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Chapter 2

Human Rights as a Framework for Reflection in Service Learning

“Para que Otro Mundo es Posible”

Kathleen de la Peña McCook

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world . . .

—Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Reflection” is the most important aspect of the student service learning experience in library settings. Through reflection, service learning abides in a larger context as part of librarianship’s broader connection to the public sphere. Reflection allows students to realize “para que otro mundo es posible” (another world is possible) and that through their commitment to the work of librarianship they will have a role in bringing another world into existence. As a framework for reflection, a model of library service based on human rights provides the pathway to change the world by helping people develop their full capabilities. What could be a better guide for reflection than the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Article 26 echoes the *raison d’être* for the foundation of the public library in the United States and is a wise rationale for the work of librarians: “Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”¹

The reflective aspect of service learning placements in librarianship requires three components:

1. A faculty supervisor/mentor who is a reflective being
2. A placement that is an opportunity for reflection through the work being done and interaction with other workers
3. The student’s preparation to encounter the service opportunity in a reflective manner and the student’s post-experience assessment of the placement

Faculty as Reflective Beings

Before faculty can incorporate reflection as an aspect of service learning for students, professors must be reflective beings themselves. In *Oneself as Another*

the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur has explained that “the autonomy of the self . . . [appears] to be tightly bound up with the solicitude for one’s neighbor and with justice for each individual.”² Or, as Saul Alinsky stated in *Reveille for Radicals*, “In order to work with people we must first approach them on a basis of common understanding.”³ Faculty who supervise service learning placements will provide successful oversight characterized by a reflective and integrated worldview that values social justice and human rights. These first years of the twenty-first century have been a difficult period for members of the academy who hold concerns for human rights, intellectual freedom, and social justice. Political considerations and conservative forces have discouraged speaking out and dissent. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Lynne Cheney, the vice president’s wife, and the organization she founded, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, took swift action to condemn academics who questioned the government.⁴ There was little resistance, as noted by Emiliios Christodoulidis in his presentation of Ronald Dworkin for the 2007 Holberg International Memorial Prize, in which he observed that Dworkin

has raised his voice eloquently and clearly against the American Academy’s dubious complicity with its Administration’s harsh and illiberal anti-terrorist “Patriot Act” and executive measures and practices. In articles and speeches, and most recently in *Is Democracy Possible Here?* he warns that such measures constitute a dangerous compromise of the values that underpin US legality.⁵

Library and information science educators must stand up on the side of human rights as political participants if service learning is to have validity in the context of intellectual freedom and civil liberties.

Today, the very essence of librarianship is threatened as the academy becomes more and more compromised. As teachers in universities, LIS faculty must understand and debate efforts by authoritarian forces to neutralize free speech within academe. There has been a post-9-11 McCarthyism to remove from the university “all vestiges of dissent and to reconstruct it as an increasingly privatized sphere for reproducing the interests of corporations and the national security state.”⁶ At my own place of work—the University of South Florida, School of Library and Information Science—our free and open student discussion list was shut down by administrators with no explanation in March 2003 during a rigorous debate about the then upcoming U.S. invasion of Iraq. The United Faculty of Florida’s union contract guarantees academic freedom, but the issue had to be formally grieved for intellectual freedom to be restored to the LIS commons.

Recognition of the increasingly repressive twenty-first-century academic environment is the most important aspect of faculty reflection that can be brought to our work with service learning. Library educators in the United

States have one central discussion list called JESSE.⁷ JESSE is moderated and censored. As I was preparing this essay, I was writing about the Vancouver Public Library strike at the blog *Union Librarian*. Over 800 library workers were on strike for pay equity in Vancouver. A simple post to the discussion list about the strike was ruled unacceptable by the moderator of JESSE. Discussion off the JESSE list found a number of professors who felt that the censored nature of the JESSE list went against the values that ought to inform the teaching of librarianship. A habit of reflection requires that educators have the opportunity to carry on discussions in an uncensored fashion about issues that affect the profession. To my way of thinking, any professor unwilling to stand for intellectual freedom should not be permitted to supervise service learning. How can students learn to stand up for their public when professors will not stand up for them? These examples of suppression in the public sphere, first at my own place of work where students were not allowed to discuss the war in Iraq, and second, the JESSE list wherein educators were not allowed to discuss a strike of library workers in Vancouver, indicate that threats to intellectual freedom are close at hand in the academy. LIS educators must reflect on the nature of discourse in our own discipline if we are to be effective advocates for service learning. Additionally, LIS educators should consider themselves as part of the university community at large and take into consideration the American Association of University Professors' 2007 report "Freedom in the Classroom," which concludes:

