

The Four Furies: Primary Tensions between Service-Learners and Host Agencies

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This paper explores four potent tensions between service-learning students and their community agency hosts. These tensions result from naturally opposing perspectives and are reflected in the service-learning literature focused on criticism and complaint. Given the centrality of the alliance between service-learners and their community host co-educators, it is prudent for service-learning educators to confront the vulnerabilities inherent in this relationship. Each tension proposed here is elucidated by targeted responses from service-learners and agency hosts, and accompanied by procedural suggestions and adaptive frames for understanding and reconciling these potentially destructive dynamics when possible. A final discussion considers the implications of a cultural shift in service-learning where the costs of this pedagogical approach are more openly and thoroughly considered.

*War is not the most strenuous life.
It is a kind of rest cure compared
to the task of reconciling our differences.*

-Mary Parker Follett

Service-learning is an ambitious proposition. There are many parties—students, faculty, community agency staff—responsible for making it succeed. This article focuses on the relationship between students and community agencies. Students endeavoring to live according to the values and priorities of the university environment must enter agency culture and quickly determine the adaptations necessary to enjoy acceptance and success in yet another milieu. Agency members are asked to share their professional agenda with students who often arrive untrained, vary widely in their degree and source of motivation, and will not be staying long. Even in cases of mutual dependence, agency personnel and students often settle into an uneasy, usually unspoken agreement to make the best of an inherently frustrating relationship (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009a). It is not surprising that the metaphor of “border-crossing” (Clayton & Ash, 2004; Hayes & Cuban, 1997; Taylor, 2002) has been widely applied to the service-learning experience, especially given the complex and often contentious nature of immigration realities.

In the boundary work of service-learning, differences in expectations and priorities between students and their agency hosts regarding the working relationship are of primary concern (Jacoby & Associates, 1996). In even the most supported service-learning initiative, university personnel have limited time in the field, and the successful agency experience depends on the mutual understanding and

compatible tolerances of students and their site supervisors. Given the importance of the link between service-learners and their agency hosts, it is surprising that there has not been more exploration of this crucial relationship. Though inquiries into the agency experience of service-learning have increased over the last decade, the broadly defined agency-university relationship remains the preferred unit of analysis (D’Arlach, Sánchez, & Feuer, 2009). Much less attention is paid to the personal reactions/perceptions and resultant relational dynamics between students and their agency hosts on the ground, and this is particularly true in the realm of criticism and complaint (Rosing, Ferrari, & Bothne, 2010; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009b).

If our goal as service-learning educators and administrators is to facilitate a positive, mutually beneficial, educational relationship between our agency associates and students, it behooves us to have a clear understanding of the natural tensions that commonly occur in this unique relationship (Liederman, Furco, Zapf, & Goss, 2003). The goal of this paper is to begin this conversation by suggesting four primary tensions I have consistently encountered in my 13 years as a service-learning instructor in higher education. These tensions arise from the inherently opposed points of view held by students and their community hosts, and include: (a) student emphasis on hours vs. agency emphasis on commitment, (b) student emphasis on learning vs. agency emphasis on efficiency, (c) student emphasis on flexibility vs. agency emphasis on dependability, and (d) student emphasis on idealism vs. agency emphasis on realism.

Context for these opposing perspectives will be provided through a review of the service-learning

literature on student and agency host complaints, as these tensions represent a logical synthesis of elements reflected in these studies. Following this review, the four tensions will be discussed in turn, employing validation from my own experience, the current literature, and anecdotal data from service-learning and agency supervisors taken from targeted interviews and anonymous survey results. The tensions will be examined with regard to cause, student and agency host reactions, student development considerations, and both procedural and adaptive remedial ideas. A final discussion will explore how service-learning tensions demand our authentic assessment of the service-learning pedagogy. It is through the attempted reconciliation of these differing perspectives that students, community partners, and service-learning educators discern when to stretch and when to change course in search of sustainable and effective educational collaboration.

