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Sheffield, Eric. (2011) *Strong Community Service Learning: Philosophical Perspectives*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

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"...failure is not mere *failure. It is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes.* – John Dewey, *How We Think*

We open with this quote for two reasons. First, Eric Sheffield's text is an emotive response to his own failed foray into strong community service learning (CSL). Sheffield's unapologetic confession that *getting it wrong* inspired him to share with others how to *get it right*, is a fitting context in which to set a text purposed towards critical, democratic, and social justice aims. Second,

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Sheffield's piece so frequently and aptly pulls from Deweyian experiential learning epistemologies that the book could have been titled, What Would Dewey Do? In addition to Dewey, we meet several of the philosophical influences, Noddings, Gutmann, Kant, Kilpatrick, Kraft, Barbara, James, and others, who help to frame Sheffield's pragmatic and philosophically grounded exposition.

Just as notable are the educational philosophers who do not figure as Sheffield's antecedents. For example, notions of education as perpetuator of social reproduction or meritocracy are not accounted for by Sheffield's placement of CSL in the philosophical landscape (see David Labaree, 1997). As readers, we found ourselves appreciating his theoretical grounding, but we also recognize that his lack of acknowledgment of other philosophical traditions may for many readers distract from his thesis.

The text is a response to the question, why does SCL suffer without clear conceptual understanding? The answer: because the pedagogical approach has stood on shaky philosophically ground. Sheffield means to remedy this deficiency. Readers are treated to a dialogic prose that invites them to witness Sheffield's experiences and listen in as he converses with himself and his fellow philosophers on his way to developing a philosophically sound and practically oriented foundation for promoting and growing a transformative pedagogy. Easy to digest, the conversational tone is peppered with declarative gems such as, "objectivity is a mythical idea akin to the unicorn" (p.67). His ultimate aim is trifocal, (1) develop a philosophical perspective to support CSL design and implementation, (2) provide a *strong* conception of CSL versus the more easily implementable and less socially impactful *weak* versions, and finally, (3) convince the audience that philosophical work is a practical research endeavor.

In addition to a pragmatic ingredient list for strong CSL, ala Hanna (p. 27), Sheffield highlights critical reflective thinking as the fundamental distinguishing characteristic between *weak* and *strong* CSL. Through "critical reflection on systematically oppressive institutional structures" educators who leverage *strong* CSL pedagogy can move their students towards the aims of academic achievement, character development and real community impact (p. 45).

Urging educators to head Nodding's advice to "feel with a stranger," students of CSL must learn to reflect with those they serve, see strange people as fellow sufferers, and develop the emotional, cognitive, and imaginative readiness to act and respond to a stranger and find the other non-threatening. Sheffield invokes Radest's complete notion of service, which goes beyond mutuality to include solidarity and diversity, as a means of achieving these aims.

Using language deliberately, Sheffield applies *community* to the construct of service learning to indicate the importance of two-way reciprocal service, learning, and mainly, reflection. Critical reflection within a community requires the adherence to two Gutmann maxims, non-repression and non-discrimination. Missionary ideologies have no home in strong CSL. Service ventures such as charity, volunteerism, philanthropy, noblesse oblige, and punishment based community service are non-examples of CSL for the simple reason that they are one-way service structures that do not lead to reciprocity of learning through mutual and critical reflection. More dangerously, these forms of service perpetuate social structures, which repress under-represented populations and further cement the idea that social ills are not to be remedied via root cause analysis but stagnant situations that one must learn to avoid by pulling up their boot straps.

In the main, Sheffield argues, CSL is a democratic pedagogy that represents a micro-practical application of critical theory. He resists the label "critical pedagogy" owing to the verbose style of some of its prominent proponents. Yet critical theory and, more specifically, critical reflection helps him explain why his own attempt at implementing CSL pedagogy as a high school English teacher failed. His students had no voice in the direction of the project, critical reflection with those to be served did not occur, and the students were never aware of the democratic aims that might help focus their purposes both for CSL and schooling in general.

As teacher educators affiliated with a non-profit focused on training urban teachers in CSL, we find ourselves struggling to educate teachers and community members alike about the origins of this pedagogy. It has been our experience that many informed observers think CSL came

into existence sometime after the Wingspread conference[1]. While CSL may indeed have drifted into popular dialogue at that time, the pedagogy's beginnings at the Penn Normal School offer a very different view of the philosophical underpinnings. This is not a movement rooted in some early 1990s version of the Peace Corps. Rather, CSL draws its beginnings from the practical task of educating former slaves, not only in teaching them how to read and write but also how to take up their authority as citizens in a democracy. This history has meaningful implications for how service learning work is situated today. And it makes Sheffield's arguments against oppressive notions of service (viz., philanthropy charity, and *noblesse oblige*) all the more profound.

Sheffield's greatest contribution is that he provides much-needed philosophical grounding for the practice of community service learning. His chapters on community, service, epistemology, and reflection (chapters five, six, seven, and eight, respectively) effectively examine both the philosophical and practical grounding for these most critical components of CSL. For example, his exploration of Howard Radest's "complete notion of service" in chapter six illuminates the concept more thoroughly than much of the available literature, which focuses instead on anecdotal accounts of service. Sheffield then takes the conversation a step further by examining Radest's notions in a Deweyan practical context. "This framework demands that the service come about as a means to solve truly felt problem…It is the teacher's responsibility to lead her students close enough -- physically, intellectually, and emotionally -- to problematic situations that they feel them and are inclined to understand them" (p. 86).

Similarly, Sheffield's discussion of reflection in chapter eight returns to the concept of a "felt problem" and outlines the philosophical basis for why reflection can and must be a continual component of CSL projects -- before (preflection), during, and after the service. Arguing that "without reflection, there are no contextual connections to be made between classroom learning and the experience itself" (p. 113), Sheffield then offers that in practice, "the CSL teacher should remain mindful that in CSL projects,

[1] Wingspread conference report, May, 1989
http://tinyurl.com/cpljpz5

as a model she is relied upon for developing reflective thought, which requires being clear to her students about how reflection works and continually modeling and explaining it" (p. 123). Sheffield's desire to address the lack of CSL researchers' attention to philosophical perspectives results in a text that helps educators understand the pedagogy's theoretical grounding with an eye toward very practical implementation.

Ultimately, Sheffield's philosophically grounded perspectives are a welcomed addition to the CSL literature. CSL practitioners are awash in narratives tracing the evolution of a particular CSL project and its lessons learned, and Sheffield's excellent appendix of research on CSL outcomes demonstrates that the academy has made solid contributions to our understandings of the pedagogy's impacts and benefits via empirical qualitative and quantitative research. But as Sheffield points out, CSL continues to suffer from a "conceptual muddiness" as "the incredible growth of CSL in practice has not had a corresponding growth in conceptual understanding" (p 39). CSL professionals as well as academics working in this subject area are well served by immersion in Sheffield's elegantly argued tome.

About the Reviewers

Elizabeth Soslau serves as an assistant professor in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. Her research focuses on experiential education and preservice teachers. She is a long time board member of Need in Deed, a non-profit organization that teaches Philadelphia-based school teachers how to implement service learning pedagogy.

After serving as program director for seven years, Kimberly Kirn became Need in Deed's third executive director in July 2012. By training and supporting teachers as they integrate service-learning with their classroom practices, NID helps students apply academics to addressing problems in their communities and schools. Prior to joining Need in Deed, Kim led Philadelphia Student Voices, a national civic education project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.

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