RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the theory and practice of restorative justice can be productive for critical service-learning pedagogies. Restorative justice emphasizes repairing the harms that result from injustice and, as far as possible, restoring individuals and communities to the state they were in prior to being harmed. It emphasizes the participation of those affected by such harms, including both harmed and culpable parties, in restorative processes. Deeply rooted in indigenous worldviews and practices, restorative approaches have been increasingly incorporated into criminal justice systems, and extended to conflict resolution in various non-criminal contexts. But their potential for guiding campus-community engagement efforts is largely unexplored. This paper aims to address this lacuna, exploring how restorative justice might deepen and further the goals of critical service-learning, which aims to address concrete injustices and power imbalances in the communities where it is employed.

Decades of research has firmly established service-learning as a transformative, high-impact practice in higher education (Astin et al. 2000; Celio et al. 2011; Kuh 2008). However, traditional service-learning pedagogies have often focused disproportionately (sometimes exclusively) on the benefits of such practices for students, neglecting the benefits to community partners and the community more broadly (Bortolin 2011). By contrast, the evolving field of *critical* service-learning (CSL) focuses on the potential for educational institutions to be forces for social change, and views community members and organizations as equal partners in shared transformational projects, not as passive recipients of the charitable activity of college and university programming (Mitchell 2008). Accordingly, critical service-learning necessarily relies on theories of justice – theories that help to identify what needs to be changed and how – in ways that traditional service-learning need not.

In this paper, I outline the ways that theories of *restorative* justice can be productive for critical service-learning pedagogies. In the broadest terms, restorative justice emphasizes *repairing* the harm resulting from injustice and *restoring* individuals and communities to a state of just and harmonious relations.[1] It emphasizes the

1. As discussed below, the language of restoration implies that the situation prior to harm was in fact one of just relations, which is often not the case. In such cases, the language of "restoring" justice can be misleading. Despite the unfortunate connotation of the term, however, the field of restorative justice remains quite attentive to the underlying concern, and tends to be forward rather than backward looking in its thinking about justice.

participation of those affected by such harms, including both harmed and culpable parties in restorative processes. Restorative justice has been applied to a number of contexts, from small-scale interpersonal conflict to large-scale historical injustice.

As applied to critical service-learning, this approach requires students to first reckon with social injustice and its concrete harms, then to work collaboratively with community partners to find ways to address those harms. Reckoning with harm in this way moves students from a charity-oriented to a justice-oriented approach to understanding their experiences outside of the classroom. Further, distinct from traditional service-learning programs that determine in advance what sort of "help" is required, a restorative approach demands that the appropriate repair be determined in consultation with harmed communities, in ways that respect their agency and autonomy, and are more likely to produce authentic partnerships and viable paths to justice.

The Need for Theories of Justice in Critical Service-Learning

Social transformation, whether on a global, national, or local scale, requires a normative goal: a vision of a just society, community, or world (i.e., a conception of justice).[2] It also requires a diagnostic assessment of where social reality departs from that goal (i.e., a conception of injustice), as well as a concrete plan for addressing injustice and moving toward justice.

From Plato to John Rawls, traditional political philosophy has tended to focus on the first of these elements: articulation and defense of a normative ideal of social justice. Philosophers engaged in this enterprise tend to see this task as conceptually prior to the others, leaving the description of social injustice to social scientists, and the plan for addressing it to activists and policy-makers. In Plato's *Republic*, for example, the protagonist Socrates sets out to build a "city in speech" – an ideal vision of a just society encompassing not only a well-ordered government, but also a system of education and child-rearing, a military structure, and more. Only after envisioning this ideal does Plato turn to an analysis of actually existing city-states and their constitutions, assessing them by virtue of how they measure up to the ideal.

The philosophical tradition that gave rise to the forms of liberal democracy predominant in the world today is less comprehensive in scope than Plato's political theory, but also employs an idealizing method. Liberal theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and others begin from the axiomatic value of freedom and equality, and theorize a basic political structure grounded in the rational consent of the governed – the famous social contract ideal. While sometimes understood as proceeding from a descriptive account of human nature, the social contract is nonetheless clearly an idealization, as nearly all social contract theorists admit when confronted with objections that their accounts of the origins of government have little historical evidence to support them. The

2. In philosophy, the term "normative" refers not necessarily to the actually existing norms that shape individual or group behavior, but to arguments about how the world *ought* to be. That is, it is most frequently contrasted with "descriptive" analysis, which aims to describe some facet of the world as it actually is. In this respect, the philosophical usage differs from the way the term might be used in the social sciences, to describe the norms of a particular group without necessarily endorsing them.

social contract, as they make clear, is intended not as a descriptive account of how governments arise, but as a normative account of what gives government legitimacy.

