HUMAN-CENTERED COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE EDUCATION: DEVELOPING A CRITICAL ONLINE SERVICE-LEARNING PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

With the continued growth in online education, higher education institutions have moved community engagement further into virtual spaces through e-service learning courses (Faulconer, 2021). These courses have a history of being client-based, rather than critical or transformational (Strait & Nordyke, 2015). I argue that this conception of e-service learning stems from an entrenched neoliberalism. In response, this paper proposes a humanity-centered, anti-neoliberal pedagogical framework: critical online service-learning (COSL). This pedagogy expands opportunities for access, equity, and solidarity through humanity-centered methods of instruction in the midst of higher education's neoliberal turn. The COSL framework relies on three converging nexuses (student-community, global-local, and individual-structural) that reframe seeming limitations of e-service learning into critical advantages for deepening student learning and advancing community goals all through a fully online experience.

Online education has been flourishing for decades, and with the COVID-19 pandemic forcing many in-person activities to pause, it has since become a ubiquitous method of instruction in higher education. As part of the proliferation of online education, faculty have worked to move community engagement further into virtual spaces through e-service learning courses. While e-service learning has been in practice since the early 21st century (Strait & Sauer, 2004), it has found new life recently. A cursory review of literature finds over a dozen case studies published since 2020 on e-service learning (e.g., Adkins-Jablonsky, 2021; Figuccio, 2020; Ngai et al., 2023; Parwati, & Suharta, 2020; Zak & Angel, 2022). Meanwhile, Stefianiak's (2020) systematic review finds only four fully online service-learning case studies dating to 2012. Likewise, Faulconer's (2021) review, with more expansive definitions, still only finds nine peer-reviewed studies in the prior decade that examine online service components in academic courses.

The recent expansion of e-service learning is important for providing students online access to community-engaged learning. But there are severe limitations that have yet to be overcome. Born out of late 20th and early 21st century service-learning pedagogical approaches, e-service learning pedagogies have generally been client-based (Strait & Nordyke, 2015). A client-based approach commonly has students focus on developing an end product in isolation from the partner. This does not often foster a meaningful collaborative process. Instead, client-based models use a business exchange model that establishes partners as "clients" and students as "experts" (Beran & Tubin, 2011).

The challenge of developing more meaningful service-learning collaborations largely originates from late 20th century neoliberal influences (Brackmann, 2015; Keehn et al., 2018) that have turned service-learning away from the experientially based and human-centered philosophies of a century earlier (e.g., Dewey, 1981). These client-based models do not afford communities equitable access to resources and power, nor do they offer transformative learning to students (Clayton et al., 2010).

Researchers and practitioners of e-service learning should rely on the work of colleagues engaged in critical service-learning (CSL) in order to develop critical e-service learning pedagogies. In response to traditional neoliberal service-learning, CSL pedagogy aimed to develop a pedagogy primarily focused on social change, authentic relationships, and redistributing power dynamics (Mitchell, 2008). In hopes of extending in-person CSL tenets to online education, I use a reflective and conceptual analysis to outline a *critical online service-learning* (COSL) pedagogical framework, organized through three interlocking curricular *nexuses*. The COSL pedagogy can be used in e-service learning to center access, equity, and community goals amid the neoliberal turn in higher education.

Neoliberalism in Higher Education

Scholars have used neoliberalism to explain the decades-long movement of Western higher education toward commercialization, privatization, and deregulation (Giroux, 2002; Giroux, 2015). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) tie their theory of academic capitalism to neoliberalism, which identifies the rift between the public responsibility of higher education with institutions' creation of organizational actors as *marketers*. Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg (2017) outline multiple "neoliberalisms" that are "rhizomatic" in higher education—offering rationale for increased elements of marketization, capitalism, consumerism, efficiency valuations, knowledge consolidation, and production. The fact that neoliberalism is a governing method of practice in higher education is less up for debate than the ways in which it manifests.

For this paper, I deploy neoliberalism as a systematic method aimed to oppress people, particularly the labor class, for capitalistic gain (Harvey, 2016). Further, this systematic hegemony is often represented abstractly and naturalistically (Gyamera & Burke, 2018). As Larner (2000) explains, even though it is a system of apparently "less government, it does not follow that there is less governance" (p. 12). Larner's warning is important when we think about how free market, individual choice, and competition can act as methods of control even as they are portrayed as markers of freedom in higher education.

