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The Pedagogy of Community Service-Learning Discourse: From Deficit to Asset Mapping in the Re-Envisioning Media Project

Shabazz and Cooks / The Pedagogy of Community Service-Learning Discourse in Deficit
Demetria Rougeaux Shabazz and Leda M. Cooks

Abstract

An intersection of power, privilege, and injustice in community service-learning (CSL) pedagogy is examined through the language used to describe relationships between college classroom and community site participants. This article extends work on deficit and asset-based discourse to address critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and whiteness in a study of a university CSL partnership with an under-resourced public middle school in Western Massachusetts. Using critical race theory, appreciative inquiry, and situated learning theory, the instructors re-framed talk of education for dominant and non-dominant ethnic group participants as sites of contestation over the meaning of difference. The article demonstrates how increased cultural competencies could be learned as a result of improved intergroup understanding, interaction, and dialogue. It suggests new directions for a CSL pedagogy that moves from deficit- to asset-based discourse and the ways such meanings are formed in relation to and in relationship with others inside and outside our communities.

In the past decade CSL research has brought together theory and methodology that link ideas of democracy and citizenship (most recently on a global level) to the process of education as it connects classrooms and communities. Less attention has been paid, however, to the language used to frame these issues, e.g., Who is already assumed to need social change? Why are these groups the assumed targets of change efforts and what keeps them in these roles? (Yosso, 2002). As more CSL scholars and practitioners work in underserved areas and commit to partnerships for more sustainable programs, critique of systemic injustice and band-aid solutions to social ills sometimes collide with the ideals of service to the community (Robinson, 2000). Likewise, a CSL pedagogy of democracy and citizenship is at times at odds with a critical pedagogy that advocates critique of unreflective patriotism and a self-reflective look at the role of race and privilege in sustaining inequities in education and community (and CSL, see Abowitz, 1999; Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2006). In agreement with these sentiments, Green (2001) notes that: "It is absolutely imperative to talk about the intersections of race, class, and service in order to prevent service-learning from replicating the power imbalances and economic injustices that create the need for service-learning in the first place" (p. 18).

In this article, we assert that the best way to focus on the intersections of power, privilege, and injustice in CSL pedagogy and practice is through a closer examination of the language we use to

describe our relationships to those we work with in the classroom and community. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* represents a major effort to both look at the discourse of social problems and offer a practical guide for speaking and acting differently. This article builds on their efforts to develop a program for community action but also extends their (and others) work on deficit and asset-based discourse to address critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and whiteness in the context of an ongoing community service-learning project and long-term partnership. We turn our theoretical and pedagogical lens on our course, our project, ourselves, and the students and community members with whom we work to take a closer look at the movement from asset or needs based talk to action—on individual, social, and cultural levels.

The context of our analysis is a four-year partnership between the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a middle school in Western Massachusetts, an under-resourced, chronically under-performing middle school, and in the larger background of a decade of doing similar community-based learning projects in better resourced (higher income) school districts. The students in this middle school are primarily (more than 75%) Latino/a; the students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst are primarily (82%) white. Our data analysis is based on one year of the program and on the constituencies involved, the language they used to describe

themselves, and their relationships to each other as well as to their school/university, community, and media. Our focus in this article is on the ways a discussion of deficit discourses and an asset-based approach to the project impacted (or did not) the language that we and our students used to describe the project, ourselves, the middle school constituencies (parents, students, teachers, school administrators, department of education), local communities, and our pedagogy in the course of one year of the partnership. In this article we draw from qualitative and nominal quantitative data based on pre and post surveys of both the undergraduate students and the middle school students, journals of undergraduate students, video of middle school program sessions, post-program videotaped interviews with middle school students, videotaped interviews of college students, pre-program focus group sessions with middle school students, videotaped interviews with faculty and administrators at the middle school, and our own self-reflections.

The Re-Envisioning Media Project

Schools are not synonymous with education. They are only part of education. Alongside school operates a parallel educational system, the “societal curriculum.” Within that societal curriculum, the media serve as pervasive, relentless lifelong educators (Cortés, 1992).

The program at the center of our analysis, the Re-Envisioning Media Project, requires undergraduate students enrolled in a Media Literacy and Community Media course from a wide variety of majors to create and implement both an in-school and an after-school media literacy program on the topics of race, ethnicity, and nationality and their representation in a variety of media. The in-school program is geared toward sixth graders and introduces the topic of media literacy and racial stereotyping and representation, while the after-school program (open to all middle schoolers) adds a production component to the aforementioned areas. Both groups produce media dealing with race, ethnicity, and nationality, but in the after-school program the focus is on the process and product of alternative media production, whereas for the in-school program the children produce a short public service announcement discussing media literacy, race, and representation.