This becomes especially clear in the work of John Rawls, arguably the most influential political philosopher of the 20th century. Rawls dispenses with the description of proto-citizens coming to an agreement to establish governments, and instead leans into the idealizing nature of the social contract tradition. Rawls asks us to imagine ourselves behind a "veil of ignorance," in which key details of our identity and social circumstances are concealed. He then identifies basic principles of justice, which he argues that all persons situated in such a way would agree to. These principles are meant to guide the production of "constitutional essentials," which, in turn, form a vision of a "realistic utopia," a political ideal by which to assess and reform actually existing societies (US society in particular).

This approach, which is often referred to as "ideal theory," holds some intuitive appeal. For one, it is hard to move toward justice without having a vision of what it is that one is moving toward. Moreover, declaring something unjust – a law, for example – would seem to presuppose some external standard to which the thing has failed to live up. However, in recent years, some political philosophers have challenged this approach as insufficient or even misguided. Charles Mills, for example, notes that Rawls' 1971 *Theory of Justice*, because of its idealizing method, "had next to nothing to say...about what has arguably historically been the most blatant American variety of injustice, racial oppression" (2009: 161). This, of course, at a time when racial injustice was at the forefront of national conversations and activist efforts. More generally, the critics of ideal theory argue that, insofar as theories of justice must be informed by robust and accurate analyses of what is wrong with the world, the diagnosis of social injustice should not be separated from the construction of counterfactual ideals of social justice. (Arvan 2014; Gaus 2019; Mills 2005; Robeyns 2008; Valentini 2012). This debate has been described as one between ideal and non-ideal theory.

But even non-ideal theorists, with their disdain for armchair philosophizing and attention to the lived experiences of those who suffer injustice, often neglect the strategic question of how one moves from injustice toward justice. Perhaps, like ideal theorists, they envision a neat division of labor between those who theorize social (in) justice and those who work toward it – a distinction between theory and practice. But if one takes seriously the aim of CSL to enact social change through a certain kind of scholarly activity (namely, community-engaged teaching and research), then one must reject such a strict distinction, and attend not only to descriptions and experiences of social injustice, but also develop strategies for ameliorating it.

This makes CSL a kind of *praxis*: a theory-informed practice that involves all three of the aspects noted above: normative theorizing, empirical (descriptive) analysis, and strategic action. In this respect, it challenges traditional theories of justice and reveals its kinship with various other critical theories, from the Frankfurt School tradition (Horkheimer 1976; Geuss 1981) to critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic 2017) and other philosophies of liberation. It also shares this practical orientation with the tradition of restorative justice, revealing possible synergies that have remained, to date, largely unexplored.[3]

3. A recent article by McMahon, Ahmed, and Bemiller (2023) comes closest to filling this lacuna. It offers three autoethnographic analyses of restorative pedagogies, which, in one case, intersects with pedagogies of community engagement. But this synthesis, while enlightening, does not take CSL as an explicit object of reflection or analysis. Plenty of other work explores the pedagogical implications

Restorative Justice as Theory and Practice

Like CSL, restorative justice is also a kind of non-ideal theory, inherently linked to specific forms of practice. Indeed, though the field is deeply reflective, the term 'restorative justice' is often understood to refer to a concrete set of practices more than any abstract theoretical discourse.

While these practices and ideas have deep and broad roots in indigenous communities (Maxwell & Morris 2006; Zion & Yazzie 2005), the increased attention to restorative justice in recent decades has emerged largely within (or at least parallel to) criminal justice systems. Due to a confluence of factors, including greater attention to victims' rights, the compounding injustice of mass incarceration, and the increasing inscrutability of formal legal structures and proceedings, restorative justice emerged as an alternative to a punitive, State-centered approach to addressing crime. Rather than viewing crime as an offence against the State, as modern legal systems generally do, or even as an offense solely against specific victims, restorative approaches tend to view crime as a violation of the core relationships that ground community (Van Ness & Strong 2015; Zehr 2015). Thus, they attempt not only to address the harms inflicted on victims, but also the ripple effects of those harms in communities, as well as the prior social and individual harms that often drive offenders to offend.