Literature Review

Agency Concerns

Agency reaction to service-learning students and the service-learning process has been sparingly studied, though formal, larger-scale projects focused in this area have increased over the last decade or so (Basinger & Bartholomew, 2006; Birdsall, 2005; Bushouse, 2005; Dorado & Giles, 2004; Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Liederman et al., 2003; Miron & Moley, 2006; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Schmidt & Robby, 2002; Tryon et al., 2008; Vernon & Ward, 1999; Worrall, 2007). With the exception of Tryon et al., every one of the articles cited above is *overwhelmingly* positive with regard to the agency experience of service-learning, and only a few offer much insight into the difficulties inherent in the agency relationship with service-learners. Many of these studies use survey data, with little opportunity for qualitative elaboration, and most use university representatives from the partnering university to gather the data although the potential for a positive response bias is a concern (D'Arlach et al., 2009; Worrall, 2007).

Interestingly, the three studies with the most data regarding agency complaints all employed a regional approach, giving them a sample of agencies served by several different universities. Vernon and Ward (1999) surveyed 65 agency directors in four separate communities, each with its own university, and conducted follow-up interviews with 30 of the directors from one community. They found challenges with the service-learners were consistently reported in three main areas: (a) scheduling—due to both the erratic nature of the university calendar and the typically overscheduled student; (b) lack of student commitment—due to both continuity issues and student

immaturity; and (c) the burden of providing students with the necessary training without a predictable return on the investment.

Sandy and Holland (2006) collected focus group data from 99 “advanced partners” served by several California schools and uncovered “issues related to the academic calendar and logistics, workplace preparedness of students, understanding the learning goals and their roles in the experience, and dealing with recruitment, supervision, placement, and evaluation” (p. 35). Though the authors provided little elaboration on these particular issues, they did highlight a great deal of agency frustration with mandatory hour requirements, referring to the gap between the supposed significance of counted hours and their actual indication of student commitment as “the great divide” (p. 39).

Other authors have concentrated their analysis on extended interviews with a few selected agency personnel regarding their attitudes toward students and the service-learning process (Bacon, 2002; Mathieu, 2005). In a chapter entitled, “Students in the Streets,” Mathieu weaves a cautionary tale by reporting a series of negative agency reactions to service-learner behavior. These agency laments include blatant presumptions by students on agency time and privacy, time-intensive student projects with products that are never delivered or are not usable, and students who make substantial verbal commitments and then disappear.

The work of Tryon et al. (2008) stands alone in the literature due to its intentional, primary focus on the challenges of service-learning combined with a wide sampling of agency voices. Their findings are the result of 67 in-depth interviews with agency representatives served by three universities and spread across 64 agencies in Madison, Wisconsin (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009b). This study focused on small to medium-size agencies with experience hosting short-term service learners. Size was limited to agencies with less than a \$1 million annual budget and/or 12 or fewer full-time staff. Short-term was defined as service of one semester or less, and typically involved a few hours of service per week.

In comparison to studies focused primarily on agency satisfaction, this effort openly explored potentially problematic areas related to agency interaction with students, including management of service-learners, diversity issues, course expectations, and communication/relationship issues. About a third of those interviewed had only worked with short-term service-learners, while the majority had worked with both short-term and longer-term placements. The primary agency complaints revealed in this study were: (a) a poor return on agency time investment due to low student commitment, student resis-

tance and resentment over mandatory service-learning requirements, and the lack of relational continuity over time; (b) ethical issues with transient students providing direct service to vulnerable populations in need of consistent, dependable relationships; (c) a limited capacity to adequately train and supervise students from whom a substantial and meaningful contribution was not usually possible or expected; (d) the unrealistic expectation of students preparing, conducting, and reflecting on a project in one semester; and (e) frustration with the university calendar and its frequent breaks where service-learners were lost to the agency. Agency difficulties with short-term service-learners were pervasive enough in this study that the authors conclude with a call to re-evaluate the utility of short-term service-learning for agencies of modest resources.

Student Concerns

As a field, we have even less in-depth data regarding student dissatisfaction with service-learning than we have on the agency side. Rosing et al. (2010) has suggested that the relative youth of the service-learning pedagogy may inspire a focus on student appreciation rather than complaint.

