

# THE POWER OF PROXIMITY

## Navigating Physical and Psychological Connection in Service-Learning Courses Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*Service-learning is an experiential pedagogy that combines community service opportunities with academic content and critical reflection. When higher education rapidly shifted to online learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators, community partners, and students had to reimagine how to implement the community component of this pedagogy. As a part of a larger study from a pilot service-learning mentoring program, results from the spring 2020 semester showed that students' attitudes about civic action, social justice, and diversity decreased throughout the semester. We argue that a decrease in civic attitudes seen in service-learners during the spring 2020 semester points to important implications about the impact of shared and sustained distress on students' capacity to engage in service activities that deviate from their expectations of service as an opportunity to provide in-person help to individuals. We consider the role of psychological proximity in moving students to see themselves as interconnected with the communities they serve and to see the problems that exist in these communities as their own. We suggest that a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic might provide an opportunity for service-learners to build psychological proximity to communities and social problems in the absence of physical proximity.*

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach to teaching designed to foster civic engagement through critical reflection on real-world community service experiences. In higher education, service-learning courses offer an opportunity for students to develop their civic identities through the consideration of, engagement in, and reflection upon community service (Duncan & Kopperud, 2008; Harkins, 2017; Harkins et al., 2021). Civic engagement, in this framework, is defined by Ehrlich (2000) as using political and non-political means to engage with a community and make positive changes that improve the quality of life for its members. Significant evidence exists documenting service-learning as a high-impact practice that deepens learning and promotes complex and critical thinking (Celio et al., 2011; Eyler, 2009; Fisher et al., 2017; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012). So, too, exists significant documentation of concerns from

theorists and researchers pointing to the danger of service-learning as an opportunity for students to feel good while engaging in and even strengthening the power dynamics and systemic inequities that inform and maintain the very social problems their service is designed to address (Boyle-Baise, 1999; Cross, 2005; Himley, 2004; Hullender et al., 2015; Mitchell, 2008; Rosenberg, 1997; Sleeter, 2001; Varlotta, 1997). Our current social context—the intersection of a global health crisis with ongoing social pandemics (e.g., anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism, Transphobia, xenophobia, targeted violence toward the Asian American and Pacific Islander [AAPI] community)—highlights both the importance of global citizenship and the risk inherent in approaching opportunities meant to develop global citizenship without the use of a critical lens.

Administrations at institutions of higher education are generally committed to neoliberal ideology and a capitalist hierarchical social structure. This primary and unspoken commitment leads administrations to intentionally avoid detailing what is meant when they endorse commitments to community engagement (Brabant & Braid, 2009; Butin, 2015; Giroux, 2004, 2014; Meens, 2014). This is particularly true when we consider service-learning in a global context, given that these programs often ground calls to global service in neocolonial assumptions that students from the Global North have the values and ideas needed to improve the lives of those living in the Global South (Cameron, 2014). The inherently hierarchical framework of higher education, when left unexamined, intentionally avoids posing questions about what we mean when we talk about global citizenship and who gets to be a global citizen (Jefferess, 2008). Vague definitions of global citizenship and its responsibilities allow universities to offer global service opportunities designed to make students feel good by “doing good” while leaving the definition of goodness up to the university and its leadership (Cameron, 2014). An avoidance of defining commitments to community engagement, civic development, and global citizenship allows for a framework of “saving” and “helping” the “other” that echoes the same rhetoric of “civilizing” used in the past to disguise colonization as a benevolent practice designed to better the lives of the less human “other” (Crabtree, 2008; Gregory et al., 2021; Martin & Pirbhai-Illich, 2015; Smaller & O’Sullivan, 2018). A neocolonial approach of saviorship framed as “helping” the “other” invites both students and educators to enter communities and perpetuate the kind of power imbalances that maintain the very social problems they seek to address (Freire, 1972; Harkins, 2017; Harkins et al., 2021; Meens, 2014).

