Chapter 7
Service-Learning’s Impact on Attitudes and Behavior: A Review and Update

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In this chapter, I reexamine and update the ongoing discussion regarding service-learning’s impact on learners’ attitudes and beliefs. For many years, advocates have promoted service-learning’s capacity to influence student attitudes and beliefs, especially toward diversity, social justice, and other pro-social attitudes (Delve, Mintz & Stewart, 1990; Dunlap, 1998). At the same time, many researchers have cautioned service-learning practitioners about the potential risks involved in using service-learning to affect these attitudes and beliefs. In particular, researchers have cautioned about the potential for unintended consequences of service-learning—the potential for increased prejudice, stereotyping, and victim blaming in service-learning participants (Erickson & O’Connor, 2000; Hollis, 2004; Jones, 2002; Kendall & Associates, 1990).

The goals for using service-learning have always included an array of intended and expected outcomes such as cognitive, behavioral, and social outcomes (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005; Giles & Eyler, 1994, Eyler & Giles, 1999; Hurd, 2006).

More recently, advocates have attempted to redirect and expand the service-learning community mission toward the goals of using service-learning as a means to promote civic and political engagement (e.g., Berman, 2008; Boyte & Hollander, 1999;
Checkoway, 2001; Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Glickman, 2008; Haynes & Pickeral, 2008; Leighninger & Levine, 2008; Mendel-Reyes, 1998). The particular reasons for this shift could (and perhaps should) be a topic for an entirely different essay, but I believe this switch is an attempt by members of the education community to place civic engagement and democratic values in a more central place in the mission of P–16 education in the United States during a period of higher expectations and accountability.

My primary purpose in this chapter is to tease out what difference it makes to emphasize civic engagement versus other pro-social attitudes and discover whether the same caveats that applied earlier still apply to our pursuit of civically engaged learners. I also review the latest research in the social psychology of attitude change to see what impacts refinements in this field have for those employing service-learning.

**Personal and Social Outcomes and Service-Learning**

I have argued previously that service-learning practice has a strong basis in psychological theory and practice and that service-learning has a tremendous potential to affect learners in ways other forms of teaching may not (Erickson & Santmire, 2001). But this previous research also raised some red flags: unanticipated outcomes such as increased prejudice and bias on the part of learners toward the very groups with whom they are doing service. The concern expressed in my earlier writings was that to be ignorant of these red flags may lead to counterintuitive outcomes that are the *opposite* of that which most service-learning practitioners would have anticipated. In 2000 and 2001 (Erickson & O’Connor, 2000; Erickson & Santmire, 2001), I argued that it may very well
be the case that those attempting to implement service-learning in their classrooms may do more harm than good if they engage in service-learning that doesn’t fulfill certain minimum necessary requirements suggested by the learning of social psychologists.

At least two issues need to be addressed to better understand what’s changed and what’s the same in regards to the critical question of how effective service-learning is on changing learners’ attitudes: (1) the emerging emphasis in the service-learning community on civic engagement as a primary attitudinal and behavioral goal (rather than the earlier goal of reducing antisocial attitudes) and (2) to draw upon the very latest research on attitude change to see what updating may be necessary in our approaches to be successful in engaging students in the democratic process.

Changing Attitudes and Intentions

Although civic engagement and democratic values have appeared among the intended goals for service-learning for probably all of its history, recently many advocates have urged service-learning practitioners to renew and reframe their efforts primarily around these goals. These efforts have been tied to broader institutional goal setting at the college and university levels (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Checkoway, 2001; Colby et al., 2007; Ehrlich, 2000; Rhodes, 2003). At the K–12 level, the civic mission of schools has been touted as a highly desirable goal for schools to seek and perhaps even the preferred option (Berman, 2008; Boston, Pearson, & Halperin, 2005; DeCesare, 2006; Education Commission of the States, 2000; Glickman, 2008; Gomez, 1999; Haynes & Pickeral, 2008; Leighninger & Levine, 2008), although this goal may struggle for acceptance in K–12 schools in light of greater emphasis on accountability and testing in public schools.
What is meant by civic engagement? Erhlich (2000) proposes “civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference” (p. v1). Others write in terms of “citizenship skills” (Mendel-Reyes, 1998), “political engagement” (Colby et al., 2007), or “political-moral identity” (Youniss & Yates, 1997); each involves “students learning the skills of democracy—critical thinking, public deliberation, community building, and collaborative action—by practicing them” (Mendel-Reyes, 1998, p. 36).