There are numerous student evaluations regarding overall satisfaction with the service-learning experience, but these data are primarily survey-driven with little opportunity for deeper qualitative understanding of the complaints. For instance, Carter and Cochran (2002) surveyed two cohorts of pharmacy students about their experience in a Public Health in Pharmacy course, comparing their expectations on a number of items with their responses at the course's end. Though over half of the students from each cohort indicated the course was helpful to the community, only 22% of one cohort and 20% of the other indicated that the course had been "a good use of my time," even though a large percentage (71% & 65%) had expected it to be.

Piper, DeYoung, and Lamsam (2000) discovered that a majority of the pharmacy students they surveyed considered their service-learning experiences educational, and yet roughly a fourth of the students surveyed said the service experience requirement should be eliminated. Researchers from both of these studies mentioned student concerns with time and over-scheduling as a likely explanation for this disconnect. In a potentially related finding, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) surveyed 433 service-learning students, and found that while the vast majority of them felt their service was educational and made a difference, a full fourth of the students reported being frustrated "most or a good part of the time" (p.58).

Other studies have taken a more qualitative

approach to single course or program evaluations. Whitbourne, Collins, and Skulety (2001) offered student reflections from two semesters of an optional service-learning component of a Psychology of Aging course. Student complaints included the excessive workload and a lack of organization and coherence from university leadership. While these students openly appreciated the flexibility and hands-off nature of the nursing home placement, they also decried the lack of staff availability to guide their experience. This dissatisfaction with agency interest or capacity to guide the learning experience is a recurring theme in students' assessment of their service-learning experience (Matthews & Zimmerman, 1999; McEachern, 2001). For example, in her analysis of the student experience and the importance of social relationships in a community writing program, Bacon (1999) highlights the clash of expectations when students expect their agency supervisors to act like teachers at the same time these supervisors are expecting the students to behave like professional freelance writers.

The most comprehensive exploration of student concerns with service-learning comes from a study of student evaluations across three years of service-learning courses at a large, urban, faith-based university. Rosing et al. (2010) analyzed 2,052 complaints written by service-learning students over this period in response to open-ended queries on their end-of-course evaluations. Like the Tryon et al. (2008) study, this is the only formal exploration to date which primarily focuses on patterns of dissatisfaction. Student complaints fell into three dominant areas:

Criticisms about the agency. Students cited a lack of attention by agency personnel unprepared for their arrival and lacking structured duties for them to perform. Students bemoaned inadequate orientations, and a lack of knowledge of their agency mission and goals. Students called for better communication between every party involved in the creation of the service-learning experience. Students expressed difficulty understanding how the duties they did perform were meaningful or important to their agency, which tied to complaints about a lack of direct service opportunities to those in need. Students recognized agency deficiencies where the students felt they could have helped more, even in creative areas such as activity design or tutoring plans.

Concerns about site choices. Students had strong feelings about their degree of control over their agency placement. Some wanted more choices, and more control over where they served, while others wanted this decision to be up to their professor. Some wanted sites where they could clearly build on their previous knowledge, while others appreciated the learning potential of an unfamiliar placement.

Criticisms related to time and scheduling. Students recognized the difficulty of being part of a meaningful, impactful experience with so little time on site, suggesting that their projects should either diminish in scope or increase in time. Other students were frustrated over the general time expectations of service-learning, and suggested considering individual student schedules and responsibilities when determining service-learning time requirements. Some suggested class time should be sacrificed for service hours, or that students should have the autonomy to create their own projects tailored to their specific situation and needs.

Taken together, the literature on service-learning complaints, though consistent in basic themes, is relatively thin, with only one study from each side of this relational equation offering a focused and comprehensive exploration of participant dissatisfaction. Perhaps the most consistent theme from both sides involves the struggle with time, which often proves to be a difficult investment for both harried students and overwhelmed agency staff. Central to the complaints from both sides is the quest for a meaningful fit, with students and their agency hosts sometimes straining to reconcile a marked difference in knowledge, perspective, and commitment to a temporarily mutual cause.

The Four Furies

The four furies began as my attempt to articulate the conflict and misunderstanding I have witnessed between service-learners and agency personnel over the last 13 years. Various versions of these four basic tensions have surfaced again and again in the thousands of written reflections I have read and the hundreds of conversations I have had with students,

agency representatives, and service-learning colleagues. I began articulating these tensions as a training aid in my current work with service-learning faculty and students at Florida State University, and believe that they can be used as a tool to educate and validate students, faculty, and agency personnel.

