



IJRSLCE

International Journal
of Research on
Service-Learning &
Community Engagement

Volume 12 | Issue 1

Conceptualizing a South African Theoretical Service-Learning Model

A Critical Pedagogy of Discomfort

Tracey L. Haselau

Faculty of Humanities, The Independent Institute of Education, South Africa

Recommended Citation

Haselau, T. L. (2024). Conceptualizing a South African Theoretical Service-Learning Model. A Critical Pedagogy of Discomfort. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.127554>

Conceptualizing a South African Theoretical Service-Learning Model

A Critical Pedagogy of Discomfort

Tracey L. Haselau

Abstract

Service-learning has been criticized as being an undertheorized practice in higher education. This is particularly problematic when we consider the range of contexts in which service-learning is facilitated. This paper offers a conceptual framework for a South African service-learning experience drawing on Paulo Freire's construct of rupture and ideas around critical pedagogy alongside a pedagogy of discomfort. South African contexts are marked by a tumultuous history that bleeds into the present, one fraught with racism, violence, and inequality. Conducting service-learning in South African contexts, therefore, requires a South African theoretical framework to illuminate the blind spots that may develop when borrowing a Western-borne practice. Drawing on theoretical contributions from Freire and Boler, I propose a critical pedagogy of discomfort as a conceptual model to forefront the role of power and emotion in South African service-learning experiences. This is important work to do in order to sensitively and productively provide a responsive frame to construct a service-learning theory that serves contemporary South African contexts.

Keywords: *critical pedagogy, pedagogy of discomfort, power and emotion, rupture, service-learning*

Conceptualización de un modelo teórico sudafricano de aprendizaje-servicio

Una pedagogía crítica del malestar

Tracey L. Haselau

Resumen

El aprendizaje y servicio ha sido criticado por ser una práctica sin suficiente sustento teórico en la educación superior. Esto es particularmente problemático cuando consideramos la variedad de contextos en los que se implementa el aprendizaje y servicio. Este artículo presenta un marco conceptual de una experiencia de aprendizaje y servicio en Sudáfrica, basándose en el concepto de ruptura de Paulo Freire y en ideas relacionadas a la pedagogía crítica y la pedagogía del malestar. Los contextos sudafricanos están marcados por una tumultuosa historia que se traslada al presente, plagada de racismo, violencia e inequidad. Por lo tanto, llevar a cabo el aprendizaje y servicio en contextos sudafricanos, requiere un marco teórico sudafricano para iluminar los puntos ciegos que pueden surgir al usar prestadas prácticas occidentales. Al usar las contribuciones teóricas de Freire y Boler, propongo una pedagogía crítica del malestar como modelo conceptual para destacar el rol del poder y la emoción en las experiencias de aprendizaje y servicio en Sudáfrica. Esto es importante para proporcionar de manera sensible y productiva un marco que sirva para construir una teoría de aprendizaje y servicio para contextos sudafricanos contemporáneos.

Palabras clave: *pedagogía crítica, pedagogía del malestar, poder y emoción, ruptura, aprendizaje-servicio*

*Editors' Note: Translation provided by Karla Diaz
Instituto de Aprendizaje y Servicio
Universidad San Francisco de Quito
Ecuador*

After the end of apartheid in South Africa, the Ministry of Education issued the Education White Paper 3. In this White Paper, they outlined "A Programme for Higher Education Transformation." In the 1997 White Paper on Education (Department of Education, South Africa, 1997, p. 3), the Minister of Education writes that "the higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities." This call

highlighted the need in higher education for more meaningful community engagement that seeks to actively and purposefully work toward social transformation and civic responsibility. In essence, this White Paper proposed a closer interrogation of the social contract between society and the university. Following this, the Ford Foundation donated to an NGO called the Joint Education Trust (JET) to assess the state of community service in South African universities. Based on the results of the survey conducted by the JET in 1997, plans were set in motion for the development of CHESP (Community Higher Education Service Partnerships) thanks to further funding from the Ford Foundation (Lazarus, 2007). CHESP was the vehicle that was going to be used to drive service-learning in higher education in response to the survey results from JET (now called JET Education Services). At this stage, much of what was known about service-learning was based on models of service-learning developed in the Global North, specifically the United States (Lazarus, 2007).