As examples of this, online education and service-learning have advanced simultaneously as methods of education that tout civic engagement and public access. Yet, the implementation of these educational methods promotes individualization of structural problems, marketization and marketability of people and degrees, and the commodification of individuals. Rather than being transformative methods of learning that tackle issues of disparity and access, online education and service-learning can advance neoliberal governance of higher education institutions. To be sure, these neoliberal versions of service-learning are not the only versions. There are more critical and humanizing approaches, yet the neoliberal logic is consistent and common enough that it is not one we can ignore (Tight, 2019). Service-learning pedagogies can be methods of enacting a neoliberal vision for an institution's role in educating society.

The Neoliberal Tendencies of Service-Learning

Since Mitchell's (2008) foundational article on differentiating critical service-learning (CSL) from traditional models, scholars have taken up critical service-learning in a number of ways. Mitchell explained that critical service-learning, rather than an educational experience designed for students' benefit, was a project of social change that required building relationships, along with a conscious redistribution of power dynamics with community partners. Over the past decade, critical service-learning has been stretched and challenged to address activism, engage in community organizing and developing, and confront neoliberalism (Clifford, 2017; Raddon & Harrison, 2015; Stoecker, 2016). Yet more than two decades since its earliest reference, we often see imperfect reflections of critical service-learning that still reveal the mark of neoliberalism (Irwin & Foste, 2021).

At first glance, service-learning may seem an antidote to higher education's long-running affair with neoliberalism (e.g., Giroux, 2002). But closer examination reveals that service-learning has often simply been the "kind face of the neoliberal university" (Raddon & Harrison, 2015). Raddon and Harrison (2015) further argue that traditional service-learning grew out of a need for a different institutional—and sector-wide—narrative that showed the public good provided by universities and colleges, whether they be public or private. This need came to light with the increasing privatization of higher education, through decreased state and federal funding, increased reliance on tuition, and the intervention of corporate funding for patent-eligible research (Davis & Morphew, 2023; Lyall & Sell, 2006).

Early efforts in traditional service-learning resulted in curricula of volunteerism that showed faculty and students providing services (often without considering the communities' need or desire for such services)—an effective picture that showed the added "public benefit" of higher education to communities. As Raddon and Harrison (2015) explain, service-learning "lends a positive public image to the post-secondary sector [...that] allows [institutions] to present a kinder face" (p. 141). As institutions began to veer more significantly into neoliberal academic capitalism, they needed this "kinder face" to provide legitimacy to the public mission of higher education (Gumport, 2000).

In addition to being a useful institutional narrative, service-learning became a popular method of education for some students, at least in part, because of its contribution to a student's employment marketability (Bowen,

2007; Smith, 2021). Service-learning provides students with the opportunity for "real-world experience." Traditional service-learning pedagogy is designed to provide students the opportunity to gain marketable, technical skills. The focus on technical skills overshadows collaborative social problem solving that requires humility and acquiescing leadership (Vincent et al., 2021). Because of this, the service-learning experience becomes, centrally, about the student. In essence, the core experience is one of *learning*, not one of *service* (or in more equitable terms, one of *social change*) (Snider Bailey, 2020; Stoecker, 2016). This creates a hierarchy of importance that might lead one to ask, "who is serving whom?" (Lieberman, 2014).

E-Service Learning

Online service-learning (OSL), or e-service learning, has benefited from nearly two decades of implementation (Strait & Sauer, 2004). While not yet as robust as service-learning modes of instruction (reflected also in a comparative dearth of literature), OSL is growing as a topic of scholarly attention (Strait, 2023). Perhaps most notable is Waldner et al.'s (2012) literature review and classification of online service-learning into four distinct categories: Types I, II, III, and Extreme e-service learning. Types I, II, and III are all some form of blended learning in which students fulfill some course requirements face-to-face. Extreme e-service learning (XeSL), conversely, is a fully online pedagogy: both service and learning components are completed entirely through online platforms (p. 137). These classifications were drawn from a literature review that examined OSL case studies. Of these case studies, very few committed to XeSL. In fact, the original literature review cited only three cases (pp. 137–138). This and other works note the logistical difficulty of XeSL courses—specifically that the inability to be in the location of the service is an insurmountable barrier to effective critical aims of solidarity (Strait & Nordyke, 2015). In Types I, II, and III, online platforms are a tool for organizing, efficiency, and ease—particularly for students. In XeSL, the online medium is the sole avenue of education, service, and collaborative efforts.