While definitions vary, restorative approaches tend to share some common principles and values. First, they are *participatory*. Instead of delegating the task of seeking justice solely to legal professionals, restorative approaches involve victims, offenders, their advocates, and other impacted parties in the process of seeking resolution. This could include victim-offender mediation programs, community-based forums for determining appropriate measures of redress, and more. Second, perhaps obviously, they are *reparative*, seeking, as far as possible, to repair the damage of criminal or otherwise harmful acts, and restore victims and communities to their prior state, provided that that state was not one of dysfunction and systemic injustice. This caveat points to an additional characteristic. Restorative approaches, despite the potentially misleading moniker, do not aim simply to return to some idealized state of affairs prior to a given disruption. Rather, they are *transformative*, seeking to reimagine and reconstitute the social conditions that produce crime and other forms of harm.[4]

This last principle reveals the broad, systemic aims of restorative approaches, as well as their potential synergy with CSL. It also reveals that, while the recent revival of restorative approaches emerged from efforts to rethink the structures and practice of criminal justice, the scope of restorative justice is potentially much broader.

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of restorative justice (Kitchen 2013; Anderson 2020; Vaandering 2014), but exploring the implications of this approach for community engagement is rare, and for CSL non-existent, as far as I can tell.

4. Some scholars and practitioners have emphasized this dimension of the field to the point of making a distinction between "restorative" and "transformative" justice. Ruth Morris (2000) for example, argues that "restorative theory [does] not take into account the enormous structural injustices at the base of our justice systems," and instead emphasizes a return to conditions prior to a specific harm, which may be deeply conditioned by such injustice. While the term "restorative" does convey a sense of looking backward in time, the claim that restorative justice fails to acknowledge deep structural injustice is simply not accurate. The fact that the most influential theories of restorative justice identify transformation as a key feature lends evidence to this assessment. This demonstrates, to my mind, that the distinction between "restorative" and "transformative" justice is a matter of emphasis, if not semantics. Accordingly, and combined with the fact that "restorative justice" remains the most common term used to describe the discipline, my analysis reflects that usage.

This breadth is consistent with restorative justice's roots in indigenous practices and worldviews. Of course, these views and practices are as diverse as the world's many indigenous communities. However, it is fair to say that restorative approaches and understandings are central to the lives of many indigenous communities around the world. For North American indigenous peoples, for example, this relationality often begins with a holistic view of humanity's connection to nature, extending across human relationships, and structuring relations among nations as well as within tribal and familial groups. Accordingly, for such a view, maintaining the health of these relationships is central to all aspects of life, from the spiritual to the political to the familial, from friendship to romantic relationship, in work and in play. The restorative practices that aim to repair broken relationships thus tend to be similarly embedded across these spheres of life, rather than isolated as specialized processes for dealing with a small subset of behaviors defined as crimes.

This sort of view provides us with a glimpse of what it might look like to live in a restorative *society*, one that aims to address conflict proactively and collectively at multiple levels, not just attempting reconciliation in the wake of harm, but aiming to *prevent* harm through widespread communication, participation, and social trust. Given its emphasis on participation, community, collective resolution, and equitable, consensual outcomes, this restorative vision of society can be understood as a vision of deep democracy (Parkinson & Roche 2004; McConkie 2024).

While the revival of restorative practices in criminal justice contexts hardly lives up to this robust vision, restorative approaches are beginning to expand into other, non-juridical contexts. For example, schools at a variety of levels are beginning to incorporate restorative approaches to student discipline as an alternative to the punitive approaches that sometimes literally remove students from school communities and contribute to troubling school-to-prison pipelines and other forms of social injustice (Evans et al. 2013; Welsh & Little 2018; Knight & Wadhwa 2014). Activist and community organizations are increasingly using restorative practices to resolve internal and inter-organizational disputes. And within the legal system, restorative approaches have also migrated beyond criminal law strictly understood, structuring, for example, proceedings in family courts (Maxwell & Morris 2006), juvenile courts (Bazemore & Leip 2000; Walgrave 2004), and more. But restorative approaches have yet to make their mark on the evolving scholarship of community-engaged learning generally, or CSL specifically. In what follows, I will provide a brief outline of what a restorative approach to CSL might look like.

A Restorative Approach to Critical Service-Learning

According to the field-defining work of Tania Mitchell (2007; 2008; 2020), CSL consists of three key elements. First, it is *oriented to social change*. This means that, while CSL projects may strive to meet specific community needs, they do so with an eye toward the way in which those needs arise from structural injustices and therefore work to eliminate these injustices as well as meet the needs. Second, CSL strives to *redistribute power* by challenging unequal power relationships, for example, between well-resourced universities and under-resourced community partners, between professors and community practitioners, or between students and the community members with whom they work. Third, CSL strives to develop *authentic relationships* with community partners – relationships that entail mutual respect and mutual benefit, and that evolve productively over time.