Students who enter communities geographically and culturally distinct from their own often do so intending to learn about these places and to increase global understanding of society while affording themselves the opportunity to experience new or “exotic” locations (Conran, 2011; Sin, 2009). While assumptions are often made that a desire to “do good” lies at the heart of engagement in learning and service, examination of student motivations reveal that the service-learner is often at the center of their own motivation to serve (see Mills, 2012; Muturi et al., 2013; Richards & Levesque-Bristol, 2016; Sin, 2009). In fact, in their examination of student motivation to take part in learning and volunteering opportunities abroad, Tiessen and Heron (2012) found that student motivations were largely characterized by self-oriented desires to develop the skills that would make them more competitive in their future careers. Doing good for others, they report, was low on students’ lists, and addressing injustice did not make their list at all. Not only did these motivations not move beyond shallow understandings of “feel good service,” they were, for the most part, a one-directional flow of benefits from those “being served”

to those “serving.” When service-learning abroad includes being hosted by a family native to the community, for instance, focus often shifts to center on the emotional experience of the student and how connected they feel to host families (Conran, 2011; Mahrouse, 2015). This centering of student experience not only limits the direction of benefit from those being “served” to those claiming to provide services, but it can also create further problems for host communities. The practice of students living with host families as a way to culturally immerse service-learners, for example, has proven to increase burdensome responsibilities on the women serving as host “mothers” within patriarchal communities (Hernandez & Rerrie, 2018).

The emotional experiences that result from intimate moments with individuals from other cultures certainly have the potential to facilitate identity development as a civically engaged global citizen. Appiah (2007) talks about this potential in his consideration of global citizenship through the framework of cosmopolitanism. Drawing from the influence of the social structure of ancient Greece, cosmopolitanism maintains that we have a shared human responsibility to care for one another and that each of us stands to benefit from learning from the other. At the heart of this framework is an appreciation for the wide variety of human diversity—a concept that turns the assumption that individuals in the Global South live in a kind of deficit state that can be improved with the cultural norms and values of the Global North on its head.

Cameron (2014) asserts that a shift from understanding global citizenship as an opportunity for personal development and charity and toward moral responsibility is often intentionally avoided by students and universities as it removes the “feel good” aspects of service. If we are to understand global citizenship as a moral responsibility rooted in our shared humanity, our responsibility to “do good” for others expands to include an examination of how we benefit from harm caused to others. This move toward what Cameron calls a “thick” conception of global citizenship requires students to de-center their own experience through critical self-reflection and intentional integration of and deference to local knowledge and wisdom (Beaman & Davidson, 2020; Hernandez & Rerrie, 2018). It also requires a complex and challenging examination of the structural violence and systemic oppression that creates and maintains the social ills we design global service endeavors to address (Jefferess, 2013).

The power of proximity to develop and inform the kind of empathy needed to facilitate this shift toward a “thick” conception of global citizenship is well documented. In his novel *Just Mercy*, lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson (2014) details his path to founding the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization that advocates for those wrongly incarcerated in Montgomery, Alabama. He talks of being motivated by his grandmother, who would hug him tightly to ensure that he could feel it even after she was gone. He explains that his grandmother’s intentionality around being close to him led him to believe that it is only through becoming proximate to others that we can truly understand and appreciate their circumstances and begin to see the connections between their circumstances and our own. The power of this assertion is affirmed not only through the popularity and influence of Stevenson’s book but also in research documenting the influence of proximity to trauma on willingness and capacity to believe disclosures from others (Miller & Cromer, 2015), including our feelings of psychological closeness to the problems disclosed and our decision-making processes in response to disclosures (Lee et al., 2018). Much of the potential power of service-learning, and global service-learning in particular, lies in its commitment to creating proximity.

