CSL Working Paper Series 1:

Thinking about Student Reflection Across Disciplines

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April 2014

Introduction by Alison Taylor

On October 16, 2013, the Community Service-Learning Office held a seminar aimed primarily at instructors to discuss student reflection. Reflection is an oft-used term, particularly in experiential learning activities like CSL, and our goal was to provide a forum to share both different conceptions of the term 'reflection' and ideas about what it can look like in university classrooms.

Influential writers like Kolb, Mezirow, Brookfield, Schön, and Freire discuss the role of reflection in processes of knowledge generation. A general tendency in this work is to see reflection as the processing of experience—the period of self-exploration through which the mind transforms experience (the raw material) into learning (the product). However, in an interesting paper, Elana Michelson (1996) suggests that these views reinforce a Cartesian dualism in which "the irrational, the bodily, the emotional and the concrete are not seen as directly productive of knowledge."

In contrast, Michelson argues for reflection as an inquiry into social and historical particularity: "By considering 'how the forms and contents of our thought shape and are shaped by the historical situations in which we find ourselves' (Kemmis, 1985, p. 142), we can identify how our thoughts —and our thoughts about thinking—are historically and culturally produced (Michelson, p. 450).

From this perspective, the process of reflection requires collectively locating our ideas within their specific historical and social settings. I agree that this way of thinking about reflection is helpful in shifting attention away from an unproductive separation of theory and practice toward thinking more carefully about the relationship between these different ways of knowing.

The panelists in our fall seminar presented their ideas about student reflection in their own teaching. Jean Clandinin is the Director of the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development in the Faculty of Education and co-author of an influential book with F. Michael Connelly called 'Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research' (2000, Jossey-Bass). Jon White is a 2014 3M National Teaching Fellow in the Faculty of Medicine & Dentistry. Renate Kahlke is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies who worked with Jon. Zane Hamm and John Simpson (with doctorates in education and philosophy respectively) have taught courses titled 'An introduction to community engagement' (CSL 100) and 'Theory and practice of community service-learning' (CSL 300). The panel was intended to provide a diversity of perspectives across faculties.

We also asked panelists to share their ideas in this working paper. In what follows, Jean Clandinin presents a narrative conceptualization of reflection, which involves student participants telling or writing their story followed by collaborative inquiry into the stories. She observes that telling of stories involves attending to the temporal, social, emotional, and place dimensions of experiences. Collaborative inquiry encourages the development of new understandings and growth that occur when there are responses from others with diverse vantage points in sustained inquiry groups.

Jon White and Renate Kahlke reinforce the importance of narrative inquiry in professional education. They highlight its importance for students in addressing the affective aspects of their experience and learning how to make sense of complex experiences, and the importance, for instructors, of gaining insight into student experiences. This approach moves beyond the narrow use of reflection in professional education to improve practice and prevent errors.

Drawing on her background in adult education, Zane Hamm proposes that reflection creates spaces to connect life experiences and theoretical concepts. Zane shares CSL classroom activities to illustrate how reflection requires instructors and students to think about important social, political and ethical dimensions of education in theory and practice. Citing Dan Butin (Professor and Executive Director of the Centre for Engaged Democracy in the US, 2003), Zane concludes that critical reflection in a CSL classroom involves

instructors letting go of some power and control but has the potential for a deeper analysis of external experiences, and an internal process of inquiry.

John Simpson also focuses his attention on the CSL classroom and the potential for anti-foundational service learning, as per Butin (2010). In Simpson's view, the cognitive dissonance that results from placing students in unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations creates a space where students can discover new insights and understandings. As his examples show, CSL creates such cognitive dissonance by introducing real world responsibility for student actions and disrupting commonly accepted stereotypes and roles. Instructors' responsibility in these cases is to ensure that students have the support necessary to address their cognitive dissonance and to be reflective themselves about the challenges that accompany anti-foundational service learning.

Together, these short contributions enrich our thinking about the ideas behind the use of reflection activities and how they can be used effectively in university classrooms.

Narrative Reflective Practice by Jean Clandinin

My take on reflection is a narrative one. By that I mean that I think about life and reflecting on life using narrative terms and concepts, that is, I pay attention to the stories that people live out and the stories that people tell about that living. When I ask students/people to engage in reflection I struggle to find ways to get them to attend closely to the stories that they are living and telling AND then to inquire into the stories that they live and tell.

I find inspiration in the words of Robert Coles (1989) in *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. He writes:

> We have to pay the closest attention to what we say. What patients say tells us what to think about what hurts them; and what we say tells us what is happening to us—what we are thinking, and what may be wrong with us…. Their story, yours, mine---it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them. (Coles, 1989, p. 30)

Whether I am working with student teachers, graduate students, teachers, medical students, practicing physicians, nurses or nurse educators, I use narrative conceptualizations of reflection (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Cave, 2008) to structure the tasks and assignments that I design.

Narrative reflective practice is a two-stage reflection process: The telling/writing of a story is followed by inquiry into the written/told story. The process of writing the story is an individual process. However, the process of inquiring into the written stories can be an individual process or a group process. In education settings such as a service learning setting, the process of inquiring into the written stories is best undertaken in a small sustained group where certain protocols to establish trust and safety for sharing and inquiring into stories are established.