In the CSL course, the university students spend the first part of the semester learning about CSL, the concepts central to the program (race, ethnicity, nationality, media literacy), learning how

to teach sixth graders these concepts, and learning basic skills of media production (e.g., storyboarding and camera operation). Additionally, an important focus of our pedagogy is on the community in which the students will be working and on their own racial, class, gender, standpoints, and privilege in relation to the community. To frame this discussion throughout the semester, we constantly draw attention to the ways we create and perpetuate deficit discourses in our talk about the school, students, and surrounding community and how we might look for resources and assets within these same contexts and our relationships with all involved.

After the first month of classes, students spend their time both in the middle school and the university classroom. At this point in the semester, classroom sessions are used to discuss class readings, the application of theories, and to refine lesson plans. The in-school program runs for eight 45-minute sessions over the course of two months, while the after-school program requires twice a week two-hour sessions throughout and beyond the semester.

At the end of both the in-school and after-school program, the final productions are edited and shown on the local cable access station. The children view their productions in their own classrooms, at a showing for parents, and at a screening at the university the following semester. All children involved in the project attend the screening, along with university students and faculty, and take a tour of the campus afterwards. In this manner, the institutional and the personal, the social and the cultural, interweave with one another—if not reciprocally, then at least at the level of recognition and, we hope, critical thought. Critical thinking is central to the project and the field trip: for the children to think about race as an idea created by people in power, for our own students to learn about social privilege as unearned benefit, rather than as a right and for all to gain the ability to take action as a result of this knowledge.

Thus, it is in the movement back and forth in the language we use to situate the personal and institutional, social, and cultural, that we might dislodge deficit discourses. Here, and without negating the political dimensions of unequal resources and underserved communities, we develop in our relationships with the school the ability to find assets and resources where only need, lack, and despair are expected. To do so, however, we must first examine the theoretical

frameworks that undergird deficit discourses and constructions of assets.

Theoretical Framework

Deficit Discourses

Beyond the cliché that “language creates our reality,” we must look at the ways language creates our relationships to each other and the world. Our words are formed in context—in communication and community with others. Communication theorists often talk about the centrality of communication in learning, in making meaning of everyday life, and thus in constructing an identity for us and others. Cooks and Scharrer (2006) note that, “By situating learning in the relational and contextual processes through which people make meaning, we also are able to situate community service-learning as engaged practice—a practice that offers learning *in situ* through challenges to notions of power, identities, cultures, community and change” (p. 2). CSL scholars, too, have found that relationships often drive the learning and pedagogy of CSL (Shadduck-Hernandez, 2006), but these relationships do not exist in vacuum; rather, they are situated as “helping” or “serving” a need—one that often implies a deficiency. Likewise, critical race theorists (CRT) in education (Delgado, 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993) challenge the ways learning and education have been constructed in the interests of the dominant racial group in society. CRT also emphasizes the importance of the experiential knowledge of marginalized groups as sources of support in the classroom, and moreover as foundations for new epistemologies that celebrate, rather than suppress, alternative ways of knowing.

Deficit discourses often frame “problems” based in a hierarchical system of social capital, where some groups have inherently more resources than others. This conception of resources, and their relative lack or fulfillment, drives the model of social programs designed to address the ills of groups on the margins of society. More insidious, however, is the degree to which deficit language becomes the measure upon which marginalized groups are defined against white middle class society in the United States. Critical race theorists in education have posited four general theoretical models that make deficit discourses seem logical and natural and make critique of such ideas difficult: genetic determinist, cultural determinist, school determinist, and societal determinist. These generally accepted theories correlate easily to stereotypes prevalent in the media and society

based on intelligence, physical appearance, and educational ability (genetic), and personality or character (cultural and societal). These stereotypes in turn inform and justify low expectations for educational ability and occupation which result in differential tracking and testing for students of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2002).

Yosso (2002) applies these general theories of deficit to the portrayal of Chicanos in the media, and especially media depicting schooling in the United States. She finds “overwhelming support for cultural deficit explanations of why the social and educational outcomes of Chicano/a students are unequal to those of whites” (p. 53). Notably, and although there are many strong connections between deficit discourses and the impacts on marginalized groups in U.S. society, the literature in this area rarely discusses the ways white students (well-intentioned or not) and CSL in general utilize this discourse in their attempts to remedy social problems, as well as among CSL scholars discussing the pedagogy of community, citizenship, and moral/ethical duty. Green (2001), for instance, observes that “for those of us at predominantly white institutions, service-learning raises particular issues of race that we need to theorize. ... In addition, when we set up service-learning sites, we should consider what those sites represent to our students” (p. 25). For us, Green’s advice translates into the need for CSL pedagogy to situate itself in relation to its own assumptions about people of color, as well as the need to theorize and discuss race in general as a “white” problem. From this perspective, deficit discourses need to be addressed not only or primarily in communities of people of color but among white people who intend to work toward a more just society.