As we carve opportunities out for students to enter communities and even countries that are new to them, their capacity to consider and value the experiences of the individuals in these spaces has a chance to grow. More importantly, we provide students with the opportunity to learn from the knowledge and wisdom of these communities. This is particularly poignant in our current context, where middle- and low-income countries responded differently to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and did not, in many cases, incur the same loss of life as the United States and other wealthy nations (Beaman & Davidson, 2020). The influence of being proximate to those impacted by societal issues on attitudes and behaviors appears to be two-fold. Spending time with those stigmatized can build empathy that can, in turn, work to inform and change perspectives around the circumstances faced by these individuals and the stigmatized group of which they are a part (Miller & Cromer, 2015). Increased openness to new perspectives not only challenges assumptions about marginalized and under-resourced groups but also allows for a shift toward understanding global citizenship through a cosmopolitan lens and a valuing of the unique wisdom and expertise of these groups.

Unfortunately, with service-learning, we often use the power of proximity to sustain assumptions about outcomes and impact that are not always evidence-based. Being physically close to problems is not the same as feeling close to them. Psychological proximity consists of much more than simply asking students to be physically present in community spaces. Feeling close to problems requires both cognitive proximity, or feeling like a problem is relevant, and emotional proximity, or feeling connected to a problem. As service-learning classrooms incorporate opportunities for engagement with community partners, we often make assumptions that linking classroom content to service inherently frames learning through a social justice lens. Cameron (2014) asserts that in order for critical reflection on global service-learning to occur, we must start with the question of what rights human beings possess by their very nature of being human. The answer to this question moves us to a consideration of the obligations these rights impose on others, the extent to which these obligations extend, and the sort of actions these obligations require. Before students can begin to examine their impact on communities and to consider themselves as civic actors, they must first consider their own intersectional identities and how they move through the world. Moreover, students must consider how their privileged identity statuses work to inform and maintain the very social issues being considered and addressed through their service activities before they can truly consider their agency in creating social change.

While service with community partners creates opportunities for students to be proximate to social problems, it does not challenge them to build psychological proximity through the consideration of how they belong to and are in relationship with these communities (Mitchell, 2008, 2015). Without an intentional examination of the neoliberal ideology that increasingly defines institutions of higher education, service-learning courses are situated to develop students as civic actors within this value system. This is likely to prepare students to maintain and legitimize the unjust and undemocratic systems and structures responsible for the very problems they seek to address (Kliwer, 2013; Meens, 2014). In the context of global service-learning, the added risk of students centering their own emotional experience of being in a new place and feeling connected to the families and communities hosting them in these spaces makes the building of psychological proximity an even more integral aspect of creating mutually beneficial experiences rather than exploitative transactions. Service-learners

cannot be part of authentic community-driven solutions unless they can see themselves as being an integral part of the problem.

The circumstance of the COVID-19 global pandemic highlighted the disconnect between service-learning theory and its outcomes. As the pandemic forced physical separation for students and educators from their school and their service communities, we were also forced to grapple with the question of what it means to be in community with one another. The pandemic forced each of us to reconsider what it means to be proximate and how we might connect with others when we cannot share physical space with them.

In his book *Getting Out: Youth Gangs, Violence, and Positive Change*, Keith Morton (2019) considers what it means to have communities be healthy and how we can best understand where this health can break down. He suggests that community is a systems effect—a feedback loop of various elements that allow for the passing of knowledge, opportunities to celebrate and to grieve, and chances to earn a living wage that reinforce one another as more than simply the sum of their parts. In this sense, he asserts, a community is located not only in place but also in people. The COVID-19 pandemic presented us with opportunities to consider how we might locate community in people without being able to locate ourselves with them in their space. This not only gave us the opportunity to be creative about connecting from afar but also to consider the problematic nature of our assumptions that simply locating students within communities will allow for the “thick” conception of service-learning that serves as a catalyst for development of global citizenship.

Butin (2015) describes these assumptions as a kind of “ivory tower dreaming,” suggesting that we often spend more time theorizing about how powerful community partnerships and connections could be than we do building these connections in ways that are meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial. The kinds of meaningful community relationships Butin describes are connections that can be sustained throughout uncertainty and distance. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic moved many of us to find new and creative ways to share moments with important loved ones with whom we could not safely visit, a meaningful community partnership is one that might be nurtured and built throughout circumstances that keep us physically separated.