Although not abandoning other pro-social attitude benefits, the main focus of service-learning’s attitude-change intentions appear to have shifted during the past 10 years away from the reduction of prejudice, empathy with disadvantaged communities, and so forth to the goal of civic engagement. Again, the reasons for this shift may be the topic for a completely different paper, but I believe it is safe to assert that the core institutional goal of many service-learning advocates and administrators has dramatically shifted. This is understandable given the tremendous pressures American schools face in the early 21st century. Schools are wedged between the enormous forces of learner and community needs on one side and government and community expectations on the other. Positioning schools in this pressure-packed environment demands a set of social and political skills that can be described at the very least as demanding. Reminding community members of the schools’ historic place in educating its citizens in democratic values captures for schools a place at the table as the United States continues to struggle with building a nation out of divergent peoples and their different cultural experiences.
Advocates promote service-learning as a tool for affecting the entire array of learning outcomes, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Billig et al., 2005; Hurd, 2006). To effect attitude change, social psychologists suggest a need for learner engagement that involves cognitive and affective components and promotes reflecting on personal identity, reducing anxiety, and developing new affiliations and attitudes (Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005). Changing attitudes and beliefs, whether they are pro-social (i.e., attitudes such as the reduction of prejudice or the enhancement of empathy for the disadvantaged) or civil (i.e., enhancing civic engagement and commitment to democratic and community values), involves substantial reflection and reintegration of personal identity and beliefs as well as the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. Both pursuits involve substantially similar cognitive and affective change processes. Both tasks are very difficult to achieve and involve the possibility (even high probability) that even if the necessary conditions are present, change still may not occur.

Therefore, is the pursuit of civic engagement substantially different in character and intentions to suggest that the same cautions that applied previously would not continue to apply? I believe the answer is no. In essence, it appears that the goal of changing attitudes toward civic and political engagement is strikingly similar to changing attitudes toward out-groups, stereotypes, and prejudice. Although resetting the attitudinal goals for service-learning toward civic engagement and away from other pro-social goals such as reducing prejudice and appreciating diversity may represent a significant shift for the service-learning field, it appears this change doesn’t substantially alter the need for certain types of social and personal engagement and reflection. Whether we aim to change personal prejudices or promote civic engagement, the general road map for how
we affect these attitudes remains the same. If the pedagogical tasks are substantially similar, then the same caveats to which the earlier critics pointed still apply.

What were those caveats? In the next section, I briefly review those classic concerns and also discuss the changes to these concerns as a result of the latest findings in social psychology.

Social Psychological Factors in Attitude Change: A Review and an Update

Claims for service-learning’s effectiveness as an attitude change agent comes from practitioners and participants who have observed attitude change among service-learning participants. The theoretical basis for claims of service-learning’s efficacy as a social change tool go all the way back to Dewey (1938). Dewey’s theories of experience and learning have formed the foundation for experiential education’s claim that learning through experience is superior to less engaging forms of learning. Others extended Dewey’s thinking to the practice of service-learning (e.g., Giles, 1991; Kolb, 1975, 1984). These theories form the core of service-learning’s basic formulation and are the basis for evaluating what is appropriate service-learning practice.

Many have promoted service-learning practice as having the capacity to change negative social attitudes toward out-groups (i.e., target groups of people about which one has a stereotypic, biased, or prejudiced set of attitudes and/or beliefs). For example, Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) draw on frequent examples illustrating ways in which service-learning creates the necessary conditions for positive attitude and value change.

Alternately, a number of critics (e.g., Erickson & O’Connor, 2000; Hollis, 2004; Jones, 2002; Kendall & Associates, 1990) have suggested that service-learning may do
more harm than good if the experience is too short or the community is given too little attention by participants. Negative and stereotypical attitudes will be strengthened if crucial and little-known minimum standards for effective practice are not followed. As Allport (1954) pointed out, “Casual contact has left matters worse than before” (p. 264). These critics suggest that too little attention is paid to a precise understanding of the theoretical assumptions and pedagogical activities necessary for service-learning to be effective at changing attitudes in its participants.