Critical pedagogical scholars, discussing the topic of race/ethnicity and inequality in schools, cite the need for critical inquiry into the role of institutions such as schools, the prison system, media, government, and transnational corporations in preparing and socializing student-citizens. These scholars note that expectations for educational and other kinds of achievement are often based on race, class, gender, and ability, and whether one is schooled accordingly. The pedagogy part of critical pedagogy lies in promoting (1) critical thinking: asking questions about “official knowledge” promoted in texts and in the written and unwritten rules of proper behavior and comportment; (2) critical self-awareness and group awareness and knowledge: understanding one’s location in society and the differing ways groups (one’s own and

others) are named, categorized and represented; (3) student empowerment: taking students' own (especially students from marginalized groups) experiences and questions as a basis for developing course material; and similarly (4) challenging the authority of the teacher as container of knowledge in order to create opportunities for more creative and democratic forms of learning. Certainly CSL and critical pedagogy share some of the same pedagogical goals, and both concern themselves with underserved communities. While critical pedagogy may provide the more radical and structural critique of schooling and social problems, both critical pedagogy and CSL often (unintentionally) frame communities as deficient. Whether discussing the need to liberate or empower students from marginalized communities (critical pedagogy) or working in the communities themselves, rarely does the pedagogy of either approach focus on the discourse of deficiency or lack, and how teachers, students, and community members might develop alternative narratives based on resources and strengths already present in the community and in the relationships among those involved in change.

Any approach to re-framing community deficiencies as assets could easily be critiqued as simply another way of ignoring real social problems and thus perpetuating the oppression of marginalized communities, but, as noted in the organizer's workbook of the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center, asset-based community development (ABCD) is an entire philosophical approach to community development that requires a shift in the ways one approaches the process and product of this work. However, they also caution that the language of assets can be a code and a cover for the same old deficit frame that ignores the real strengths of the community—strengths not immediately apparent when quick intervention is the operating principle. So, given that CSL is not community development and does not necessarily share the same community-based priorities and goals, can CSL pedagogy and practice move from deficit-based discourses about community needs and service to asset-based approaches? In the following sections we explore this question and its potential application within the context of our own CSL media literacy project.

Asset Building

When surveying the landscape of social scientific thought regarding social problems

and social needs, some scholars are critical of psychological diagnoses of social ills as well as interventions of social work based on neutral and standardized evaluation (Gergen, 1994; Huot, 2004; Robinson, 2000). Ludema (2000) observes that the language of critique (postmodernism), as well as that of problem solving (the tradition of social science) offers few alternative solutions and often leads to conditions of cynicism and hopelessness. Alternatively, Ludema (2000) posits that language can also be used to create vocabularies of hope (or, for our purposes, community assets) when members of organizations and communities are willing and able to work together cooperatively to explore deeply held values with a sense of agency and optimism about the future. They are not merely a code word for resources, Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) concentration on assets, while less focused on language per se, is similar in its emphasis on cooperation and optimism. Assets are the strengths and talents already present in communities that often go unrecognized in a server-client or needs-based framework. Assets are not merely a code word for resources, but are the result of a strategy that requires the identification of deeply held values and defining problems and developing solutions from within the community. This strategy, called asset-mapping by Kretzmann and McKnight, takes place on several levels, from personal relationships to those between and among institutions that impact the community. At each level, Kretzmann and McKnight outline a process for capacity building: (1) locating "primary building blocks" in the form of human and social capital (skills and talents of community members); (2) moving to secondary building blocks currently outside the purview of the community that might be used as resources; and (3) thinking of potential building blocks, such as children, whose strength could help sustain the community into the future.

Discussing asset building, Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) observe that "[I]f a community development process is to be asset focused, then it will be in very important ways 'relationship driven,'" and that one of the central challenges for asset-based community developers is to constantly build and rebuild the relationships between community members and others to sustain partnerships and build capacity (p. 6). Indeed, relationships are central to making meaning: subjects create subjectivities—and objectify their others. If we are to move from deficit to asset-based discourse, we must examine our position in our narratives about members of the community,

along with the language of the narrative itself.

Given these concerns, our research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How/did our talk about ourselves (cultural identities as well as our roles as students/educators) in the school and the project change from the first part of the semester to the latter half (as we worked in the school)?

RQ2: Can we make links between classroom and community discussions of deficit and asset discourses and asset mapping and actions taken (i.e. PSAs and other video productions, projects started or underway, etc.)? What language/stories characterized these projects?

RQ3: What are problems and possibilities of using asset mapping in a program that deals specifically with concepts of race, ethnicity, and nationality (specifically as it involves primarily white, middle, and upper middle class students working with a community vastly different from their own?)?

