February 2017

Are We Really Helping Communities? A Teaching Case to Challenge Dominant Narratives about Sources of Inequity

Cynthia Gordon da Cruz
St. Mary's College of California

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces

Recommended Citation
da Cruz, Cynthia Gordon (2017) "Are We Really Helping Communities? A Teaching Case to Challenge Dominant Narratives about Sources of Inequity," Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship; Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol10/iss1/11

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.
Are We Really Helping Communities? A Teaching Case to Challenge Dominant Narratives about Sources of Inequity

Cynthia Gordon da Cruz

Abstract
Students in service-learning courses often make well-intended but deficit-oriented comments about the communities with whom they are working. While service provides opportunities for student learning (e.g., developing civic commitments and academic skills and increasing awareness of discrimination), service can also reinforce deficit-oriented thinking. Further, students from marginalized backgrounds in service-learning classrooms can be negatively affected by deficit-oriented comments. Possible theories to confront such challenges include asset-based models of community development, critical service learning, and structural explanations for inequities. Teaching cases are a pedagogical device for supporting students in putting complex theories like these into practice. This article presents a teaching case—grounded in these critical theories—that can foster students’ abilities to develop responses to typical scenarios they might encounter at service-learning sites that are informed by structural understandings of social and racial inequities. Further, the case can be part of a classroom environment conducive to the learning of all students.

Introduction
“I’m so glad we get to work at the MLK Afterschool Tutoring Program so that I can give these children the help that they can’t receive at home.”

“I like helping out at Urban School because I can teach children to value education.”

“I have so many ideas for how to help the community, I can’t wait to start!”

As a professor of service-learning courses, I often hear my students make well-intended but deficit-oriented comments like these about the communities, families, and students with whom we work. Statements like these disregard community members’ own ideas for addressing social issues or are based on inaccurate assumptions that the families with whom we work do not value education. In our inequitable society, service-learning courses can provide an excellent opportunity for students to develop political, social justice, and civic commitments (Astin, Vogelgesang, Misa, Anderson, Benson, Jayakumar, Saenz, & Yamura, 2006; Schamber & Mahoney, 2008), hone personal and academic skills (Eyler & Giles Jr., 1999), and increase awareness of discrimination (Hochschild, Farley, & Chee, 2014). However, engaging in service can also reinforce deficit-oriented thinking like prejudices and stereotypes (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), particularly when programs fail to question the policies or practices that have produced an inequitable status quo (Cipolle, 2004). And when students from traditionally marginalized racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds in service-learning classrooms encounter such deficit-oriented statements from their peers or professors, they can be negatively affected (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Yep, 2011).

There are many possible avenues for confronting these challenges in service-learning classrooms, such as presenting material on asset-based models of community engagement (Garouette & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014; Hess, Lanig, & Vaughan, 2007; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), engaging in critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008; Rhoads, 1997), and focusing on structural explanations for inequities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Gordon da Cruz, 2013; Lopez, Gurin, & Nagda, 1998). Faculty leading service-learning courses can also work to pay close attention to how students of color and lower income students are impacted by these pedagogical choices and the comments of their peers (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Yep, 2011). One particularly helpful instructional practice includes teaching cases, which can be used to support all students in understanding how to put complex academic content and theories like the ones mentioned above into practice (Smith, Malkani, & Dai, 2005; Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning, 1994).
To this end, in this article, I present a teaching case that can serve as a pedagogical device for supporting postsecondary students in questioning their assumptions and thinking critically about inequities. The case is a tool for shifting thinking away from deficit-based ideas, such as “social problems exist in needy communities,” toward asset-based ideas like “social problems exist in democracies that disproportionately fund public education, health care, and other human services, and the impacts of these democratic problems are often most readily seen in predominantly racial minority and low-income communities. People in these communities have multiple ideas and strengths for addressing public issues and maybe I can work with them to implement solutions.” By developing this understanding, students can then perhaps stop saying “I have so many ideas for how to help the community” and instead claim, “I learned so much in my service placement about how to change public policies and cultural practices that unfairly result in non-dominant communities getting less access to resources.” Thus, through the teaching case, instructors can foster students’ abilities to develop explanations and responses to typical scenarios they might encounter at service-learning sites that are informed by structural understandings of social and racial inequities. Further, the case can be one part of creating a classroom environment that is conducive to the learning of all students.