Let me begin by noting some striking similarities between these guiding principles of CSL and those of restorative justice. Perhaps most obviously, both express a commitment to social change, which is not merely symbolic, but embedded in concrete practices and projects. Notice also the emphasis on *relationship*. Community-engaged learning is often framed as a response to a kind of conflict or division between universities and their communities – the old "town vs. gown" tensions. CSL, more than traditional forms of service-learning, aims to make good on this rhetoric, by analyzing and developing the relationships that have the potential to repair these rifts. This includes attempts to engage the broader public in the highly specialized, erudite practices of higher education, empowering community partners and members as co-educators, and challenging the hierarchical view of course instructors as sovereign authority figures, ruling over students and collaborators alike. In spite of all of this synergy, attempts to theorize CSL – or any form of community-engaged learning – in restorative terms are few and far between. So, let me attempt to articulate what such an approach would look like in more detail, beyond overlapping principles and values.

I begin by recalling the key components of social justice praxis, and reframing them in restorative terms. Truly transformational CSL initiatives will entail, explicitly or implicitly: normative prescription (the goals that the project/partnership are aiming to achieve), empirical description (an account of the injustices/harms that stand in need of repair), and a concrete plan for moving forward. Each of these elements can be improved by robust participation.

A criminal justice professor may be capable of providing an accurate and compelling account of the harms associated with contemporary mass incarceration in the United States without community participation. However, they may not understand the specific impacts of that issue within the local community. The first-person experiences of formerly incarcerated persons, or the organizational wisdom of ex-offender re-entry programs, for example, might add detail and nuance to an abstract understanding of the issue. In order to move from a general empirical account to a *place-based* empirical understanding in this way, community participation is crucial.

Perhaps most obviously, a strategy for addressing community harms cannot and should not be developed without participation from those affected. Doing so amounts to the kind of paternalism readily found in bad development policy and bad service-learning programming alike. Community members and organizations must not only be consulted, they must also take the lead in determining what changes are most desired and most feasible. Failure to defer to community prerogatives here is likely to lead to either failed initiatives or changes that are actually counterproductive or unwelcome.

Finally, normative theorizing can be improved through broad community participation as well. If one takes seriously the non-ideal theorists' critique that visions of a just society must be informed by nuanced empirical understandings of social injustice, then all of the reasons that participation improves empirical description are also reasons that it might improve normative prescription. Moreover, if one is committed to democracy as the vehicle for moving toward justice, then it becomes difficult to articulate a view of how society ought to be ordered without discerning, again, what is feasible, and what actual persons can come to support. A view of social justice, however elegant and consistent, is of little value if community members cannot be convinced to support and work toward it.

This does not mean that scholars and community members must always be in complete agreement as to ultimate normative visions, nor that the former must always defer to the latter in articulating these visions. It does mean that working toward justice in democratic contexts means engaging in dialogue, understanding the perspectives of others, even (perhaps especially) where there is disagreement, and seeking to find areas of consensus to motivate action.

This collaborative normative project relates to what Mitchell and Latta (2020), following Noelani Goodyear-Kaʻopua (2012), call *futurity*. They ask:

> If there is to be a social change, a more "human dwelling place," as the desired outcome of critical service learning, what might this change look like? Which changes will be produced and which futures might these changes produce? What might the outcomes of authentic relationships be? When power is redistributed, what new terrains and features will this redistribution produce? (Mitchell & Latta 2020: 5).

Thinking restoratively, one might add the following questions: What does a truly restorative future look like? What sorts of practices will be normalized? Who will participate in these practices, and how? How will future-oriented discourses think about the past (and present), which is rife with egregious harm?

These are hard questions, which I do not pretend to answer here. Attempting to do so, in fact, would miss a crucial point: that such questions should be answered collaboratively, through processes that bring together the resources, expertise, and experiences of knowledge workers with the corresponding resources, expertise, and experiences of community members.

To summarize this brief sketch: a restorative approach to CSL entails identifying and describing community harms, working to develop ways of redressing those harms, and ultimately, articulating shared norms that flesh out a vision of social justice, all pursued collaboratively, through authentic campus-community partnerships.

If aiming for social transformation in this way seems like an unreasonably high bar for community-engaged learning, a few reminders can serve to defend against the charge of utopianism. First, as Mitchell (2008) points out, authentic relationships take time, and cannot be expected to develop and bear fruit in the course of a single semester. Accordingly, new (or young) collaborative relationships may not aspire to much more than improving mutual understanding, while perhaps also pursuing some easily achievable, mutually desirable goals. Similarly, even for established relationships, projects may not focus on all aspects of the restorative process. They might focus solely on helping a community partner (and one's students) better understand a pressing social problem, on creating (or improving, or assessing) spaces where restorative dialogue can happen, or on supporting or amplifying well-developed community initiatives.