RQ4: What theoretical and practical implications might we draw from asset mapping to pedagogy for social justice and social change?

In the subsequent paragraphs we outline our data and methodology and analyze the data in response to the research questions.

Data and Methodology

Discourses jostle up against each other, fight and conspire together, influence and change each other; they make us and we make them—although they have usually started before we got on the scene and continue long after we have left (Gee, 2001).

Using critical race theory's critique of deficit discourses, along with a view of schools and schooling as inherently political and often oppressive, we have a clear basis for a structural critique of teaching and learning as inherently biased. Less clear, however, are the ways we might use CSL as pedagogy for movement from deficit- to asset-based discourse. Kretzmann and McKnight provide (literally and figuratively) a map for community action, and other CSL scholars (Ludema, 2002; Shadduck-Hernández, 2006) have discussed the use of appreciative inquiry and situated learning theory, among other approaches to re-framing talk of communities. These approaches, while useful for our analysis, are limited in their lack of actual application in classroom or community contexts (although the theories are themselves grounded explicitly in discourse analysis). As a result, theorizing about

how we might use pedagogy to move or change our ways of talking, teaching, and thinking about communities has not moved beyond the abstract.

How can we utilize our talk about our work in and out of the community, our relationships to classmates and community members, our course goals and assignments, what it means to do CSL to trace stories of deficit and/or asset, lack or presence of resources? The force of these stories as a theoretical lens still undergirds much of our pedagogy as well as our critique of the general conditions of injustice, and it is these overlaps and blurring of boundaries that become points of confusion and enlightenment. For these reasons, in this paper we examine the stories of our undergraduate students throughout the semester as we introduce the concepts of deficit discourses and asset mapping. We trace these ideas as they appear (or not) in the talk among the sixth graders with whom we worked, their teachers and principal, and in the public service announcements they made at the conclusion of our program.

Our data come from several sources: video of our class at the university, sessions at the middle school, interviews with our students, focus groups of our students, interviews and focus groups with the sixth graders, interviews with the sixth grade teachers, interviews with the first author and with the school principal (separately and together), along with a large compendium of videotaped class sessions, personal narratives, and interviews with the undergraduate, graduate, and middle school students participating in the after-school program. Due to the breadth and quantity of the materials we amassed during the course of the project, we focus in particular on stories about relationships as they emerged in discussions of the project: in our (teacher, students, and student-teacher) discussions about pedagogy, in the content of the program at the middle school, and in the subsequent reflections on the part of those involved. In addition to the video materials, we draw from sixth graders' responses to surveys (pre and post) on the concepts of race, ethnicity, nationality, and media literacy, on undergraduate student journals, and on the class' final projects for the semester.

In all, we logged over 125 hours of video-recorded material, 120 surveys from the in-school program, 15 surveys from the after-school program and 250 pages of written reflective and evaluative material. From this corpus, we center on relational talk in particular in part as a response to Cooks, Scharrer, and Paredes' (2004) discussion of learning as a social and relational process in which selves

and others are co-constructed, and of assessment of CSL (Cooks & Scharrer, 2006) as necessarily emphasizing the connectedness of language, power, identity, and relationship in the context of civic engagement. We use critical pedagogy and critical race theory as a framework for our analysis of deficit discourses and utilize cultural studies analysis and the narrative concept of position to make sense of the relational stories we found in our data.

Cultural studies scholars look at culture as a site of struggle, often using critical theory to problematize areas of popular cultural discourse that are viewed as common sense or as unremarkable by the dominant culture. Within CSL, cultural studies have been employed to critique the enthusiasm with which CSL has approached concepts of democracy, civic education, and community service—often without reflection on the disparate meanings and benefits these concepts have held for those on the margins of society (Abowitz, 1999; Jones, Maloy, & Steen, 1996; Shadduck-Hernández, 2006). While certainly CSL scholars have worked to be inclusive of diverse populations in their work, they have often done so at the exclusion of examining their own position relative to those they study. Research conducted from the perspective of the dominant group, be it with regard to racial, gender, class, or sexual identity, often fails to regard its own biases and exclusions, and more so the epistemological assumptions which frame what counts as teaching and research of and for the community.

While certainly not without its own faults and assumptions, cultural studies analysis offers one corrective through deliberative attention to media and everyday experiences that are mostly taken for granted. Cultural studies analysis builds from the concept of articulation, first elaborated by Hall (1980) and then extended to methodology by Slack (1996) and Halualani, Fassett, Warren, and Dodge (2006). Articulation was first defined by Hall (1980) as a “non-necessary correspondence” of terms that become common sense. For Slack (1996) for instance, articulation results in correlation of technology with modern society, civilization, and development. Closer to the goals of CSL, Halualani et al. (2006) examine the ways terms such as race and diversity are intimately connected in everyday talk, and yet lived as disparate realities. In this analysis, we use the concept of articulation and its deconstruction to analyze the movement or flow of discourses in the articulation of racial and ethnic identity. Terms such as race or ethnicity

often articulate with deficit discourses in the talk of all constituencies involved in the project (including ourselves), and our interest is in the meaning and consequences of these articulations as well as the ways we moved toward or away from them in attempts to construct narratives about the community and its assets.