Before presenting the teaching case, I first outline theoretical background on the pedagogies and content referenced previously—asset-based community development, critical service learning, inequality content, and service-learning classroom experiences of non-dominant students—all of which informed the development of the teaching case. In this first section, I integrate analyses of how these pedagogies and theories motivate the three dilemmas presented in the case. Next I provide the methodological basis for using the case method in order to support students in grasping these concepts. Following, I offer detailed ideas for how to use this teaching case in service-learning classrooms. Finally, I include the case itself, Understanding and Addressing Inequities in a Social Change Seminar, along with a series of discussion questions to guide student reflection.

**Background on Critical Pedagogies in Service-Learning Settings**

Service-learning courses generally include experiential learning, an individual reflection component, service to the community, and the integration of that service with academic learning (Eyler & Giles Jr., 1999; Jacoby, 2003; Mitchell, 2008; Rhoads, 1997; Seider, Rabinowicz, & Gillmor, 2011; Stanton, Giles Jr., & Cruz, 1999). Service-learning usually requires a balance between promoting students’ personal development, knowledge, and skill acquisition and supporting the development of communities and community organizations (Furco, 1996; Hatcher & Bringle, 2012; Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2011). Yet traditional service-learning is often based on a deficit model of communities in which students are thought of as advantaged and providing necessary services to communities, and communities are thought of as disadvantaged recipients in need of help (Eby, 1998; Hess et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008). Not only is this characterization of communities inaccurate, it can have multiple negative impacts, such as acting as a barrier to relationship-building amongst community and university members, harming community members’ emotional well-being, and creating an obstacle to uncovering and addressing actual causes of social problems.

Many in the service-learning field therefore critique traditional service-learning approaches and instead encourage more asset-based or critical methodologies (see e.g., Davis, 2006; Mitchell, 2008). Such methods recognize the expertise of community members and can simultaneously support both community development and student learning. Students in service-learning classrooms may be more likely to avoid deficit-based assessments of communities and gain deeper understandings of structural inequities. Students of color or those from other marginalized backgrounds may experience more supportive, respectful learning environments if they are subjected to fewer disparaging, uninformed comments about their home communities. Finally, all students can gain a more nuanced perspective about the variety of ways in which they can civically engage to fight injustice.

**Asset-Based Community Development**

Asset-based approaches focus on discovering the capacities, skills, and assets that are located within and benefit communities (Garoutte & McCarthy-Gilmore, 2014; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). These approaches are based on a foundational belief that communities can create sustainable growth from the inside. One way to carry this out is through asset-mapping, which involves mapping the assets of: (a) households of community residents to discover individual talents
and productive skills, (b) community associations (e.g., religious, cultural, athletic, or recreational groups), (c) private businesses, and (d) public institutions. Then community members, sometimes in partnerships with university members (e.g., faculty and students in service-learning courses) or non-profit organizations, can collaboratively analyze the maps to consider how these embedded assets can be used for community-building purposes (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). It is important to note that an asset-based approach does not intend to “minimize either the role external forces have played in helping to create the disparate conditions of lower income neighborhoods, nor the need to attract additional resources to these communities” (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993, p. 6), but rather to recognize the importance of community expertise, capacities, and local control in rebuilding communities.