Approach 1: Writing Field Notes/Inquiring into Field Notes
One way I think about this is asking people to go into a situation and to create field notes. I ask them not so much to keep journals on their experiences but to describe what they see, hear, feel, and smell as they are in a situation. In this way the task is both what they notice in a situation and on their personal response to what is happening to them in the situation.

As Claire Desrochers in her doctoral work was the researcher who first worked in this way, I want to draw on her words:

> I asked the students after each service learning session to write field notes about what they noticed, thought, or wondered about and to share them with me by email. In opening up this electronic connection, I was attempting to fit my request for field notes in to their busy lives. (Desrochers, 2006, p. 63)

This is the beginning of narrative reflective practice. Here is one example of a field note taken from Claire's work. The field note was written by Thea, a student who was engaging in service learning as a volunteer in an afterschool program with Claire, another student and some youth who attended the program. They volunteered in the program for about three months.

> Sandra was very quiet during the conversation, which is abnormal for her; usually she is loud and talkative. We talked about bullying and how the girls get along with each other. Some of them revealed to us that sometimes they don't all get along. But it seemed like it was more the girls didn't get along with Sandra as much as anyone else. (Thea's field notes, April 12, 2004) (Desrochers, 2006, p. 170)

Field note writing is the first part of the narrative reflective practice. This writing of the field note precedes the process of inquiring into the field notes. The process of inquiring into the field notes begins with reading the field notes. Claire was one of the readers and, of course, later the students who are engaged in service learning also read their own field notes out loud to each other. Claire describes the process this way:

> …I looked forward to receiving their field notes to see what had caught their interest each week. Placing their field notes alongside mine, it was interesting to identify the moments that captured our respective or collective interest. These often involved moments where they, or I, bumped up against unexpected social or cultural narratives reflected in children's stories. During site-specific group conversations, our overlapping field notes helped us return to those moments and focus on how we were making sense of them in relation to our prior experiences. Sometimes, reflecting on our overlapping field notes directed our attention to certain aspects of the setting, events, or children's stories in preparation for our next time at the [service learning site]. (Desrochers, 2006, p. 65)

"Returning to our overlapping field notes on a regular basis" (Desrochers, 2006, p. 65) allowed us to slow time to moments so we could inquire into what was happening to each of us, to attend to what we were learning.

As these field notes were laid alongside other field notes from other students and with Claire's, these notes became part of the inquiry into Thea's learning, what Thea was making sense of as she reflected on the situation. It was not so much to learn more about Sandra and the girls in the service learning site but what Thea and the other service-learning students were learning. The focus was on what Thea was learning through the narrative reflective practice.

Approach 2: Writing a Story and Inquiring Into The Story
This is a strategy that Michael Connelly and I have worked with since the mid 1980's (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Working with teachers and administrators and, more recently, with my colleague Marie Cave in Family Medicine, we developed this approach to narrative reflective practice (Clandinin, Cave & Cave, 2010; Clandinin, Cave, Cave, Thomson & Bach, 2010). Marie Cave and I have been engaged with undergraduate students and residents in the Faculty of Medicine asking them to write stories of their clinical encounters with patients. This is the beginning phase of the process of narrative reflective practice. We have published examples of these written stories. We can only share them with the permission of residents and students who wrote them. Stories shared in the inquiry groups are not shared outside the group. That is part of the ethical protocol of the groups.

After the students/residents have written a story of a clinical encounter we meet with them in small, sustained groups that meet for three to five sessions to read their stories and to engage with each other in shared inquiry. We ask them to engage in asking inquiry questions that point toward temporality, sociality and place. Some of the questions we encourage them to ask each other are:

How was your emotional response in the encounter? Did it evoke memories of other times you have experienced? Where was the encounter? Who else was in the situation with you? What happened before the encounter? To you? To the patient? What happened after? Who was in the encounter with you? What were the gaps and silences?

As the students engage in the shared inquiry, they begin to see aspects they had not attended to in the moment of living or in the moment of telling. As they engage in narrative reflective practice they see themselves in new ways and gain insights into how to live differently with their patients.

To Return to Where I Began:
For me, understanding reflection requires a narrative turn. It is a way of finding out, making visible, the stories we each live and tell and then finding ways to tell those stories. The learning that comes from reflection comes in part through the telling of stories but even more learning, more attentiveness to who we are and to the possibilities of changing, of learning, of growth, come from the inquiry into the stories we live and tell.

Exploring Students' Stories of Surgery by Jonathan White and Renate Kahlke

> "We are the creature of language, and through language we affirm ourselves, we find out about the world, including ourselves, through words, and we share with one another through language."
> Robert Coles (1989)

All my life, I [Jon] have been entranced by stories, and as I've developed as a teacher, I've become increasingly interested in how we teach through story (Coles, 1989; Egan, 1988). In the summer of 2007, I met Australian professor of Education Angela Brew who got me thinking about how I might use stories in my own teaching. Angela told me she was certain that medical students would be able to write interesting stories, if only I would give them the chance. I wasn't so sure - I didn't really know what my students could write about, and I didn't even know if they would write for me. But, encouraged by her confidence, I decided to give it a try. I asked medical students in both of our clinical courses in surgery to write about something interesting that had happened to them during the course, and waited to see what would happen (Kurien & De Gara, 2009).

