

The ‘theoretical foundations’ of community service-learning: from taproots to rhizomes

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Abstract

As a relatively new education phenomenon community service-learning has been subjected to various criticisms. One of the criticisms is that its theoretical foundation is thin. In this article I review efforts at tracing the theoretical roots of service-learning. Furthermore, I trouble the idea of seeking theoretical alibis for justifying educational work generally and service-learning more specifically. I argue that tracing the theoretical roots of service-learning is based on arborescent thinking, which is hierarchical and dichotomous. I propose that service-learning might be thought of rhizomatically so as to affirm what is excluded in western thought, creating new knowledge spaces in which indigenous knowledge and western knowledge can be transformed and integrated.

Keywords: deterritorialisation, poststructuralism, rhizome, service-learning, theory

Introduction

Community service learning is a relatively new education phenomenon. According to Giles and Eylar (1994:78) the term ‘service-learning’ was coined in 1967 and grew out of the work of Robert Sigmon and Ramsey in the USA. In South Africa, interest in community service-learning is much more recent. It was placed on the higher education agenda following a series of higher education policies produced by the Department of Education (DoE) in the late 1990s. Interest in community service-learning is growing in South Africa, ostensibly because it opens up opportunities for contributing to the transformation of higher education as higher education institutions (HEIs) “are urged to become more democratic, more responsive to community challenges, and conducive to partnership-building with a variety of stakeholders” (Erasmus 2005:1).

As a ‘new’ phenomenon service-learning has and continues to be the subject of debate and deliberation. Some debates focus on its nature (what it is). For example, is it a pedagogy, a philosophy or a form of inquiry (a methodology)? Or, does it encompass all of these? Also, the question of what counts as service-learning has resulted in multiple descriptions – “academic service learning, community-based service learning, field-based community service – in an attempt to differentiate between programs and emphasize what is of primacy” (Butin, 2003:1676). Moreover, service-learning is riddled with ambiguity. Butin (2003:1675) argues that on the one hand, it could serve

as a powerful counterpoint to positivist educational trends that deprofessionalise teaching through prescriptive curricula, behaviorist outcomes and instrumental views of teaching and learning. On the other hand, service learning could involve, “a voyeuristic exploitation of the cultural other that masquerades as academically sanctioned servant leadership” (Butin, 2003:1675). Furthermore, compound terms such as service-learning also have great appeal as political slogans, because they embrace what appear to be disparate aspirations. Drawing on the work of discourse analyst Fairclough, Stables and Scott (2002:55) note that in democratic societies compound terms have a strong appeal as policy slogans but are difficult to implement – a huge gulf therefore develops between policy sloganising and policy implementation. A further concern about service-learning is its usefulness in South Africa given that it is a construct that emerged in the United States of America, shaped by particular local social and historical forces. Put differently, is service-learning an intellectual MacDonalds burger that has travelled to Africa as a consequence of Americanization and/or globalisation?

I can generate several other matters of contention with respect to service-learning, but would like to focus on one particular criticism of service-learning, that is, that it lacks a well articulated theoretical/conceptual framework – in short that it is fluff (see Giles and Eyer 1994:77). I divide the remainder of my article into four sections: in search of a theoretical alibi for community service-learning; community service-learning after theory; from taproots to rhizomes; alternative possibilities for community service-learning in South Africa; some parting thoughts. In this article I use the terms community service-learning and service-learning interchangeably.

In search of a theoretical alibi for community service-learning

Often when new social or education phenomena emerge its protagonists respond to criticisms of it by searching for a theoretical alibi (or alibis). Community service-learning is no exception. In response to criticisms of the field Giles and Eyer (1994) wrote an article with the main title, *The theoretical roots of service-learning in John Dewey*. The title of their article is perhaps a little misleading because what Giles and Eyer do is to use the works of the pragmatist Dewey to (re)construct a conceptual framework for service-learning. Their exercise did not simply involve digging through academic “soil” to discover the “roots” of service-learning. Their exercise was one of active (re) construction and selection.

Giles and Eyer (1994:77) point out that service-learning does not need a theory simply for the purposes of social and political legitimacy and they also do not believe that theory development is a natural step in the evolution of service-learning. They instead argue that theory is necessary for developing and refining a solid research agenda for service-learning. Giles and Eyer draw mainly on two works of Dewey, *How we think* (1933) and *Experience and Education* (1938) and construct nine areas for theory development and testing in relation to service-learning. I summarise these nine areas briefly:

- *The continuity of experience*. This relates to whether there is a development continuum in service-learning. Put simply, do the activities done in adult stages of learning build on those of earlier stages?
- *The principle of interaction*. This concerns whether service-learning experiences differ because of different interactions between individuals.

