From "Figure-ground" to "Figure-in-ground": Relevance and Outcomes of Critical Service-learning for the Design Field_ the Detroit Case Study

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The recognition of pressing complex societal, environmental and ethical issues calls for the creation of new types of knowledge that encompass the ability to involve people affected by design and planning decisions, to protect the built heritage and the environment, and to deal with problems associated with under-represented populations (Salama 2005). Within this framework, what is the relevance of critical service-learning? A thorough analysis of overarching themes from critical service-learning theories, current transformative pedagogical approaches, and findings from a recurring service-learning project in Detroit will be presented to delineate outcomes of a pedagogical approach that centers on the intimate personal growth of students, and gradually enables them to see themselves as part of a larger context, in which critical issues become a personal call for action. This paper will discuss traits of critical service-learning that ensure the promotion of core abilities, including the ability to understand social contexts and broad patterns, i.e. sociological imagination (Astin et al. 2000), to acknowledge the continuum in which one thinks and operates, to recognize needs as systemic versus individual, to question teaching and learning roles, and to overcome the framing of service-learning as a transaction between those serving and those being served (Mitchell and Humpries 2007), towards an authentic embracement of social justice aims and a more accurate interpretation of learning outcomes. A discussion of outcomes from a service-learning graduate course will be presented, through the use of selected quotes from students. Research methods included qualitative analysis conducted on students' written reflections and essays. Notes on in-class discussions and field notes from the service-learning activities were also used to contextualize data. This paper argues that students involved in critical service-learning, not only gain a deeper sense of self and being, but become capable of expanded conceptualizations of interpersonal identities, such as self+other and self+society. Through the course students overcame what could be defined as a figure-ground paradigm in education, a decontextualized self-centered learning model, and shifted towards a holistic "figure-inground" relationship, a self+XXX paradigm, in consistency with the philosophical foundations of service-learning.

SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE DESIGN FIELD

The focus of this paper is the framing of perspectives on critical service-learning, with the aim of connecting the discussion of outcomes of service-learning opportunities to a broader discourse on transformative and critical pedagogies in architecture. Two starting points for the discussion are proposed: first, the recognition of education in the design field as a path towards the development not merely of the ability to solve problems, but more importantly the capability to actively engage in the creative process of problem definition; secondly, the acknowledgment of pressing complex societal, environmental and ethical issues that call for the creation of new types of knowledge that encompass the ability to engage people affected by design and planning decisions, to protect the built heritage and the environment, and to deal with problems associated with under-represented populations (Salama 2005).

Within this initial framework, the relevance of critical service-learning will be explored. A thorough analysis of overarching themes from critical service-learning theories, current transformative pedagogical approaches, and findings from a recurring service-learning project at University of Detroit Mercy will be presented to delineate outcomes of a pedagogical approach that centers on the intimate personal growth of students, and gradually enables them to see themselves as part of a larger context, in which critical issues become a personal call for action.

The nature of learning, as a social, transformative, and collaborative process will be explored together with epistemological questions related to roles in teaching and learning, and to issues of authority in knowledge. Furthermore, ontological questions stemming from an expanded conceptualization of self in relation to "the other/s than self", i.e. conceptualizations of I-Other relationships (Anheier and Juergensmeyer 2012), will be tackled, in the effort to delineate a pedagogy that centers in dialogic learning, inductive thinking, and engenders in students a pro-active approach towards real-world challenges.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THEORIES ON SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning can be defined as a form of teaching and learning that prioritizes real-world experiences and multi-person interaction over traditional in-class, remote-from-the-world, deductive learning. The importance of experience in education and its connection with ideas of

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freedom and social norms have been put forth numerous decades ago by Dewey, whose ideas on experiential learning aligned with Vygotsky's pedagogical theories, which framed cognitive development as a by-product of social interactions and sociocultural contexts. The early foundations of service-learning revolved around epistemological questions of how knowledge is constructed, recognized and warranted. These questions remained relevant for several decades and were brought forward in full force during the 60s and 70s. At that time, social movements facilitated critical approaches to dominant positivist discourses in academia, and created the conditions for envisioning changes in curricula that addressed the lack of representation of voices and perspectives by underserved and minority communities (Lyman and Corroto 2010).