To my surprise, Angela was right. Everyone wrote something, and most of the stories were really good. We got essays of course, but also poetry, blank verse, crosswords, haikus and limericks, as well as screenplays and monologues. There were also letters, recipes, wanted ads and TV commercials, song lyrics, and even a short Choose-Your-Own-Adventure. It seems the students were a lot more creative than I had imagined. Even more interesting was what they wrote about. I conducted an analysis, and identified three main themes. The first was "Student Stories," addressing the student's role, confidence and survival tips, changing perspectives, and emotional reactions to surgery. The second theme was "Patient Stories," which focused on making a difference, connecting with patients, and dealing with disease and the fragility of life, including cancer, bad news, futility and trauma. The last theme was "Stories About Surgery," which addressed the Operating Room, the team, work, success and failure, and issues around career choice. Some of the stories they told were difficult or dangerous - death, mistakes and struggling with becoming a doctor were common themes. I realized that students had given me access to a vast ocean of stories, which contained their real experiences, and I started to see our courses from a new perspective.

At this point, I was the only one reading and reacting to my students' stories. I began to take all the assignments to the end-of-course student meetings and, with students' permission, to read out excerpts. You could hear a pin drop as students heard each other's stories, and I would often respond by sharing stories of my own. Inspired by the students, I began to share some of my own writing. As the years passed, I gave students more freedom in choosing a format for the assignment, and I began to receive music, songs, board games, paintings, photos, drawings, YouTube videos and physical pieces of artwork. Several assignments have been published in peer-reviewed journals (Stauffer & White, 2012; White, 2008). Every year, we choose the top 20 reflective assignments and post them on our website to show the incoming class the best of the previous year's work.

Some have expressed surprise that a surgeon would embrace reflection as a technique for teaching and learning. Wouldn't this fit better in Psychiatry or Family Medicine? Isn't this a little wishy-washy for a surgeon? It's my contention that surgeons are reflective by nature – dealing with complications, wondering how they could have been avoided, and constantly striving to perfect the art of surgery. Of all physicians, surgeons have enshrined reflection as a formal part of practice in our monthly Morbidity and Mortality conferences, where we sit as a group and reflect on our failures. However, as we began working together, we noticed that in addition to this historical focus on practice improvement and error prevention, there are other things that students (and practitioners) seem to develop through reflective practice. The "student stories," "patient stories" and "stories about surgery" do deal with practice improvement and patient safety, but they often do so by addressing the affective components of surgeon identity and experience.

Mann, Gordon & MacLeod (2009) suggest this dual nature of reflection when they write that reflection "fulfills several functions, including helping to make meaning of complex situations and enabling learning

from experience" (Mann, Gordon & MacLeod, 2009, p. 610). These dual roles of reflective practice are also delineated when authors make distinctions between "technical" reflection, or reflection for practice improvement, and other types of reflection, such as narrative reflection (Cave & Clandinin, 2007; Charon, 2004; Clandinin & Cave, 2008), which is addressed in depth in Dr. Clandinin's section of this working paper. When students, residents and surgeons reflect on the complexities of practice, these aspects of reflection more often than not become deeply entwined. The affective and technical aspects of reflection are intimately related; for example, clinical errors have very human emotions tied to them – guilt, shame, and defensiveness. Likewise, understanding of one's own emotions and the ability to self-regulate are tied to a surgeon's ability to prevent errors. Students, residents and surgeons engaging in reflective practice are attempting to navigate the complex web of clinical practice, where they must learn to understand themselves as practitioners, their patients, their coworkers, and the technical "nuts and bolts" or their learning needs and clinical practices.

So, what have we learned from the reflections of my students? Using stories and writing has helped us to see the student experience of surgery from a new perspective. We've begun to appreciate what students really go through, and have discovered experiences, emotions and meaning that we had not appreciated before. Students say that they have gained much from the act of sitting down to reflect on their experiences; "when you sit down to write, you never end up with quite what you thought you would." I've been surprised at the creativity and imagination that our students possess but are not normally asked to express in medical school. Our students have submitted over 2,000 assignments in the 6 years that I have been using stories to teach about surgery, and this strategy is now an established part of the surgery curriculum. I will continue to use it to gain insight into student experiences, and to keep creativity and imagination alive in medical school.

Teaching and Learning Moments

My Hands

Don't touch that! What glove size are you? Watch your hands.

My hands are well traveled by now—a year of clerkship puts a lot of experience in your hands. I've sutured lacerations on the belligerently inebriated. I've held the hands of grannies as they climbed onto the examination table. Many, many babies have gripped my index finger. I've palpated lymph nodes, cervixes, and prostates across the province. I know how to hold my stethoscope properly, like an internist.

I don't think I really thought about how much of medicine involves hands until my surgery rotation during clerkship. It seems obvious—tying, suturing, and cutting are clearly all about manual dexterity. They are skills that are taught and practiced, but it is more than that.

During one of my days on thoracic surgery, we brought a young man into the operating room whose stomach contents were coming out of his chest tube. My job for the next four hours was to retract his heart for the surgeons. The flexible strength and elasticity of this organ was palpable through the metal retractor I held, and the patient's life beat through my body. It was an incredible moment. Never had life been so clear to me as when the surgeon took a break

and put my hand on our patient's pericardium. I felt my pulse and his heart. Our rhythms were not in sync but we were the same—we were both alive. It was a grueling surgery, but it was amazing. The surgeon fixed the esophagus and stomach, and the patient lived.