Writing or Communications courses might help those experiencing homelessness articulate and share their experiences in various media. Mathematics courses might help community organizations gather and analyze data critical to understanding a need, or securing resources to meet it. Philosophy courses might explore restorative dialogue as an illustration of discourse ethics. Nursing courses might explore conceptions of public health while aiming to connect healthcare insecure groups with resources and care. These are just a small set of possibilities.

Further, when projects like this are grounded in authentic relationships that persist over time, they are likely to evolve and expand in unexpected new directions.

If incorporated well and widely, restorative CSL has the potential to align the aims and resources of a critical "anchor institution" with local communities to pursue social transformation in the interest of justice (Anchor Institution Task Force 2009). But centering harm in the way that restorative justice does also might raise concerns for communities wary of being reduced to their deficits, ignoring their assets and advantages. This perspective is presented powerfully by Eve Tuck, in her critique of "damage-centered research" (2009). Let me now turn to this potential objection, describing and responding to it in more detail, before returning to my own efforts to develop a restorative approach to CSL.

A Note on Damage-Centered Research

In "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," indigenous educator and researcher Eve Tuck develops a critique of what she calls "damage-centered research," defined as "research that operates ... from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (Tuck 2009: 413). Modelled on strategies of litigation, this approach aims to "prosecute" social injustice by "testifying to damage so that persecutors will be forced to be accountable" (414). Research of this kind imagines itself as essential to movements for social change, describing and documenting harms that can then be rectified. But Tuck raises an important question about this common approach (so ubiquitous, she claims, that some see it as the very essence of social science):

> It is a powerful idea to think of all of us as litigators, putting the world on trial, but *does it actually work*? Do the material and political wins come through? And, most importantly, are the wins worth the long-term costs of *thinking of ourselves as damaged*? (415).

Tuck suggests, plausibly given the persistence of oppression and inequality, that such a strategy may not be sufficiently effective to outweigh its costs. In its place, she proposes a "desire-based framework," which goes beyond damage and deficit, to account for the "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (416). Such a framework navigates a path between deterministic accounts that envision communities paralyzed by oppression and injustice, and naively idealistic accounts that construct unrealistic standards of resistance and responsibility.[5] It does not deny the existence or impact of harm, but it insists that communities not be defined by their deficits.

Tuck takes aim at research, but her critique could easily be extended to community-engaged teaching and campus community engagement efforts more broadly – especially those that use community partnerships simply as sources of "real-world" illustrations of the kinds of harm one might encounter in damage-emphasizing

5. This latter approach could be understood to have both progressive and conservative iterations. The familiar conservative approach dismisses structural factors and emphasizes personal responsibility. The progressive variation demands a kind of ideological purity and consistency of resistance that, Tuck argues, is impracticable in real lives.

course materials. It might also be thought to apply to the restorative approach I have outlined above, given that such an approach is centered on identifying harm as a prerequisite to rectifying it. Indeed, such an approach does run the risks that Tuck identifies, especially if pursued in a narrow, insufficiently collaborative way. But as mentioned above, restorative justice is not only about identifying and rectifying harm. Its emphasis on participation and relationship has the potential to mitigate some of the concerns about an excessive focus on damage and harm.

First, notice that Tuck does not deny that oppression and social injustice have in fact created significant harm in indigenous and other vulnerable communities. She insists "I am not arguing to install desire as an antonym to damage ... to make the mistake of merely swapping one framework for another." (419). Rather, her call is to avoid the fetishization of damage – the characterization of certain communities as *only* or *primarily* damaged, in a way that fails to recognize that community's agency and assets. Consider the following passage:

> It is important to ask, when considering a new community research project, "What can research really do to improve this situation?" The answers might reveal that research can do little in a particular situation or quite a lot in another. Or they may reveal that it is not the research that will make the difference but, rather, who participates in the research, who poses the questions, how data are gathered, and who conducts the analysis. This is a call to not take theories of change for granted, but to be sure that our actions make steps toward our purposes (423).