Towards the end of the seventies Sigmon (1979) supported the definition of service-learning as a form of experiential learning based on "reciprocal learning", where both the providers and the recipients would learn and benefit from the experience. This form of learning was recognized as distinct from other forms of service, such as volunteerism, in which benefits seem to go in favor of recipients, and from other forms of experiential learning, such as an internship, in which benefits seem to go in favor of the provider, e.g. in the case of student during an internship at an architectural firm. While ideas of reciprocity and balance of benefits remained central to the debate on service-learning for a long time (e.g. Furco 1996), it is in the early 2000s that a renewed and critical interest in service-learning took place. By then service-learning had been employed and tested in multiple forms for several decades, and while some benefits of service-learning were understood, such as for example the enhanced sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher 1995), its impacts on academic learning, and, even more strikingly, its impacts on the communities served had not been explored and explained in a satisfactory manner (Butin 2003; Eyler et al. 2001; Giles and Eyler 1998). Furthermore, a growing body of scholars began to highlight various non-intended negative impacts of service-learning. These impacts were recognized as connected to a central issue of power imbalance between providers and recipients. Pompa (2002) and Butin (2003), among others, acknowledged the potential of service-learning to have a disempowering effect on "served" communities, as the giver is granted power over the receiver of service. This was found to be particularly true of short-term (drop-in-get-out) approaches to servicelearning. These projects were found to be likely to promote the development of a truncated understanding of the nature of social problems (Eby 1998) and could therefore unintendingly strengthen prejudiced and stereotypical approaches towards underserved communities. Concurrently, whiteness in servicelearning was also uncovered as a critical issue (Green 2001; Mitchell et al. 2012), together with the more significant and overarching issue of privilege, and the definition by privileged groups of the needs of underprivileged minorities and the framing of such needs as deficiencies (Astin et.al 2000).

THE POSTRUCTURALIST PERSPECTIVE: CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING

As noted by Butin a postructuralist perspective on servicelearning is concerned with how service-learning "constructs, reinforces, or disrupts particular unarticulated societal norms of being and thinking" (2003, 1683). The understanding of the role of service-learning, as a tool for the questioning the status quo or for conforming to it, becomes a central issue. It is within the postructuralist perspective on service-learning that it is possible to trace important affinities with Freire's theories on pedagogy. What comes to mind is Freire's warning about the illusionary neutrality of the educational process. As described by Schaul (1970/2000) in his introduction to Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, educational processes inexorably fall into two dichotomic categories, as processes that can either favor students' integration into and conformity to the current system, or processed that enable the cultivation of ideas of freedom and change.

At the center of critical service-learning is the furtherment of actions, processes, and learning that result in an authentic crossing of boundaries and questioning of divisions, differences, and distances. At the root of this new approach to servicelearning one can find the recognition of service-learning as a tool to expose and question the sui generis nature of borders and definitions (Butin 2003). Within this approach, ontological questions emerge, in relation to roles and identities embedded in service-learning projects. Butin stated that a poststructuralist perspective on service learning questions "to what extent service learning supports and undermines our notions of, [...], teaching, learning, self, and otherness" (2003, 1683). The role of service-leaning in the construction of students' conceptualizations of themselves and others, in relationship to gender, race and status becomes the focus of various studies (e.g. Boyle-Baise 1999; Harvey 2000).

The postructuralist perspective enables a new critical position towards service learning. Within this new critical approach, the initial framing of service-learning as "reciprocal learning" is dismantled, and the issue of power imbalance is acknowledge and addressed. More subtle and nimble approaches to the interactions between students and community members are proposed, with the acknowledgement that definitions, methodologies and complexities of service-learning impacts on communities further need to be identified and understood (Cruz and Giles 2000). Green (2001) calls attention to the importance of questioning levels of expertise of facilitators and community members and of acknowledging the variety of types of expertise possessed within and across groups. Mitchell and Humpries suggest the "need to move beyond notions of 'benefit' to explore the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of the engagement between higher education institutions and communities that are the object of service" (2007, 47). Mitchell (2008) highlights the importance of promoting the redistribution of power among participants, the building of authentic relationships within and across groups, and the embracement of a social change perspective.



Figure 1. Classroom activity at a Detroit Public Middle School, 2018. Image credit: Claudia Bernasconi.