- *Inquiry*. This relates to whether engagement in service-learning stimulates a need or demand for further knowledge.
- *Reflective activity*. This concerns whether it can be empirically demonstrated that reflection creates learning by linking experience and education. In other words, is complexity in problem-solving an outcome of reflection in service-learning?
- *Truly educative projects*. This relates to whether Dewey's four criteria ¹ for educative projects can be demonstrated and tested.
- *Concrete and abstract knowledge*. This concerns whether service learning participants develop and demonstrate a balance of concrete and abstract knowledge.
- *The Great Community*. This relates to whether service-learning leads to a valuing of community and whether it promotes the creation of community.
- *Citizenship*. This relates to whether service-learning promotes the development of social intelligence; does it foster participant's belief in their ability to solve problems; does it lead to a commitment to citizenship.
- *Democracy*. This concerns whether the ideal of democracy can be applied to service-learning and whether it can be developed and sustained in contexts of diversity and conflict.

Giles and Elyers' nine areas provide a useful framework for guiding and for evaluating whether activities might count as service-learning. Butin (2003:1676-1677), however, describes a much simpler framework which he refers to as the four *Rs* – respect, reciprocity, relevance, and reflection. Respect involves being respectful to the circumstances, views and ways of life of those being served. Reciprocity concerns mutual benefit to all those involved, that community members being served should be responsible for articulating what the service should be. Relevance relates to service being pertinent to the academic content of the module – that the service-learning should form an integral part of the module content rather than being an add on. Reflection gives context and meaning to experiences of participants so that service-learning constitutes more than mere transparent experiences.

It is possible to generate several other conceptual frameworks or typologies that could serve as heuristics or guides for understanding the education phenomenon service-learning. These frameworks can be generated from experiences and/or from insights gained from ideas or theories of particular scholars, in the way that Giles and Elyer does with Dewey. A question that begs answering is: should we view such frameworks as “the theoretical roots of service-learning” as Giles and Elyer (1994:77) do or should we talk about “multiple conceptions of service learning” in the way that Butin (2003:1674) does? My preference is for the latter but I wish to take the discussion further and therefore in the next section I will turn to a discussion on what I call, “community service-learning after theory”.

Community service-learning after theory

The idea, “after theory” has more than one meaning. It could mean “following in time” but also “in pursuit of” or even “in imitation of” (Schad 2003:x). Giles and Elyers' (1994) work would be

¹ Dewey's (1933:217-218) criteria are: “1. must generate interest; 2. must be worthwhile intrinsically; 3. must present problems that awaken new curiosity and create a demand for information; 3. must cover a considerable time span and be capable of fostering development over time.”

an example of the latter meaning of “after theory” and an alternative title for their article with this meaning in mind might have been, *Service-learning after Dewey*. I find the notion “in imitation of” much more attractive and generative than, “the theoretical roots of”. The latter suggests a foundationalist view of service-learning that has the danger of narrow framing or interpretation of the phenomenon service-learning to the exclusion of alternative possibilities. The notion “in imitation of” opens up endless possibilities for enriching service-learning ‘theoretically’ without, for example, discounting the contribution of Giles and Eyler in linking service learning to Deweyian thought. “In imitation of” opens up possibilities for doing *service learning after Dewey*, *service-learning after Foucault*, *service-learning after Rorty*, *service-learning after Nussbaum*, and on – the possibilities are infinite. The notion “in imitation of” opens up possibilities for multiple conceptualizations of service-learning instead of closing such possibilities.

But, it is the meaning “following in time” that I wish to explore in greater detail. The meaning “following in time” holds that the moment of “high” theory has passed. As Schad (2003:x) elaborates:

Indeed, in the last few years there have been a number of books marking this passing – witness, for example, Thomas Docherty’s *After Theory* (1996), Wendell Harris’s *Beyond Poststructuralism* (1996) and Martin McQuillan’s *Post-Theory* (1999). Some, in such books, have argued that theory has been discredited; some that it has completed its task, that theory has now vanished into new, and better critical practice ...

In his report on knowledge in the most highly developed societies which was presented to the Conseil des Universités of the government of Quebec at the request of its president, Lyotard (1984:xxiv) defines postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives/metatheories. He writes:

This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimization corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on.

As mentioned, Lyotard’s report focused on knowledge in highly developed societies. However, what happens in developed ² countries/societies spills over into the developing world and developing countries such as South Africa are not unaffected by what is referred to a an emerging “knowledge society” and “knowledge economy”. The knowledge society/economy could present interesting challenges for service-learning that remains largely unexplored. I shall return to a discussion on this later.