Critical Service Learning

A second approach to service learning, which also recognizes community expertise but instead focuses more explicitly on critical perspectives, redistributing power, and broad-scale change for justice, is called critical service learning. Rhoads (1997) proposes eight principles for guiding “critical community service”; among these principles are attention to fostering critical consciousness, engaging in larger struggles to improve social conditions, and creating a more liberatory form of education. More recently, Mitchell (2008) reviewed the literature to outline aspects of critical service learning, finding that it: (a) emphasizes social change and social justice and makes the connections between service-learning and social justice intentional and explicit, (b) works to redistribute power in society, (c) develops authentic relationships between higher education institutions and communities served, (d) encourages reflection on and analysis of the structural causes that create the need for service, (e) embraces the political implications of service, and (f) balances the outcomes of student learning and social change. Critical service learning simultaneously helps students develop democratic competencies through partnership with community members, while also preparing students for the complex work of engaging for justice in a diverse and inequitable world.

Structural Causes for Inequity

One of the tenets of critical service learning cited by Mitchell (2008)—an analysis of the structural causes of inequities that create the need for service—is an approach in and of itself recommended by multiple researchers for assisting students in justice-oriented community engagement (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Gordon da Cruz, 2013; Lopez et al., 1998; Nagda, Gurin, & Lopez, 2003; Sleeter, 1996). Including course content on and analyses of the structural causes of inequities is based on the premise that institutions within societies treat different groups of people unequally, resulting in life opportunities and accomplishments being more challenging for some groups to attain than for others (Lopez et al., 1998). Inequity course content and analyses are intended to support students in understanding how structural arrangements—such as laws and policies—in the political system and the economy, as well as cultural traditions and practices [e.g., extending job opportunities to those in one’s own social network (DiTomaso, 2013)], produce or reinforce group-based inequities. Research by Kluegel and Bobo (1986) supports the importance of including such content in postsecondary classrooms because they found that simply having higher levels of formal education did not increase the likelihood that individuals would offer structural attributions for socioeconomic inequality.

Oftentimes, students engaging in service are not aware of the societal causes of the inequities they encounter in low-income communities of color. This can lead to comments like the one at the beginning of this article in which a student places the blame for children not receiving tutoring support on their home environment. A structural critique of the need for homework tutoring would include an analysis of the policies, laws, or cultural practices that led to that need. Student comments with structural analyses could include: “I’m so glad that I can work at this afterschool tutoring program, since the local elementary school does not have adequately funded bilingual education classes,” or “I’m so glad that I can work at this afterschool tutoring program and provide the individualized instruction my tutees don’t get during class time, since the local elementary school has such large class sizes.” Each of these comments includes an analysis of a policy or practice that led to the need for a child requiring tutoring, as opposed to placing the blame squarely on the parents of children in under-resourced schools. Faculty using service-learning approaches in their classrooms can provide their students with experiential activities and literature that support them in developing these structural-level explanations for the inequities that they are very likely to encounter when doing service.
Diversity of Students in Service-Learning Classrooms

For many students, doing service is an opportunity to enter a community different from the one in which they grew up. Often, college students have more racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic privilege than the communities in which they will be performing service. Thus, service can be a chance to learn about and from people from different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural backgrounds than their own. However, there are also growing numbers of students who are entering communities similar to their own during service placements. These students may face obstacles to their learning in the classroom and find themselves performing an additional service by educating their peers (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Yep, 2011). In the words of a Latino student in a service-learning classroom who frequently had to listen to disparaging comments and deficit-based assumptions about his community, “I do more service in this class than I ever do at my site” (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009, p. 172). In racially and ethnically diverse service-learning classrooms, often students come with different levels of awareness of race and racism, privilege, and how it feels to be viewed as an “other” (Mitchell & Donahue, 2009; Yep, 2011; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Teaching one’s peers about these topics is a service that students of color are often performing within service-learning classrooms.