During one of my nights on general surgery, we brought another young man into the operating room. He had been absolutely fine three weeks ago, when he suddenly couldn't keep anything down. The small bowel obstruction we saw on X-ray became something even worse on CT—cancer, likely pancreatic. No warning of painless jaundice. No weight loss. Maybe some night sweats. My job for the next four hours was to retract part of the intestine while the surgeon did a roux-en-Y gastric bypass to buy this gentleman some time and some quality of life. Partway through, the surgeon placed my hand on our patient's intestine. It was hard and lumpy. The texture was all wrong. He let me run my hands along the length of our patient's bowel with him—parts of it felt grainy and rough. We spent most of the operation in silence. It was cold and late. And we weren't going to save him—help him but not save him.

In surgery, my hands held life and death.

I've held the strange weight of a leg as you hand it over to the nurse during an amputation. I've felt the unbelievable stretch of a skin graft as the surgeon staples it over a massive burn and the rush of air around my index finger as I clear the opening for a chest tube. I've understood the sorrow of the abnormal strength in a young trauma patient's grip who has just earned the label of C6 quad. I've given my pen to the attending to sign a death certificate.

My hands have changed and so have I along with them. I know who I am as a person, and I'm finding out who I might be as a physician, with a growing confidence in my abilities. My hands are the entryway, from the very first handshake with a patient, and they are one of the tools I am learning to use to connect with and care for my patients. My hands are a part of me and of my presence in medicine.

Scrub in. Can you feel that? Hold this for me.

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"My Hands," an example of a published student story (Acad Med, 2012. 87:1460)

Not a 'Single Story': Reflection across Disciplines by Zane Hamm

As an educator, my understanding of reflection is shaped by my experiences with Community Service-Learning (CSL) and my background in experiential learning. It is situated and grounded in a particular belief about learning, and a context of thinking about learning *in action*. It is not a 'single story'. In this section I highlight the theoretical concepts that inform my view of reflection, and provide examples of reflection in my teaching practice. Activities include a "3 minute story", "CSL Snapshots" and E-Portfolios. Finally, I share one perspective of reflexivity as an instructor, and conclude with critical and realistic limitations of reflection.

Reflection in Adult Learning

Reflection is a critical component in adult learning as a learning process that is life-long, rooted in personal experience and place (Freire, 1970; Kolb et al, 1974; Mündel, 2002). In other words, interaction and learning happens 1) in a real life context that is; 2) community-based; 3) reflective, (collective as well as individual); 4) focused on thinking critically; and 5) evaluative (Mündel, 2002, p. 20). Learning happens through a process of reflecting on experiences and taking action, or engaging in dialogue and problem-posing (Freire, 1970). However, Hartog (2002) stresses that while reflecting on concrete experience is a starting point, "to develop an ethical practice as a reflective practitioner" this cognitive process of reflection must extend beyond the external activity of concrete experience and include the process of "internal inquiry/reflexivity"(p. 234), a process of in-depth questioning and response. Internal inquiry is required to move from description to reflection, and finally, to a critical or "emancipatory phase" that acknowledges conflict and contradictions between theory and practice (Hartog, 2002, p. 237).

Adult education "considers the nature and process of learning, as well as the value of connecting theoretical ideas to learning that is acquired from experiences" (Houle, 1992, p.98). Reflection creates spaces to connect life experiences and theoretical concepts or 'hooks' to examine and address critical questions. Through reflection, learners build on theoretical foundations as they develop 'ideas with hands and feet' in the words of adult educators Father Thomkins and Moses Coady. Reflection is a vital part of program planning and learning transfer (Caffarella and Ratcliffe-Daffron, 2013), and often occurs through personal responses, shared stories, and dialogue (Vella, 2002; 2004).

The 'Truth(s) about Stories' – Reflection in Practice

Reflection involves an ethical dimension of examining power, context and whose knowledge 'counts'. Thomas King (2003) emphasizes that stories are 'all we are', and cautions to take care with the stories we tell and those we are told. The significance of stories for thinking about our lives and analyzing our own experiences lies partly in the telling phase, while the "inquiry" that Clandinin and Connelly (2000) develop calls for a deeper layer of analysis. While individuals' lived experiences can be understood as they are shared through stories and narratives (van Manen, 1990; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Vella, 2004), life stories are shaped by the interconnections of social, familial, cultural, political, educational and geographical dimensions. Stories may strengthen a sense of belonging or connect people and place; conversely, they can exclude. Initial reflection is an entry to an on-going process*.*

Next, I share three activities to illustrate how reflection activities are focused on "technique" and foreground, while they require instructors and students to reflect on important social, political and ethical dimensions of education in theory and practice (Sork, 1996). These elements, shaped by social dynamics and context, always involve power and require further reflection on whose knowledge is heard and counted.

I begin with the "3 minute story", and discuss "CSL Snapshots" and E-Portfolios.

3 minute story

In partners, learners share a 3 minute story in response to a question. For example: "describe 'a learning moment...' when you were at your 'best'. Students listen to each story, noting emotions, and choose phrases

to describe the story. In response, they ask questions about what was experienced – what was seen, felt, imagined - around each narrative. Reflection is enhanced through a set of explicit guiding questions to take this inquiry to a deeper level.