The student and agency host complaints captured in the service-learning literature, when considered together, provide the logical and necessary elements to generate these four identified tensions. Therefore, the data I collected in service to this paper were not intended to validate the existence of these tensions, but rather to elucidate the character of each tension and increase the clarity of its description. To this end, targeted reflections were collected from two different sources. First, a brief and completely anonymous survey was sent out electronically to 118 service-learning students and 20 nonprofit agency personnel with a history of hosting service-learners. Of the service-learning students, 56 were from three separate, recently completed sections of an undergraduate Leadership Studies course requiring 30 hours of service to varied nonprofit agencies. The other 62 students were at the end of an undergraduate Family and Child Science course which required 60 hours of service to local, human service agencies and schools. The courses were chosen for convenience (taught by me or known colleagues), and because they each featured a very intentional placement protocol, instructor relationship to agency hosts, and extensive reflection opportunities for students. The survey (see Appendix) asked responders to indicate the extent to which they had experienced each of the briefly described tensions, and offer any comments they may have about these experiences. Forty-one students (35%) and 13 agency hosts (65%) responded to the

Table 1
Student and Agency Host Responses to the Four Furies

	Poll Results					rating average	resp. count
	no experience (1)	little experience (2)	some experience (3)	much experience (4)	very much experience (5)		
Hours vs. Commitment							
students	26.8%	39.0%	17.1%	9.8%	7.3%	2.32	41
agency hosts	0%	30.8%	46.2%	15.4%	7.7%	3.0	13
Learning vs. Efficiency							
students	24.4%	26.8%	29.3%	14.6%	4.9%	2.49	41
agency hosts	8.3%	50.0%	41.7%	0.0%	0.0%	2.33	12
Flexibility vs. Dependability							
students	30.0%	27.5%	27.5%	7.5%	7.5%	2.35	40
agency hosts	0%	38.5%	30.8%	23.1%	7.7%	3.0	13
Idealism vs. Realism							
students	27.5%	10.0%	27.5%	27.5%	7.5%	2.78	40
agency hosts	0%	30.8%	46.2%	23.1%	0%	2.92	13

poll (see Table 1), and many comments were offered.

A second source of data is brief, targeted interviews conducted with five former service-learning students and four agency representatives, chosen for their willingness to discuss this topic and their track record of high-integrity, candid feedback. Each of these interviewees was briefed on the four tensions, and asked which, if any, resonated with their experience and if so, how. Interviews were videotaped for use in a national service-learning conference, and reviewed thoroughly for clear, compelling descriptions of the tensions and resulting dynamics. I did not poll or interview any of my own current students still subject to academic evaluation. Though this data lacks academic rigor, it is my hope their inclusion will bring clarity to the proposed tension descriptions and inspire fuller, more trustworthy exploration.

In the following section I will present each tension along with student and agency host quotes concerning this issue. I will follow with a brief discussion of both procedural considerations that may reduce this tension and a larger conceptual framing of the tension that may aid one or both sides in their effort to understand and adapt (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

Student Emphasis on Hours vs. Agency Emphasis on Commitment

For better or worse, the number of hours served is a primary currency of accountability in the majority of service-learning endeavors. Unfortunately, some agency hosts feel this emphasis on hours sends the wrong message to students, not to mention the paperwork hassle and constant reminder to the agency that the student's commitment is inherently time-limited (Sandy & Holland, 2006). For students, hour mandates are a primary course expectation, and require agency respect. In my anonymous poll, 69% ($n = 9$) of the agency hosts and 34% ($n = 14$) of the students claimed at least "some" experience with this tension. One student wrote: "The agency I had experience with did not take students' class requirements into consideration. They did take our asking for hours as not caring about the agency, which was far from the truth." Another student wrote: "I raced through my hours and did not ever really commit to the organization." An agency host wrote: "Tension often exists when the student is more concerned with hours than assignments, AND does not voice to the supervisor that s/he may have difficulties completing the assignment in the allotted time." In my targeted interviews, an agency host quipped: "I'm not concerned with how many hours they put into it...I want them to be committed to doing it, and if it takes more hours, then that's good...I don't mind asking them to do more hours."