The value of reflection in service-learning has long been recognized, in particular in the sense of a routine component of the overall experience. Jacob and Associates (1996) refer to cycles of thought, action and reflection in service-learning. Within critical service-learning, reflection and critical analysis assume an even greater importance. Reflection also aligns within the development of what has been defined by Astin et al. (2000) as sociological imagination, i.e. the ability to understand broad patterns and social contexts, a concept antithetical to what identified by Eby (1998) as the truncated understanding of social problems, i.e. a superficial understanding of real world issues and realities that could result in negative impacts on communities, through disempowerment and the reinforcement of stereotypes. The importance of listening, dialoguing, and reflection have also been advocated in the context of contemporary critical and transformative pedagogies. Salama defines transformative pedagogies as incorporating "a learning process that seeks to contextualise contemporary issues as active learning instruments for pro-active response" (2015, 310).

THE DETROIT CASE STUDY

The Teaching and Learning the City service-learning course has been offered at the School of Architecture (SOA) at University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) in 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017, and 2018. This course is open to graduate students from the Architecture and the Community Development programs at UDM. The course is funded through the Detroit Mercy Leadership and Service Institute and the Ford Community Corps Partnership funds, which provide support for graduate assistants, materials, logistics, and also provides assistance in interfacing with service partner institutions in Detroit.

Throughout the semester, Detroit Mercy students enrolled in the service-learning course work with one class from a k-12 public, charter or private school in Detroit. The general aim of the course is to introduce graduate students to questions regarding the educational process in the design field. While students continue to learn about design and architecture in their graduate studios, they are faced with the task of teaching design. Epistemological questions about content, tools, relevance, perceptions, and real-world applicability of knowledge surface during the semester. Another foundational aim of the course is to allow student to engage with the community, and in particular with youth from the community, as a means to offer students the opportunity to question one's own role as a designer, as soon-to-be professional architect, and as a community member. Ontological questions also gradually emerge throughout the semester during activities, in-class discussions, and reflections. A third foundational aim of the course is the fostering of the engagement of the younger students from the Detroit schools in activities centered around the idea of design as an opportunity for reading the urban and architectural environment through multiple lenses, and for the envisioning of change. This is achieved through project-based hands-on design activities on various connected urban and architectural topics. Activities are facilitated at the local partner school during one-hour weekly sessions.

The two groups of students, the graduate Detroit Mercy students and the younger students from the Detroit school first encounter for an initial greet and meet, then gradually become acquainted and learn to exchange ideas and information, while working together in small groups for the entire semester. The typical class size comprises ten to twelve graduate students, and twenty to twenty-five younger students.

Throughout the semester, the graduate students also attend class once a week at SOA and learn about theories on service-learning and pedagogy. The pedagogical perspective is approached through theories on cognitive development by Piaget, Vygotsky and Montessori. Students learn to think about adaptation, assimilation, and accommodation processes, scaffolding, problem-based learning, and general strategies including the contextualization of learning skills, the connection of knowledge and learning to experience, and the presentation of tasks just above competency levels.

The initial meet and greet event allows the graduate students to visit the school, get more acquainted with the neighborhood and learn about the younger students' interest and ideas. A preparatory three-week period follows, during which students design a curriculum for the younger students, envisioning a series of design activities. The graduate students work in teams. Each team is asked to identify content and goals for the three activities throughout the semester, and to outline teaching methods, learning outcomes, and tools and materials. Students design rubrics and prepare a kits for each activity. When at the partner school, graduate students introduce the topic and the

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related principles through a digital presentation, then break into small one-three people teams and work at the table level with four-five younger students (Figure 1). The topics for the activities ranged over the years across multiple scales and foci, including for example: streetscape design, façade design, interior design, working in section, space planning, formal compositions, urban density, mapping, wayfinding, and urban design at the neighborhood scale. The scale and methods for the physical outcome of the project ranged from small collages or models, to larger models showing structure and materiality, to design-built work.

The general working process includes prototyping the activity and a group discussion at SOA, followed by the activity at the partner school, which is in turn followed by a reflection and evaluation at SOA before the new activity is finalized and prototyped. This is possible as the course meets by-weekly, and the activities at the partner school happen once a week. Through this mechanism, the concept of cycles of though, action, and reflection (Jacob and Associates 1996) is incorporate in the structure of the course.