Our analysis focuses on stories told of relationships, and of the articulation of race or ethnicity within those stories. For instance, our own stories as co-teachers in the classroom often articulated race and ethnicity with whiteness and privilege—assets we wished to problematize for the direct implications that such ideologies and identities might have on our project for their direct implications for our project. Although we share some CSL scholars’ concerns (Jones, Maly &, Steen, 1996; Shadduck-Hernandez, 2006) with sending white middle class students off into the community to work with underserved youth, we also believe that the project allowed those (primarily white) students to break the seemingly “natural” correspondence between race and the body of the nonwhite other. By teaching and talking about race/ethnicity and nationality, the white university students were illustrating race through their own bodies: by pointing back at themselves. The middle school students were then freed to explore race as an idea, which had been created and used as a marker of difference as deficit.

We now turn to our analysis of the data and of the project. We first look at the ways race, ethnicity, and nationality were articulated in our own pedagogy, as goals and as practice reflected in our syllabus and course plan and in the video documentation and students’ surveys and journals. Next, we extend our examination to the articulation of race in-relation-to the various constituencies involved in the project.

Analysis

The Pedagogy of the Media Re-Envisioning Project

Our class, Media Literacy and Community Media Production, enrolled three graduate students and eleven undergraduate seniors and juniors. The course was designed to give students theoretical content via readings and discussion in several areas: community-based learning and social justice, whiteness and privilege, theories of race and racism, ethnicity, and nationality as socially constructed concepts, critical race theory in education (including deficit theory), and media literacy. Readings on standardized testing,

educational policy and “failing schools,” and on Puerto Rican culture and communities were assigned. Lesson plans from previous groups were handed out, along with many samples of potential curricula. We also discussed basic skills in media production. The readings and class discussion centered on how various systems—of knowledge, power, and privilege, media and education—worked to frame the school and the children we were working with as deficient, and we discussed the role of communication in creating, maintaining, and perpetuating that frame. We mentioned the need to reflect on our own language, as well as the talk of those we were working with at the middle school. We asked students to create an initial asset map based on the information they had from readings, Internet research, and interviews with previous university students who participated in this program. Once the sessions began in the school, we reflected on the use of deficit/asset language in the narratives we told about our own experiences in the middle school, as well as those of the school children, teachers, and principal. The video-recorded interviews and focus groups with the in-school and after-school participants assisted us in this process. Recorded interviews with teachers and parents were used as supporting data for the use of deficit discourses.

Beyond our university class, our pedagogical efforts extended into the middle school as a relational teaching/learning process. The in-school program was coordinated with the sixth grade social studies class (five classes with a total of 65 students). The university students were assigned to the various classes (or tracks) of students—each of which represented their academic ability. On the other hand, the after-school program served students on a voluntary basis and was open to all grades in the middle school. The after-school program attracted students interested in media production. For the 15 students enrolled in the program, the focus on race, ethnicity, and nationality allowed them to address their invisibility in mainstream media through writing and producing their own stories and poetry. The after-school program ran for two hours, twice a week for approximately three and a half months. This program required supervision beyond the semester and so one instructor/author and a few dedicated students agreed to continue to meet with the children over the break.

In our work in the middle school we encountered several contradictions between an approach to education in our university courses that emphasized critical thinking and challenged

the institutional power of schools and schooling and that of the middle school teachers who emphasized rules and regulation due to (they said) the chaos of the children’s everyday lives. Although we were careful to present a more complex picture of the relationship between teacher and students, initially the university students found the seemingly unrelenting discipline and emphasis on failure in the schools somewhat depressing. As they spent more time with the teachers and students however, they began to see more complicated relationships between teachers and curriculum, teachers and community (school community, parents, neighborhoods, etc.) and teachers and students. In their interviews with us, the teachers expressed optimism and despair, as well as a sense of genuine affection for the children along with a conflicting and conflicted sense of their potential.

As we assessed our pedagogy and the structuring of the university class, we found places of movement from discussing the school and students as “at-risk” to talking about it and us in more relational terms that connoted change. We observed in our (instructor) in-class stories later in the semester more discussion of the sixth graders’ creativity and humor, their pride in their ethnicity and nationality, and their concern and care for their community. Although the underside of these stories always loomed, we found little need to focus on the negative aspects of students’ experiences with school and community beyond their use as a basis for more creative ways of relating.