Le Grange (2007, p. 4) raised concerns about the globalization of service-learning, referring to service-learning as an “intellectual MacDonald’s burger that has traveled to Africa as a consequence of Americanization and/or globalization.” Le Grange (2007) was essentially warning against implementing a practice that was designed for a different context without critically exploring the nuances that can render service-learning either effective or unprogressive as a pedagogical practice and social transformation initiative. This paper is particularly concerned with the potential that service-learning has in South African contexts marked with inequality and historical social turmoil, rooted in exclusionary and oppressive systems such as apartheid, and the role that a strong theoretical underpinning plays in the construction of service-learning programs in such contexts. Service-learning has the potential to transcend these nuanced, complicated, and messy circumstances and also the potential to exacerbate them by using students (young, fairly inexperienced—and often privileged, adults) to drive the process (Leibowitz et al., 2010).

It is critical that we hold in mind the differences in contexts between students and the communities with whom they are working. This is not to say that all higher education students in South Africa emerge from similar backgrounds or have access to the same resources—quite the opposite, in fact. Rather, it is necessary to remain mindful of the power positions that students hold when entering diverse communities for service-learning initiatives. A critical South African service-learning model, therefore, requires not only an acknowledgment of but an interrogation of the power structures that lie beneath the sociohistorical inequalities in the service-learning contexts in which our (South African) students are learning. Mahlomaholo and Matobako (2006) have argued that service-learning is not a practice that can be conducted without an awareness of and engagement with these sociohistorical inequalities. This argument is based on their contention that service-learning in South Africa might be “held terminally captive by legacies of the past” (Mahlomaholo & Matobako, 2006, p. 203). This sentiment is one that captures the necessity of critical South African theories of service-learning to produce a pedagogy for service-learning that is responsive to its unique context.

The danger of uncritical models of service-learning that have been utilized in South Africa is that students are prompted (often unintentionally) to employ charity discourses of service-learning to “rectify inequalities” within the communities with whom they are working. Current models tend to focus on empowerment within communities, and on “giving back.” This positioning reinforces the disparities between students and members of the communities, often leaving the oppressed freshly reminded of the inequality they face. If we initiate service-learning programs that take for granted that the community “needs” something that students can “give,” we leave communities vulnerable to exploitation for learning gains under the guise of charitable engagement. A theoretical model of service-learning that prompts an interrogation of the self and one’s own role in the oppression they are observing may help us to facilitate service-learning practices that are more critical and produce better outcomes for communities and students alike, regardless of the contexts in which students are working. In other words, I argue that a conceptual service-learning model that impels students to examine themselves as much as the “other” in whichever context they are learning will help us to facilitate more meaningful and effective experiences for all involved. Moving away from charity models to more critical models that pay heed to emotion and power in learning is a productive move for South African service-learning practitioners.

Hlengwa (2010) describes the impact of globalization on higher education and how transformation in higher education needs to be viewed in context. In this way, she calls for a contextualized and nuanced conceptualization of service-learning that serves our local communities rather than global service-learning practitioners and theorists. She argues that knowledge is a key factor to consider when “globalizing” something like service-learning. Knowledge is used differently in different communities of practice, and it is important in our interrogation of our practices to consider whether we forefront and privilege university knowledge over Indigenous knowledge or do we (as South African practitioners) value Indigenous knowledge in our service-learning programs in ways that our American counterparts may not have done in their models? A critical South African model of service-learning, according to Hlengwa (2010) is one that would integrate Western knowledge with Indigenous knowledge, rather than using Western knowledge to “fix” problems in Indigenous contexts.

Le Grange (2007) refers to this process in terms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. He notes that “service-learning in South Africa can crucially contribute to the deconstruction of Western thought and the transformation of both indigenous knowledge and western knowledge” (p. 10). In concordance with these thoughts, Preece (2013) promotes an “Africanisation” of community engagement and service-learning in response to concerns such as those raised by Hlengwa (2010) and Le Grange (2007). She argues that we need to reflect on “how to Africanise an agenda, which has been, to a large extent, imported from the West” (p. 114). In agreement with this sentiment, this paper offers a conceptual service-learning framework drawing on contributions from a pedagogy of discomfort as well as Paulo Freire’s notion of *ruptura* to reimagine South African service-learning with the above considerations as priorities. In particular, the proposed conceptual framework acknowledges the role that power and emotion play in South African service-learning practices. This is important to do in South African contexts if we are to begin unveiling our blind spots in how we conceptualize and operationalize local service-learning practices.