So, what are the precise conditions in which real attitude change can occur according to social psychologists and others engaged in studying personality and social cognition? Classically, that question was often answered by looking at the Contact Theory (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Cook, 1985). More recently, refinements in Contact Theory have deepened our understanding of the necessary (conditions that must be present for change to occur) but not sufficient (even when present, do not always guarantee change) conditions for authentic attitude change to occur. Presently, I discuss these conditions to ascertain whether any changes are necessary in our formulations of service-learning practice for our renewed effort at forming civically engaged learners.

Contact Theory: Minimum Conditions to Reduce Prejudice

Contact Theory (CT), also called the contact hypothesis, was introduced and developed by social psychologists as a way to understand and evaluate the various conditions under which face-to-face contact would promote greater personal and social understanding between members of different groups (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969; Cook, 1985). In this section, I review CT as a theoretical framework from which I can evaluate the potential effectiveness of service-learning as an attitude-change tool. CT traces the
minimum necessary conditions through which favorable experiences with individual members of an out-group may be transmitted or generalized to one’s group-related attitudes (Pettigrew, 1988; Rothbart, 1996). Recent research has outlined important clarifications to CT, although much of the basic core of CT remains consistent (Dovidio et al., 2005). Many of these concerns focus on the specific context(s) in which varied social identities (i.e., the relevant aspects of the self that are tapped in different social contexts) are aroused (e.g., to engage in active reflection on our opinions about our own or another’s culture, we must have our own cultural identity in conscious awareness) (Dovidio et al., 2005; Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996).

At its core, CT describes the necessary conditions under which contact inhibits or reduces prejudice. The four main factors as outlined by Allport (1954) in his classic book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, are as follows:

1. Equal status contact
2. Pursuit of common goals
3. Intergroup cooperation
4. Support of authorities, custom, or law

Let’s briefly review these conditions, and then identify two new concerns raised by more recent research developments. (For a more thorough discussion of CT and its application to service-learning, see Erickson & O’Connor, 2000.)

Equal status contact refers to the extent to which both the service provider and recipient of service have a comparatively equal amount of social status. In practice, this is very difficult to obtain in many community service interactions because of the lower status implied by being in need of service in some way.
The pursuit of common goals refers to the character of the task on which both service provider and recipient are working. Perhaps the best example of a social situation in which the common goal factor is met is the sports team—different people from different social groups performing differentiated tasks in pursuit of a unified goal. When the affiliation between provider and recipient is authentically in pursuit of common goals, real attitude change may occur.

Intergroup cooperation refers to the manner in which the service participant first identifies as a member of a special group such as ethnicity, political affiliation, or nationality. Once one’s in-group identity is salient, the service participant must then recognize others’ group (or “out-group”) identity and perceive a constructive cooperative relationship between in-group and out-group. In civic engagement, I wonder whether service participants, once their political identity has been activated, will tend to see pursuit of their goals as involving the cooperation of the “opposition” (or out-group) forces or entities.

Finally, the prevailing social norms of a community, that is, the support of authorities, social custom, or laws, must promote positive contact between out-group members. This support could be in the form of special outreach programs such as structured diversity training, laws prohibiting discrimination, or other organizational efforts such as a special initiative from a business, religious, or fraternal organization (e.g., a “Get Out the Vote” drive).

Another condition long associated with classic CT is long-term contact. Quick, casual, and/or superficial interactions generally promote entrenched attitudes. Social psychologists, especially those focused on the cognitive aspects of attitude change, say
that it is for this purpose (i.e., making quick judgments) that we form generalizations in our attitudes in the first place (Allport, 1954; Dovidio et al., 2005).

Because of the practical logistics of doing service-learning in educational settings (academic terms, transportation issues, student turnover via matriculation and graduation, etc.), many service activities are short in duration and may violate this condition. Without long-term contact (long-term either in intensity or duration, or both), service relationships can actually increase the degree and severity of attitude entrenchment.

Long-term status may be difficult to achieve as long as schools define service placements solely within the context of a course or academic term. One way to move beyond these limits and potentially expand the time frame in which the contact occurs is to create service placements that extend over two or more academic terms or over several years in more than one course. This would require coordination among two or more instructors and involve a more comprehensive and careful integration of the service activities with the school’s curriculum, but the benefits would be a greater likelihood of authentic attitude change on the part of students.

These five conditions form the core of classic CT. Recent developments have extended our understanding of the facilitating conditions that promote attitude change.