Procedural considerations. Ironically, agencies that take the time to mandate clear hour-verifying

requirements and procedures, and stick to them, often have less ongoing stress than agencies that allow themselves to be at the whim of students sporadically seeking hour-count validation. Where possible, hour logs featuring time-in and time-out, and kept on-site, can help ensure consistent, current student records and allow site supervisors to sign at their convenience. Agency hosts should not be asked to validate hours beyond their reckoning, either because the hours were completed weeks before or completed under another's supervision.

Perhaps most important is the opportunity for agency hosts to have another way to vouch for student commitment outside of their hours. One way to accomplish this is through a simple, easy-to-use agency evaluation of student commitment. Covering a few key areas of professional integrity, and collected from site supervisors at mid-term and end-of-term, this tool is even more effective when students and agency hosts know that this evaluation will be considered in final grade calculations.

Adaptive framing. Agency personnel consistently reveal that the opportunity to educate students, thereby furthering their agency impact and mission, is a primary motivator for accepting service-learners (Sandy & Holland, 2006; Tryon et al., 2008; Worrall, 2007). Given this motivational frame, clear student commitment to an agency's work may be viewed as a pedagogical goal to be achieved over time rather than an expectation from the first hour. If an agency's motivation is primarily educational rather than transactive in nature, the normal trajectory of student growth and maturity over time is to be expected, and initial disappointments tolerated. This developmental frame may be helpful with agency hosts and students alike, as it implies an expectation that ideally, hours invested in agency work have the potential to deepen both felt and expressed commitment.

Student Emphasis on Learning vs. Agency Emphasis on Efficiency

Students often fail to find the meaning in service-learning tasks that are nonetheless essential to their host agency operations. The daily needs of agencies are often so great and the "all hands on deck" philosophy so pervasive that students simply fill any necessary niche. In the poll, 41% ($n = 5$) of the agency hosts and 49% ($n = 20$) of the students claimed at least "some" experience with this tension. One student wrote: "Personally, I wanted to gain new learning from my service in relation to my class, and with my particular agency I often felt like I was doing busy work and not gaining real experiences." Another student wrote: "...they did not care about our leadership development at all; they simply wanted us there to be a few extra pairs of hands." An agency host

wrote: "Due to the limited amount of time they spend at the agency each week and the complex nature of the agency, it is not possible for us to train students for in-depth work." In targeted interviews, one student fumed, as if still speaking to his site supervisor: "...you've got us waking up early in the morning to sit out and take people's money and have them park somewhere. We want to actually have an impact on people!" An agency host offered:

Our agency...was in the midst of pretty significant organizational change....so that was a struggle for me because I needed them to help with the functioning of our department and doing menial things... and probably they would have appreciated more time to do more meaningful learning.

Procedural considerations. It is not uncommon for agency personnel to mistake service-learners for other community service volunteers (Birdsall, 2005). At a minimum, students must make sure that their syllabus and/or learning objectives for the service experience are shared with their agency hosts, and a letter from their instructor clearly outlining the expectations for the experience is also helpful (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). On the agency side, a brief orientation to the agency mission, scope of work, and current resources available to do the work is essential, as students need to understand both the aims and struggles of the organization they are temporarily joining. If possible, some agency access to student reflections on their educational experience should be offered, even if it is only occasional and selective (Eyler, 2002).

Adaptive framing. For service-learners who are untrained and new to the work of their agency, it is inevitable that some balance of their responsibilities will be unskilled and potentially uninspiring. The power of a contextual frame to help put these experiences into perspective cannot be overestimated. As an example, one of the service-learners interviewed for this project served with a local Hospice organization, and on two different occasions spent several hours shredding confidential documents. Though this was an unfortunate use of his time, the tension surrounding this agency choice was severely lessened when this young man was given a short lesson regarding agency records, the extreme value placed on the appropriate handling of confidential documents, the pressing problem of adequate storage in a crowded facility, and the recent loss of paid personnel to address this issue. As a result, this work, though mindless and repetitive, grew in value, meaning, and educational merit. Course reflection opportunities, appropriately prompted and fielded by instructors with both empathy and contextual information, can provide ripe

opportunities for students to glean meaning from service experiences that otherwise may seem empty (Eyler, 2002; Hatcher & Bringle, 1997).