One of the obvious purposes of service-learning is to personify the theory that students learn in the classroom from their lecturers and prescribed texts. However, the practice of service-learning has been criticized for being poorly theorized. If we are to Africanize the service-learning agenda, we need to do so in the context of theory that supports the development of nuanced and progressive practices that work for the local contexts. We benefit from studying service-learning in a more theoretically robust manner (in terms of methodology) but also in taking findings from service-learning research to reconceptualize the practice in situ. In other words, theory helps us to contextualize and reconceptualize a practice that was not developed for the Global South but is nonetheless being used. This is not necessarily in itself problematic, but we would benefit from engaging with theoretical contributions underpinned by robust methodologies to deepen our theoretical understanding of the practice of service-learning in local contexts.

Kawai (2021) has recently attempted to develop a theoretical framework for service-learning using reflection theory and identity theory. This work is interesting because of the focus it places on the role of the students’ subjectivity in developing relationships in the service-learning context. However, the focus of these theories is weighted heavily on the self and may not be entirely applicable or useful in South African contexts where the focus is on the collective. Kawai’s work originates in Japan but DeMarais et al. (2022) looked at contextualizing service-learning in diverse global contexts (East Africa). They were interested in how we can enable critical reflection in a transformative learning framework with the African context in mind. Critical reflection is important in service-learning (this has been well-established in the literature); however, it may be useful to be more specific about what exactly we are asking students to critically reflect on. Otten et al. (2022) note that most service-learning programs do not pay mind to power dynamics inherent in social injustice and argue that a critical service-learning model in the South African context needs social innovations that pay attention to this. More recently, Grewal (2023) has proposed a model for service-learning that she calls *Seva +*. Her model heeds calls for decolonization in order to produce more contextually relevant conceptualizations of service-learning. Her narrative account of the development of the model draws on Freire’s critical pedagogy to frame a paradigm for service-learning that prioritizes collaboration and liberation from “dominator systems” (Grewal, 2023, p. 2). In further developing Grewal’s

(2023) propositions, this paper proposes that we prompt students to critically reflect specifically on power and emotion in service-learning in order to do justice to the service-learning initiative, themselves and the South African communities with whom they are working.

In this paper, I argue that we can borrow from philosophy (critical pedagogy and *ruptura*) and integrate it with a well-known higher education theory (pedagogy of discomfort) to produce some important insights and nuances relevant to the South African context, specifically in relation to the role that power and emotion play in the practice. Service-learning practitioners are well versed with the early theoretical roots of service-learning including John Dewey's contributions, but we need a closer interrogation of the practice in South African contexts to go in with our eyes wide open to the context—rife with racism, poverty, inequality, violence, corruption, and so on. This close interrogation is made more robust when done by drawing on theoretical contributions from various fields to conceptualize a contextualized critical model of service-learning. This is not to say that the issues raised above do not occur in other parts of the world, but this paper proposes a framework for how we can integrate existing theoretical structures and use them as torches to help us navigate potential blind spots in South African service-learning programs. It is important that whatever conceptual framework is proposed for the South African context is a critical service-learning framework rather than a traditional service-learning model. In the next section, I explore why this is so before presenting a South African example to practically demonstrate the argument for a responsive critical framework.

Traditional Versus Critical Frameworks of Service-Learning

Service-learning has been conceptualized in both traditional and critical frameworks with the latter a more recent development in the literature than the former. Critical frameworks of service-learning emerged as a response to the shortcomings of the traditional models. The traditional model of service-learning is represented in the literature in numerous ways. For example, Celio et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 62 studies based on students involved in service-learning programs. The authors cited the outcomes of these studies as involving gains in students' attitudes toward themselves, improved attitudes toward learning, an increase in academic performance and civic engagement, and improved social skills. More recently, Compare and Albanesi (2021) conducted a systematic review to document the outcomes of service-learning reported in the literature from 1967 (when the term "service-learning" was coined) to October 2021. They found that service-learning (a) improves students' beliefs about social justice, (b) changes students' attitudes to altruistic behavior, and (c) improves critical thinking by illuminating personal assumptions about social inequalities. These kinds of findings have fed into what Stewart and Webster (2011) refer to as a romanticized view of service-learning that does not fully consider the impact of service-learning beyond student gains. The focus of a traditional and romanticized view of service-learning is on the range of benefits that students gain in terms of their learning by engaging in this kind of experiential learning. Claims are often made about improved civic responsibility and commitment to social justice (Eppler et al., 2011; Fenzel & Dean, 2011), reductions in negative attitudes toward those with whom they are working (Barney et al., 2010), greater sensitivity in students and increased empathy (Bernacki & Jaeger, 2008; Wilson, 2011), and stereotype reduction (Conner, 2010; Wright et al., 2009).