We ought to learn from history that the vitality of institutions of higher learning has been damaged far more by efforts to correct abuses of freedom than by those alleged abuses. We ought to learn from history that education cannot possibly thrive in an atmosphere of state-encouraged suspicion and surveillance.⁸

Those supervising service learning must, above all, be reflective individuals. The definition of *reflection* in the glossary of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse is at once applicable to those who supervise service learning experiences as well as those who enroll:

Reflection describes the process of deriving meaning and knowledge from experience and occurs before, during and after a service-learning project. Effective reflection engages both teachers and students in a thoughtful and thought-provoking process that consciously connects learning with experience. It is the use of critical thinking skills to prepare for and learn from service experiences.⁹

Library workers reflected on their role in the twenty-first century at two historic events in 2006 and 2007: the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) and the United States Social Forum (USSF). Faculty who participated in these transformative events are prepared to work with students at a level

of engagement that transcends traditional classroom experiences. Both events connected librarians to overarching societal issues and concerns such as war, economic injustice, environmental challenges, poverty, and racism.

The JCLC brought together library workers of all ethnicities to Dallas in October 2006. The event was a collaboration of the American Indian Library Association, the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, the Chinese-American Librarians Association, and REFORMA (National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking). The participants shared experiences, best practices, research, and theory. They made new connections and built and strengthened coalitions.¹⁰

The USSF gathering, entitled “Another World Is Possible” (“Para que Otro Mundo es Posible”), took place in Atlanta, Georgia, in June–July 2007 under the auspices of the World Social Forum.¹¹ Library workers attending the USSF were participants and speakers on urgent issues of our time including poverty, environmental destruction, immigration, and human rights. They documented the USSF by collecting materials distributed by organizational and individual participants for the Labadie Collection, University of Michigan; surveying attendees about the services they need from libraries; volunteering skills as librarians at the Ida B. Wells Media Justice Center; and reflecting and learning about the social forum.¹²

Faculty involvement in conferences and forums like the JCLC or the USSF provide the opportunity to interact with thoughtful library workers who embrace values of equality and justice. Faculty who supervise service learning should be judicious and discerning. We hope they will answer affirmatively to the question asked by Lesley Rex of the Wingspread Access, Equity and Social Justice Committee: “*Are more faculty becoming engaged and increasing their efforts toward solving broad social problems?*”¹³

Placement as an Opportunity for Reflection

Service learning is collaboration between the community and the classroom that gives equal priority to student learning and community service. Unlike fieldwork, which focuses on skills, the student role is determined by the community’s needs.¹⁴ Students must be prepared to work with the community at hand. This can be achieved by an understanding of the principles of community organizing and involvement and by application of this understanding to the library context.¹⁵ Librarians’ involvement in community building has been long-standing but is not well articulated at the local level.

Reflection can happen in most contexts if the placement is done in a manner that fosters understanding of overarching socioeconomic and political considerations. Careful deliberation on the concept of library as “place,” literacy as an adult education endeavor, homelessness as a product of economic injustice, incarceration as a result of a society that does not nurture people of all classes

and colors, and lack of effort to develop cultural competence to serve people of different backgrounds are examples.

Twenty-first-century leaders in the ALA have endeavored to establish the librarian's role in building and transforming communities. During the presidency of Leslie Burger in 2006–2007, the ALA adopted an agenda for the twenty-first century: “Libraries Transform Communities; Communities Transform Libraries.”¹⁶ The 2007–2008 presidency of Lorie Roy included initiatives to operationalize the ideas of community transformation through the project Supporting LIS Education Through Practice. It should be noted for the purpose of expanding discussion that the use of *community* as synonymous with *place* can be problematic.¹⁷ Libraries as culturally constructed places may succeed in supporting community or not.