Partners discuss how their story was received and clarify their 're-thinking' about experiences and challenge the interpretations. I also used this activity to examine the breadth of experiences and emotional responses students have around 'school' or experiences with mentorship and "hands on" learning across generations.

CSL Snapshots

The goal of sharing photographs of CSL experiences is to reflect on assumptions and respond to questions. Students share their portfolio entries with the instructor or a peer-partner for feedback and continued reflection. To describe "initial impressions of the CSL placement" students share 1) first impressions of the placement; 2) What they hear, smell, feel when they arrived; 3) What surprised, angered, pleased, or confused them; and 4)The most significant thing that they have learned about the organization so far, with key words or emotions to describe the experience. Why is the incident you shared significant? How and in what ways did "learning" occur? Students share images at the beginning, middle and end of the term, and may revisit, compare, contrast, or build on these entries at various points. In "critical incidents" students describe a moment when they were unsure of how to communicate or respond in a situation, and work with classmates to ask, "what would you do?" as they explore a range of possible responses.

E-portfolios

Reflective on-line journals develop a 3rd dimension of learning. As Sork (1996) explains, learning can explore the technical (surface), social-political, or ethical (deeper level) of program planning and learning, and deeper layers of power and privilege. Portfolios can enhance student learning through selection of artifacts and reflection. The benefits of e-portfolios are numerous. Portfolios are student-focused; support high-impact learning experiences outside of the classroom; encourage reflective and integrative thinking; and support the concept and practice of life-long learning (U of A Portfolio Project, 2010). On the other hand, they require careful planning and guidance, and comfort with technology. Assessment poses unique challenges. To address these limitations, I consulted with colleagues who use portfolios, and with the Centre for Teaching and Learning to create a rubric for assessment. Next, I share my 'lived experiences' to illustrate the challenges, risks, and surprises of reflection in theory and practice.

Challenges – exploring limits and possibilities for reflective practice

Critical reflection in a community service-learning classroom involves letting go of some power and control, which can be disruptive and uncomfortable (Butin, 2003). Although it may lead to rich, exploratory learning, reflection is not a 'free fall' method of engaging with theory or exploring community. In contrast, while it is messy and complex, it can be guided with a framework that invites students to prepare thoughtful, layered responses. This process includes internal inquiry to explore responses from different angles, over time (Hartog, 2002). A 'continuous loop' from external-internal-external is essential to learning:

> *Students identified examples from their placements to illustrate themes from the course readings and lectures. Some students could articulate where and how they applied their classroom learning to their community experience. Several students spoke about "trigger points" or shifts that occurred in their learning as they linked the theory to practical situations, and brought these moments back into the classroom…in e-portfolios we [saw] connections…that seemed to blur the boundaries between in-class and community (more than a bridge) -- beginning to unify the experience - though other students were less clear about these connections (Author's journal, 2013).*

Challenges and limitations emerged. Some students were able to engage with the issues more critically than others. Stronger rapport between students might strengthen peer sharing in formal and informal ways. When we overheard students discuss their external experiences, we posed additional questions. However, some students shared less insight and analysis. Their reflections were individual, unless prompted through

specific questions posed in-class, or directed by the instructors. I reflected on strategies to address this limitation:

> *...we could ask more direct questions to frame discussion and set the stage for [students] to reflect about their experiences 'across' the projects (discuss similarities/differences); how can they extend their learning beyond the boundaries of their own specific theme, [probe] in what ways do these pieces contribute to the goals and mission of the community organizations…social, environmental, political…(Author's journal, 2013).*

Reflection in this course had the rich complexity of core themes: community engagement, social justice, and environment. Sharing stories lead to thinking about the truths they tell: Do they stand on their own? How might they be observed, studied and documented? In what ways might they lead to advocacy or action to inform program or policy development? Reflective practice involves deeper analysis of external experiences, and an internal process of inquiry (Hartog, 2002). There is room for educators to reflect on core questions of how to improve their own practice as they work with students to examine the relationships between the projects, external and internal responses, and connections to broader concepts. These activities and my own reflective process demonstrate the possibility for growth and change, while they illustrate the 'unfinished' often unsettling nature of reflection.

Anti-foundational Service Learning by John Simpson

<u>Introduction</u>

In a 2010 monograph investigating the future of service-learning in higher education Dan Butin suggests that embracing an anti-foundational approach is a necessary step in having service-learning become an academic discipline (Butin, 2010). This assertion is made on the reasoning that, unlike other approaches to service-learning that he discusses, the anti-foundational approach is not troubled by conflicts between the background expectations of the approach regarding what students *should* experience and what they actually *do* experience. While other approaches claim to use service-learning to highlight important truths student experiences ultimately subvert or otherwise challenge these truths. Embracing the anti-foundational approach means recognizing these potential subversions as indicative of actual truths and welcomes them. As Butin puts it, the anti-foundational approach "...is not encumbered by the myth of its own transparency" (Butin, 2005, p. 49 & 62).