While service-learning may indeed produce numerous benefits for students and communities alike, more contemporary literature has begun to employ a critical gaze at the practice in which the more uncomfortable and "thorny" (Stewart & Webster, 2011, p. 13) aspects of service-learning are interrogated and integrated into our current understandings of service-learning. The "thorny" aspects noted by Stewart and Webster (2011) refer to the often hidden and sometimes unintentional but nonetheless insidious outcomes of facilitating a service-learning course, especially with marginalized communities. Conner and Erickson (2017) have warned that poorly implemented service-learning programs may result in unintended outcomes including an increase in prejudice and negative attitudes toward the community in partnership, thereby leaving the community worse off than before the contact with service-learning students. Left uninterrogated, service-learning research can misrepresent the practice if positive benefits for students are overemphasized, and community outcomes are not closely enough analyzed (Conner & Erickson, 2017).

This is a particularly pertinent concern in (South) African contexts where inequality is already so entrenched in multiple layers of daily life for many sectors of the population. Introducing service-learning leaves particular communities vulnerable to further harm if not carefully managed and implemented.

A critical model of service-learning is one that acknowledges the “messy” nature of service-learning, as a practice that is imperfect, in flux, and non-linear. The critical model also pays close attention to power relationships in service-learning—between student and community member, between student and lecturer, and between communities and institutions. Power differences can be expressed in gender, race, differences in physical and mental ability, language, socioeconomic status, educational histories, and personal subjectivities. A critical model of service-learning allows space for these aspects to be brought to the fore in learning and interrogated in their role in the students’ (and community’s) experiences of the service-learning project. Shiller (2022) notes that service-learning, when imagined through a critical lens, also importantly has the power to illuminate the hegemonic discourses that White students draw on in their service-learning experiences that tend to work in opposition to the core aims of service-learning which are centered on change. Accordingly, Bennett and Sanchez (2023) have explicitly called for “anti-racist praxis” in service-learning in acknowledgment of the pervasive and insidious outcomes of racism in institutional and service-learning contexts. Traditional models of service-learning have tended to marginalize or even ignore the effects of race, gender, age, socioeconomic positions, and so on, in service-learning contexts. The critical model, however, centers these constructs as integral to the experience and are indeed the very sites in which and of which learning happens. In South Africa, this is arguably especially relevant because of the ways in which these constructs are deeply embedded in the existing power structures, informed by a complex sociopolitical history rife with inequality, oppression, and discrimination.

Mahlomaholo and Matabako (2006) have conceptualized the duality in traditional versus critical models of service-learning using metaphors. They argue that service-learning is either “in the community” (charity metaphor) or between the university and the community (project metaphor), rather “of the community.” In a project metaphor, service-learning is understood as “doing with” rather than “doing for” the community and is arguably more empowering to the members of the community (Mahlomaholo & Matabako, 2006). Service-learning programs are vulnerable to becoming charity metaphors if they are facilitated for the sake of doing it. If there is true intention to effect meaningful change, service-learning needs to be executed at the level where introspection and disruption are the core agenda. Power imbalances need to be acknowledged, addressed, spoken about, and interrogated. For example, students can be offered spaces for collaborative and private reflection after each engagement with the community, spaces where they can be vulnerable with each other and with themselves. If carefully managed by an experienced facilitator or supervisor, students may be offered opportunities through focus groups or reflective journals to grapple on a deep level with the complexities, both on a physical and psychological level, which they observe and feel during their service-learning experiences. If we simply “give” of our time or expertise with no reflection on the process thereof, we are in danger of further embedding the inequalities that necessitated the service-learning program in the first place. In order to exemplify some of these power imbalances and the effects thereof, the paper now turns to a brief examination of a South African service-learning initiative in order to demonstrate the necessity of a critical rather than traditional framework for service-learning.