To understand how communities can be transformed, we can look at *The Library as Place*, edited by Buschman and Leckie, and find different analyses of place that provide means of reflection—the Habermasian influence that allows us to make “normative and democratic claims about libraries as places.”¹⁸ The establishment of locations for service learning that provide an opportunity for reflection and community transformation has been discussed by Roy.¹⁹ She provides a variety of examples with a diversity focus, including tribal community colleges and schools and cultural heritage institutions such as the National Museum of the American Indian.

Cuban and Hayes have reported on students placed in a community literacy agency and have described the need for literacy education curricula in LIS education.²⁰ The connection of the service learning experience to curriculum reform demonstrates a mechanism by which the classroom and the external site reinforce values. Reflective service learning placements require a setting where coworkers are intellectually knowledgeable about the philosophical and theoretical basis of service provided. Literacy for adults must be viewed as far more than a library challenge, and this can only be done through active engagement in the work of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) and involvement with colleagues imbued with the AAACE vision “that lifelong learning contributes to human fulfillment and positive social change.”²¹

At the University at Buffalo, Peterson has written how students engaged in a service learning seminar worked to turn a homeless shelter library into a satellite of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library.²² Peterson's use of the evaluation process as a mechanism for reflection provides a different way to carry out the reflective component of service learning. She has shown how engaged students can become change agents through the act of learning in places where they revitalize the idea of community. Through thoughtful placement, students can move the value of librarianship from the library to the homeless shelter or even to places where people are confined.

Ours is a prison nation with over 2,000,000 people incarcerated. Any of the hundreds of local, county, state, or federal jails and prisons are sites for

service learning through libraries and the provision of literacy education. Clark and MacCreaigh demonstrate how a public library model can be used in correction facilities.²³ Mark discusses an internship at the Oshkosh Correctional Institution that she undertook after involvement with the student group at the University of Wisconsin that works with inmates at local jails.²⁴ Although she does not use the term *service learning*, her reflection on the experience through the article demonstrates an effort to move beyond tasks and skills. Mark describes books she read in preparation for the experience and comes to conclusions that transcend the work.

In *Still Struggling for Equality*, a thorough assessment of U.S. librarian initiatives to serve immigrants and minorities from 1876 to the present, Jones provides hundreds of examples of librarians who have looked to serve marginalized people and developed programs to provide basic information and literacy.²⁵ The use of Jones's book in concert with state and national policies and programs that were the framework for the JCLC helps students and their faculty supervisors to recognize the variety of opportunities for service learning that will contribute to a world without old structures and tired ideas.

So there are many opportunities for students to be placed in service learning situations where the work being done transcends a particular library or system and allows the student to address issues that are societal in scope, though perhaps individual in the here and now. By working with the homeless and reflecting on the factors that create homelessness, by working with people in jail and reflecting on the reasons they have been incarcerated, and by assuming a reflective mode of thinking about these issues, we will find that the opportunity to create change is amplified.

Student Preparation and Post-experience Assessment

Students prepare for service learning beyond the acquisition of the skills and theories of librarianship. They must learn about the placement and the conditions that surround the point of service. Reading is a reflective act. Writing is a reflective act. Those who choose to study to become librarians come in the main from that group of people for whom reading and writing are important. In spite of society's aggrandizement of technology and its concomitant undervaluing of traditional skills, these skills—reading, writing—form the essence of reflection. Before reflection on the service learning experience can take place, the larger philosophical questions must be addressed; there is a need to step back and have students read broadly to examine the context of service. This includes primary human rights sources such as the Vedas, the Bible, the Qur'an, the Analects of Confucius, and the Magna Carta on up to more recent documents like the 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National, or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities or the 2006 Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.²⁶