However, listening to students from more privileged backgrounds make disparaging comments about their communities can enact an emotional toll on students of color in the classroom and thus create an obstacle to their learning (Caplan & Ford, 2014; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). Such comments are one example of microaggressions: “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). The perpetrator of a microaggression is frequently unaware that their comment has a negative message; nonetheless, such comments can be psychologically taxing on students of color, leading to such impacts as self-doubt, frustration, or isolation (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

Both Mitchell and Donahue (2009) and Yep (2011) suggest several pedagogical strategies to make service-learning classrooms more welcoming for students who experience marginalization by their peers. For example, Mitchell and Donahue (2009) suggest valuing students’ color double consciousness and creating classroom environments in which they have the opportunity to assist students from more privileged, often white, backgrounds in uncovering dysconscious racism (King, 1991). Double consciousness describes constantly looking at oneself and measuring one’s identity and worth both through the eyes of the marginalizing white majority and also through the perspective of one’s own strong and vibrant home culture (DuBois, 1903 cited in Mitchell & Donahue, 2009). Dysconscious racism is an impaired consciousness in understanding issues of race and racism (King, 1991). It is a distorted understanding of racial inequity that locates the cause in African-American culture or as an inevitable result of slavery, without attention to current policies that continue to perpetuate or create new inequities. Students of color own double consciousness—or the ability to see the world through multiple lenses that recognize power, privilege, marginalization, and numerous perspectives—that can be utilized to support all students in understanding the ways in which deficit-oriented views of communities of color are limited and distorted.

While students from marginalized backgrounds often have the capacity to perform service in the classroom through educating their peers, some also question whether it is fair to expect these students to take on an educator role and place more emphasis on strategies the professor can take to simultaneously meet the needs of students from both dominant and non-dominant racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds, such as through the use of critical multicultural pedagogies (Yep, 2011). Yep (2011) suggests strategies such as general classroom agreements that encourage students to make multiple attempts to understand others’ perspectives, balancing air time, and refraining from insulting other students. Yep also forwards multiple strategies in which students learn from one another, such as de-escalating racially tense conversations through having students anonymously write questions on note cards and randomly re-distributing the note cards so that other students can answer these questions. Another strategy entails having students discuss readings or dilemmas in small groups of three with assigned roles of notetaker, facilitator, or presenter so that students are more equally distributing listening and speaking roles. A further strategy involves having students name and analyze contradictions they encounter at their service sites in the
form of observations and developing a research question to investigate the observations. For example, the observation that “Teachers are disciplining only black students even though all students are acting out” led to the research question, “Why are there higher rates of discipline for black students than working-class white students?” (Yep, 2011, p. 115). Through such pedagogies, Yep (2011) aims to engage all students in analyzing systems of power and privilege and move away from critiquing one student’s comments about a service site or community to engaging all class participants in critical analyses of systems of oppression that are reflected in their service placements.

Applications to the Teaching Case

The literature on asset-based understandings of community, critical service learning, and supporting structural analyses of inequity motivated two of the dilemmas—those of Steven and Tanya—in the teaching case presented below. In Steven’s dilemma, he makes a deficit-based assumption about why students are not showing up for his tutoring sessions, claiming that “they don’t care.” When I teach this case, I aim to support students during our classroom discussion in uncovering possible asset-based and structural reasons why the students might not be attending their tutoring sessions with Steven. In Tanya’s dilemma, [motivated by Remen’s (1999) story of service], students often leave Edgar (the client with a disability) out of their proposed actions for addressing the dilemma. When discussing the case, I encourage students to consider what unique expertise Edgar might offer and how he could play a role in action-strategies for responding to the dilemma.

The literature on experiences of students from racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically non-dominant backgrounds in service-learning classrooms and critical multiculturalist pedagogies motivated the case’s third dilemma, which involves Mateo. Mateo, a multiracial bilingual student, experiences much of the frustration and disillusionment that Mitchel (2008) and Yep (2011) also observed with their students in service-learning classrooms. When reading the case, students are encouraged to place themselves in Mateo’s shoes, as well as consider what the professor of the class could do differently in order to mitigate these learning obstacles for Mateo.