This active openness to the inclusion of subversive material is what makes the anti-foundational approach *anti-foundational*—by embracing subversion the foundations of our understandings are challenged and the possibility of assembling stronger and more reasonable foundations is created. Anti-foundational service-learning brings about this foundational challenge through the cognitive dissonance that results from placing students in unfamiliar and uncomfortable situations. The resulting destabilization is intended to create a space where students can discover something that they would not have otherwise seen, aiding them in arriving at an understanding that they would not otherwise have. Unfortunately bringing such new realizations is not simply a matter of shaking students up until their minds are receptive to the truth and then inserting that truth. Such an approach would amount to a successful brainwashing recipe rather than a responsible approach to education. The possibility of unjustifiable indoctrination has been levied at various educational practices associated with service-learning before (Fish, 2003; 2004) and the danger is just as real here. As Stanley Fish makes clear, what is at stake when pursuing such alternative methods is the ability of the academy to claim that it has truths and that it is truth that it is disseminating.

With high stakes and high potential it is necessary to spend a little more time thinking about what anti-foundational service-learning is and how to bring it about in a way that maximizes its potential benefits while minimizing potential harms. Let us begin this process by first considering two examples of anti-foundational service-learning that Butin considers to be paradigmatic. With these two cases as templates, the major factors contributing to the anti-foundational nature of these classes are extracted and offered as the major factors needed for consideration of any truly anti-foundational service-learning program. This is followed by an overview of some of the dangers that this approach either creates or exacerbates and some possible ways to minimize these dangers are offered. Finally, a review of the responsibilities of the instructor when creating anti-foundational service-learning classes is shared alongside a series of plausible courses that this approach could be applied to.

<u>Two Paradigmatic Cases</u>

Butin (2010) offers two cases of service-learning that he believes exemplify both the spirit and the execution of the anti-foundational approach as he is advocating it.[1]

The first is in the *Inside Out* project by Lori Pompa. In this project Pompa brings together university students alongside convicted felons inside a local prison for classes related to justice and the law. The purpose of the class is to have the students---both the ``outside'' students from the university and the ``inside'' students from the prison---working *with* each other during the weekly 2.5 hour classes. The lack of service in the sense of one group working *for* the other is a particularly interesting aspect of this program since it does not count

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1 These two articles can both be found in *Service-Learning in Higher Education*, a 2005 collection that Butin edited.

as service in the way that would initially align with most conceptions. Pompa addresses this by defining the service involved as being one of ``mutuality'' wherein:

> ...everyone serves, everyone is served. One group is not ``teaching'' the other; rather, we are all learning together. (Pompa, 2005, p. 178)

A second approach discussed by Butin is Susan Dicklitch's *Human Rights-Human Wrongs* which partners students in the class with refugees seeking asylum in the US and tasks the students with assisting these refugees in making their case before the courts. Students took the place of legal aid and counsel for these asylum seekers, providing for them a service, which they would not otherwise be able to afford. Students were not simply faced with the prospect of trying to obtain asylum for the refugees they were partnered with; some detainees had falsified information and others simply did not qualify for asylum at all. In participating in this class students were given responsibilities with relevant and real responsibilities for which there were no easy answers.

Despite the high expectations and the general deviation in each class away from standard experiences both classes are reported to be popular among students.

Extracting the Anti-foundational Aspects

Experiences are anti-foundational to the extent that they challenge core beliefs or assumptions about the world, those beliefs or practices which underlie our deepest understandings about who we are and the people and structures of the world around us. Such moments of challenge may be captured by their ability to produce cognitive dissonance, defined as simultaneously holding conflicting mental states (Festinger, 1962). For students within a service-learning class there are numerous possible sources of cognitive dissonance, including other students, the course materials and readings, and the instructor. But this much is true about any class. What makes service-learning different is particular experiences it makes available that are capable of raising cognitive dissonance in students beyond what is available in other sorts of classes.

There are three aspects to a service-learning placement that stand to make students uncomfortable and thereby unsettle the foundations of their presumptions: significant real-world responsibility, challenges to deeply embedded stereotypes and expectations, and a defusing of traditional coping mechanisms. It is not necessarily the case that each aspect must be present before a service-learning class may count as anti-foundational, only that the presence of each of these increases the likelihood that an anti-foundational experience might be had through a community placement.

Significant real-world responsibility has always been an attractive aspect of service-learning and in all likelihood stands as the principal reason why it is offered by instructors and undertaken by students in the first place. It is an important component in creating an anti-foundational service-learning experience to the degree that it engages students in both the course content and the experience of the placement. This engagement amounts to allowing the experiences of both class and placement to interact more directly within the student, salvaging either from simply being dismissed outright. This interaction allows for challenges to be raised in one environment and for answers to be sought in the other.

Of the two cases that Butin holds up as exemplars of anti-foundational service-learning, it is *Human Rights-Human Wrongs* that most clearly demonstrates the role of real-world responsibility in generating cognitive dissonance. Students involved in this program stood to have their decisions about their level of involvement and commitment stand to result in greater consequences than a low grade that might bring about chiding from peers or scolding from parents. A job poorly done had as its worst consequence the exportation and possible death of the asylum seeker they were paired with. With no magic recipe for how to proceed in the face of the juggernaut that is US immigration and the complicated world of refugee politics students were inevitably placed in situations where their decisions and actions—and the lack thereof—could have serious consequences. It is in the weighing of choices that cognitive dissonance arises. When a decision to enjoy a

movie rather than visit the library has the potential to make magnitudes of difference in the life of another human being—or just as likely not—it will not be easy to find a mental reprieve.