See, for example, how one local effort connects to the universal. Irene Sweeney's family literacy project in rural Florida was conducted as a service learning placement, and her reflective article, "Learning by Doing: Engaged Service and the MLS," connected her to larger concerns through the ALA's Office for Literacy and Outreach Services.²⁷ This in turn required an understanding of the process that leads to established national policy: "The American Library Association reaffirms and supports the principle that lifelong literacy is a basic right for all individuals in our society and is essential to the welfare of the nation."²⁸ This in turn connects with Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has a right to an education."²⁹

Students may also find that librarians who have struggled for social justice and human rights provide inspiration and encouragement. In the summer 2007 *Information for Social Change Journal*, Lowe and Samek highlight people who provide information and help to others who are caught up within conflict situations. They cover aspects of the work of peace libraries and of resources to aid those who are working within or upon various conflict situations throughout the world. Participation in service learning in college was shown to predict attitudes toward both personal and community responsibility for improving the welfare of others.³⁰

These are deplorable times. Immigrants and refugees suffer, the poor have little access to health care or food security, and torture is condoned by the George W. Bush administration. The reflective student can review and examine these examples of human suffering and seek a close-up way in connection with an individual to enable change to make another world possible. In Moorehead's book *Human Cargo*, the chapter "Fence" is about migrants in San Diego and Tijuana. She ties together attacks launched against immigrant populations by George W. Bush that make use of the USA PATRIOT Act and shift policy from openness and tolerance to secrecy and obfuscation.³¹ What can librarians do to assist people caught in the net of immigration? We can use the tools and policies of our profession to develop programs and services. The New Immigrants Center at the Austin Public Library provides tools to navigate different social norms, civic institutions, transportation systems, and different languages.³²

Service learning can take place in all types of libraries. In "Learning by Serving," Sitter develops the argument that teacher librarians in school library media centers "have a unique opportunity to work with students, teachers, and community partners . . . to help our young citizens develop sensitivity to human need and a responsibility to serve."³³

And sometimes service learning can be work within a system of services that librarians provide rather than direct service. Farmer has written of the new war on the poor in terms of structural social violence and lack of access to health care. His examination of social inequity relies upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as he pleads that everyone has the right "to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."³⁴ Farmer's emphasis on human rights

finds voice in the work of the National Library of Medicine's Environmental Health Information Outreach Program, which includes representation from historically black colleges and universities, institutions serving Hispanic students, and tribal colleges. In addition to working with these institutions to promote the use of and access to electronic health information and related technology, this program brings attention to scientific research related to health issues that disproportionately affect minorities.³⁵ In the quietest ways, librarians can develop resources that will make a difference in people's lives.

Conclusion: The Meaning of Twenty-First-Century Librarianship— Service Learning for Human Rights

Students placed in service learning programs must reflect on the meaning of twenty-first-century librarianship. Samassékou asserts that “the development of the information society must be based on the framework of human rights, and should respect and uphold the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”³⁶ Although a specific service learning experience might require certain technical skills (assisting with an information commons, digitizing archival materials), it is the core values of the profession that will illuminate the experience. And it is on these core values that reflection rests. As Katharine Phenix and I have argued, these core values should be based on a human rights model.³⁷

For librarianship, Samek has gone the farthest of all scholar-philosophers in defining the manifestations of social action. The faculty member and student who plan a reflective service learning experience should review Samek's monograph *Librarianship and Human Rights* for models.³⁸ These provide tangible opportunities for service learning if the faculty supervisor is attuned to human rights and social justice considerations in librarianship. Samek gives many examples of specific forms of social action that would be the opportunity for reflective service learning. These include AIDS information and awareness, protests of library closures, serving the homeless, and digitization and development of memory programs.

Reflection requires quiet thought. And we librarians will find the topics and concerns not just in technical or professional literature but in the work of those men and women, those writers, who likely first brought us to this calling. We close with the words of José Saramago, Nobel laureate in literature whose speech was given on the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Let us think that no human rights will exist without symmetry of the duties that correspond to them. It is not to be expected that governments in the next 50 years will do it. Let us common citizens therefore speak up. With the same vehemence as when we demanded our rights, let us demand responsibility over our duties. Perhaps the world could turn a little better.³⁹

NOTES

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