In OSL literature—nearly twenty years after the "birth of e-service learning" and ten years after the categorization and exploration of XeSL—the most common trope today is that fully online service-learning has indisputable limitations. XeSL has been seemingly irrevocably relegated to a "consultation model" in which students and community cannot engage in a transformative experience (Strait & Nordyke, 2015, p. 26). Top disciplines of XeSL tend to reinforce a client-based model in courses—business, marketing, communications, and technical skills courses have been the most common types of courses (Germain, 2019; Ngai et al., 2024; Strait & Nordyke, 2015). Core to these fields is learning how to serve a client base. Business classes or technical writing classes establish "real-world experiences" for students who create a written product before handing it over to clients (Barath, 2020; Waldner et al., 2010). This approach reinforces the professionalization and marketization of higher education learning that is emblematic of neoliberalism.

XeSL literature also reveals that most cases are mired in the practical difficulties of digital communication (Kaur, 2019; Tangen et al., 2018), consultation mindsets and curricula (Waldner & Hunter, 2008; Waldner et al., 2010), and relational and physical distance (Bringle & Clayton, 2020; Shah et al., 2018). These barriers point XeSL practitioners and researchers alike toward a traditional version of service-learning that aims at "practical

application" of academic material to gain "real-world experience." This stands in contrast to the CSL human-centered aims of collaborative experience for social change. But, with a large uptake of the pedagogy still looming, OSL still has time and space to transform into expansive pedagogies of deep relationships, power sharing, and solidarity.

Resisting Neoliberalism in Higher Education

To imagine a COSL pedagogy, I build on the counter-history of critical pedagogies that have challenged mainstream neoliberal methods of teaching and learning. These are found in CSL and decolonizing service-learning perspectives as well as online pedagogies such as Community of Inquiry (COI), which relies on social, cognitive, and teaching presence to center community formation as foundational to learning in online educational settings (Fiock, 2020) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which prioritizes designing curricula and pedagogies that are equitably accessible and relatable to the full range of diverse student bodies (Edyburn, 2005). None of these methods has perfectly challenged neoliberalism or perfectly detached itself from neoliberal tendencies. It is a necessary function of challenging an ongoing hegemonic status quo that critical theories are unfinished. Yet, the core lessons of CSL and collaborative online pedagogies focus on changing social structures, while examining the human-centered experiences made available by more collaborative structures.

Critical Lessons Learned

Online education is, in many ways, a revolution in access. Even though it expanded so quickly in part because it was a revenue generator, online education is now successful largely because of its quality educational offerings (Ortagus & Derreth, 2020). Though it is not nearly a panacea—there still exists a strong digital divide especially related to race and income (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2018)—in many ways online education has broken long-standing barriers to access. Veterans, rural residents, and other historically under-enrolled and marginalized students make up greater proportions of online students (Ortagus, 2017). Along with an expanded student body, pedagogy scholars have developed methods and theories for online education that rely on access and diversity as fundamental elements of successful teaching and learning. These methods aim to support all students and open courses as sites of learning and collaboration that decentralize instructors in the course. Methods like Community of Inquiry (COI) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are admittedly incomplete, but they can also challenge educational norms grounded in neoliberalism by relying on social presence and humanity-centered designs (Fovet, 2021).

Online education can be designed to depersonalize education—the promise of access turns into an education that can utilize a kind of assembly-line pedagogy. To maintain measures of quality, through methods of surveillance, online education has removed a focus on the personal—or more to the point, *the person* of our students. UDL is fundamentally a method of design that centers the humanity of individuals in the course (Harshbarger, 2020). Rather than asking students to fit a singular vision of learning, UDL creates a structure for which resources, pedagogy, and course design adjusts to be universally accessible (Sasha-Gupta et al., 2019).

COI also works to resist depersonalization by offering multiple "presences"—social, cognitive, and teaching—that an instructor can take up to engage their students (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Social presence calls for instructors to engage socially and emotionally in an online course as "real people," which in turn has shown advances in course community, student outcomes, and an improved socio-emotional climate (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Kreijns et al. (2014) describe social presence as the "salience of the other" which leads to the sense of intimacy in an interpersonal relationship. Social presence, in other words, is an attempt at establishing a community "closeness" that, in service-learning courses, can be used as a foundation on which to build the trust and vulnerability required to engage in activities toward social change and solidarity.