South African Service-Learning in Practice

This paper draws on one example of a service-learning program called Masibambane, facilitated through the local university in Makhanda, Eastern Cape in South Africa. This service-learning program has been the focus of several research endeavors (for example, Haselau, 2020; Haselau & Saville Young, 2022; Saville Young, 2019; Saville Young & Berry, 2016) and is included here to exemplify some of the key arguments made in this paper. Masibambane is a service-learning course offered to fourth-year psychology students to introduce them to childhood disability and mental health. The focus of the course is on developing psychosocial understandings of the interrelatedness of dimensions such as disability, mental health, race, and poverty (Saville Young, 2019). Students are paired up and assigned families with a disabled child to visit once a week for a course of several weeks over the semester. The students’ role is

to provide emotional support to the caregivers of disabled children in the local community and to simultaneously learn about what it is like to care for a disabled child in particular (usually not favorable) circumstances. The goal of the course is for caregivers to receive support from students, ostensibly improving their lives in some way even if only for a short time, and for students to become more aware of the sociocultural and psychological factors that impact a caregiver's experience of caring for a disabled child.

In theory, the course was structured to be mutually beneficial for both the institution (and its students) and for the community. Masibambane was designed with the critical model of service-learning in mind, fore fronting the role of broader power structures and ideologies in the embeddedness of inequality in the local community with which students were learning (Saville Young, 2019). Despite the best intentions and the employment of a critical service-learning model to circumvent the blind spots created by a traditional model, unintended outcome nonetheless emerged but with specific reasons including defensiveness against guilt and anxiety related to social position.

Many students who participate in the Masibambane service-learning program are confronting disability in childhood for the first time. Further to this, many of these children have limited resources and limited access to quality health care. Poverty and racial discrimination further compound the difficulties faced by these children and their caregivers. For many students, these circumstances are vastly different from their own and participating in this service-learning course unsettles students and impels them into places of discomfort that prompt them into introspection and reflection on their own roles and positions in a system of inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. Again, in theory, this design sounds promising in terms of achieving aims of transformation and redress envisioned by CHESP in its early stages of using service-learning in South African higher education institutions. It must be noted that it was not an explicit aim of the course to make students uncomfortable, thereby prompting anxiety and guilt. This is a natural consequence of being confronted with a new and sometimes upsetting set of experiences working with disabled children and their caregivers. Students were however prompted to reflect deeply on their experiences. It is these deep reflections that were often most uncomfortable for students and unveiled important unconscious processes that, once brought into awareness, had the power to teach the student something about themselves within the experience.

A psychosocial analysis of students' talk about their experiences of service-learning through the Masibambane initiative (Haselau, 2020) revealed some noteworthy outcomes that while may have been unintentional, have provided a useful learning opportunity for service-learning facilitators in South Africa. Through adopting a psychosocial lens (drawing on discursive social psychology and the concept of mentalization, borrowed from contemporary psychoanalysis), I investigated the discourses students employed to construct service-learning (Masibambane) and explored the reasons why students invested in those discourses (Haselau, 2020). Some of these findings are further explored in Haselau and Saville Young (2022) for their implications with regard to social justice but the findings from Haselau (2020) are summarized below to exemplify the ways in which sometimes service-learning can still have unintended outcomes even when facilitated through a critical model.

Students constructed service-learning in different ways using competing sets of discourses. At times, students constructed service-learning using traditional liberal discourses, to position service-learning as "doing" for the other, not dissimilar from Mahlomaholo and Matobako's (2006) charity metaphor discussed earlier in this paper. At other times (sometimes within the same conversation or journal entry), service-learning was constructed as "being" using constructivist discourses of learning. What this research uniquely offered was a psychosocial perspective that accounted for *why* students invested emotionally in those discourses and also why they unconsciously moved between the two. The focus was on the psychological rewards that students received from this (mostly unconscious) positioning work. The notion of defended subjectivity (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013) was employed to account for the shifts in talking (and perhaps thinking or feeling) about service-learning (Haselau, 2020). What this means is that students were investing emotionally in particular discourses for defensive reasons. That is, those students were (unconsciously) selecting discourses that allowed them to engage in positioning work in their talk.

