterment of these populations.

Identification of the circumstances or contexts of social injustice is important for beginning conversations about the design and diagnoses of social justice campaigns. The *membership* we wish to reach may seem obvious, but without clearly specifying and listening to target audiences, students and instructors may focus on subjects falling outside the purview of the "social," or worse, unintentionally ignore the needs of their target audiences. For example, prior students have lobbied for the inclusion of animal protection programs for their term projects. Reminding students of the *social* (or human) component of social justice assists in delineating projects that are both doable and faithful to the concept.

Moreover, we must work with students to identify those *institutions* changed with applying social justice. Encouraging students to identify the places where they think justice *should* happen proves useful for the diagnosis and design of communication campaigns of social remedy. When students are encouraged to see the interlaced network of institutions surrounding them as well as the consequences of their relationship to these institutions, they are better equipped to interrupt injustice in meaningful ways.

The ability to identify *change agencies* within this network helps students develop navigational strategies both for their projects and for life after college. The university itself can be seen as an agency with the *propensity* to change other institutional structures out of step with the aims of social justice. Students become pilots maneuvering various instrumental means within these change agencies to overturn injustices in their communities. Requiring students to identify agencies of change introduced students in my persuasion class to public school administrators who assisted them in creating anti-gang communication campaigns. In their final presentations, students reported

that these alliances proved invaluable both for their term projects and in discovering career options. Attention to these *circumstances* of social justice (audiences, institutions, and change agencies) allows us to foreground a general set of first principles that can help us differentiate social justice from other enterprises.

Coauthoring classroom-specific definitions of social justice further connects campaigns in social justice to disciplinary conventions and goals. One such definition, crafted from a communication perspective, might read something like this: "Social justice is an ongoing process that requires communicative engagement particularly in the diagnosis of social injustice, assessing prevailing rationales for such injustice, and devising communicative strategies for equitable redress." When students are invited to craft definitions calibrated to their curriculum they are better equipped to apply theory in pedagogically sound practices.

Personalized definitions such as these empower creators to perform their projects confidently, because underlying convictions are their own. For educators, such definitions develop into defendable mission statements for classroom lectures, written scholarship, and grant proposals. However, it is essential to tether social justice to a minimal set of first principles. As David Miller (2001) puts it, "No matter what else it requires justice minimally demands consistency in the treatment of individuals and groups" (p. 253).

Whatever criterion of just treatment is devised with our students, "it is an elementary requirement that any two people who resemble each other along the dimension that justice tracks must be treated in the same way" (Miller, 2001, p. 253). Equity, need, and merit are three central components of social justice that assist students in diagnosing the "ingredients" of social problems so that, in Freire's words, "fantasy" solutions might be avoided (Freire, 2000).

From Social Justice Theory to Service-Learning Practice

Having made clear the importance of social justice to the mission of the academy and having explored a variety of perspectives on the meaning of justice, we arrive at the question of *how* to make social justice *happen* in the university. A first step toward this end has already been explored in inviting students to coauthor their own definitions of social justice. At some point, theories and definitions of social justice beg to be put into practice. Here,

service learning enters our discussion as the catalyst for activating social justice locally.

My pedagogical preoccupation with social justice springs from Cicero's twin concepts of *vita contemplativa* (thoughtful life) and *vita activa* (active life). Cicero believed that educators should produce citizen-scholars who practice their theories for the betterment of the republic. Engaging social justice through classroom discussion and actualizing it through service-learning projects performs Cicero's *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* simultaneously.

Moving from classroom practices to applications of social justice in the "real world" necessitates that scholars and students practice the things to which our natures are best adapted. Nature has best adapted educators to the disciplines where we teach, research, and write. All disciplines, from the hard sciences to the humanities, provide students with concepts for practical use. Service learning actualizes these concepts in real contexts.

Most books on service learning employ a four-step model. Students are first taught to conceptualize justice abstractly. Students move from abstractions to scenarios that test theories in controlled classroom experiences such as small-group activities. These experiences lead to the identification of concrete problems that service-learning projects are designed and implemented to remedy. Finally, some variety of feedback mechanism promotes critical reflection.