But closer to home, I now will briefly discuss education’s romance with theory. Thomas (1997:76) argues that education’s romance with theory is based historically on the success of theory in other fields. He points out that the domains (such as those in the natural sciences) in which theory have been useful show no congruence with education. Furthermore, the romance appears to have

² I use the terms developed and developing in relation to countries/societies reservedly. The categorization raises questions about the criteria used to distinguish between these categories and who defines the criteria. I continue to use the terms because I don’t have better terms to use.

continued despite anti-theoretical strands in postmodern thought. Thomas argues that education's romance with theory should come to an end in part because theory has become obsolete, but his argument is deeper, that is, he also argues that education's romance with theory should never have occurred in the first place. He writes:

Theory's acquired potency for bestowing academic legitimacy is troublesome, for it means that particular kinds of endeavor in educational inquiry are reinforced and promulgated, while the legitimacy of atheoretical kinds is questioned or belittled. Education inquiry is thus distorted; within education research, strange interstices are created by the hegemony of theory. I argue that theory of any kind is thus a force for conservatism, for stabilising the status quo through the circumscription of thought within a hermetic set of rules, procedures, and methods

Moreover, the way in which theory is used in education is confusing anyway, ranging from metatheories such as critical theory, to notions that question traditional theory but still use the term theory (grounded theory is an example), and further to theories which individuals develop such as personal or practical theories. Thomas (1997:77) therefore makes a case for what he terms "ad hocery" rather than theory, suggesting that "creativity and progress are rarely the fruit of theory and more often the fruit of anarchy in thought".³

In short, in recent times there is a greater interest in the fragility of theory than in its utility and therefore the obsession with seeking theoretical alibis for justifying or giving credence to educational work should be subjected to critical scrutiny. What I suggest is that we need alternative metaphors for helping us to (re)imagine and (re)enact educational inquiry generally and service learning more specifically.

From taproots to rhizomes

In their seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) distinguish between arborescent and rhizomatic thinking. The former refers to conceptions of knowledge as hierarchically articulated branches of a central stem or trunk rooted in firm foundations and the latter refers to chaotically complex networkings of stems interconnecting the upshoots of some grasses (see Gough 2004, Sellers, 2006).

A tree has a single taproot from which a main stem grows, from which branches in turn grow to produce leaves and fruit. The tree is a useful metaphor for understanding how knowledge is understood and constructed within traditional western thought and remains the dominant system of thought. When service-learning is viewed or constructed arborescently, then its usefulness needs to be justified in terms of a theoretical foundation or theoretical foundations. The imperative for tracing theoretical roots is therefore obvious and the work of Giles and Eyler (1994) might best be understood in this light. Theory can be likened to a taproot which grows into a central stem/trunk from which all service-learning activities branches.

³ Thomas's ideas have not gone uncontested. See, for example, Rajagopalan (1998) and Thomas (1999) for interesting exchanges on the topic. However, I use Thomas's thoughts here because he raises important points, in a contemporary era in which theory's relevance and utility are increasingly questioned.

However, the rhizome metaphor opens alternative ways of thinking about knowledge generally, and service-learning more specifically. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) thoughts on the rhizome are particularly illuminating and generative. They point out that the rhizome assumes very diverse forms, "from ramified surface extension in all directions to connection into bulbs and tubers...'.c9. The rhizome includes the best and the worst: potato and couchgrass, or the weed. Animal and plant, couchgrass is crabgrass". Service-learning as a rhizome can therefore be best and worst. It can produce good and bad practices, but should, however, not simply be viewed as a dualism or dichotomy. It can on the one hand be reduced to political slogans and on the other hand it can produce powerful transformative effects for learners, teachers, schools, universities, communities and policy-makers. Best can become worst and worst has the potential to become best through a process called deterritorialisation (another Deleuzo-Guattarian construct). As Colebrook (2002:xxii) so neatly captures:

Life creates and furthers itself by forming connections or territories. Light connects with plants to allow photosynthesis. Everything, from bodies, [concepts], to societies, is a form of territorialisation, or the connection of forces to produce distinct wholes. But alongside every territorialisation is the power of *deterritorialisation*. The light that connects with the plant to allow it to grow also allows for the plant to become other than itself: too much sun will kill the plant, or perhaps transform it into something else (such as sun-dried leaves becoming tobacco or sun-drenched grapes becoming sultanas). The very connective forces that allow it to become what it *is* (territorialise) can allow it to become what it *is not* (deterritorialise).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:7-12) identify six characteristics of rhizomes which I suggest are very generative in relation to service-learning: 1 and 2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity; 3. Principle of multiplicity; 4. Principle of assigning rupture; and 5 and 6. Principles of cartography and decalcomania.