We also found places where we remained stuck in deficit models and re-positioning ourselves felt impossible. The purpose of the school program (media literacy) located us as critics of mainstream media and our focus on race, ethnicity, and nationality connected to this population placed the emphasis again on race as Other. Although we constantly reframed race in terms of white skin, we did not manage to escape the inevitable deficits that contextualized our work “in the community”. Still, while we discussed the label the state had given the school, “chronically underperforming,” and student scores on their standardized tests, we did so self-consciously. Whenever we used these discourses, we reflected on what they did and did not say. Of course, later in the semester as our time in the school grew, we were able to fill in these blanks and return to them differently. Although we discussed the language of both critique and “client” as framing the community as a problem or as a target for social change, we did not bipolarize either as bad or good. Where Ludema

(2000), among others, would have us do away with negative critique, we believe that such language is necessary for movement toward change. Likewise, where Robinson (2000), Abowitz, (2001), Jones, Maloy and Steen, (1996) and others feel that CSL pushes students away from radical action or advocacy on behalf of social change, we feel that students may or may not choose to use CSL experiences to motivate further action. If some of our students have gone on to advocacy roles in children's non-profits and others have become teachers, should we be critical of the latter? Just as we can question the language of social problems and social change, so too should we reflect on the ways the language of critique often assumes only one form of advocacy toward justice.

Articulating Race through Dialectics of Deficit and Asset: Stories of Teaching and Identity

In the sections that follow we look at the articulation of race in the project and in stories told about the project. We transcribed and analyzed data from focus groups and interviews with university students, sixth graders, the principal of the school, several teachers who worked with the sixth graders, parents who attended the open house for the after-school program, as well as interviews with each other (co-authors/instructors). We also analyzed university student journals, surveys of the sixth graders in the in-school program, surveys from the after-school program, and the various projects of both the in-school and after-school program. Additionally, and after producing and editing footage from both programs, we held a field trip for the students to the university where they viewed their work and then took a tour of the campus. On the bus rides back to the middle school we asked the sixth graders for further feedback some six months after the program had ended.

From this vast array of data, we first highlighted terms based on their repetition within stories told about relationships. We checked our perceptions with each other and with our students and the teachers at the school. Then, within the narratives we looked closely at the ways race and ethnicity were articulated; that is, we paid attention to how these terms were associated with others and looked for any changes in those linkages. Although it is tempting to look solely at the ways deficiencies defined early on in the semester became assets once relationships were established, we found that actual interactions, whether in the classroom, middle school, or during the interviews, were

often much more complex. Asking mostly white students to not only think about, but to talk about to community members in asset terms in a context where the community was/is the target of social change is difficult given the institutional knowledge and liberal politics that support such a structure. We, too, were wary of asset terms becoming an excuse to ignore the very real structural inequities that made the gap between the university and communities to its south seem worlds apart. On the other side, and documented in the research of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), Solórzano and Yosso (2001), and Yosso (2002), community members themselves can and do speak of themselves in deficit terms—sometimes for strategic purposes but generally as a reflection of dominant (i.e. institutional) discourses about them.

Although race was articulated with many important concepts across our corpus of data, due to space limitations we focus here on two of the most common narratives: teaching and identity. The former was discussed more often by the university students and in our own stories; the latter spanned all groups we worked with and demonstrates well the dynamics of race, privilege, and critical community service-learning.

Teaching and Learning. In our analysis of the data, we found that “teaching” was often articulated early on in the semester with “knowledge” about race and racial identities—and “helping”. Several of the university students expressed some hesitancy about entering into a middle school of students who were so different from themselves racially, ethnically, or economically, and being able to teach them, much less talk to them, about race. As one student expressed in her journal, “I have to say that I am nervous about going to the middle school. I don’t feel that I have much to say about race: I’m a white girl; that’s about it.” Responding to these sentiments, a student of color in the class later reflected on her nervousness about teaching earlier in the semester: “If they don’t get it [the links between racial oppression and everyday actions of well-intentioned white people] then I am worried about what happens when they go in to teach the kids.” Teaching about race, for this student, was linked to self-knowledge, a theme that connected the discourse of the three students of color in the class.

