

WAYS OF RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY ISSUES: AN OVERVIEW AND INVITATION

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UBC LEARNING EXCHANGE

INTRODUCTION

The University of British Columbia's Learning Exchange is an outreach initiative that aims to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with community organizations and schools in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and other inner city areas. The Learning Exchange Trek Program connects UBC students, staff, and alumni with community organizations where these members of the university community do volunteer work. The types of community service vary: volunteers do one-on-one tutoring with children in classrooms; organize sports activities with teen-agers; spend time with hospice residents; participate in adult education programs; and undertake short-term projects that achieve specific goals. The community organizations with which the Learning Exchange collaborates are diverse: some are inner city public schools, some are social service agencies, some are health care facilities, while others are community centres. These organizations have diverse goals and ways of operating. Different organizations may have different underlying philosophies and even within the same organization, different staff may have different values and beliefs about the work they do. Some community organizations are founded on an ethic of charity; some organizations are motivated by principles of social justice and advocacy; others are founded on community development principles; while others are very project-focused. Working in these organizations provides UBC students, staff, faculty and alumni with the opportunity to experience a range of environments where activities that fall into the broad category of "community service" are undertaken.

Some people find the variation in different organization's approaches to service confusing. The purpose of this article is to outline the differences among the various ways that community organizations approach their work and to encourage participants in Learning Exchange programs to reflect on their own perspectives on these different approaches and to think about how their engagement with community organizations and issues reflects their own values and beliefs. Although the Learning Exchange itself is focusing increasingly on projects that achieve specific objectives, it is not our intention to argue here for the merit of one approach over another; rather, we hope that this article will lead to a better understanding of the complexities of working in community settings and encourage readers to reflect on the questions raised.

THE LEARNING EXCHANGE TREK PROGRAM

In 1999, UBC created the Learning Exchange as a result of the commitment to community engagement articulated in the university's strategic plan for the 21st Century, *Trek 2000*. Following a community consultation in the Downtown Eastside that identified local organizations who were enthusiastic about including UBC students as volunteers in their programs, the Learning Exchange established its Trek Program. The program has grown exponentially since its inception. In the first year of the program, 30 students volunteered in 10 organizations. In 2004-2005, 800 students volunteered in 36 community organizations. Over the past six years, opportunities to participate in the Learning Exchange Trek Program have diversified: members of the UBC community can participate in the general volunteer program, the Trek Leadership Network, the staff initiative, Reading Week Community Service Projects, alumni special projects and through courses that feature a community service-learning component. In UBC's recent

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renewal of its strategic vision (*Trek 2010: A Global Journey*), community engagement continues to figure prominently. In this renewed vision UBC commits to preparing students to become exceptional global citizens who work with and for their communities to achieve a civil and sustainable society. (See www.trek2000.ubc.ca/index.html)

In addition to organizing the Trek Program, the Learning Exchange operates a storefront in the Downtown Eastside that offers free educational courses, events, and resources to inner city residents and professionals. For more information about the Learning Exchange and its programs, visit www.learningexchange.ubc.ca.

COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING

Community Service-Learning (CSL) refers to an experiential learning approach that combines classroom learning with voluntary service that meets community needs. Processes that encourage critical thinking and reflection (for example, journal writing, small group discussion, and the writing of analytical papers) link real-life experiences in the community with academic content. Community Service-Learning differs from other forms of experiential education such as co-op programs, practica, and internships in several ways: the focus is less on discipline-specific skill development and more on increasing students' understanding of community issues and their own role as citizens; the experience ideally benefits students and community organizations and/or community members; and the emphasis is equally on service and learning. Community Service-Learning programs are widespread at universities and colleges in the United States but are relatively new in Canadian post-secondary settings. In *Trek 2010* UBC commits to developing CSL programs that engage at least ten percent of its students in a Community Service-Learning experience.

THE COMMUNITY SETTING

Most of the community organizations with which the Learning Exchange collaborates are located in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside or other inner city areas in Vancouver. The Downtown Eastside is one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Vancouver. It is a community that enriches the city with its vibrant history, heritage architecture, and diversity of people. It is often said that many within the Downtown Eastside experience a real sense of community and the neighbourhood is well-known for its political activism. Yet the Downtown Eastside is better known for being the country's poorest neighbourhood where many social problems are highly visible: mental illness, substance abuse, drug dealing, prostitution, crime, a lack of safe and secure housing, a high incidence of diseases including HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and tuberculosis, and a lack of legitimate economic activity are all prevalent. But these social and economic issues are not constrained by specific geographic boundaries; they can be found in other parts of the city. The Learning Exchange uses the phrase "inner city" to describe areas that face issues related to poverty and marginalization such as those noted above.

APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY ISSUES

Organizations that aim to respond to social, economic, and health issues are usually founded on a particular philosophical approach or paradigm. Generally four approaches or paradigms can be identified:

1. **The charity approach** involves the direct provision of services to individuals where the focus is on meeting short-term, immediate needs. Examples of charitable service would include giving homeless people free meals or accommodation in shelters.
2. **The social justice approach** is based on the belief that the underlying structural causes of social inequity need to be addressed so that lasting social change can be achieved. Rather than working to improve specific services, individuals operating within this model

- would advocate for policy changes such as increased welfare benefits or subsidized housing programs.
3. **Community development** approaches aim to empower those who are experiencing problems so they can themselves identify appropriate solutions and work collectively with others to implement those solutions. For example, organizations using this approach might organize people living in substandard housing so they can build a self-run housing co-op.
 4. **Project-based** approaches identify particular problems or opportunities and implement time-limited, focused projects designed to achieve specific objectives. For example, an organization might design and implement a project where residents of a housing co-op create a rooftop garden.

While these definitions may seem straightforward, the reality is seldom as unambiguous as these descriptions suggest. In any given community organization, there can be individual staff who hold different perspectives on the values or philosophy that underlie their work. For example, an Executive Director might believe that her organization is oriented towards social justice while individual front-line staff members believe their job is to provide direct service to alleviate the immediate suffering of their clients. Further, even a given individual's values and behaviours might seem contradictory. A professional might espouse community development principles but behave in ways that inadvertently disempower people. In addition, a given initiative might comprise aspects of different approaches. For example, an organization might implement a pilot project that includes both direct service to individuals and community development activities aimed at empowering individuals to develop long-term solutions to particular problems.

THE DEBATE IN THE COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING LITERATURE

The question of which approach to addressing community issues has most merit has generated debate in many quarters for many years. It is not just participants in Learning Exchange activities who struggle with the differences in organizational philosophy or approach that exist. Participants in other community-university outreach initiatives face similar challenges. In the literature that discusses the experiences of other educational institutions using Community Service-Learning, charity has been described by some as a more limited form of involvement because it focuses on immediate problems rather than on more long-term change generally associated with social justice or advocacy approaches. Marullo and Edwards state, "Our goal is not to denigrate charity work but rather to have us move, individually and collectively, from charity to justice" (Marullo and Edwards 2000: 900). This notion of a continuum or progression of service suggests that while people may begin with a charitable approach, social justice or advocacy is a more desirable and mature form of service (Vernon and Ward 1999). Robinson maintains that Community Service-Learning programs focus "mainly on bricks and mortar projects, on working as a hospital aide, on assisting at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen—though they deliver many benefits to individuals in need, [they] silence the citizen and constitute more of a glorified welfare system than a socially transformational movement" (Robinson 2000: 145). While Robinson does not argue that all Community Service-Learning programs should focus on social change, he believes that more programs should stress this approach (Robinson 2000). Bickford and Reynolds (2002), Hertzberg (1994), Abowitz (1999), and Maybach (1996) make similar distinctions between charity and social justice, and propose that Community Service-Learning rooted in social justice is more desirable.

In contrast to those who describe a continuum from charity to social justice, Keith Morton argues for three related yet distinct paradigms of service (charity, project, and advocacy) that have a range of "thin" to "thick" expressions, based on the depth and integrity of the engagement. The consequence for educators is that, "Rather than moving students along a continuum, we are doing

two things simultaneously: challenging and supporting students to enter more deeply into the paradigm in which they work; and intentionally exposing students to creative dissonance among the (various) forms” (Morton 1995: 21). Morton argues that “thin” versions are disempowering and hollow, and can be paternalistic and self-serving. He says “thin” engagements magnify or institutionalize inequalities of power, lead to additional problems that are worse than the original ones, or create unsustainable dependences. In contrast, “thick” versions are sustaining and potentially revolutionary, and are “grounded in deeply held, internally coherent values, match means and ends, describe a primary way of interpreting and relating to the world, offer a way of defining problems and solutions, and suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like” (Morton 1995: 24, 28). According to Morton, “While we can and do work across these paradigms, we are most at home in one or another, and interpret what we do according to the standards of the one in which we are most at home . . . (D)one well, . . . all . . . paradigms lead ultimately toward the transformation of an individual within a community, and toward the transformation of the communities themselves” (Morton 1995: 29). Morton argues that, “At their thickest, the paradigms seem to intersect, or at least complement one another” (Morton 1995: 28).