Student Emphasis on Flexibility vs. Agency Emphasis on Dependability

Student perception that the inflexible demands of service-learning are offensively insensitive to their hectic schedules often meets with agency amazement that students could be so cavalier about their service commitments. In the poll, 61% ($n = 8$) of the agency hosts and 42% ($n = 17$) of the students claimed at least "some" experience with this tension. One agency host wrote:

...there are some that don't seem to grasp the importance of being here when they say they are going to be here. For those, everything else in life has priority before volunteering. Sometimes I am in shock on how students sometimes don't come for a shift and feel no remorse about it.

A student wrote: "Being a student is hard enough and when you are giving your personal time and hours to an organization it is hard for them to act as if it is a paid job that you are responsible for." In interviews, an agency host shared: "We really value their help...and, thus, we make projects for them to do, and they can't do them at their speed, they really have to do them at our speed." Another offered: "I tried to be a little more flexible which probably bit me in the rear end...it became a bit of a nightmare just trying to juggle, O.K., who's coming in now?" A student remarked: "I think college is just a unique time when you have so many things going on in your lives that you want everything to be flexible so you can, you know, play Tetris with your hours."

Procedural considerations. Without specific guidelines regarding their service hours, students are likely to fit their service-learning time in where it is least likely to interfere with their comfortable regimen of study, work, and play (Dalton & Crosby, 2008). I have heard countless complaints from agency hosts over the years about students showing up and demanding to serve all their hours in the final two weeks of the semester. Once, due to a loophole in my own syllabus, I had a small group of students surprise me and their large agency by serving their entire thirty hours of service in the first full week and weekend of the semester. This may have cleared their schedule for the rest of the semester, but it was an unfortunate choice for both their agency and our class dynamic.

It is important that instructors and agencies work together to establish policies that assure service coverage while respecting both agency and student needs where possible. Beyond scheduling, crystal clear expectations must be established at agencies

concerning professional expectations such as dress, absence/tardiness, client contact, and confidentiality. Flexibility in these areas is often assumed by students because they are not paid staff, and agency hosts who count on student dependability can be slow to correct these assumptions until they have reached an unproductive level of anger and disillusionment with service-learners.

Adaptive framing. Sometimes extreme agency flexibility, though highly desired, is interpreted by students to mean that their presence at the agency is not valued enough to be counted upon. As noted above, student complaints in the literature reflect a clear desire for structure and work that matters (e.g., Rosing et al., 2010), and this is difficult for agencies to provide along with totally flexible scheduling. Important work requires dependability and accountability, and access to agency staff often depends on students keeping a set, predictable schedule. One of the most powerful determinants of student motivation is *perceived usefulness* (Astin et al., 2000). In my experience, many service-learners who feel useful show up early and stay late when possible, and regularly exceed their service-learning hour requirements. The idea that agency standards for punctuality, communication, and consistency are directly related to the importance of student help is a frame that can transform the notion of agency inflexibility into a genuine display of agency respect.

Student Emphasis on Idealism vs. Agency Emphasis on Realism

Charged with fresh classroom knowledge and youthful assurance, students are often disappointed with the realities of agency work, and agencies have little time for student judgments easily interpreted as naïve presumption. In the poll, close to 70% ($n = 9$) of the agency hosts and 62% ($n = 25$) of the students claimed at least “some” experience with this tension. One agency host wrote:

Students come to us not understanding the full picture or reasoning behind our work. ...they don't always take time to learn (or listen) to why some things are/aren't a certain way or that similar methods being suggested have been tried in the past and failed.

A student wrote: “I wanted to really help every student at my agency, while my agency was fine with letting many slip through the cracks.” Another student offered: “A lot of times I would see better ways to do things, but just kept it to myself.” In interviews, a student mused: “So many people come...to work with kids to change their lives and be there for them. They stop showing up after a month once they see how much work it really is.” An agency host shared:

I think part of our job is to help students grow a little bit of a callous. We've noticed there's a pretty good trend. If it's a 15-week semester, by about week 7 or 8 you'll get interns really frustrated with parents, or really frustrated at situations, and I think it's that “should” mentality versus what actually happens.