From a critical perspective, the articulation of teaching with knowledge indicated an association of teaching with knowledge of race and ethnicity as facts to be obtained and contained. Consistent

with the distancing that whites often experience with the concept of race (i.e., as something possessed by “others”), the white university students felt that to teach the younger students they must first and foremost be able to define race as objectively as possible. While certainly we instructors emphasized preparation in our class sessions, we also were careful to displace race-making the concept personal to white people in general and our class in particular. Data from our own interviews and our emails showed that teaching in our own discourse was often linked to learning in and from the community. Despite our efforts to differentiate between helping the community and working with them, several students continued to mark achievement in terms of changing the sixth graders’ lives. As another student later commented:

I thought it was interesting the last discussion we had in class ... a lot of people [early in the semester] were having expectations that they were to go in and change the school and save the kids. ... I think that the work we are going in to do there with them is planting seeds and really important seeds. You are not going to necessarily walk away like you have saved a child. ... I don’t think that should be an expectation

The discourse of “helping” can be seen as a reflection of race and class privilege, one that makes assumptions about communities of color as deficient and in need of correction. Green (2001) argues that where mainly white students perform service among mostly people of color, they must “unlearn” their “largely white middle class biases” (p. 19). Like many of our students later in the project, the experience of “working with” the younger students allowed the student quoted above to see through the stereotypes and misperceptions that the school is deficient and the students within its corridors are victims or problems.

In later reflections on the programs by the university students, teaching was linked to the experience of learning about race and ethnicity from the sixth graders. As one student commented about the course and project, “everyone was a teacher in that class and everyone was a student.” Another student agreed, noting that it was,

Everyone learning together ... contributed to the atmosphere that this class had.

... [I]t did not feel like anyone had all the answers and that was at first a scary feeling I think.... But ultimately I think that is what made it the most honest and truly beneficial and organic experience.

Although the sixth graders and after school program participants did not reflect on teaching per se in their interviews, our follow up conversations with the students during their field trip sixth months later revealed that they saw themselves as teachers of their peers, their siblings, and parents about stereotyping in the media and about media production. Thus for these students as well, teaching and learning became intertwined and enriched the experience of both. Although the movement of deficit and asset discourses was not always clearly delineated in discourses about race and teaching or teaching about race, the actions taken in the creation and filming of the public service announcements and in the creative projects of the after school program revealed that the creation and production of content dealing with race and identity for a presumably sympathetic audience led to discussions and representations of assets within the community and in the students themselves.

Identity. Given the nature of our CSL course, the program in the middle school, and of the characteristics of deficit and asset-based discourses, identity (and racial identity in particular) was a central theme throughout the data. As the dominant narrative around which the project and the course was situated, it is important to locate racial identity discourses in relation to an asset-based ideal of change from the inside out (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). In the student narratives, change from deficit to asset discourses was associated with subject or object position in relation to the narratives about racial identities. Early in the semester, several of the white students related that although they knew they had white skin they did not identify with a white race. When asked to write about and discuss their first encounters with racial identification, they told stories that displaced race from their own bodies and onto the bodies of those who were racially marginalized. Others distanced themselves from race all together and became quite upset at arguments in favor of recognizing racial differences and the histories behind them. A few of the students insisted on the moral and spiritual basis of their advocacy for equality in a colorblind society (to the point of long emails and discussions after class), when

nothing had been said about the particular ethical rightness or wrongness or their point of view. They seemed troubled by their sense that we instructors were not attempting to empower all people on an equal basis. These views also reflected a particular centering and de-centering of themselves as invisible subjects in narratives of racial identity. If centered as the subject (the one who points out) and to race of the narrative of first encounter, then whites can distance themselves from the objects (the one pointed to) in the story. In this manner, they see themselves as neither gaining nor losing in stories about racial identity.

Later in the semester, however, some students told of uncovering their own biases and discovering whiteness as an unearned asset. In his final journal, one student, who had been an outspoken “savior” of the downtrodden youth of Holyoke, reported that:

Though I lack the hatred and malice often associated with this word, I am guilty, at least to some degree, of the ignorance implicit in being a racist. By not understanding; acknowledging, even, my own place in the racial discourse; my own whiteness; by blindly assuming that I was aware of the challenges facing subordinate groups in our society without ever working to truly understand them—in these subtle, seemingly inert ways I came to be as I am. Now that I have seen the whole picture, though, I will never allow myself to ignore it again.

Although it would be easier to look for—and find—language that moved from deficit to asset in all the talk about racial identities as the semester progressed, actual interaction around these topics never moves in such a linear fashion. What we found in the children’s talk, alternatively, was that deficit and assets could be located in the same stories—and in some cases (as in the after-school poetry project and in their public service announcements discussed below) one became the other. The after-school program poetry project resulted in poems about where the middle school students were from. Most of the poems reflected cultural foods, stories from their childhoods in places like Puerto Rico, the Bronx, and the local communities of Springfield and Holyoke. The poems were beautifully articulated expressions of sandy beaches of Puerto Rico, bustling streets of New York, and locating themselves through deep

experiences of joy and pain. One such poem from a young girl spoke of being “from her dead cat Princess” and another from “church music” and “missionary work” of her parents. We then asked the students to read or recite their poems several times on camera during a field trip to some of the sites they had mentioned as important to them with another student usually doing the video work and another working the sound. While the creation of the poems opened up new vocabularies for expressing the assets of their communities, the expression of this poetry to a wider audience (cable access television and a university screening) seemed to heighten the middle school students’ feelings of deficiency. Several of the poems were mumbled, with the students looking down or away from the camera. It was as if the sights and sounds of their community recreated as beautiful or at the least as more complexly significant in their poetry might become lost in translation simply as deficiencies.