The question of locating community in people when unable to locate it in place was also particularly poignant for institutions of higher education, as the circumstances of the pandemic forced members of the school community to return to homes located throughout the world. While traveling between school and home communities is, for many, a hallmark of the experience of higher education, the semesters of remote teaching and learning were likely the first ones in which many students and educators existed as a learning community without physically being together.

While the logistic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic made reimagining community and relationship building imperative, the emotional reality of this global crisis made this very difficult to do. The shared sense of ongoing crisis and threat made all of us more vulnerable to lean into our preconceived notions and to seek comfort in familiar strategies and the relationships we have already formed. Terror management theory suggests that much of our behavior when facing the threat of death reflects our desire, as the only species that is cognizant that we will someday be successful in our quest to self-preserve, to create some sort of meaning and order that can provide a sense of stability and permanence (Solomon et al., 1991). In the presence of an imminent threat,

we manage uncomfortable thoughts about death and our mortality by pushing these thoughts to the future or denying our own vulnerabilities. When these thoughts have been pushed from our conscience thought and we are no longer trying to confront terror head-on, we work to manage our anxiety by clinging to our worldviews and trying to build our self-esteem and interpersonal attachments to create the kind of meaningful presence capable of outlasting our physical lives (Greenberg et al., 2014). Our drive to persevere and our attempts to push thoughts of the fragility of this endeavor pull us to manage anxiety by rooting ourselves in what we know, affirming the beliefs we already have about who we are, and connecting with those we see as supporting these realities. Opening ourselves up to new possibilities in the face of a shared and sustained threat, then, is no small task. New learning and strategy development can only occur in the face of terror if it is understood as a meaningful way to affirm our place in the world in ways that extend past our human mortality (Shea, 2021). This tasks educators with the challenging assignment of managing their own reactions to a sustained global crisis while also providing scaffolding to invite students to engage in new learning and critical thinking in ways that feel safe and meaningful.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have returned to some of our earlier research on a pilot service-learning mentoring program (Harkins et al., 2020) and have considered these findings and our subsequent research during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (spring 2020) through the lens of the circumstances of the pandemic and the questions these circumstances have highlighted. If psychological proximity extends beyond physical closeness, we expect that circumstances keeping us apart might actually serve as a chance to reimagine what it means to be citizens of and participants in a global community.

## Method

The data presented in this article is a part of a larger study of a service-learning mentoring program that was developed at an urban, private university in the Northeast from 2017 to 2020 (Grenier et al., 2021; Harkins et al., 2020). This program encompassed multiple levels of mentoring: faculty–faculty, faculty–graduate student, graduate student–undergraduate student, and undergraduate student–undergraduate student. A unique component of this multi-tiered service-learning mentoring program is the involvement of service-learning assistant mentors (SLAMs). SLAMs are undergraduate students with experience in service-learning who serve as (a) peer mentors to undergraduate students currently enrolled in a service-learning course; (b) liaisons between the faculty members and undergraduate students, and (c) liaisons between the community partners and undergraduate students. During the spring 2020 semester, service-learning courses within our university had to adapt to the rapid move to remote learning due to the COVID-19 crisis. In a short time, our service-learning classes followed the directives of the university and public health officials more broadly to shift to online learning and conducting service online. This shift caused unprecedented challenges for community partners, educators, and students to adapt an experiential and hands-on pedagogy to a remote format. With this shift, many classes transitioned from weekly direct service requirements to non-direct, project-based assignments or to meeting with community partners over online platforms. Of the three sites, two switched to a more project-based remote

service work with the same community partner. One of these courses worked with a nonprofit who supports families with children diagnosed with cancer. Students working with this nonprofit shifted from attending the nonprofit in person to working in a team-based model on identified projects (e.g., fundraising) to provide indirect support to the nonprofit virtually. The second course, which had been working with public schools on a gardening initiative, transitioned to developing an assessment measure and fundraising for these communities as well as tutoring international grade school students over Zoom.