Methodological Basis

To facilitate experiences and discussion in service-learning classrooms that can support students in understanding and applying theories like structural thinking about inequity and asset-based community development, I utilize the case method. But what precisely is a case? Generally, a case: (a) is based on a real event or series of events that could reasonably take place, (b) tells a story, (c) has conflicts that need resolution, and (d) has more than one viable solution (Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning, 1994). Pedagogically, a case can be used to encourage discussion at three possible levels (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994). First, students can analyze the case from an observer or outsider perspective, isolating relevant facts and discussing core dilemmas. Second, students can be given a role in the case to play and asked to argue for one resolution based on their knowledge of the interests of that role. Third, students can be asked how they would handle the dilemmas in a case as if the case were a real-world scenario.

Teaching with the case method is frequently used in the fields of medicine, law, and business and, more recently, in the fields of teacher education and educational administration (Diamantes, 1996; Merseth, 1991; Smith et al., 2005). Across these fields, two of the most fundamental purposes of case-based learning are to encourage the use of and assess the extent to which students are able to put academic theories into practice to address complex real-life problems (Barnes et al., 1994; Smith et al., 2005; Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning, 1994). Teaching cases are also often used to: (a) illustrate that problems or dilemmas are constructed as opposed to facts (i.e., show that there are multiple interpretations of situations), (b) broaden students’ appreciation for multiple perspectives (Smith et al., 2005), (c) support students in learning to identify problems, key players, and situational aspects that influence dilemmas, (d) engage students as active participants in the learning process, and (e) create classroom environments in which both students and teachers can teach and learn (Kleinfeld, 1988, cited in Merseth, 1991; Barnes et al., 1994; Merseth, 1991; Smith et al., 2005).

Teaching cases have numerous benefits for student learning. For example, the use of cases is thought to promote critical analysis and problem solving (Barnes et al., 1994; Merseth, 1991), the ability to take deliberate action, and the capacity to see multiple perspectives and empathize with those who are culturally different from oneself (LaFramboise & Griffith, 1997). Further, in one study that examined 65 educational psychology
students’ perceptions of how teaching case methodology impacted their learning, students self-reported that case discussions gave them the opportunity to see perspectives they otherwise would not have seen, put theories into practice, and feel engaged in class discussions (Smith et al., 2005).

In courses with students from diverse backgrounds and with varied life experiences, there is a wealth of knowledge upon which to draw in the classroom. By utilizing the case method, students are able to learn from the wisdom of their peers. I developed the teaching case below with the overarching purpose of cultivating students’ abilities to put critical service-learning theories into practice as they navigate issues at their service sites and in the classroom.

Suggestions for How to Use the Teaching Case in the Classroom

To use this case as a teaching tool, I ask students to read the case in advance of our discussion and jot down their ideas to the discussion questions. In class, I split students into three groups with each group focusing on a different dilemma. Generally, I am able to accommodate students’ preferences for the dilemma on which they would like to work. Professors can also consider assigning students to consider a particular dilemma; in this case, I recommend taking care to form groups in which there are a diversity of perspectives represented and also making sure not to ask students to speak for an entire racial or socioeconomic group (e.g., in a predominantly white classroom, I would not assign all of the students of color to work on the Mateo dilemma). I give students time to discuss their specific dilemma and discussion questions in their small groups. Then, I instruct students they must collaboratively—as a group—agree on action steps to take to address their dilemma. Next, student groups each have time to present their ideas to the class.

Following each presentation, classroom peers are encouraged to ask questions, respectfully critique their peers’ action steps, and offer their own insights on possible actions to take in response to the dilemma. If asset-based solutions to the dilemmas that value community expertise are not proposed by students, I pose questions to the class that allow them to bring in these ideas. For example, in the case of Tanya, I might ask, “What role do you think Edgar should play in responding to this dilemma?” Or, in the case of Steven, I might ask, “What evidence does Steven have that his tutees don’t care? Is there any other way to interpret this evidence?” Finally, I ask questions that encourage students to incorporate class readings that might provide a theoretical basis for taking particular actions. For example, if students have read Mitchell’s and Donahue’s (2009) article on students from non-dominant racial and ethnic backgrounds in service-learning classrooms, I might ask, “How could the theory of double consciousness help us to understand how Mateo might be feeling right now?” Overall, my goal is to create an environment in which students can critically reflect on how they might respond to a dilemma, learn from one another’s diverse experiences, and utilize class readings on asset-based models of community engagement, critical service learning, or structural explanations for inequities to inform their thinking. In short, utilizing the teaching case in service-learning classrooms is one way to support postsecondary students in developing knowledge and skills to civically engage for justice in a diverse and inequitable democracy.