Countering the opposition between critical analysis and discourses of hope (Ludema, 2000), the final projects from the sixth graders in the in-school program, demonstrate the need for both. One group of sixth graders rapped about stereotypes, and offered:

People think that if I am Puerto Rican I know how to fix cars. Just because I’m white doesn’t mean I know how to run an industry. I could be a teacher at [our] school teaching history. Just ‘cause I’m black doesn’t mean I own a gun. Just ‘cause I’m a youth doesn’t mean I’d be shooting up for fun. Just because I am Mexican doesn’t mean I know how to run a bar.

Chorus: White rice, black dice are both nice/Peace and love are both the same and none of us should be ashamed/Color doesn’t mean/Our personality is an easy thing/Try to talk to one another/No violence or pain. Leave with a friend come back with a homey/The person is not a phony/So let there be color and everything is rosy dozy.

And a middle school principal said:

I have found critical media literacy and particularly questions on race and ethnicity really valuable because our teachers are differently skilled in

integrating conversations like that, and overall there are limited opportunities because of curriculum to really address both those questions of media and its impact. Being able to read it and secondly, to think about it systematically to think about questions of race and racism, race and ethnicity.

Conclusions

Our study evolved out of the research questions posed earlier based on deficit and asset discourses, the examination of language as it pertains to the classroom and community action work, and our own pedagogy with regard to critical theory, social justice, and community service-learning. Addressing the first research question, we found that (the university students and our own) talk about race and our talk about teaching shifted in the course of the semester. For the white students, it seemed that many became more reflexive about deficits and assets based on privileges and social inequities. Both the in-school and the after-school projects helped to establish relationships among the university and middle school students and with the teachers in the school, and this seemed to promote easier access to assets and to discussion of the same in the middle school and in our own classroom. Telling stories, rather than reciting facts about poverty and school failure, helped bridge the gap between our (and their) bodies and the reality of racial identity. The second and third research questions delved into the links between asset-based language and asset-based action in the community. As mentioned earlier, the opportunity to engage in the creative work of re-presenting stories of identity and community within the contexts of our partnership moved us away from discourses of deficiency and abstractly negative critique and toward restorative critical thinking. That is, we asked questions and had discussions about how we might re-envision race, ethnicity, identity, and community in the contexts of our relationships. The third question asked specifically about the problems and possibilities of using asset mapping in a program that deals with concepts of race, ethnicity, and nationality. We found that teachers and the principal of the middle school emphasized deficit discourses in their stories about the children, their families, neighborhood, and struggles in the school. However, we also discovered openings for resistance to these stories in their interest in and response to the children's creative projects and in our own commitment to

partnering with the school over the years. Where the children could easily recite all the stereotypes of students who went to their middle school (drop outs, poor, deviant, criminals, over sexualized, etc.), they knew also that the combination of their own stories and the platform of community media could educate a wider public.

In response to our fourth research question, regarding directions for CSL pedagogy, we hope that this essay contributes to the growing dialogue on moving from deficit- to asset-based discourse through complicating this shift as neither precisely one or the other, and by looking at the ways such meanings (deficit or asset) as formed in relation to and in relationship with others inside and outside our communities. Although it is perhaps a bit simplistic, we take from this study a pedagogical emphasis on three R's: Relationship, reflexivity, and realism. By relationship, we emphasize centering our teaching on the ways we create meanings for identity (and everything else) in relation to others. Reflexivity means looking at the ways discourses (like those about race) point both toward and away from ourselves as subjects/objects. Focusing on the actual movement of discourse complicates the divisions between deficit and asset, along with the subjects and objects of such discourses. Lastly, and in terms of pedagogy, realism refers to the connections between a critical analysis of material inequities in social life and the hope embedded in everyday and mundane acts of human creativity.

Indeed, it is simply the strength of the relationships built during the projects that adds depth, complexity, and interdependence to our discussions in the classrooms on the college campus and the middle school as well as faith that things will not go careening out of control and everyone will be better off in the end. Calderón (2003) argues "the connections between the classroom and community based learning are all about translation"—about looking for ways to get students to "understand communities outside of themselves and to become engaged interpreters" (p. 22). In this fashion, we find that it is in those moments of self- and other-recognition as well as the realization that deficits do not reside in people or in communities but are mobilized in discourse that are central to the pedagogy of asset building in relationships and in communities.

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