Similar questions could and should be posed about restorative CSL. What goals are actually feasible? What are the costs of failure, and how are those costs distributed? How will proposed projects build community agency and capacity? Do such projects have the potential to reinforce harmful stereotypes or overemphasize narratives of victimization? These are not questions that can be answered by well-meaning academics in advance of a collaborative process. As Tuck notes, the matter of "who participates in the research, who poses the questions, how data are gathered, and who conducts the analysis" is crucial here. Community insiders are best positioned to answer such questions, though the expertise of university faculty and staff will likely be relevant as well. This sort of participatory framework, which identifies and includes relevant stakeholders, is precisely what restorative practices aim to enact.

The participatory emphasis of restorative justice practice dovetails with CSL's emphasis on authentic, mutually beneficial relationships. Tuck notes this as well, prescribing that "relationships among the academy and tribes and communities should be mutually beneficial, with an emphasis on the real, positive outcomes for communities in both the short and long term" (424).

Secondly, one of the central concerns underlying Tuck's discomfort with damage-centered research is that it ultimately conceals the historical and contemporary injustices at the root of oppression and harm. "Although ... damage-centered research involves social and historical contexts at the outset," she worries, "the significance of these contexts is regularly submerged. Without the context of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses" (415). Perhaps obviously, by

foregrounding justice, restorative approaches to community engagement combat the tendency to deemphasize social injustice. Identifying relevant injustices – their root causes, concrete effects, and possible paths of remediation – is essential to the approach. This distinguishes restorative approaches to community engagement from the sorts of ahistorical, allegedly value-free social science Tuck primarily targets.

In sum, while Tuck's critique of damage-centered research identifies perils that any community-engaged pedagogy should work diligently to avoid, her critique should not be taken to condemn restorative approaches. It is possible for such approaches to proceed in ways that avoid her legitimate concerns, especially insofar as these approaches overlap with and are informed by the lessons of CSL. Having sketched some broad parameters for a restorative approach to CSL and dealt with this important objection, I will now briefly describe my own evolving attempt to embed restorative CSL into my teaching on racial justice.

Restorative CSL as an Approach to Racial Justice

While I have experimented with community-engaged pedagogies for much of my career, my first exposure to the power of restorative practices in this context came as a result of leading a group of students on a one-week service trip to the Cheyenne River Sioux (Lakota) Reservation. The work that student volunteers were doing in this community – retrofitting manufactured homes with adequate insulation for brutal South Dakota winters – was desperately needed. Yet, for the Lakota citizens, the experience of receiving such assistance from non-indigenous Americans was also complicated by feelings of resentment, anger, and shame. Students too experienced complex emotions. Having studied the history of the reservation system (O'Neill 2002), and of the Lakota in particular (Gagnon 2012), they were precluded from uncomplicated feelings of pride at their altruistic activity, experiencing guilt, sadness, and the general weight of the reservation's challenges alongside moments of genuine joy and connection. Traditional service-learning programs might be tempted to flatten out or ignore these complexities, but our partners – respected Lakota elders – insisted that we address them openly and honestly, in what I would come to learn is the manner typical of restorative justice practice: the restorative circle. In circle, students struggled with the ways in which their experiences challenged their preconceived notions of "service" and "volunteering." They wondered if their efforts could possibly change anything. They wondered what it must be like to receive assistance from people some of whose ancestors may have been responsible for the damage that they were now attempting to rectify. They wondered about how to provide useful assistance without undermining autonomy or creating dependence. Indigenous participants, in addition to struggling with some of these same issues, also demonstrated deep knowledge of not only the challenges their community faces, but its assets: valued traditions and practices, resilient and resourceful approaches to change, and points of great local pride, including impressive accomplishments in basketball, equestrianism, and competitive horseshoe pitching.

The trust that the organization (a regional non-profit) had built with Lakota elders and citizens was later critical to their ability to address real, pressing issues on the reservation, including a project that aimed to enable local Lakota families to care for Lakota youth who had been removed from their homes and were at risk of being adopted out of their tribal community. What struck me at the time though, was not this potential, but simply

the impact of reflecting together on the complexities of this cross-cultural, power-differentiated endeavor – what realistic possibilities it entailed, what limits it might encounter, and what attitudes it might engender or forestall. This sort of collaborative reflection, sharing, and learning is surely not sufficient for resolving the deep, enduring injustices experienced by the Cheyenne River Lakota and other indigenous communities. But my experience convinced me that it is necessary, and this insight has shaped my pedagogical practice significantly, as this practice has evolved toward local initiatives in my own community. In particular, it has shaped my thinking about racial justice, my area of scholarly expertise.

Accordingly, one such initiative took the form of a community-engaged course to explore the ways in which race and racism shape various facets of life in my mid-sized, midwestern city, from education, health care, and housing, to policing, criminal justice, and immigration. While the course is an evolving experiment, it may be useful to provide a snapshot of its current state, with an eye to how it reflects the restorative approach to CSL outlined above.