The challenge to embedded stereotypes and expectations is best exemplified by *Inside Out*. In this program students are not just confronted with individuals who clearly count as "others" on the basis of their everyday lived experiences but this encounter takes place in their home and in a way that does not easily conform to simple interaction templates. Anyone hearing the door lock shut behind them as they walk into a prison cannot help but find themselves facing a number of realizations. Not only are they locked in, but they are locked with a group of people that society has chosen to segregate away from everyone else for reasons like protection, retribution, rehabilitation, and revenge. It is a world that most people only get glimpses of through the popular media and as such it is a space ripe for apprehension. Pompa reports that the prisoners experience a similar sort of apprehension based on the stereotypes that they hold about students who may well be entering their home and studying them.[2]

The circumstances of the location and the company aside, the most deeply anti-foundational aspect of the program is the insistence that the students and prisoners study alongside each other. By having the individuals in each group work with each other rather than for each other, it becomes challenging for anyone involved to do so through a behavioural script. In most situations outside the prison walls prisoners are in situations that put them in service to others. Likewise, students are often subject matter experts around anyone other than more senior academics. Homogenizing the roles of these two groups provides for an experience where roles evaporate simply because they are not allowed, both explicitly (it is declared up front for everyone) and implicitly (students quickly discover that many prisoners are experts and prisoners find out that not all students are stuck-up brats). This represents a fundamental change in power relations. Granted, the power relations return to normal when class is over, but the conditions for the possibility that future interactions are entered into with a greater awareness of the self in the other are in place.

The third means by which to implement an anti-foundational service-learning program is to remove from students the ability to use their standard coping mechanisms to mitigate any cognitive dissonance that they are experiencing. According to Festinger's (1962) theory of cognitive dissonance people who experience it are motivated to remove it, seeking a state of consonance. When dissonance is experienced people seek to return to consonance by doing one of three things: modifying one of the dissonant factors, seeking additional consonant information, or lowering the relevance of dissonant elements.

Given the frequency with which events that create cognitive dissonance are believed to arise most people are quite adept at escaping this state by various means. While these means are surely efficient, they may not necessarily lead to ideal behaviours, let alone allow the dissonance escape artists to see the world in a new way. Since service-learning is interested in using the cognitive dissonance created through anti-foundational practices as a tool to create the possibility that the world might be understood from a non-trivially different perspective it is important that the use of traditional dissonance escape is mitigated. Failing to mitigate the use of such tactics in a CSL experience may actually go beyond a neutral outcome and instead result in the entrenchment of various biases and stereotypes. Butin raises this as a possibility when he speaks of the "myth of the stable community". There is thus a responsibility on the part of the instructor to ensure that traditional dissonance escape techniques are not available to the individual students in the class.

As an example, consider a student who holds the belief that homelessness is a choice and who finds themselves confronted with alternative explanations on a case by case basis through a CSL placement. One possible response to this new information is to downgrade its significance, possibly by allowing that these are exceptions that somehow prove the rule. Another would be to seek out instances that confirm the initial belief and to give them extra weight. These are only two possibilities of many. What matters from an anti-foundational CSL perspective is that these simple explanations are avoided and that homelessness comes to

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2 Himley's "Facing (Up To) the Stranger" needs to be worked in here in a future revision.

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be seen as a phenomena that is more complex than the initial understanding of the student suggested might have allowed. For this to happen the standard coping mechanism of the simple explanation or confirmation seeking behaviour needs to be overcome. This can be done by ensuring that these mechanisms do not offer the safe havens that they traditionally might. Possible ways to do this include repeating and prolonging exposure to the source of dissonance, upgrading its intensity, and offering exposure in non-traditional places such that trivial escapist tactics do not work.

With this in mind both of the previous means of creating anti-foundational service-learning experiences may reasonably be seen as special cases of removing standard coping mechanisms. *Inside Out* forces participants to share a physical space and interact on a regular basis and *Human Rights-Human Wrongs* sets up a situation of significant dissonance that cannot be easily shaken no matter where a participant goes.

None of these is necessary nor sufficient to produce an anti-foundational service-learning placement since each individual student experiences the placement against the background to their previous life experiences and capacities. As such there is no recipe guaranteeing that every student will have an anti-foundational experience because they may have already found a way to achieve consonance with the issues being raised and therefore be immune to dissonance.

Barriers and Challenges

Anti-foundational service-learning is full of potential to be either sidetracked in its delivery or to simply be blocked outright. The potential for sidetracking arises from elements related to the process itself while the potential for it to be blocked outright is more likely to come from challenges raised around the methodology of the approach within the context of higher education.

While there are likely many more possible sidetracking issues with implementing anti-foundational service-learning, only four will be listed and discussed here. These four were selected because of the high probability that they will be encountered by any would-be practitioner. The first of these is the possibility of students simply not understanding the experience at all, what Susan Jones refers to as, "getting it" (2002). When this happens students are typically unable to see relevant and non-trivial connections between their placement and the course content and are left asking what the point is. This is a serious potential problem because if students do not understand the relevance of the placement and that placement is intended to underline important themes from the course then it is likely that they are not understanding the important themes. This is an issue for regular CSL and it stands to be an even larger issue for CSL that promises to be anti-foundational. Recognizing this issue does not provide a clear path to overcoming it since at increasingly deeper levels no one can ever be sure that they really do get it and confidence that you do is placed on increasingly shaky ground. Any attempt to solve this problem through student discussion should be done on the understanding that false confidence or excessively deep regressive questioning are as likely as a truly objective self-assessment.