Procedural considerations. Helping students face the difficult realities of nonprofit work without losing faith in positive, sustainable change can be a complex task. Students can lapse into judgment of their agency hosts when they mistake forbearance born of experience for defeatism or complacency. Service-learning instructors and agency hosts can help students differentiate between agency helplessness and heartlessness. Classroom panel discussions of agency partners speaking to both their hopes and frustrations can be effective, as are interview assignments in which students must choose an agency worker and formally engage them regarding their personal philosophy and approach to their work.

One of our agency partners serving at-risk youth uses a case study approach with students frustrated over a lack of client progress. These students are guided through client files that reveal reiterations of the same issues and behavior over time in spite of varied, well-intentioned, and proven approaches from a number of helpers. This is not to breed hopelessness, but rather to underscore the complexity of client progress and the importance of creative persistence without blame.

In addition, instructors and agency hosts can encourage and supportively field honest, emotional reflection, even when that reflection tends toward difficult questions, skepticism, or despair (Clayton & Ash, 2004). Students without these informed outlets may simply internalize negative narratives, such as the student quote above suggesting agency representatives are “just fine” with students falling through the cracks (Sperling, Wang, Kelly, & Hritsuk, 2003).

Adaptive framing. Supporting students as they wrestle with this morally charged tension can be a rich and productive experience. I have found that many students show a predictable pattern of response to their agency encounter (Clayton & Ash, 2004). First, there is an *uninformed, naive optimism* that idealizes agency realities. Deepening experience with difficulties can replace this honeymoon phase with a period of *disillusionment* and feelings of helplessness, judgment, and disappointment. With adequate support, and time for meaningful reflection, the disillusionment phase usually gives way to an *informed optimism* that recognizes both the worth and challenge of the effort. Perry's (1970) theory that college students traverse a predictable path of growth from dualistic, either-or thinking to more complex ways of

understanding the world is helpful here. Students may come to experience nonprofit work as exhausting AND rewarding, frustrating AND effective, enriching AND mind-numbing. Instructors and agency hosts do well to realize that often only student time in the field and supported reflection will serve this developmental arc.

Conclusion: Tension as a Midwife for Adaptability and Change

Complaint-fueled tensions between service-learners and their agency hosts are not heavily featured in the public, service-learning conversation, though most service-learning professionals will be acutely (and perhaps painfully) aware of one or more of the tensions described above. This is not to suggest that the realities of the field are not reflected in our canon; however, because we witness the power and vitality of this educational approach when it goes well, we sometimes stretch our meaning-making, tension-relieving skills to capacity when faced with any of these furies.

Rosing et al. (2010) suggests this determined positivity may stem from a protective attitude toward a newer pedagogy, and Stoecker and Tryon (2009a) suggest that most research into agency attitudes suffers from an assumption of satisfaction once removed from agency reality. It does seem, at times, that the field is having it both ways. Given the popular and arguably gritty metaphor of border crossing to depict service-learning dynamics, it is sometimes surprising to also learn from our literature and conference workshops that our border towns are functional and appreciative, with citizens so tolerant of difference!

If protection of the service-learning movement is the function of this inherently positive lens, it may be time to reconsider the strategy. The annual Campus Compact Survey (2011) laments that the percentage of professors employing service-learning has hovered at 6-7% for the last several years, and other leaders have suggested that the community engagement movement in higher education has stalled (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2008). Downplaying or minimizing the difficulties of this educational approach may actually rob the field of the urgency necessary to creatively adapt (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

Clayton and Ash (2004) have suggested that the unique educational tensions inherent in the “messiness” of service-learning pedagogy should be *heralded* as potent elements for student growth and development. They challenge the field to acknowledge and embrace the discomfort as a pathway to developing flexible, adaptive learners willing to take responsibility for their education in an uncertain and changing world. They write:

Our task is thus to see—and to help our students see—uncertainty, confusion, insecurity, and frustration as normal, acceptable, and even beneficial dimensions of learning—as signs, in fact, that learning and growth are taking place. (p. 61)

Likewise, student development theory makes a strong case for educational experiences that fundamentally challenge student comfort; it has been suggested that the customer satisfaction model currently practiced in higher education must be resisted to preserve this transformative component of a liberal arts education (Dalton & Crosby, 2008).