New Developments in Contact Theory

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the release of Allport’s classic book, Dovidio, Glick, and Rudman (2005) released On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years After Allport. In this book, more than 40 social psychologists attempt to review and renew Allport’s classic theory based on the latest research developments. Although many
new details have emerged over the past 50 years, a consistent theme among these authors and others in this field is the degree to which most of Allport’s original formulations have held up. The conditions we have just reviewed (equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and community support, along with the fifth condition of long-term contact) all remain important to the attitude change process.

Several new issues have emerged in recent research that have extended and elaborated Allport’s original formulation, whereas other aspects of Allport’s work have been dropped or de-emphasized. Some of these issues do not apply to the question at hand, but two issues emerge as potentially expanding our understanding of attitude change in the classroom and community: the important role of affect, particularly anxiety, in facilitating or inhibiting attitude change (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2005), and the importance of rousing a sense of identity among participants (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Kenworthy, Turner, Hewstone, & Voci, 2005).

Much of the emphasis among advocates of using service-learning as a means to increase civic engagement focuses on developing not only the necessary cognitive skills, but also the personal and social attitudes required of full civic participation. Recent research indicates that the affective state of the learner may play a critical facilitating role in the process of attitude change, possibly even more important than cognition (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2005). When learners experience higher levels of anxiety, they cognitively shut down and are not open to unfamiliar thoughts. It appears that those attempting to engage learners in the civic life of the community would be well advised to attend carefully to reducing as much as possible elevated levels of anxiety in their participants.
Advocates also often point to personal and political identity factors as being crucial to developing civic engagement in learners (e.g., Colby et al., 2007; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Identity formation has also been recognized as an important factor in attitude change research. When attempting to engage learners in attitude change, learners’ ability to rouse a sense of identity, in terms of their uniqueness and differences, needs to be addressed (Dunlap, 1993; Kenworthy et al., 2005). Individuals cannot begin to reflect on and reassess their identities without first placing themselves in the relevant social contexts in which their identity is situated. For example, one cannot reflect on what it means to be an American unless one can first rouse a cognitive vision of “American-ness,” and then differentiate that awareness from what it means to not be an American. This finding suggests that learning activities aimed at developing a civic identity must first engage in activities that provoke a sense of group affiliation. Only after this requisite first step is accomplished (“I am an American”) can we assist learners in reevaluating or activating their role in that group (“I intend to be an engaged American citizen”).

Conclusion

How should these civic virtues be taught? What are good models of the engaged campus? There are no easy answers to these pressing questions.


Service-learning pedagogy must meet certain necessary but not sufficient conditions as described to have any hope of successfully changing learner attitudes and behavior. Researchers have looked at these mechanisms for more than 70 years and have
identified these conditions, and how, if followed, we can be successful in changing learners’ attitudes and behavior. Although there are no simple answers or recipes to follow, if we are serious about promoting authentic civic engagement, we should not be satisfied accepting service-learning practice that is vague or inattentive to these necessary conditions. The ultimate value or worth of the service-learning experiences we provide depends on the quality of these experiences (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Rigorous understanding and application of theories of development, cognition, and attitude change suggest that service-learning, designed and implemented in such a way as to meet these conditions, should be expected to enhance academic learning and attitude change over instruction which does not involve these components.

If these conditions are not met, the intended results (enhancing civic engagement) could be diminished or, even more problematic, could make students’ attitudes worse than they were before, that is, students may be turned off to civic engagement. Studies of service-learning’s effectiveness should include assessments of the extent to which these conditions are met. Such assessments would allow a much richer and rigorous examination of the effects of service-learning on learner attitudes.

As I have argued previously (Erickson & O’Connor, 2000; Erickson & Santmire, 2001), service-learning can be expected to enhance knowledge and change attitudes so long as it is conducted in the context of an academic discipline and in a manner that applies the powerful social and cognitive psychological principles noted here. I believe many of the concerns highlighted in previous research regarding service-learning and attitude change continue to be relevant. In general, service-learning teaching activities aimed at attitude change continue to lack the necessary conditions proposed by social
psychologists. As a result, we can expect poor outcomes with respect to students’ attitude change, and we will also see a *worsening* of student attitudes in the very domains in which we want to have impact. As Allport and others have observed, if we don’t meet the minimum necessary conditions laid out in Contact Theory, we risk making matters worse rather than better. The new findings in social psychological research extend our understanding of the necessary conditions through which successful attitude change might occur, and we would be wise to consider these conditions when designing service-learning activities aimed at promoting civic engagement.
References


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