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS’ INVITATION TO CARE

As part of a recent research project investigating community organizations’ experiences with Community Service-Learning, personal interviews were conducted with some of the Learning Exchange Trek Program’s community partners. Most of the interviewees made little direct mention of the debate regarding different philosophical approaches surfacing in their work, within their organization, or in their relationship with the Learning Exchange. Instead, community partner organizations emphasized that encouraging Trek Program participants to care—rather than persuading participants to adopt a particular paradigm of community service—has greater potential for making a difference in inner city communities (Newnham 2004).

John McKnight suggests that care “is the consenting commitment of citizens to one another. Care cannot be produced, provided, managed, organized, administered, or commodified. Care is the only thing a system cannot produce. Every institutional effort to replace the real thing is a counterfeit” (McKnight 1995: x). McKnight argues that since the Second World War, we have professionalized the acts of caring that were once an integral part of community life and created industries of human and social services. McKnight sounds a warning about the unintended weakening of communities that can result from the tendency to expect professional systems to care for people who are vulnerable or marginalized: “As the power of profession and the service system ascends, the legitimacy, authority, and capacity of citizens and communities descend. The *citizen* retreats. The *client* advances” (McKnight 1995: 106. [emphasis in original]).

For many community organizations, there is seldom enough time to worry about abstract questions such as which model of community service is best. Rather, there is immediate work to do and it must get done. Further, it is strategic for community organizations to welcome everyone who participates in the Learning Exchange Trek Program regardless of their particular orientation to service: the greater the number of participants who are engaged, the more work can be achieved. However, community organizations’ invitation to care is more than a means of attracting more volunteers. Community partners are convinced that incremental social change will happen if more people are exposed to the problems and capacities of community members living in the Downtown Eastside and other inner city communities. The community partners recognize that inviting people to care is the first crucial step in this transformation (Newnham 2004).

THE LEARNING EXCHANGE PERSPECTIVE ON THE DEBATE

Based on our experiences over the past six years, the Learning Exchange believes it is important to avoid simplistic conceptualizations of community service that polarize our thinking about how

to address social problems. Instead, we, like our community partners, want to promote a more open-ended invitation to care about what is happening in inner city communities and elsewhere. For the Learning Exchange to try to identify what is “good” or “bad” community service would be counter-productive as it could result in alienation and division—among community members, community partner organizations, and participants in Learning Exchange programs. Instead, we try to adopt approaches and strategies that engage people in meaningful ways in important social issues and thereby provide opportunities for people to learn more about the issues and the people who live and work in the midst of these issues.

The Learning Exchange Trek Program invites participants to work within a community setting that best matches their interests and worldview. Following from Morton’s analysis of “thin” and “thick” service, we strive to create learning and service opportunities that deepen people’s experiences. We anticipate that what will distinguish effective community service and university-community engagement is attention to the extent to which participants have “thick” experiences. We have already become convinced that structured reflection—a key component of the Community Service-Learning model—facilitates “thick” experiences. Reflection is an active and conscious practice that allows the exploration of new thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. Reflection contributes to a “thick” experience because it facilitates self-examination, broadens understanding, and connects theory and practice. Reflection cultivates meaning and enhances the quality of the community engagement.

Examples of reflective questions on the nature of service include:

- What is service? How does service done in the context of a community organization differ from help you might give to a friend?
- How is the value of service assessed? Who assesses it?
- How can one’s experience of being of service become increasingly “thick”?
- What barriers sometimes separate those doing service from those receiving the service? Why do those barriers exist?
- Under what circumstances might the various approaches—charity or social justice or community development or project-based—be most appropriate?
- What characterizes mutually beneficial caring relationships?
- What competencies (skills, understanding, and abilities) do you need to engage in mutually beneficial caring relationships?
- What role do “learning exchanges” play in caring or service-oriented relationships? That is, how does a focus on learning about and from the person, the community, and the issue affect the caring relationship?
- What role does “service” play in global citizenship?

Considering these questions—whether in one’s own journal, in conversation with community partner organization staff, or in groups with others—will develop “thicker” understandings of the challenges and benefits of working with community organizations in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and other communities.

CONCLUSION

The Learning Exchange is not trying to persuade participants in our programs to adopt a particular ideology. Further, we do not presume to have the answers to what are complex, interrelated social problems. Instead we urge Learning Exchange participants to work within whatever approach or paradigm matches their beliefs, values, and worldview and to explore the nature of their experiences with curiosity and integrity. We believe that as long as participants are engaging sincerely with their experiences and reactions and making an effort to understand them, then participants’ engagement with the community will be a success. The point is not to try to

find the right answer, but to continue pursuing ever more complex and penetrating questions. This means moving from thin to thick experience. While this process of engaging and caring may not always be comfortable or easy, we believe such engagement is a necessary precursor to the development of effective responses to the kinds of problems society is facing.

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