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Cipolle, Susan Benigni (2010) *Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Pp. 191 ISBN 978-1-60709-519-4

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From reading *Service-Learning and Social Justice* it is clear that Susan Benigni Cipolle has reflected a great deal on both the pedagogical and theoretical aspects of cultivating critical consciousness in students. Cipolle attempts to build a pedagogically rich and practical approach to boldly marry Freirean models of empowerment to pedagogies of service-learning (in which community service activities are used as an opportunity to promote personal, community and social change). There are several premises upon which her new book is based that certainly resonate with my own position as an educator and anthropologist, including the importance of a critical pedagogy oriented around social justice, and the notion that both service-learning specifically and education broadly can be an act of social justice. The

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book itself is divided into two sections, the first of which aims to provide the broader framework through which “individuals develop a critical consciousness and social justice orientation” (p.64) based on Cipolle’s qualitative research and the second, which provides practical tools and guidance on how to develop, organize, and maintain such programs.

Cipolle opens her book with an excellent overview of the meaning of and need for counter-hegemonic, multi-cultural and critical approaches to education today. Based on surveys of alumni from Benilde St. Margaret’s School, and interviews with eleven current students, Cipolle’s first section then develops an almost psychological model of critical consciousness development through service-learning. She describes the ways that these informants moved from an orientation of charity (based in pity) towards one in which they were able to examine the historical and structural systems of oppression at work in America. Themes and quotes about growing awareness to social issues pepper these chapters to demonstrate the process of developing critical consciousness for students. She goes on to describe how common educational and family experiences around service-learning impact identity formation and social justice orientation. Cipolle, writes specifically for those who work with white, middle-class students; I believe this a wise decision, both because (1) such students may most clearly benefit from engaging the lives of living, breathing people who live in disadvantaged settings, and (2) students of color would clearly understand social justice and schooling in an entirely different way, requiring a book of its own to explicate.

More specifically, Cipolle describes these processes through her own experiences in Catholic schooling with its history of service and community engagement. Although the decision to do so is understandable, I would have liked to see a little more about how orientations to social justice may have been differently experienced in more diverse classroom settings. This relatively minor point is emblematic of a more serious flaw in Cipolle’s overall approach to the first section of this book, although its effect is felt in the second section as well.

Although Cipolle’s review and analysis of critical literature is admirable, her claims based on her own

qualitative research suffer because she seemingly sets out research objectives that would be better suited to quantitative research models. She seeks to establish both the factors that contribute to a social justice orientation and the outcomes of service-learning based upon her qualitative work with eleven students in one program. The details of her survey research are never fully described, which leaves the reader wondering about the rigorousness of her methods. From this work, she builds her framework for the development of critical consciousness through three separate stages and four elements. It is simply not feasible to make claims about “universal,” psychological stages of development based upon the experiences of eleven people (and as someone steeped in such research, I would hesitate to lay out such universal stages under any circumstances). Even if her survey work was rigorous, it is based on the findings from one institution. As a qualitative researcher, I find it disheartening when qualitative approaches are used to answer research questions that seem based in a quantitative epistemology.

One of the reasons why I am a qualitative researcher is because I believe that the historical and cultural context matter, that students’ experiences in schools are powerfully shaped not only by broader forces (such as history, culture and the media), but also by micro-interactions, individual personalities, and personal experience. I would thus not presume that I can build a set of normative stages through which every student will move. Indeed, throughout the first section I found myself skeptical that the linear model of development described would be equally true for White, middle-class students in New York, Wichita, Phoenix, Miami and Cincinnati; to say nothing of those in public schools, home schools, evangelist schools, or charter schools. It also presumes that all such students are beginning at a stage of “Charity” (i.e. feeling empathy for the disadvantaged) rather than indifference or hostility (i.e. feeling that disadvantaged groups are lazy and exploiting others for personal gain).

The second section provides pedagogical and administrative approaches that Cipolle has successfully used to promote this social justice orientation. In contrast to the first section, the qualitative data here is more effectively used to describe how individual students responded to the particular pedagogical techniques

utilized. Detailed advice is provided, from specific classroom techniques and service experiences to how to cultivate a service-friendly environment on campus.

Cipolle's strategies on how to garner support from various campus stakeholders and promote long-range change are particularly helpful in thinking through institutional efforts at pursuing social justice. The author clearly breaks up such approaches into chapters about K-12 issues, higher education settings, and institutional efforts. In fact, I anxiously plowed my way through the first section, lured on by the promise of practical strategies and strong practice to be found in the second half of the table of contents. Even this section, however, is impacted by the lack of Cipolle's experience with other settings. In my reading, the pedagogical and programmatic efforts described take place in a setting that is somewhat uniform in its student body, and in which a social justice-oriented, service-learning program would be received with either support or indifference. It is important to recognize that there are settings where such programs might be met with open hostility, if not by individual students, then by families or superintendents or campus groups. I would have liked to hear more about how to engage either hostile individuals or groups in a constructive debate, and to incorporate such conflicts into teachable moments.

Overall, *Service-Learning and Social Justice* delivers what it promises: an accessible and engaging exploration of how critical consciousness can be cultivated through service-learning, and the practical approaches that can be used to promote that process. As a reader, I was hoping that her work would be more sensitive to the diversity of paths to and through social justice, but regardless the book does inspire introspection about theoretical and practical aspects that educators are likely to face.

### About the Reviewer

Alex Posecznick is a recent graduate of Teachers College, Columbia University with a Master's in Anthropology in Education and a Ph.D. in Applied Anthropology, as well as an independent instructor in the City University of New York (BMCC) and Metropolitan College of New York. His research examines such topics as social interaction within



educational settings, the cultural production of merit, cultural diversity (including race, gender and class), higher education policy and practice, explanations of student failure and under-achievement, the use and misuse of the concept of culture in education, and entry into professional life. His dissertation, an intensive ethnographic study of admissions at a small, non-elite, urban college offers a fresh perspective on the ways that educational bureaucracy and policy configure social reproduction on the ground. He can be contacted at [aposecznick@yahoo.com](mailto:aposecznick@yahoo.com).

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