## Procedure

We recruited 61 participants through enrollment in four courses during the fall 2020 semester. Data were from 23 students who completed both the pre- and post-test during the spring 2020 semester. Of these 23 participants, 65% identified as White ( $n = 15$ ), 22% identified as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) ( $n = 5$ ), and 13% did not disclose their race ( $n = 3$ ). Students completed the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) (Moely et al., 2002), which is a 44-item self-report measure that assesses skills, attitudes, and action plans related to civic engagement producing six subscales: *civic action*, *interpersonal and problem-solving skills*, *political awareness*, *leadership skills*, *social justice attitudes*, and *diversity attitudes*. Students enrolled in service-learning classes completed the CASQ as a pre-test and post-test at the start and end of the spring 2020 semester. Additionally, qualitative data was collected from SLAMS who completed weekly reflections and an end-of-semester reflection paper.

As a response to the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, students also answered a series of open-ended questions about their experience throughout the semester, with an emphasis on how COVID-19 impacted their learning (e.g., “In what ways did COVID-19 and the resulting transition to remote learning impact your relationship with your SLAM?”). These questions were included in the post-survey of the CASQ. Questions ranged from how students perceived their relationship with their SLAM to how COVID-19 and the resulting transition to remote learning impacted their experience in the course.

## Results

To assess if service-learning impacted civic engagement outcomes based on the CASQ, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA and found a significant difference for *civic action*,  $F(1, 22) = 18.40, p = .001$ , such that students' report of their intention to engage in their civic duty decreased from pre-test ( $M = 4.15, SD = 0.14$ ) to post-test ( $M = 3.57, SD = 0.81$ ). We also found a significant difference for *social justice attitudes*,  $F(1, 22) = 92.10, p = .001$ , such that students' self-report of their social justice values decreased from pre-test ( $M = 4.30, SD = 0.13$ ) to post-test ( $M = 2.61, SD = 0.63$ ). Additionally, we found a significant difference for *diversity attitudes*,  $F(1, 21) = 111.78, p = .001$ , such that students' scores decreased from pre-test ( $M = 4.06, SD = 0.91$ ) to post-test ( $M = 2.65, SD = 0.72$ ). There were no significant differences between pre- and post-tests for *leadership skills*, *interpersonal and problem-solving skills*, or *political awareness*. We also disaggregated data to see if differences

existed between the way that BIPOC students and White students responded to their experience using repeated measures ANOVA. We found no statistically significant group differences by race for any of the subscales.

Open-ended responses from students highlighted their desire to engage in meaningful relationship building as a part of their service and their assumption that meaningful relationships with community partners would be the natural end-product of physical proximity:

Overall, I was looking forward to spending more time with my community partner and creating more of a bond and relationship with them. I think my experience was cut short and was then less impactful on my professional and personal development in this course.

I would say the transition disrupted this class more than any of my other classes because of the nature of a service-learning class. It was a time in the semester when I had started to get into a flow at my placement, so having to adapt to being online and switching online was disruptive because I didn't get to continue building the original relationship, but there also was not really enough time to build a new relationship.

Another student shared, "My service in this class was based purely on face-to-face interaction with the youth, so transitioning to remote learning made it incredibly difficult." These responses indicate a desire for relationship building that focuses on the student's experience of intimacy with the members of the communities they are serving. This understanding of service as occurring only when in physical proximity to marginalized and under-resourced groups highlights how intimately linked relationship building is to physical proximity and challenges us to consider aspects of relationships that might build outside of shared physical space. Perhaps more importantly, it also challenges us to imagine aspects of relationship building that are not dependent on physical proximity because they extend beyond the neocolonial understanding of service as "doing for."

Some responses, though, show how the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic moved students and SLAMs to a new appreciation for how proximity extends beyond physical closeness. One student stated, "It's made me realize that we are interconnected." Another student shared, "Although the leadership in America has failed us at this moment, I think that this crisis has taught us the importance of community."