The Teaching Case: Understanding and Addressing Inequities in a Social Change Seminar

It’s just another Wednesday evening service-learning seminar for the students in Professor Sanchez’s social change course. During the week, students work at various service sites in the surrounding community, some volunteering in public services for people with disabilities and others at the local alternative high school, tutoring students for their GED exam. Every Wednesday the students get together for two hours and each seminar begins with a success story. A student will share something positive about their service experience during the week: something they are excited about, proud of, or that they learned. Then one or two students share a dilemma that has come up for them at their sites. In the next part of class, students strategize in teams about how to navigate the dilemmas their classmates raised.

Professor Sanchez warmly greets each student by name as they enter. The students in the social change course come from a variety of backgrounds and life experiences; some have access to white privilege and class privilege, and others come from backgrounds that are more similar to those of the alternative high school students: primarily students of color and students whose families are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The students know the routine; they drag the well-used couches into a loose circle and all find their seats.
“Who would like to start us off with something positive?” Professor Sanchez asks the class.

Tanya, a white student from a middle-class background with an interest in disability issues, raises her hand. Tanya has been volunteering with the public service center for people with disabilities.

“Well, I’ve been volunteering with Edgar for three weeks now and basically what happens is I help him out with chores around the house that he can’t do because of his disability and then we eat a meal together. I have to help him eat his food because of the tremors he is experiencing in his hands right now. This past week I forgot to bring my gloves. The service center tells us that when we assist folks with eating, we should be wearing rubber gloves for sanitation, but I forgot mine. I knew Edgar had to eat, so I just washed my hands and helped him anyways. Before I left, Edgar called for me to wait. He wheeled his chair out into the hall and said he just wanted to say an extra thank you. I asked him why. He told me that he was so used to people putting gloves on before they fed him and it had somehow felt more human and closer to have me simply hold his fork. I hadn’t even thought it was a big deal. I actually felt guilty for not following protocol, but it turned out that not following protocol helped Edgar feel closer to me. Edgar doesn’t say a lot, so when he told me that, it was a really moving experience for me. It also made me wonder if there’s anything else I do to follow protocol that might impact someone negatively.”

“Thank you for sharing your story, Tanya.”

“But I still have a dilemma,” Tanya said. “What do I do next week when I go back? There’s always an attendant from the public service center there too. Should I follow protocol because I’m supposed to? Or should I not because I know that Edgar feels better when I don’t?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mateo explains. “I’ll keep doing my service; that’s not the reason. I’m just kind of sick of sitting in class and listening to the dilemmas they discuss in seminar. And so Professor Sanchez is surprised when Mateo tells her, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m thinking about dropping the course.”

“But Mateo, why? The students you tutor would miss you! And I would miss you. Your comments are integral to our class discussions.”

“Did you tell the alternative high school program director? Was there maybe someone else you could have tutored?” asks one of Steven’s classmates.

“No,” Steven says. “I didn’t bother. I looked around and there were no extra students there waiting to be tutored, so I just left. I’m not even sure they want my help anyways.”

“Okay, that will be our second dilemma. Let’s split off into teams and think about the issues that Steven and Tanya have raised.”