The research conducted on the Teaching and Learning the city course over the years 2011-2019 employed qualitative methods. In addition, pre-, mid-, and post- surveys including forced choice and 5 point Likert scale questions were also administered to the graduate and the younger students. The surveys, though not central to the analysis, allowed to keep track of demographics, and general trends in perceptions. What has become more important through the years, is the qualitative analysis conducted on the graduate students written reflection open ended questionnaires (pre-, mid-, and post-) and the mid-term and final essays. Methods for data reduction included the identification of regularities in students responses (Marshall and Rossman 1995) and the subsequent recognition of emerging themes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995), as well as the identification of positive, neutral, and negative indicators in written responses (Dukhan et al. 2009). Class discussion and field notes from the activities at the partner school, also provided for a broader understanding of the themes emerged from the analysis.

CENTRAL THEMES FROM THE DETROIT CASE STUDY

The analysis of the reflection questionnaires and the student essays revealed several interlaced personal outcomes and suggested four broad themes. The following is a brief description of the nature and implications of each theme. The themes are interconnected, and operate outwardly, at the scale of self, the scale of self+Other, and the scale of self+society. As a whole the four themes suggest that all shifts in students' perceptions, ideas and beliefs, happen internally and surface through reflection. The order in which these themes are presented should not mislead the reader into thinking that they are sequential or that there is necessarily a cause-effect relationship between themes. These themes should be understood in a more holistic way, acknowledging the complexity of individuals and of their relationship with others and the world. For the

purpose of this discussion "student/s" identifies the Detroit Mercy graduate students.

Awareness of Preconceptions and Personal Growth: Students reported gradually acknowledging having preconceived ideas about the younger students, and a general skepticism towards the course. Assumption about anticipated low interest levels, weak learning abilities, lack of friendliness or open mindedness in the younger students surfaced. This admission produced a change in students as it allowed each to look back at one self. Students admitted that reflections and group discussions allowed them to confront these topics and gave them "a very human way to look back at" their "[my] own life" (mid-term essay, 2016). Students also acknowledged that reflection helped them understand how they personally related to others. Students reported questioning teaching and learning roles. The surprised realization that "No teaching can happen when no learning happens" was heard more than once during the class discussions. Furthermore, students began to see themselves as teachers and simultaneously as learners while at the partner school. These shifts also facilitated self-knowledge. Students reported learning "most of all [about] myself" (final paper, 2013). For some, self-discovery became one the most important components of the course.

Deeper Thinking and the Complexifying of Views: Students were spurred to question their own ability to build relationships, both within the student group, and across the younger student group. Through interaction and collaborative learning across groups, students uncovered diverse perspectives. Differences in age, race, and, in most cases, inferred differences of socio-economic status were acknowledged. The younger age of the students from the partner school provided grounds for the students to think back at their own younger selves at that age. Memories about the school environment, the teaching and learning, and also about their own younger selves' identity surfaced in various discussions, reflection forms and essays. These memories became a sort of bridge between themselves and the younger students, and allowed diversity to be embraced. Privilege and systemic structural disparities at the societal level in educational processes became evident. Students felt humbled, admitting what had "been provided for me in my life" (final essay, 2013), while others felt enraged by the fact that "Not every child receives the same education, ad this is frustrating" (post-reflection, 2018). Throughout the semester students seemed to undergo what could be defined as a progressive "complexifying" of opinions, views and ideas about reality and diversity. Through this process, students became more aware of larger broad social patterns, and it can be inferred that the process developed in them what Astin et al. (2000) identified as sociological imagination.

Interpersonal Relationships, Part of a Whole, and Otherness: The course allowed students to uncover the potential for embodying the multiple and interconnected roles of students, teachers, facilitators, community members, and designers/future professionals. Two central outcomes, in form of seemingly opposite conceptualizations, stemmed from these shifts in roles, responsibilities, authority, and group belonging. The first, consists of

the understanding of reality as a whole in which all individuals take part. This conceptualization evokes the logic mechanism of the synecdoche, where individuals are the part that signifies the whole. The interpersonal relationships become a medium for acknowledging a continuum that also encompasses our own individuality, and that of Others. "[...] service learning is reflective, and sets you up with an opportunity to intimately view yourself as part of a whole" (mid-term essay, 2016). Within this continuum it is possible to envision commonalities, shared learning and dialogue. Students acknowledged seeing themselves "[...] more clearly as a player in dialogue and not just the main character" (post-reflection, 2016).