Principles of connection and heterogeneity and service-learning

This principle means that any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other. Deleuze and Guattari (1987:7) argue that this is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order. Service-learning understood in this way, connects in multiple ways the ideas, tools and skills of all participants involved: community members, academics and students so as to produce new knowledge and new knowledge spaces. I shall return to this discussion in the next section.

Principle of multiplicity and service-learning

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:8) argue that arborescent thinking produces pseudomultiplicities. For them multiplicities are rhizomatic. They write: "A multiplicity is neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows)". Therefore, if service-learning as an educational phenomenon is viewed rhizomatically then it will be characterized by multiplicity. Not pseudomultiplicity that involves branching from a single trunk (theory) to produce variants of the same. Deleuze and Guattari (1987:8) remind us that the rhizome has no points or positions, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root – there are only lines. Lines enable proliferation in all directions to form an assemblage. Service-learning could be understood as an assemblage, meaning that it increases in dimensions of

multiplicity, and necessarily changes its nature as it expands its connections. Therefore all aspects of service-learning (such as outcomes, learning activities) are in constant movement, that is, without fixity. They are always tentatively understood as moments that emerge during pedagogical episodes when lecturers, students and community members interact. With respect to assessment, inferences drawn about what is learned becomes an art of assembling momentary or emerging performances in the field.

Principle of assigning rupture and service-learning

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:9) argue that a rhizome might become broken, shattered at a given place, but it will again grow on one of its old lines, or on new lines. They write:

You can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed. Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialisation down which it constantly flees. There is a rupture in a rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight, but the line of flight is part of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:9).

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:10) use the example of the orchid and the wasp to describe movements of deterritorialisation and processes of reterritorialisation to show how the two species are always connected, that is, caught up in one another. They write:

The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it deterritorialises the orchid by transporting its pollen. Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari,1987:10).

The processes of territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are generative in relation to service-learning. I would like to suggest two senses in which it is. As mentioned, service-learning is a USA phenomenon that was coined in the 1960s and its birth would have been influenced by particular social, historical, political and educational influences. It is in the USA that the phenomenon became territorialized. I have no doubt that the phenomenon has undergone deterritorialisation within the USA as a consequence of a host of factors (reflection, socio-political change, critique, and so on). However, what is more interesting is the deterritorialisation of service-learning in the USA and its reterritorialisation in South Africa, like the pollen of the orchid. The phenomenon service-learning has travelled from the USA to South Africa. Its deterritorialisation has presumably occurred through interaction between humans from both countries, through journal publications, optic fibre technology, and so on. In South Africa it has become reterritorialised, that is, it has been given a local flavour – made part of the state's transformation agenda for higher education, for example. There are elements of USA service-learning that are not lost when deterritorialisation occurs but new lines of flight emerge in this process that enable its reterritorialisation elsewhere. These constructs shift the angle of vision on notions such as Americanisation and globalisation. Phenomena do not simply travel intact from one destination to another and become assimilated where it arrives. Both deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation change the nature of the phenomenon, that is, it is transformed.

The other sense in which territorialisation, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation are useful in helping us to think about service-learning, relates to the interaction between South Africans socialised in western traditions and those socialised according indigenous traditions. Indigenous knowledge resides among the majority of South Africans and is valued in many communities. In post-apartheid South Africa, greater prominence has been given to indigenous knowledge and there have been calls for integrating indigenous knowledge with so-called western canonical knowledge. The challenge of integrating these disparate knowledges is not easy, but the three Deleuzo-Guattarian constructs are particularly useful in opening up possibilities for doing so. When a researcher trained in western traditions and someone knowledgeable about indigenous traditions are brought together to collaborate in solving a community problem, the deterritorialisation of both knowledges occurs. New lines of flight are generated from both knowledges and when these connect, new knowledges as well as new knowledge spaces are created. The new knowledge produced will have elements of both western knowledge and indigenous knowledge but will also be distinctly different from its two precursors, that is, transformation of both knowledges occurs. Deterritorialisation, in a sense involves the deconstruction of western knowledge so that it can be compared more equally to other ways of knowing. Service-learning in South Africa can crucially contribute to the deconstruction of Western thought and the transformation of both indigenous knowledge and western knowledge. O'Riley (2003:7) argues that a rhizomatic view of knowledge "affirms what is excluded from western thought and reintroduces reality as dynamic, heterogeneous, and nondichotomous; they implicate rather than replicate; they propagate, displace, join, circle back, fold".