Falling directly out of the challenge of getting it is the possibility that students might very well fake having the sorts of experiences that they feel are necessary to do well in the course. What sorts of experiences? The ones that are internal to the individual involved and upon which some important emphasis within the course has been based. These include the trigger experiences discussed by Dunlap et al. (2007) that might signal the beginning of an anti-foundational experience to an epiphany that might bring about its resolution. Students are constantly being asked to record, discuss, and write-up their experiences within CSL courses as a means of assisting them in working through at least a sliver of the total experience. While the intent may be to provide a process it can easily become the case from the perspective of students that what really matters is the content. There is little principled difference between a student sitting in a CSL class waiting for it to become their turn to share their experiences for the week and the test subject in one of Solomon Asch's (1951) famous experiments (CITE). In both cases there will be heightened anxiety if the actual experience does not match the experiences being reported by others and an increased likelihood of making a false report as a consequence. In a class that has anti-foundational service-learning as an important tool in aiding student

understanding and where a big deal is made of this, the likelihood of false reporting—either complete fabrications or exaggerations—of anti-foundational experiences is going to rise.

Third, students who do not get it are also particularly likely to fall off the wagon, either curtailing (or ceasing) their involvement with the course or being led astray by spurious factors that they would not normally be susceptible to.

Fourth, the problems cited previously will be exacerbated in classes that do not have a technical component to teach which might otherwise offer grounding. Such classes will typically be focused on the theory that supports CSL.

Providing a service-learning placement that can function as an anti-foundational placement at all will become increasingly challenging as more students are exposed to CSL. This means that would-be anti-foundational instructors will increasingly find themselves working with students that are immune to the anti-foundational nature of their courses because their life experience has already been fettered by exposure to similar experiences. For example, it is less likely that students will find working with a marginalized group to be anti-foundational if they have already been exposed to that group through similar experiences and even less so if they are part of that group.

Instructor Responsibility

The implementation of anti-foundational service-learning should also not amount to letting the students sort out whatever they encounter on their own. While this is a fine approach for certain issues that may arise, if applied universally then it is quite likely that students will find themselves either simply confused without relief or vessels to be filled by someone else's beliefs. Clearly a middle ground is required, but what is this ground and how is it to be found?

That middle ground will come from the ability of instructors to recognize requisite anti-foundational elements such that they are able to build these into service-learning placements and to ensure that students have the support necessary to usefully navigate the resulting cognitive dissonance that they are likely to encounter.

A knowledgeable instructor can craft experiences that will generally lead to dissonance in the majority of the students in their classes. The two examples offered by Butin exemplify this and each makes use of some—but not all—of the dissonance creation tools just summarized.

Anti-foundational service-learning goes beyond the placements and needs to incorporate the entire class experience, both inside and outside the classroom. To this end instructors are responsible for the following:

- construct a class of placements (variety of experiences and ideas represented, complimentary, and contrasting). Provides familiarity with the possible ways these events might be integrated.
- construct the placements themselves (partners, students, other connections and supports) to maximize the likelihood of challenging specific beliefs held by participating students. In the face of expanding service-learning experiences and the broadening of the student base that service-learning attracts this must be done with increasing attention.
- assist the students in developing a way to be comfortable being uncomfortable and arriving at the truth in a way that brings their standard methods for doing so into question (is this a double destabilization of sorts?).

Providing the assistance in navigating the cognitive dissonance being experienced is in the hands of the instructor, the community partner, the community members being aided by the project, other students within the class, and those outside of the class. The size of this group alone prevents coordination problems that will only be compounded as their differing perspectives and experiences (hang-ups and motivations) are taken into account (subversions). While the instructor can assemble the class content and choose the placements they do not get to choose the students and will often have only limited interaction/selection with

the community partners (may not have access to everyone). This is a good thing since it sets up the possibility of difference, which is the source of the cognitive dissonance.

If CSL stands to gain stability and acceptance as a disciplined component of the academic community through the use of an inherently destabilizing practice then some thought as to how to best go about this is required. In particular, two questions fall out of this: ``what can and should anti-foundational service-learning look like?'' and ``what challenges exist to implementing anti-foundational service-learning?''

Seems there are two models at work here:
1. Instructor as expert and guide for a subject matter. No need for the instructor to have an anti-foundational experience. What matters is showing the students the complexity and intricacy of the subject matter.
2. Instructor as expert and guide for CSL. Possible need for the instructor to have an anti-foundational experience. What matters is having the students understand their experience. Could be navigated by having the students interact with each other such that they can help themselves by helping each other.

Students as partners in sorting out cognitive dissonance. Necessity of including the student in assessments of what will count as anti-foundational. What if a student doesn't find a situation anti-foundational? By demanding anti-foundational service-learning (AFSL), it seems that we are positioning ourselves to overextend a model premised on trigger experiences that are not necessary. Service-learning is a tool. AFSL is a variation of this tool. It must not become the reason as well (think enlightenment of Horkheimer and Adorno).

Also the possibility of AFSL for partners and clients. The university may well find itself having an anti-foundational experience as well.

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