Extending this concept, a *critical* social presence would locate an individual in their various contexts—including geographic—as foundational to the socio-emotional connection made between participants. For a service-learning class, this is important for understanding more about community partners and their specific communities, but it is also important for resisting the depersonalizing of students in conventional online settings.

As individuals locate themselves in their various contextual geographies, the space of an OSL course expands. Where in-person service-learning centers a single geography through which other contexts and histories intersect, a COSL course can develop as complicated *cross-contextual* space, a network, that welcomes and values each person's contextualized, historicized self. In this way, each participant can arrive at a COSL course as both student and community member in fundamentally relevant ways. Meanwhile, critical service-learning (CSL) has transformed service-learning pedagogies from hierarchical to collaborative and subversive. Its core tenets—social change, authentic relationships, and redistribution of power—make CSL simultaneously personal, social, and structural (Mitchell, 2008).

CSL, like the above online pedagogies, is also incomplete. Even with a strong historical shift toward the critical, service-learning remains criticized for its centering of Whiteness (Irwin & Foste, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2012). Other perspectives, like Santiago-Ortiz's (2019) call for an anticolonial stance in service-learning, which demands more than critical perspectives on social change. In naming this approach, she acknowledges the inherent limitations of service-learning, noting that *decolonizing* means relinquishing stolen land (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Until that is realized, decolonization is not a possibility. Instead, Santiago-Ortiz calls for an *anticolonial stance*, which she describes as

> the acknowledgment of settler colonialism as a distinct and continuing structure in academic spaces and beyond, (b) incorporating anticolonial and decolonizing methodologies that counter and resist dominant narratives in CCSL [critical community service learning] as well as (c) a relational shift in the way that community–university partnerships are envisioned. (p. 48)

This stance relies on a transformative shift in power dynamics, but importantly, it promotes a relational approach. It grounds service-learning engagement in the both the recognition of structural systems and the responsibility of individuals to build personal relationships that advance social change. Using Santiago-Ortiz's definition of an anticolonial stance, we can begin to construct a new vision of online service-learning that uses its online platform not as a boundary but as a tool for critical solidarity.

Imagining the Converging Nexuses of a COSL Approach

I have developed the proposed COSL pedagogical framework by blending a critical reflection on my experiences as a co-instructor of a course in which COSL was used (Derreth & Wear, 2021) and the above analysis of the historical context for e-service learning. The course I co-instruct is an online service-learning course on community-based evaluations in public health. It has been offered yearly since 2020, with an average of eight students and three community-based organizations per year. Enrolled students live across the globe, though the majority were from across the United States. Community-based organizations joined the class through relationships with the co-instructors. All organizations were in the city local to the university. Therefore, both course instruction and community projects were fully online.

Through my experience as a co-instructor of this course and a service-learning researcher, I establish a conceptual framework for this pedagogical approach. To facilitate an organizing structure for this framework, I borrow Mills's (1959) language of *history* and *biography* to explain how COSL works to place people's biographic experiences (biography) in relation to macro-narratives of social structures (history). In other words, COSL aims to impact social systems and social identities in tandem (Edwards et al., 2013).

The COSL framework is a direct critique of the dehumanizing neoliberal constructions of service-learning and online education, as they manifest in e-service learning. COSL nourishes relational approaches that rely on a series of interlocking nexuses that reflect the interface of *history* and *biography* in online settings. These interlocking nexuses are established on three fronts: the global and local; students and community; and the structural and individual. The idea of converging nexuses is to frame seeming dichotomies instead as elements of related social experience that are constantly converging with and changing each other.

These nexuses build on each other, relying on the notion that our *biographies* (our individual positionalities) are fundamental to our *histories* (our social movements and structures). In other words, individuals' humanity must be at the center of the systems we make. What follows are explanations of current OSL limitations, examinations of the purpose of each nexus, followed by practical examples of enacting these nexuses derived from critical reflections facilitating a COSL course.

The Global-Local Nexus

The Present Limitation

This nexus deals with the dilemma of a global reach for student participants in online education that conflicts with the hyper-local concentration of service-learning projects. In neoliberal terms "global" might be better understood as "universal," in which online education aims at a depersonalized pedagogical approach that increases the market (e.g., tuition revenue) of the given course (McCann & Holt, 2009). Meanwhile, the neoliberal reading of "local" might be understood as using a place as a "laboratory" where problems are studied and solutions "worked

out" (Sapp & Crabtree, 2002). The global-local nexus of COSL is not merely combining these two differing approaches into a single pedagogy. Instead, it is a transformation of the value each scale offers, reading them as complementary approaches to more holistic education and more effective social action.