In my Intercultural Communication classroom we begin with theories of intercultural communication and personal definitions of social justice. Definitions and theories are then put into practice through role-play activities. (One example is to have students read Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1997). After reading this short, seven-page essay, I pair students up and ask each group to formulate additional unseen advantages that contribute to social injustice. Each dyad shares its list with the class, and then we contemplate strategies for interrupting these injustices and creating alternatives.)

From classroom role playing, students are invited to choose from a number of service-learning sites for their semester projects. After completing learning logs, students reflect on the theory and practice of intercultural communication in typed journal entries and classroom presentations. Through such activities, I ask students to see themselves and their peers as encyclopedias. Each student contains invaluable insights and experiences

from which all can learn. I mandate a second level of reflection in the form of student responses to presentations, nudging students to move beyond the role of passive audience member and into the role of active cocreator of shared social justice experiences.

While service learning for social justice campaigns furnishes instructors a pedagogically sound way of offering students more than the basics, many remain wary of how to implement social justice into their curricula. Reservations about time trade-offs and lack of resources or institutional support, as well as liability concerns, can paralyze one from implementing service learning in his or her classes. During my first year as a new faculty member the *last* thing on my mind was finding a way to fit service learning into my three new class preparations. Thanks to some gentle prodding, I visited my campus's office of service learning and found, to my surprise, much of the work was already done. Gracious colleagues offered templates I retooled for my own curricular goals. The vast inventory of samples to draw from, combined with a supportive staff, made service learning irresistible. If similar support is absent, online resources and books such as this one provide groundwork for implementing service learning.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to widespread incorporation of service learning is skepticism that such endeavors amount to little more than "charity" work or, worse, "distractions" from core disciplinary principles and theories. Bharti (2003) elaborates, "Recent research which has engaged with issues concerning social justice in education has emphasized the contradictory ways in which seemingly good intentions may be reflected in practice" (p. 67). At intervals throughout a semester I remind students that their service-learning projects are not to be confused with charity work that they might be already doing in their private lives. Instead of charity, I insist that students conceptualize their projects as professional partnerships that require the application of the complete array of tools available in their disciplinary toolboxes. Sometimes the final results of a service-learning project do not match a student's initial project proposal. I encourage students and those reading this to (re)consider such "failures" as important lessons for determining what does and does not work in community campaigns. Many students begin their presentations reporting that they "failed" to meet their initial objectives and then unpack lessons they and their colleagues can learn through shared experiences.