In the first place, it is worth noting that the course was launched as a collaborative effort including myself, student leaders at a small, Catholic women's liberal arts college, and the Assistant Superintendent of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for the South Bend Community School Corporation (SBCSC), our local school district. In the spring semester of 2020, our Justice Studies program launched a new social justice leadership program, selecting four student leaders to pursue a collaborative project addressing a collectively agreed upon social justice issue. Early on, the racially diverse group of student leaders discovered a shared interest in racial justice. This interest was solidified in the summer of 2020, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the unprecedented demonstrations that followed. In the fall, we proceeded to meet with key administrators and campus allies. After intense discussion of what sort of project the students would pursue, they coalesced around a proposal to fundamentally restructure a course in our catalog called Diversity Dialogues, which emphasized dialogue across racial difference.

Having found a vehicle for the project, we proceeded to connect with a variety of potential community partners, as well as other local colleges and universities. We built upon existing relationships with a community center serving a largely Hispanic immigrant population, the South Bend chapter of Black Lives Matter, a local ex-offender re-entry and support program, and SBCSC. We also connected with the Indiana University South Bend Civil Rights Heritage Center, and the Moreau College Initiative, a prison education program organized by Holy Cross College.

The students and I worked with these community partners to identify relevant, accessible, and compelling course materials – not just readings, but also podcasts, documentaries, short videos, and more. Accessibility was especially important, since the course was open to SBCSC high school students as well as Saint Mary's College students. Each course session incorporated our community and higher education partners as guest speakers, and featured small-group discussions lead by our student leaders. Course time was split roughly evenly between these two elements for each week of the seven-week, one-credit course.

In lieu of a detailed account of the course content, I will briefly outline how the experience reflects the key features of a restorative approach to CSL, as described above. Overall, the course is structured to analyze and

explore two different conceptions of racism: racism as individual bias/prejudice (explicit and implicit), and racism as structural/systemic barrier. We begin with a general inquiry into the differences and interconnections between these two conceptions. Then, in each of our domain-specific sessions on education, immigration, criminal justice, policing, and health, we talk with our community partners about how individual biases and/or structural barriers based on race are experienced by them and the communities they work with, and how such factors impact their work. We also work with our community partners to produce and refine empirical accounts of what racial injustice looks like in our community. The course materials that students encounter include a document called *The Racial Wealth Divide in South Bend*, produced by community members in collaboration with city officials and the non-profit organization, *Prosperity Now*. A health equity report produced by the Saint Joseph County Health Department is also included. An immigration fact sheet shared by our community center partner also helps to shape students' understanding of immigration nationally and locally. These elements of the course help to flesh out an *empirical account of injustice*.

With the benefit of this place-based empirical account, and alongside our community partners, we begin to imagine what racial justice would look like in our community: equitable health outcomes and access, a welcoming and supportive environment for newly arrived migrants and refugees, accountability for police misconduct, etc. These specific goals together provide a *normative ideal of justice*, a set of goals to strategically pursue alongside our educational and community partners.

Finally, the trajectory of the course is designed to move from understanding to action, culminating in a session with local activists and organizers called "moving toward action." This feature of the course is probably the most important to the transformational goals that CSL and restorative justice share, but it is also, admittedly, the most difficult to achieve. In part, this is because the timeline of social change cannot be forced into the parameters of a single semester. But even more centrally, it is because (to state the obvious) social change is hard won, and often dependent upon a number of factors outside of the control of students, educators, and community partners. Still, if we think of a course as offering an *opportunity* to elicit change, rather than thinking of change as a guaranteed outcome, there are surely ways in which the course can be designed to maximize such opportunities.

In the case of my course, my collaborators and I try to create opportunities for transformative change in a number of ways. The student leaders co-facilitate the course in the first semester of a full-year fellowship experience. The second semester of the fellowship consists of a student-led racial justice project that connects with one of our course partners. I encourage interested students in the course to connect with these projects as well (though doing so is entirely voluntary, as the course finishes before the project begins).[6] Second, as part of ongoing feedback from and discussion with community partners, I ask them to identify what they take to be the community's most pressing challenges, and what specific changes are, in their view, desirable and feasible in the near future. I ask them how Saint Mary's students might connect with their current or future projects, and how the College can help them further their organization's goals more broadly. Their responses to these and

6. This part of the program reflects Scott Myers-Lipton's *Teaching Social Action* initiative, which aims to incorporate student activism into a variety of courses across the curriculum (Myers-Lipton 2022).

other questions guide ongoing collaboration with student leaders, myself, and other stakeholders at the College. Finally, though most of the course partners already have working relationships with each other, I find it valuable to create opportunities to talk together about the goals of the course and of their organizations, and to seek productive synergies therein. This is especially important given the ways in which various sorts of racial injustice tend to intersect and compound (e.g., the way that social determinants of health produce educational inequity, which has implications for criminal justice, and so on).