The COSL Alternative

Rather than synonymizing global with universal, a COSL framework acknowledges the complex geography of *global localities.* That is, each person has their unique biographies, that are couched in their various social contexts (including the course itself). These specific experiences are not beside the point of the course, but fundamental to it.

Where online learning can lean too far into a universalized approach to education, COSL makes intentional space for a more specific and humanity-centered approach to instruction and learning. The difference between these approaches is the recognition that a COSL course cannot function without each person communicating their individual contextualized experiences. The progress of the course, the solutions for the service-learning project, and the connections to the material are all dependent upon who is a part of the class. In other words, a COSL course would not treat a person in Japan and a person in Ohio equally, but it would treat them equitably, affording space for contextualizing their experiences in the course. This is particularly important given that online education is a more accessible option for many marginalized students (Zak & Angel, 2022).

The capability of designing a course around the global-local nexus, or multiple global localities, invites the possibility of drawing communities and individuals closer together through shared understanding of each other's lives and circumstances. Courses should make space for individuals to share their stories and contribute their knowledges and expertise to the shared purpose of addressing the service-learning project. This might take the shape of break-out rooms with extended introductions, written storytelling narratives that connect to course materials, or reflection sessions grounded in experiential questions.

The global-local nexus allows courses to take full advantage of the diversity of participants that can improve service-learning outcomes for local community projects (Derreth, 2018). CSL approaches that center humanity and diversity of course communities have previously relied on in-person pedagogies. The expansiveness of truly "global" reaches for online modalities might only increase the creativity and diversity of such coalitions. In doing so, COSL has the potential to be a humanizing approach to education that subverts the neoliberal depersonalization of education. Engaging with others focusing on relational, diverse, individual experiences is a way of expanding further the CSL call to develop authentic and contextualized relationships.

A COSL course example

In our community-based evaluation course, we began with extended introductions, which we framed as "inviting collaborators into a meeting place." Students, instructors, and community partners all had the responsibility to video record introductions of themselves, viewpoints on their communities, and reasons for joining the course.

For community partners, they recorded an interview with me that explored more about their communities and the rationale for the project they were proposing for the course. I and my co-instructor both introduced ourselves, not simply professionally, but explained our perspectives as members of our home communities. We used these as models for students to follow. Finally, we asked all participants to engage with each other's videos, sending recordings or written comments to each other. These comments included what they wanted to learn more about, where they saw similarities in their own spaces and lives, and new insights into people and places they did not know before.

Through this exercise, we learned about places like Seoul, Korea, Cleveland, Ohio, and rural Georgia through how students experienced those places in their everyday life. We learned about their professions right alongside their pets' names. For students particularly, these introductions would serve as humanizing foundations through which they could introduce experiential-based ideas for the community-based project. It would also serve as the beginnings of cross-contextual reflections, discussed further below.

Finally, these introductions opened important logistical conversations for us as instructors about how to best serve students, in a range of time zones, sometimes with full-time jobs or with family responsibilities—while also meeting the needs of local community partners. Simple humanizing comments in these introductions, such as a student from Japan commenting, "I'm talking to you late at night here in Japan, after my workday," drove us to reach out to students about assignment due dates, best times to communicate, and how to engage with partners effectively and appropriately.

This early assignment helps us set a tone for the course that students, instructors, and partners can, and are encouraged, to share their stories. Further, we reiterate, as students engage in community projects, that their experiences *are not beside the point*, but, if understood in collaboration, can bring to the project valuable knowledge that might facilitate a better partnership and product. With some guidance, the dialogue of sharing stories and learning from others' narratives created a space of open, respectful reflection about social diversity across many *localities*. The online setting only elevates these realities, as students remain in their communities, rather than attend university on campus away from their homes.

The Student-Community Nexus

The Present Limitation

In service-learning literature, there is frequent discussion on the reciprocity of projects—a framework that necessarily assumes different expectations between students and community partners (Clifford, 2017). In the most hegemonic forms, these different expectations are pitted against each other, with the community expectations significantly devalued. The community perspective is re-read as "a problem" that requires fixing (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Further defining the difference between student and community needs and expectations are neoliberal definitions of service-learning as primarily for students' educational benefit. The neoliberal tendency toward marketization and transactionalism frames service-learning as a client-based endeavor centered around product creation, which can be largely removed from a critical awareness of how the product gets made (i.e., in

collaboration with community). All of these constraints position a student as a professional-in-training more than a collaborator or learner.