As predicted, these responses show the development of psychological proximity and a shift toward understanding community as being located in more than just place. With this lens of psychological proximity, possibilities for service extend beyond activities that necessitate physical closeness. Moreover, a sense of interconnectedness moves students away from understanding themselves as the center of their service experience and toward an understanding of themselves as an integral piece of a complex community system. A shared global crisis highlights for students the ways in which we are all interconnected and positions us to think about our global society as one that both suffers and heals together. Students also learned that existing social and health disparities meant that already vulnerable communities were disproportionately impacted by this global event in which we are all implicated. In this way, students recognized that we are all in the global crisis together and that we will either come out of this crisis together or will fail together. For example, as students engaged in tutoring



for international students across the globe, psychological proximity was built even in the absence of physical proximity because of shared experiences (e.g., quarantine, isolation, the risk of the virus, navigating sudden and unprecedented circumstances). Similarly, the opportunity to re-focus on indirect aspects of service (i.e., fundraising) allowed students to move beyond their desire to feel good through providing help and building intimacy and consider the needs of these community organizations and the challenges they now face serving individuals more likely to be differentially impacted by a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given these unprecedented changes, students also experienced immense anxiety at the state of the crisis. As students with previous service-learning experience, SLAMs helped facilitate the transition into remote learning and worked to mitigate the resulting anxieties that were coming up for students during this transition. SLAMs reflected on creating psychological proximity through online platforms when physical proximity was not an option:

In the wake of this Coronavirus crisis, I had to work with [professor] to restructure the class and evaluate the service that students had. Also, being part of the class online, I had to learn how to engage my mentees in online discussions and how important interpersonal relationships are.

Oftentimes, when we would split into small groups, I would always check in with the students asking how they were amidst Corona, whether they had groceries, and they always openly shared with me their lack of motivation to do schoolwork and their stress about the situation. I think that in this situation, students were more inclined to open up in a way that I don't think they would have if we were physically at [university].

SLAMs shared how the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted not only the students but the faculty as well: "The students were very responsive and vocal, and I think that this [online] check-in was beneficial to both the students and to [the professor] and myself to see where they are at." Another SLAM shared how critical meeting online was to human connection: "[One] student in my group shared that she was living by herself, and she was an international student, so she was [feeling] quite lonely. She was glad that our classes were being held still."

Though SLAMs expressed their own sense of anxiety and challenge at shifting to an online platform, their previous service experience as well as their commitment to facilitating meaningful experiences for other students seems to inform a greater capacity to consider proximity as more than just physical closeness. As they worked to use online platforms to foster psychological proximity, SLAMs expressed noticing that in these spaces, students felt more willing to open up and share authentically with their classroom community, even though they were not physically close to one another.

## Discussion

Engaging in service-learning during a time of ongoing threat comes with a uniquely heightened risk of approaching service opportunities and new communities with the aim of managing our own sense of terror by confirming

our previously held beliefs. Our findings that students' expressed intent to engage in civic activity, their attitudes about diversity, and their sense of their own social justice values decreased throughout the semester suggests that students entered the semester with expectations of engaging in "thin" service-learning, or the kind of community service experiences that allowed them to feel good by doing for others. This is further supported by qualitative statements made by students, suggesting that relationships could not be built once learning became remote. We believe that these findings around decreased civic attitudes, after the shift to remote learning, highlight important implications of the intersection of our ongoing social pandemics and sustained global health crisis. Within this uniquely challenging set of circumstances, where existing inequities and vulnerabilities are being highlighted and garnering increased attention, service-learners are expressing decreases in their own self-confidence relating to their intentions to engage civically (*civic action*), their understanding of the causes of inequality and how social problems can be solved (*social justice attitudes*), and their attitudes toward diversity and relating to culturally different people (*diversity attitudes*). While this may seem somewhat counterintuitive and contrasts with previous findings in this area (Harkins et al., 2020), in the context of a global pandemic, these findings are in line with the literature on the theory of terror management as well as the theory of reasoned action.