During the team strategizing session, Mateo walks over to Professor Sanchez. Mateo is a bi-lingual biracial student who grew up in a low-income neighborhood. He is passionate about issues of social justice. He was really excited about his placement at the alternative high school. He has been one of the top students in the class; he has received great feedback from his service site and he frequently shares nuanced perspectives with his classmates in response to the dilemmas they discuss in seminar. And so Professor Sanchez is surprised when Mateo tells her, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m thinking about dropping the course.”

“Thank you for sharing your story, Tanya.”

“Steven raises his hand. Steven is from an upper middle class, Asian-American background, and volunteering at the alternative high school is one of his first service experiences. “I’m not sure if I want to keep on doing this,” he tells his classmates. “I took the bus out to my site three times this week and I only had a student show up one of those times. The other two times I wasted more than an hour getting out there and back and didn’t even do any tutoring. Why should I waste my time doing this if the students don’t even care?”

“Did you tell the alternative high school program director? Was there maybe someone else you could have tutored?” asks one of Steven’s classmates.

“No,” Steven says. “I didn’t bother. I looked around and there were no extra students there waiting to be tutored, so I just left. I’m not even sure they want my help anyways.”

“Okay, that will be our second dilemma. Let’s split off into teams and think about the issues that Steven and Tanya have raised.”

During the team strategizing session, Mateo walks over to Professor Sanchez. Mateo is a bi-lingual biracial student who grew up in a low-income neighborhood. He is passionate about issues of social justice. He was really excited about his placement at the alternative high school. He has been one of the top students in the class; he has received great feedback from his service site and he frequently shares nuanced perspectives with his classmates in response to the dilemmas they discuss in seminar. And so Professor Sanchez is surprised when Mateo tells her, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m thinking about dropping the course.”

“But Mateo, why? The students you tutor would miss you! And I would miss you. Your comments are integral to our class discussions.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Mateo explains. “I’ll keep doing my service; that’s not the reason. I’m just kind of sick of sitting in class and listening to the dilemmas like Steven’s. I’d rather be out at the site tutoring more students.”

Professor Sanchez nods. “That is a tough dilemma. How about for today you join a team and think about the dilemma that Tanya raised and I will consider your dilemma. Maybe after class we can touch base again?”

Mateo agrees to join a student team and Professor Sanchez sits back down to puzzle over all the dilemmas.

Discussion Questions

Dilemma 1: Tanya and the Gloves

1. What are the benefits of Tanya choosing to wear gloves next week when she eats with Edgar? (For Tanya? For Edgar? For the public service center?)
2. What are the benefits of Tanya choosing not to wear gloves next week when she eats with Edgar? (For Tanya? For Edgar? For the public service center?)
3. Are there any risks associated with Tanya wearing/not wearing gloves? For whom?
4. Based on your analysis, what would you recommend to Tanya that she should do?
Dilemma 2: Steven and the Lonely Tutoring Sessions

1. Steven told his classmates that the students he’s tutoring are not coming to their sessions because the students “don’t care.” Please come up with several additional possible reasons why the students with whom Steven works are not coming to his tutoring sessions.

2. Name three concrete actions Steven could take next week to address his concern. (Please keep in mind these actions could involve multiple different people in the scenario.)

Dilemma 3: Professor Sanchez and Mateo: Navigating Student/Educator Roles

1. Why do you think Mateo might be “sick of sitting in class and listening to dilemmas like Steven’s”?

2. What are the benefits of Professor Sanchez encouraging Mateo to stay in the class? (For Professor Sanchez? For Mateo? For the rest of the class?)

3. What are the benefits of Professor Sanchez encouraging Mateo to continue his service, but to drop the class? (For Professor Sanchez? For Mateo? For the rest of the class?)

4. What might Professor Sanchez do differently in class to create an environment conducive to Mateo’s learning?

5. Based on your analysis, at the end of class, what would you recommend Professor Sanchez should say to Mateo?

References


### About the Author

Cynthia Gordon da Cruz is on the full-time teaching faculty at St. Mary’s College of California, teaching in the Justice, Community and Leadership Program and at the Kalmanovitz Graduate School of Education.