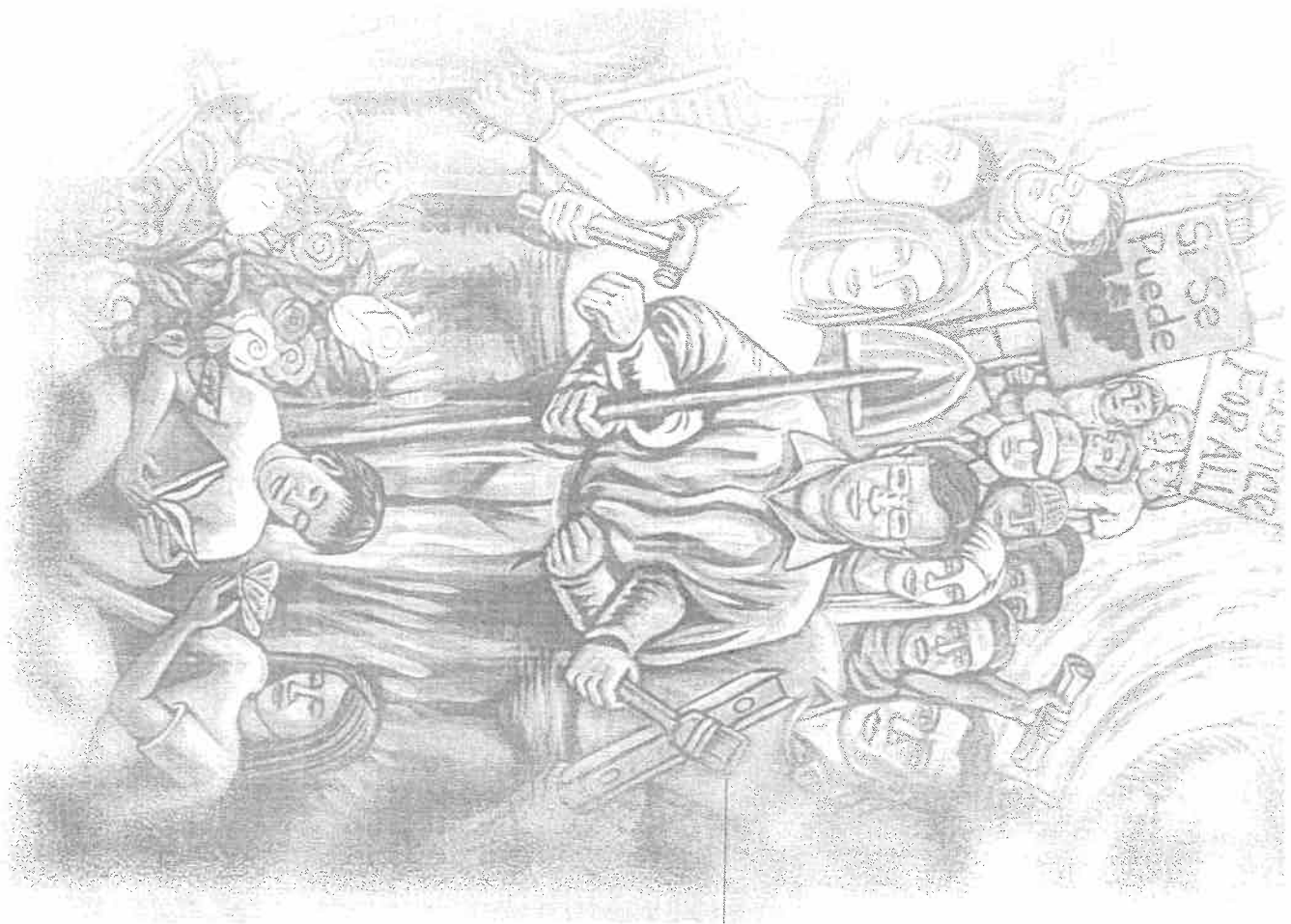
Most students, however, report enthusiasm for their service-learning experiences. Initial resistance to community service soon gives way to realizations of the short- and long-term benefits. In the short term, students see how course concepts and theories play out in the "real world" and thus begin to personalize course materials in ways that help them excel on quizzes and tests and in other courses. Moreover, students experience solidarity with their colleagues as they network and develop collaboration strategies essential to life after the academy. Many students report that their service-learning projects provided either career opportunities with the agencies they served or letters of recommendation from community partners.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have discussed the twin forces of theory and practice informing my service-learning-for-social-justice communicative campaigns. Theories of social justice help launch classroom discussions and collaborative coauthoring of discipline-specific definitions. Using examples from my classrooms, I have endeavored to provide ways of beginning conversations about social justice with students while moving these discussions to the street for practical application through service learning. I have also provided examples of the importance of such programs as socially and educationally potent sites for developing partnerships between educators, students, and community members. Such partnerships hold the potential of maximizing each partner's interests while simultaneously positioning the university to answer its critics. As a theoretical ideal, social justice cannot activate itself. Further it takes the concerted effort of interdependent stakeholders (community members, students, and instructors) to transform social justice theory into service-learning practice. Reflecting on student projects ranging from anti-ging awareness campaigns to Hmong refugee tutoring programs, I have provided examples of the types of projects available for implementing social justice into college curricula. Service learning offers a proven method for activating social justice through partnerships that are at once both theoretically sound and socially beneficial. In the final analysis, learning through social justice service offers synergies between educators, students, and community stakeholders with spectacular results, if we keep our goals clear and make the first move of implementation into our pedagogical practice.

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RACE, POVERTY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Multidisciplinary Perspectives
Through Service Learning

Edited by

José Z. Calderón

Foreword by Robert A. Corrigan

Soyuz

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