Defining students' role as a professional-in-training can promote a power imbalance. First, it elevates students as current and future "knowers," who are preparing to solve problems others cannot. Second, it creates a transactional approach to coursework, in which students are asked to deliver an "answer" or a product in exchange for experience. The unchallenged power dynamic creates a barrier between students and communities (and faculty) that prohibits meaningful relationships with each other.

The COSL Alternative

The student-community nexus orients student and community goals as complementary and dependent upon each other. Student learning cannot be elevated above community expectations because the pathway to students' learning runs directly through community expectations. Without the reorientation that centers community perspectives, student learning will be limited to professionalized skills. The contextual, social, communal modes of problem-solving that might be available through service-learning become impossibilities if hierarchies of knowing are not challenged and dismantled.

To fully engage with a student-community nexus, a COSL course should be designed around more inclusive and expansive definitions of learning. Students should not be positioned as primarily (pre)professionals, and communities should not be positioned as "problem sites." Instead, the students and community partners, both, are active agents engaged in a communal learning process toward a shared goal.

Further, a student-community nexus redistributes power dynamics so that the community's knowledge and control of the process toward project completion is central. This can be difficult to manage in university partnerships. This difficulty can increase in online environments when students cannot experience in-person community spaces. In past examples noted above, we have seen how scholars and instructors treat this as a limitation—relying on client-based models as the ceiling of e-service learning pedagogy (Nordyke & Strait, 2015). These models result in work products that support some immediate needs of communities but do not provide space for broader systemic transformations.

We might reframe the lack of in-person experience through the lens of Santiago-Ortiz's (2019) model of an anticolonial stance in service-learning and see the opportunity for radical re-allocating of power in a COSL course. Most practically, COSL courses do not infiltrate physical communities that have long suffered histories of exploitation from universities. COSL affords the possibility of community partners controlling or limiting entry into their communities because of the online medium, without cutting access to the resources available at universities. This creates the potential for less violent, less colonial positioning at the foundation of the pedagogy. An online course makes a space for both communities and students to enter, while decreasing the possibility of some kinds of exploitation in the name of student learning. This is possible because communities would have more agency over their presentation, knowledge sharing, and communication than if students went into communities uninformed and without critical awareness of their privileges and positionalities—a consistent concern

in service-learning partnerships (Stoecker et al., 2009). The COSL pedagogy, then, resists the tendency to make a community a place of observation and highlights the need for relational engagement and community agency instead (e.g., Derreth & Wear, 2021).

A COSL course example

In our COSL course, we, as instructors, initially labored over how to ensure students "understood" the community, if they were never going to set foot in the neighborhood. After speaking with our community partners while planning the course design, they put our minds at ease. They saw the course as an opportunity to present themselves and their communities without the usual worry of how disruptive students might be to community members. With this new framing, we worked with community partners to develop more agentic ways of sharing understandings of the context, history, and people of the communities our partners were a part of. In our initial recorded interviews with partners, some would share video of their offices and communities. Others directed the class to readings, podcasts, community art, and historical resources. One organization invited a community member, and organizational affiliate, to share their story of waterway clean up in their neighborhood as a way of showing how communities come together to address longstanding issues.

The range of community-derived resources and stories that partners provided were the primary way students had into learning about the community project. Rather than have students arrive on-site and draw conclusions for themselves, based on any historical and personal biases, community partners were able to curate—in conversation with the instructors—a narrative of their community from their viewpoint. In an online course, these resources took on primary importance for the students, who used them as a way into understanding communities. These were not supplemental materials, instead they were the only way to engage in an effective context-specific evaluation project.

Returning to the clean waterways example, we can see how students relied on communities' own telling of who they were to advance their project. Students used the community member's story, the community partner's guidance, and a community-based resource on the history of how the city's waterways and sewer systems were built, how they are inter-related, why they needed repair, and how communities could contribute to cleaner waterways. These resources led students to develop the infrastructure for a community-sourced interactive map of cleaning activities that prioritized the community's ongoing events and assets.

