

# A Challenge to the Notion of Service

Nadinne Cruz

*An experienced practitioner speaks frankly about the inherent contradictions and dilemmas in service-learning and in the mission of one organization that advocates it. Even though this position statement begins with a focus on one organization, the ideas presented here are valuable for any program or organization interested in combining service and learning. The author appropriately struggles with the premises of this resource book in a way that the editor and many of the authors struggle with the dilemmas in this dynamic, delicate, and inherently problematic combination of concepts — service and learning. Reprinted with permission from *Experiential Education, National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE)*, Vol. 14, No. 5, November-December 1989, pp. 15, 23.*

"AS A COMMUNITY OF INDIVIDUALS, institutions, and organizations, NSIEE is committed to fostering the effective use of experience as an integral part of education, in order to empower learners and promote the common good."

The magnet that *draws* me towards association with NSIEE are the individual members, many of whom I have come to treasure as colleagues and friends. What *keeps* me in NSIEE company despite competing priorities is its mission. It is, for me, a compelling one that engages me with our thinking and "doing" as NSIEE'ers. So I will probe a bit and assume that, among friends, we can disagree in the spirit of taking seriously the responsibility for continuing to refine our sense of NSIEE's mission.

NSIEE seems to be experiencing "good times." We applaud development of principles for good practice in service learning, which appears to fit beautifully with our mission. We celebrate the current national interest in youth service and the now standard acceptance of internships. We delight in the connections people

are making between service learning and cross-cultural/international study. We exult with those who mine opportunities for enjoining all these with civic responsibility and educational reform.

I am pleased with the apparent nationwide popularity of ideas that we in NSIEE have been talking about for years. On the other hand, the current flurry of interest in youth service brings to focus for me the unease I feel about assumptions we seem to make in NSIEE's mission statement and which are similarly reflected in discussions about service. The articulation of a broad normative position is a necessary beginning point, and we have done it. But I fear our celebratory mood might muffle questions we need to wrestle with in order to deepen understanding of our mission, including areas that people like myself might question. The apparent mainstreaming of some of our ideas notwithstanding, we at NSIEE still have lots of leadership work to do through critical reflection on *our* thinking and practice.

For example, I don't think we have talked enough yet about the intractable issues in service learning or youth service (which I don't think, by the way, are one and the same). Even carefully crafted guidelines for practice can do damage if they are not placed in the context of social realities, namely different and competing interests as well as outright conflict, based on, for example, class, race, gender, and even nationality. We simply cannot gloss over, without cost to us, concrete conflict situations and experiences that make difficult the application of concepts like "reciprocal learning." I would argue that the possibility of mutuality of interests and needs implied in the concept of reciprocal learning could be more easily realized if it were *not* tied to any notion of service.

I want us to talk about why, in the context of conflicting interests and the historical dominance of one racial or gender group over another, it is possible that "service," in and of itself, can have racist or sexist outcomes despite good intentions. For example, I resist the notion of service learning for U.S. students in the Philippines, my country of origin, because I think it perpetuates a "colonial mentality" among Filipinos and a kind of "manifest destiny" among U.S. students. To my way of thinking, the results of the history of U.S. dominance in the Philippines is so overwhelming that it is almost impossible for a U.S. student doing what is regarded on both sides as "service" not to deliver a message of superiority.

I challenge us to talk about the possibility that our social realities as well as the history and practice of the notion of service makes it more problematic than its current popularity might suggest. I think that, in the context of a history of dominance of one group over

others, there is an incipient racism in the practice of service that cannot be avoided even if the conceptualization of it includes values and ideals we can respect and the virtues of people who practice it are above question. That is different from saying that reciprocal learning is impossible, even when the partners-in-learning are not equal in power and resources. I am suggesting that reciprocal learning may be *more* possible if it is *not* tied to a notion of service. Odd as it may sound, perhaps the common good might be better served in certain situations if we emphasized learning as the primary goal and "service," as we commonly think of it, as not involved at all.

This brings me back to the NSIEE mission statement, which appears to make assumptions about the connections among: a) the effective use of experience as an integral part of education, b) empowerment of learners, and c) promotion of the common good. I think it is possible to empower learners (through service learning) and *not* promote the common good (by reinforcing a sense of inferiority among those "served" or a false sense of power among those who "serve"). It is possible to use experience as an integral part of education and simply duplicate the realities we wish to change. I am getting at the possibility that our mission assumes or implies the nature of connections among goals that may not in fact hold together.

I want us to discuss assumptions in our mission statement, not in the abstract, but apply them to programs and ideas that appear to reflect a "mainstreaming" of NSIEE. Let us hold them up for scrutiny, which I think can be better done by hearing voices that reflect the real diversity in this society and the social realities that are the context for the commitments we make on behalf of learning. There is no short cut for hearing these voices directly and for airing competing perspectives openly. I hope this is the outcome of our national meeting in Santa Fe, which called for "Meeting the Challenges of Diversity." May diversity bring out conflict where it exists; may conflict deepen and develop further our self-understanding and mission as a community of people in a very special NSIEE organization.

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*Nadine Cruz is Executive Director of the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (HECUA) in St. Paul, Minnesota.*