The first class of student leaders ultimately pursued a project that was internal to campus, seeking to increase student worker wages to a level equitable with other universities in the region. But before landing on this project, they explored a number of exciting possible projects with community partners. These included connecting with a faith-based organizing group to respond to a backlash within the county health department that resulted in an abrupt end to the county's efforts to address racial equity in health outcomes. Another possibility would have connected the student leaders with a local tenant's union, and a group called "Housing is a Human Right," which has been collecting data on eviction proceedings in the county, which disproportionately (though of course not exclusively) impact communities of color. Yet another possibility would have connected students to a local refugee resettlement program, training them to form "welcoming committees" and to organize structures of support for recently resettled migrant families. As new iterations of this and other community-engaged courses have developed, students have taken up some of these projects and launched others, including efforts to help a local indigenous group gain federal recognition, to regulate short-term housing rentals in the city, to support undocumented students and their families, and more. Any of these projects have the potential to ground a strategy capable of connecting empirical realities of racial injustice to a normative ideal of racial justice, as a restorative approach to CSL demands.

Conclusions, Challenges, and Opportunities

While I am generally pleased with the progress of the intersecting course and fellowship experience, the model does entail some challenges. For one, the incorporation of multiple community partners increases the challenges of maintaining authentic, truly collaborative instructional relationships. Adequate communication prior to, during, and after the course can become quite labor intensive. And while this labor has thus far paid off in the form of solid collaborative relationships, I can envision a situation where, over time, some partnerships become more central to the experience, and others less so. This might be determined, in part, by the projects that student leaders choose to work on, the desire to maintain continuity with such projects, and the evolving priorities of the community partners. It would likely also be shaped by the changing circumstances of the region, making some issues more pressing than others. One way to think about a project like this then, is as a way to responsibly explore a variety of partnerships, and see which are most conducive to authentic, mutually beneficial initiatives for change. I fully expect that the course will continue to evolve as these relationships evolve, and as social circumstances change.

A second challenge has to do with the increasing politicization of and backlash against social justice work. This has been most apparent, perhaps, in the backlash against (what is often misperceived as) "critical race theory," and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion efforts more broadly. I am lucky to work at an institution where social justice

advocacy is squarely grounded in our mission, and where our administration has, in recent years, affirmed the centrality of anti-racist work to this mission. But even at institutions like mine, a general commitment to social justice and anti-racism can sometimes fail to garner adequate support for the concrete initiatives that restorative CSL entails. The situation can be even more challenging for public institutions with no comparable justice-centering mission, where unsympathetic administrators and/or political pressures might draw undue scrutiny to restorative CSL work.

How to navigate such challenges will obviously differ depending on the specific circumstances, such that it is challenging to offer general guidance. But one thing worth noting is that engaging with a broader (and sometimes hostile) public about what experiences are desirable and appropriate in higher education curricula, and about the aims of restorative CSL specifically, is an essential part of the democratic process of change in which restorative CSL efforts ought to be embedded. That is, it can be understood as part of the difficult but essential process of collaboratively articulating normative ideals, beyond the specific contexts of community partnerships. This sort of work is challenging, of course, but critical to creating real and lasting change.

Recent years have seen significant social upheaval around issues of racial and economic injustice, gender inequity and identity, cultural diversity, and more. Institutions of higher education have, as in decades past, found themselves at the center of such upheaval, sometimes willingly, as they reexamine what the role of higher education in society should be, and what it means to be an agent of change, and sometimes unwillingly, targeted in culture wars that paint them as the source of radical and dangerous ideologies. At the same time, the landmark *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard* decision has overturned a key affirmative action precedent, and has thereby cut off one of the most common and reliable paths to racial diversity on college campuses. In light of these events, colleges and universities must revisit their social and civic purposes, and their responsibilities and commitments to the communities in which they are embedded (Laur & Russell 2023). A restorative approach to community engagement, aligned with the principles of CSL is well-equipped to play a significant role in such a reevaluation. By aiming to identify and redress community harm collaboratively, with the goal of real social transformation, higher education can play a powerful role in fostering and furthering the justice that our communities, our societies, and our world sorely need.

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