The Structural-Individual Nexus

The Present Limitation

The structural-individual nexus is perhaps the most necessary to subverting neoliberalism in e-service learning toward a COSL pedagogy. Neoliberalism makes structures and systems invisible (Larner, 2000). Service-learning becomes a way to empower students as actors to address problems in communities, but without any necessary

framing of the interface between individuals and structural social problems. This neoliberal individualizing of structural problems fuels a hierarchy of knowing that positions students above community partners in their understanding of community needs and goals. This model of engagement further entrenches power dynamics that encourage transactional engagement, savior mentalities, and colonial relationships to place.

In OSL, the individualizing of service-learning can combine with depersonalized online pedagogies (Waldner et al., 2012). The result of this combination of seeming contradictions (individualism and depersonalized education) is a professional training approach. Our individual roles and capability within *industry* become the method of solving problems. Problems are still not defined as systemic. Instead, each problem is "client-based." With a client-based structure, the online education parlance of job-training becomes particularly relevant. Service-learning poses students as "knowers-in-training," where OSL narrowly defines the relevant "knowing" as professionalized knowing. Professionalized OSL might further posit that industries and market innovations have answers for "client-based problems." In this way, students are trained that they can still individually solve problems, but that the best way to do so is with professional knowledge and expertise in a given industry. This is evident in client-based models such as travel and tourism (Dort & Gough, 2023), business (McGorry, 2015), and telehealth (Muzammal, 2023), which focus primarily on student skills-building more than community partnership practices of CSL. The blend of individualizing problems and depersonalized/professionalized training erases structural elements of problems *and* communal approaches to solutions.

The COSL Alternative

A COSL pedagogy relying on a structural-individual nexus overtly designs projects and courses around the interface of systems and individuals. Social problems are defined as structural. Importantly, structures and systems are not abstract and outside the influence of individuals. The structural-individual nexus reflects the dialectical relationship between the two, in which structures influence individuals just as individuals shape our social structures and systems.

This, of course, is not a new concept (Mills, 1959; Vygotsky, 1987). But we might use a COSL pedagogy to critically analyze this dialectic with students and community partners. The aim of this kind of education, by way of implementing the structural-individual nexus, is working toward *social change* of an identified issue. The online medium affords new tools for understanding structural issues and implementing methods for social change.

A primary method of engaging the structural-individual nexus is through *cross-contextual reflection* (Derreth & Wear, 2021). In online education, students are spread across many communities during the course; we cannot rely on a shared place through which we experience concrete examples of social issues. Rather than treating OSL as a disadvantage because there is no shared *place*, we might understand COSL as having the advantage of inviting multiple contexts into the course as participants are experiencing them *in that moment*. Cross-contextual reflection, then, becomes less about what *happened* in a shared place and more about what *is happening* across contexts.

Using cross-contextual reflective assignments and discussions, we can make structural forces more visible. In cross-contextual reflection, all participants are asked to understand the social problems at hand (e.g., housing,

environmental justice, social services, education) for the project *and* within their home communities in order to understand how to move forward on the project with a plan for social change. In this way, participants can understand the community project in relation to their own communities. Through this activity, participants might come to a cross-contextual understanding of social change(s) as a structurally oriented one.

The purpose of the structural-individual nexus (manifested through cross-contextual reflections) is that each one of us turns to address these "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973) in our own communities. Individuals can see how healthcare problems persist in a service-learning project even as they observe it in their home communities. Discussions can open on the similar and different causes for lack of transportation in communities across the globe. In other words, we each can engage social issues with a critical lens, recognizing the structural factors involved in any localized issue. Further, this approach can tie the critical analysis of social issues to the importance of authentic relationships, as individuals can rely on and work to strengthen relationships in their own communities to address these problems.

Instead of having course participants see the service-learning project as a discrete problem with manageable solutions (with the "right" kind of training), they can understand the COSL community-based project as a unique but related instance of structural issues that many communities experience. The class can more readily identify these as structural issues because the diversity of positions, geographies, and biographies cannot account for the genesis of the social issue. This framing demands a structural analysis, while still prioritizing individual experiences in relation to these structural issues.

In a structural-individual nexus, each individual can offer ways forward for the shared issue at hand even as they take others' ways forward to their home communities. This sharing of knowledge and experience might be a method that enacts transformational anticolonial solidarity. COSL rejects the notion of a client with a problem in need of solving. Instead, a cross-contextual community of scholars—historicized, contextualized *people*—might gather to address an instance of a pervading social issue. Important to this orientation is the shared approach to this work—it is not "owned" by anyone. The project that holds a service-learning course together is seen as addressing a material, temporal, contextually located instance of a historical, cultural, and structural issue that we all, as a collective of individuals, are in relation to.