The second conceptualization is related to ideas of self and others as separate entities, in an oppositional relationship. This process, also defined as Otherness, is understood through the concept of I-Other relationships, as a complex and paradoxical recognition of similarities and differences between an I and his or her Others (Anheier and Juergensmeyer 2012). One quote that exemplifies this framing of others as different and similar comes from a reflection paper: "I assumed these children would be very different from myself, but found they are very similar to us" (post-reflection, 2013). Additionally, in this quote myself and us are used somewhat interchangeably, meaning that the student also identified herself/himself as part of the group of graduate students. The framing of diversity as similarity reveals a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships in the context of service-learning, and results from a cognitive-affective process that took place throughout the course. Through this process, Otherness also becomes a multiplying factor on other course outcomes as it enables opportunities for selfknowledge, self-reflections and self-evaluation (Anheier and Juergensmeyer 2012).

A Call for Action and Social Change Perspective: The graduate students in the course engaged with youth from the neighborhoods adjacent or in proximity to the Detroit Mercy campus. The act of going to the school sometimes meant walking through the entrance gate that interrupts the continuous iron fence guarding the campus from surrounding areas, some of which have been, in past few occasions, crime scenes. While the issue of isolation of the campus from the surrounding neighborhoods and communities is often discussed by faculty and students at SOA, the frequent visits to the schools, and the cheerful interaction with the younger students made a difference. These actions humanized the community surrounding the campus, communicated a sense of urgency and agency to students, and produced, together with other aspects of the experience, important outcomes, including the recognition of the concrete possibility for individual actions to result in a positive impact for the community.

Students also reported that they felt this type of course is important for those architects, or soon-to-be architects, who will become involved in decision making in urban areas. Other students felt this experience shaped the way they "relate to people, especially of a different age." (mid-reflection, 2016). Some student began to frame the design process, as an "adaptive" process that requires of the architect the ability

to interact with, listen to, and understand perspective of community members. In one student's words "...people think and perceive things very differently and [I] know it is my job to adapt to others in the design process" (post-reflection, 2013).

Overall students experienced ideas related to actions. The engagement on the ground allowed them to "have a better understanding of the positive impact that can be done by someone" (mid-reflection, 2016). Students initially disenchanted with ideas of active participation into their community, reported feeling called to become active community members who can bring about change as a result of this experience.

DISCUSSION

Outcomes of the Teaching and Learning the city provide insight on several key aspects of critical service-learning, and its applicability within the framework of a transformative design pedagogy. Interconnected epistemological questions (related to teaching and learning roles, and more broadly to power and knowledge, and to the production of knowledge, individually or socially constructed, in or outside of the classroom), and ontological questions (related to conceptualizations of interpersonal relationships and more complex views on real world issues, environments, and people) can begin to inform ideas for pedagogical shifts in design education.

The Detroit case study highlights the importance of servicelearning in promoting the embracement of complexified views on real world problems, towards the development of the ability to understand systematic structural issues and broad social patterns. The ability of service-learning to engender personal growth and self-discovery, through the questioning of preconceived ideas and boundaries, and the multiplicity of roles enacted by participants, is another central area of outcome that speaks to larger questions on priorities in educational models. Expanded conceptualizations of self and self+others, enabled through critical service-learning, positively impact students' abilities to see themselves as part of a whole, and to trace similarity between themselves and others, across diversity. The concept of Otherness, and its function within the framework of critical service-learning is central to current transformative pedagogies. As stated by Simão, Otherness is "a philosophical notion whose intrinsic dual character challenges us at the personal, cultural, political, and educational levels. It challenges us to think about how to promote human rights and welfare among persons who will always feel themselves, at the same time, very similar and very different one from the Other" (in Anheier and Juergensmeyer 2012). The critical approach to service-learning founded on the search for authentic relationships and the embracement of social change, can become central in the education of a designer who is pro-active, engaged, and better prepared to collaboratively identify and solve complex problems for people and places.

Certain central questions emerge from the discussion of the Detroit case study. Is design education concerned with the formation of persons, who have the ability to embrace complex views on reality, who see themselves as part of a whole, and

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who are able to cultivate interpersonal relationship that can bridge across diversity, and in doing so, who can search for an understanding of the real-world issues and pressing problems? One could answer the set of questions with a reduction ad absurdum, advocating for an educational model that prioritized closed-doors, top-down, domain knowledge deductive learning, and the framing of learning as an individual pursuit and investment that reinforces preconceived notions about reality.

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