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Reflecting on Jonathan Kozol's Challenge: Who Really Benefits from Service Learning?

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Can service learning do more harm than good? Who actually benefits from service learning? In some cases the motivation to serve may overlook the community voices and actual needs defined by the community being served. While the well intentioned goals of service learning may be to develop healthy, well-rounded citizens, is this being done at the expense of communities?

These sentiments ran through educator and author, Jonathan Kozol's speech, at the 2001 National Service-Learning Conference in Denver, Colorado. He challenged service-learning leaders and practitioners to examine the conscience of service learning, focusing on which side of the relationship truly benefits from "service." He urged the audience to listen to the voices of those they serve; to meet the needs of the community as defined by the community. And equally as important, he challenged us to make a long term commitment to the communities in which we are serving.

Recently I was back home, on the flower farm I grew up working on, in a rural Northern California town, to help prepare for a large wedding. It was late afternoon and a female co-worker and I had been making floral arrangements since 7:30 am. Our mouths moved as fast as our hands, as we talked about everything from split-ends, to our families, to the elementary school I went to that her four children now attend. In the middle of our conversation about the price of Barbie dolls, she paused and said, "Yesterday someone dropped off a large bag of used children's clothes at the house. I can't stand it when people do that. I did not ask for anything. I do not take handouts. What is that woman saying? That my children are dirty and poorly dressed?" I muttered some excuse about good intentions and then caught myself. My friend's story is not uncommon.

My friend's story and Kozol's challenge ran through my head, forcing me to reflect on my work in service learning. As a student, community member and practitioner I am a strong advocate for service learning. I realize, however, I am only an advocate for service learning when it is implemented with a community, not for them. As a field we must ask ourselves how often we actually work with a community to define their needs, as opposed to just assuming that we know what its members want? We must be open to hearing that some service learning projects are not helpful to the communities they are intended to serve.

The woman who dropped off the clothes, like the majority of service learning practitioners, probably did not have the intent of oppressing anyone for the benefit of her own personal growth. However, when the community is not involved in defining their own strengths and challenges, there can be negative consequences.

Instead, as Wokie Weah of the National Youth Leadership Council states, "We must teach (young people) to understand the reciprocity in service learning, whereby they become both the server and the recipient of service. In other words, both the students and the community members become learners and teachers in the service learning process."

According to Kozol, "inner city kids have seen five generations of benevolent white people pass by by the age of ten." Is service learning adding to those statistics? Tutoring and mentoring--common service learning projects--fulfill the undisputed needs that young people have for mentors and that schools have for more tutors. With good intentions many short term service learning projects make the students and tutors feel good and then end. What is the long-term result? What is this final impact in the community? Kozol emphasizes that, "poor children were not created by God to be the research (subjects) of rich children." He questions whether, by passing through their lives with the good intentions of service learning, we are teaching kids another lesson in betrayal and abandonment.

By quoting Cesar Chavez in his speech, "Some give time, some give their lives," Kozol challenges us to examine our service intentions and stick around for a while. Kozol encouraged young people to not just teach or work with a community for a day or even one year, but to reexamine why they are there in the first place and commit themselves to work with a community for the long haul. Why did the woman in my story go out of her way to drop off clothes? What was she assuming about the farm working community on the west side of town? Did she need to be there at all? How could the situation have been more reciprocal? Only when the voices of all involved are represented and respected will real change occur in a community.

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