The structural-individual nexus and cross-contextual reflections might lead all individuals to identify as simultaneously teacher/student/community member. More than reciprocal, COSL can ensure the redistribution of power by becoming a collective process of addressing social change in multiple contexts. Students are no longer "learning to serve" in charity models or consultative models that erase the structural nature of social problems. Instead, COSL prioritizes communities and contexts, while identifying the structural elements at work in our shared experiences.

A COSL course example

In our COSL course, we designed a reflection assignment that was presented as a planning component of the community-based project. The students are assigned a critical reflection paper that draws together their

experience in their communities with a brief literature review on the related social issue the community-based project is addressing. For example, one project asked for a community survey that gathered families' experiences and opinions on a K–12 school's social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum. The survey was designed to understand how well (or not) families and students engaged with the curriculum and if the school was addressing their immediate concerns, needs, and goals. Further, it was meant to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum according to the SEL learning objectives.

In preparation for developing this survey with the community partner, we asked students to reflect on their own experiences at their K–12 schools. Students reflected on whether SEL was addressed in their curriculum, whether there were structural or cultural reasons this was more or less of a focus, and how necessary, or not, it seemed for their school communities that SEL be present. Further, students then conducted a brief review of how SEL functioned in their communities to integrate with their experiential reflections. Sometimes this meant students would interview local individuals, such as teachers or principals. Other times, research on their local region, through news articles, historical archive, or peer-reviewed work, was readily available. After completing the assignment, we asked students to discuss with each other how these reflections were informing their approach to the project. Students raised important sociocultural considerations like the impact of racism and poverty in communities with the necessity of culturally responsive SEL curricula. This connection to structural issues was not in any conversations prior to these reflections. Students went into conversations with community partners with a better sense of what to listen for and ask about because of the critical reflections on their own communities. Through this practice, students reframed the community project. It was not a singular, limited problem that they were tasked with solving. Instead, students recognized that their work was part of broader efforts to address structural issues of education, the role of schools, and support for communities' youth amid deep inequities and injustice.

This example shows how students' work on the service-learning project was influenced by their investigations of their home communities. This practice highlighted the structural nature of the problem, elevating it from a problem people have, to a systemic injustice that people experience. This adjustment led students to reframe their approach to the project, guiding their engagement with the community partner to be more collaborative and more community led.

Conclusion

The three interlocking nexuses of the COSL pedagogy can work together to value the humanity of individuals taking the course, without abandoning the centrality of structural drivers of social issues. Through the framework, instructors can design a course that invites individuals to be students and community members simultaneously. This might flatten conventional hierarchies, while encouraging individuals to be critical of how social issues manifest in their home places. That all participants can remain in their home places is vital to the pedagogy and new possibilities for community-engaged education. Instead of a *shared place*, students, instructors, and community partners are asked to share experiences and perspectives that require critical sensemaking. Unlike in-person service-learning, the unifying element of the pedagogy is not an event that all have experienced. Rather,

it is a process of *relationally communicating* to others how one lives in their community in order to understand how to change social injustices.

COSL is only in its nascent form as a pedagogy. This pedagogical framework is a place of beginnings. I hope researchers, community members, students, and instructors can take up these beginnings to build concrete experiences and courses. Future work might analyze these courses and ground the proposed conceptual framework offered here with much needed empirical data.

In designing COSL and related research, rather than seeing the online medium as a limitation or barrier to effective critical service-learning, we might use the online medium to elevate the possibilities of CSL. The three nexuses that integrate *history* and *biography* into a COSL pedagogy become particularly effective with the broad access of online education and the possibilities of having students engage in service-learning across contexts, while still in their home communities. This makes the implementation of a course deeply personal even as it is focused on structural change. In-person service-learning makes this impossible because the *biographical* power imbalance will always exist—students are not (always) community members. But online education allows for the possibility of being both a student and a community member, in which the online course acts as a converging point for these dual "course identities."

Ultimately, the nexuses of the COSL pedagogy highlight the difference in purpose between neoliberalism in higher education and critical resistance to it. Neoliberalism uses tactics of dehumanization that allow an exploitative social structure to continue to exist. In contrast, human-centered pedagogies, like COSL, aim for communal problem solving, structural analyses and social change for the purpose of radical liberation and shared humanity.

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