The human tendency to estimate one's own behaviors in ways that are overly enthusiastic, inaccurate, and unreliable is well documented. This cognitive bias is both highlighted and challenged in the face of events that ask us to continue functioning within circumstances that are traumatic and unprecedented. The theory of reasoned action serves, in part, to understand the ways in which a person's beliefs may or may not impact their actual behavior (Ajzen, 1985; Fishbein, 1979; Miller, 1980). Attitudes, this theory posits, work in combination with social norms to inform behavioral intentions. The weight taken on by each varies with context and is dependent on the agency a person feels to engage in action and the pressure they feel to act in ways that are socially desirable. We see this impact in the statements of our SLAMs who reflect on managing their own distress while feeling the responsibility to serve as mentors to other students. This tension was particularly challenging for students for whom a decrease in physical proximity extended across the globe:

I also struggled with the difference in time zone because it would always be night here in Hong Kong [when classes were being held]. My sleep schedule was not fixed and I would be sleeping during the day. This overwhelmed me while doing all of my papers because I was not motivated to do anything. However, as a SLAM, I understood that coping with the changes in the school environment and adapting to the new online classroom should not be a big issue for me.

In their role as a bridge between educators, community partners, and service-learners, SLAMs give us important insight into the unique challenges of working in real time to reimagine classroom space in order to meet the needs of the students and the community partners while also managing the personal impact of this shared crisis. In this reflection, we see the dissonance between attitudes and behaviors. Understood more broadly in the context of a global pandemic: this student had a belief that adapting should come easily to her within her leadership role—an attitude that was in conflict with her behavior or ability to engage in her role. This can be understood

as an example of students in service-learning classes experiencing dissonance between their thoughts and actions as they are being pushed to continue engaging in challenging self-reflection around the work with new communities while also seeking to self-soothe in response to the trauma of a global pandemic.

Decreases in students' social justice and diversity attitudes suggest that they are seeking to navigate their responses to sustained trauma by rejecting civic action attitudes and political engagement that would require them to shift their worldviews and beliefs about themselves and their loved ones. In the context of a global pandemic, the already challenging and vulnerable process of critical self-reflection inherent to effective service-learning is both interrupted and nested within a set of circumstances that are likely to have students re-examining their assumptions about their safety, their ability to control their circumstances, and their place in the world. This makes educators' parallel processes of readjusting expectations to meet the circumstances of the moment even more crucial.

Reflections from SLAMs help us to consider the enormous challenge of managing one's own logistic and emotional response to trauma while also working to create space for students to do so. The responsibility of service-learning educators to help students to navigate this process cannot be understood outside of their own need to navigate an adjustment to traumatic uncertainty both as educators and as people. In these unprecedented circumstances, those committed to authentic service-learning pedagogy are charged with managing their own terror management responses and resisting the urge to find comfort in seeking a return to the status quo or a reduction of service to its "feel good" components.

SLAMs also indicated an appreciation for transparency around the challenges professors faced navigating this process for both students and for themselves: "[Professor] shared how overwhelmed she was, as most professors were." By being open and modeling their own discomfort in these unprecedented times, educators can connect more deeply with students. Another SLAM highlights how effective this approach can be:

Class was awesome too, we sat around a circle and [Professor] opened up the floor to just talk about whatever was on our minds. We talked about coronavirus, major-to-career insecurities and Rare Disease Day. The classroom felt very connected, and we talked about important things. The students were way more comfortable getting vulnerable in front of each other. It was honestly a really awesome thing to witness.

This reflection highlights the importance of building psychological proximity in the classroom. Building a network of psychological proximity between faculty, SLAMs, and students builds a foundation for students to bring this connection, rather than the hierarchical power structures inherent in higher education, to their work with their community partners.

We see the power of engaging students in reimagining shared spaces throughout our SLAM reflections. These students, who elected to build on their initial experiences of service-learning by serving as mentors to new service-learning students, are further along in their process of civic identity development and their development of psychological proximity to social problems. Statements from SLAMs indicate that in managing their own anxiety and feelings of despair around adjusting to unforeseen and unprecedented circumstances, they prioritized the

building of opportunities to create psychological proximity to one another through online platforms. Moreover, SLAMs indicated feelings of connectedness to the educators with whom they were working to reimagine classroom spaces that lead to feelings of empowerment around redesigning courses to meet the needs of the moment. We did not see statements reflecting feelings of psychological proximity with community partner sites in this same way. We believe that the strategies successfully used to create psychological proximity within the classroom during unexpected and uncertain circumstances can be built on in future service-learning courses to create psychological proximity to communities that extends beyond physical closeness and challenges our neocolonial understanding of service as the imperative to help and do for others.