Principle of cartography and decalcomania and service-learning

Deleuze and Guattari (1987:12) view the rhizome as a map and not a tracing. They point out that all tree logic is a logic of tracing and reproduction. They return to the orchid and the wasp and write:

The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:12).

Trying to discover the theoretical roots of service-learning in the way that Giles and Eyler (1994) do follows the tree logic, that is, the logic of tracing and reproduction. If service-learning is viewed as a map then it is constantly open to new connections and alternative possibilities. As Deleuze and Guattari write: "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification".

Viewing service learning rhizomatically enables us to rid ourselves of the desire or need to trace its theoretical roots. Service-learning has multiple entryways, and its transformative potential lies in its orientation toward experimentation with (real) communities in efforts to address pressing problems faced by such communities.

Possibilities for community service-learning in South Africa

South Africa is faced with many challenges. Many of its communities are vulnerable and faced with problems such as lack of housing; lack of sanitation; unemployment; diseases such as HIV/AIDS,

tuberculosis and malaria; environmental degradation, shortage of water resources, and so on. Just educating students *about* these problems can be dangerous because they learn the lesson of hypocrisy – they learn that it is enough just to learn about these problems without having to do anything to help address them. It is here that community service-learning comes into its own.

But, narrowly framing service-learning within a particular theory or theories could exclude so many possibilities for engagement with problems faced by communities and can produce blind spots. Viewing service-learning rhizomatically enables us to (re) imagine and to (re)enact it in endless and multiple ways, creating new knowledges in new knowledge spaces. For example, when academics and students collaborate with indigenous communities both western knowledge (so-called canonical knowledge) and indigenous knowledge (the wisdom of the elders) become deterritorialised, that is, it becomes something other than what it was, yet retains something of what it was. When lines of flight from the deterritorialisation of these knowledges connect, then new knowledge spaces are created. For example, Aborigines in Australia's Northern Territory have for many years through their own performative modes mapped their country by identifying every tree and every significant feature of their territory. Today some Aborigines are doing the same using the latest in satellites, remote sensing and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). By representing their local knowledge on digital maps they are able to make their ways of knowing visible in Western terms, - "a new knowledge space which will have transformative effects for all Australians" (Turnbull 1997:560). Closer to home, in South Africa San ("bushmen") trackers are being equipped with digital devices to record animal sightings, a local example of traditional African ways of knowing, working together with sophisticated Western knowledge (Le Grange, 2001). The valuing of indigenous knowledge and the introduction of the latest technologies such as GIS in the new curriculum framework in South Africa, open up new spaces for the transformation of pedagogy in schools and Faculties of Education. Rhizomatic service-learning has the potential for enabling this.

But, service learning can also occur transnationally. South African students can engage communities that are physically far removed from them. Technology opens up such possibilities. Fraser (1993) argues that we need to take advantage of shifting solidarities within and between nation states that globalisation affords. She identifies two senses of such solidarity: solidarity premised on shared identity and solidarity premised on shared responsibility. She goes on to outline four ways of formulating an inclusive, global view of solidarity as shared responsibility which does require shared identity (see Fraser 1993:22 for detail). One of the forms of solidarity that Fraser mentions is: "A radical-democratic view of global solidarity rooted in the fact that we inhabit an increasingly global public space of discourse and representation ... that might be redefined as a space in which all people deliberate together to decide our common fate" (Fraser 1993:22). A global public space affords multiple opportunities for enacting service-learning transnationally through processes or movements of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Some parting thoughts

Service-learning is a philosophy, it is a form of inquiry, it is a pedagogy, and more. In an emerging knowledge society/economy service-learning can play a role in building knowledge cultures. Moreover, it plays a role in creating new knowledge spaces in which both western knowledge and indigenous knowledge can be transformed. However, this will require changing our language and

metaphors that we use in relation to service-learning so that it is imagined and enacted in alternative ways. I have proposed in this article that service-learning should be thought of rhizomatically rather than arborescently. When service-learning is viewed rhizomatically then tracing its theoretical roots could become an exercise in futility.

This of course does not mean jettisoning important principles such as the four *Rs* that Butin (2003) identifies. For example, the words of an Australian aboriginal activist Lilla Watson, so aptly illustrates the importance of the principle of reciprocity: "If you've come to help me you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together" (quoted in Gough 1998:3).

I part with Kappelar's (1986:212) words, "I do not really wish to conclude and sum up, rounding off the argument so as to dump it in a nutshell for the reader. A lot more could be said about any of the topics I have touched upon ... I have meant to ask the questions, to break out of the frame ... The point is not a set of answers, but making possible a different practice ..."

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