While acknowledging the tendency to idealize service-learning pedagogy, Mathieu (2005) suggests that as a field we have entered a “second wave” of service-learning scholarship which features an increased capacity for critical analyses of our own rhetoric. This perspective suggests we are developing a middle path for this conversation—one that readily acknowledges and sets out to explore the tensions introduced by the discipline, but seeks to differentiate between productive, growth-producing tension and tension causing a poor educational return (Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010). To this end, some instructors and agency directors in my community, while increasing their overall commitment to service-learning, have become much more selective concerning the service-learning formats they feel their agencies and teaching priorities can support. This approach does not attempt to minimize the challenges of service-learning, sweep them under the pedagogical rug, or cloak them in rhetoric about humanitarian responsibility (Butin, 2006). Rather, it asks service-learning advocates to present these aspects up front, validate and creatively address the tensions where possible, and honestly assess the losses and gains emerging from the investment.

This study has attempted a systematic exploration of common, predictable, and stubborn tensions threatening our service-learning efforts. It is a limited effort, as the preliminary data used here are in no way comprehensive, and are intended to elucidate rather than substantiate these ideas. A study designed to capture a deeper and wider range of responses from service-learners and agency staff regarding the dynamics of this unique relationship is warranted. Future research efforts can explore the conditions, interventions, and institutional/course adaptations which most impact this relational unit so pivotal to service-learning success.

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Appendix

Tensions Survey

Each of the following four questions represents a different common tension I have noticed in my service-learning teaching over the years. These tensions are between the natural and expected student perspective and the natural and expected perspective of the nonprofit agency where the student serves. For each question, you will be asked to indicate the degree to which you, as a student or agency supervisor, have experienced the identified tension related to your service learning experience. This tension may have been shared or acknowledged openly, or it may have simply been your own private experience. Any additional comments you may have regarding any of the four tensions would be most welcomed. This survey could take as few as two and as many as 15 minutes to complete, depending on your use of the comments sections.

These results will come in to me anonymously. If you have any desire (or willingness) to speak with me further on this subject, I hope you will email me, but this is completely optional. My desire is to understand these tensions as well as possible (including the degree to which they exist), so that I might both increase my effectiveness as a practitioner and share what I learn with other service-learning professionals. Your experience and opinion are much coveted. Thank you so much for taking this time from your day!

1. To what extent have you experienced the following tension in your service-learning experience:

Student Emphasis on Hours versus Agency Emphasis on Commitment

(where students are concerned with the number of service hours their course requires and agencies are more concerned with the students' commitment to the agency than the actual hours).

no experience little experience some experience much experience very much experience

Comments:

2. To what extent have you experienced the following tension in your service-learning experience:

Student Emphasis on Learning versus Agency Emphasis on Efficiency

(where students want meaningful, educational tasks and agencies want students to do things that are most practical/helpful for the agency).

no experience little experience some experience much experience very much experience

Comments:

3. To what extent have you experienced the following tension in your service-learning experience:

Student Emphasis on Flexibility versus Agency Emphasis on Dependability

(where students need as much flexibility as possible and agencies need students to keep a more predictable schedule).

no experience little experience some experience much experience very much experience

Comments:

4. To what extent have you experienced the following tension in your service-learning experience:

Student Emphasis on Idealism versus Agency Emphasis on Realism

(where students hold a more idealistic view of how things should be and agencies are more accepting of the sometimes difficult or disappointing realities).

no experience little experience some experience much experience very much experience

Comments:

5. These questions were answered from the perspective of a: ____service-learning student ____agency host

6. If you have any leftover comments regarding these tensions or your service-learning experience, please use the space below. If you would be interested in speaking with me briefly concerning any of these answers, or this topic in general, I am very interested in your experience and would love to hear from you. Please send me an email and I will contact you. Otherwise, THANK YOU for taking the time from your busy schedule to respond to this query.