## Implications

The call to readjust expectations, practices, and strategies to meet this unprecedented moment is one that is shared by us all. In the context of higher education and service-learning, we are all operating with this shared agenda and an awareness of the impact of our current circumstances on our ability to teach, learn, and engage. What might be less transparent, though, is the impact of these circumstances on those who are driven to manage their feelings of anxiety through increased civic engagement. While our current circumstances exacerbate historic inequities in ways that demand increased engagement, doing so without the discomfort of critical reflection on the social justice implications of our intersecting pandemics and our response to them may likely cause more harm than good to our most vulnerable communities.

As we move forward through the ongoing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic and its intersection with our social pandemics, we see the real-world impact of terror management. As these social and public health pandemics wage on, we witness the influence of those who put concern for their own comfort above public good. We see, in real time, the difference between being physically close to problems and feeling a sense of urgency and shared responsibility about these problems. We live in the consequences of ignoring our interconnectedness and interdependence and turning away from the reality that hoarding resources and maintaining inequity not only compromises the health and safety of those with inequitable access to care but also keeps us from sustaining our own wellness.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder that, as cosmopolitanism suggests, we are truly all interconnected with and responsible for one another. We are only as strong as our weakest member, only as healthy as our most ill neighbor. Perhaps, though, there is some optimism in the power of this message. In this forced confrontation with our global connectedness, we might be moved to reconsider our identities as global citizens. Service-learning educators are in a unique position to navigate their parallel process with students and model resisting the desire to self-soothe through attempts to maintain the status quo or to feel good by avoiding critical reflection. As we move forward with our goals of engaging students in service with communities suffering from social problems, we might do so by starting first with an examination of our own psychological proximity to these communities—whether they be local or abroad—and a consideration of the role we play in maintaining the problems they face.

## Future Directions

Due to our limited sample size, we did not have a clear picture of whether students responded differently to their experience based on their race or other demographic factors. As we have witnessed throughout the course of this pandemic, COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted BIPOC communities, where BIPOC communities are at higher risk not only for rates of COVID-19 exposure but also for increased rates of more severe illness, hospitalization, long-term health consequences, and death (CDC, 2020; Gaynor & Wilson, 2020). These higher rates of exposure and differential impact both intersect with and are informed by the ongoing health disparities, systemic racism, and inequitable access to vital social resources (e.g., education, employment, childcare, transportation) that have been impacting these communities and their members throughout our country’s history. With a larger sample size, we expect that we would have seen differences between the attitudes of service-learners from BIPOC communities and those of their White counterparts.

BIPOC students who have spent their lives navigating systems of oppression are much more likely to approach communities from a place of interconnectedness and reciprocity (Hickmon, 2015). Thinker and activist W. E. B Du Bois describes this ability to both locate oneself within and separate oneself from systems of oppression as a double consciousness. He explains that oppressed groups develop the capacity to use their own culture to resist oppression perpetuated by White supremacy and to persist within systems designed to legitimize their devaluation (Martinez, 2002). We expect that with a larger sample size, the double consciousness of BIPOC students would emerge as a strength that would inform different trends in changes in civic attitudes throughout the semester. BIPOC students who have developed a double consciousness due to their own experiences of being oppressed and understood as the “other” in need of being served would likely not struggle with the implications of dismantling their own internalized biases to the same extent as their White service-learner counterparts as they reflect critically on what it means to engage in service in communities distinctly different from their own. These differences should be considered both in relationship to the existing literature on critical service-learning and the assessment of its outcomes as well as in the context of emerging literature on the influence of COVID-19 on service-learning pedagogy and outcomes. Moreover, the implications of double consciousness as an asset for the development of psychological proximity to various social and global problems should be more intentionally explored as we consider how we want to use practices of higher education as part of rebuilding our new normal.

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