The positioning work allowed them to invest in particular constructions of themselves and others and by doing so, they were able to circumvent anxiety caused by pervasive guilt around their social positions in relation to the caregivers and their children. For example, one (White, socioeconomically privileged) student positioned the (black, socioeconomically disadvantaged) caregiver as the “teacher” in the service-learning experience. This allowed the student to observably relinquish their power and the concomitant anxiety that this power brings. By constructing herself as the less powerful and less knowledgeable learner, and the caregiver as the holder of the knowledge, the student managed her own unconscious anxiety about being part of a highly unequal system that favors her and subjugates the caregiver.

What this study showed is that while employing service-learning may be usefully designed to impel students into introspection and inner work alongside the cognitive academic work higher education demands, forcing students into places of discomfort may invoke defended subjectivity, even if a critical model is adopted. When this happens, students draw on unproductive discourses of service-learning (such as charity discourses of service-learning) and disability that appear to work in opposition to the aims of a critical model of service-learning. They do this for defensive reasons to manage their own anxieties about the experience. However, what this shows us is that while activating discomfort in our students during service-learning may look attractive from a pedagogical point of view, we need to manage this carefully to account for the defensive emotional strategies students may use when the discomfort they experience during service-learning becomes overwhelming. When students are overwhelmed by their own anxieties in the learning process, their ability to critically reflect is shut down and they instead employ discourses that position them as less powerful and therefore less responsible for the atrocities of inequality. This is not desirable or productive in terms of the aims of a service-learning course, and it is therefore crucial that we open up “safe” spaces for students, such as supervision sessions, reflective journaling or debrief groups, to explore their own vulnerability with curiosity rather than anxiety.

The psychosocial methodological approach used in Haselau (2020) and Haselau and Saville Young (2022) brought to light how the defensive use of unhelpful discourses has the potential to do more harm than good, rendering the service-learning program unproductive rather than progressive. However, through carefully employing particular theoretical lenses to understand the unconscious processes occurring during critical service-learning in South African contexts, the practice is left somewhat less vulnerable to becoming unproductive or harmful. I propose that engaging with a pedagogy of discomfort alongside Paulo Freire’s concept of *ruptura* (in the context of a critical pedagogy) is helpful in theoretically framing the purpose of the discomfort we invoke in service-learning so that it becomes productive instead of destructive.

Pedagogy of Discomfort

The need for the critical model of service-learning is particularly important in South African contexts where socioeconomic inequality continues to characterize most communities in the country. If service-learning is to be employed in the interests of transformation and social redress, students will need to face the uncomfortable realities of the disparate resources afforded to the communities in which they are learning. Megan Boler (1999) proposed a pedagogy of discomfort as a framework for the emotional nature of service-learning, one that engages a student’s discomfort and interrogates it for its worth in examining one’s own role in problematic structures and systems that serve to marginalize particular sectors of the country. This framework departs from traditional learning which is often viewed as something cognitive rather than affective, and as something that occurs in a linear fashion. A pedagogy of discomfort embraces the places that affective work can take a student in their learning. Zembylas (2017) argues that within higher education, allowing students opportunities to engage with uncomfortable feelings also provides them with opportunities to challenge their own beliefs and social habits, especially those that contribute to inequality and prejudice.

Leibowitz et al. (2010) draw on a pedagogy of discomfort in their conceptualization of learning about interpersonal difference in service-learning. They argue for the importance of acknowledging both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning in a pedagogy of discomfort. In other words, learning should not be conceived of as a purely cognitive activity. Rather, we benefit from paying attention to the inherent

emotional processes occurring alongside the cognitive processes. Leibowitz et al. (2010) also acknowledge the pervasive roles of power and inequality in service-learning. They argue that power dynamics interact constantly with students' cultural capital in sometimes messy ways that can limit the transformational capacity of the learning initiative. Power imbalances in the South African context occur on several dimensions including race, gender, class, socioeconomic status, and disability inter alia. A pedagogy of discomfort draws on the emotional experiences of confronting these power imbalances (which can often invoke feelings of guilt and anxiety in privileged students). The disruption of pre-existing beliefs is a priority in higher education institutions according to Zembylas (2018), especially when discomfort is present in hegemonic learning environments. The disruption of power is a key part of the decolonizing project at the heart of South African higher education institutions. One way in which this disruption and interrogation of power has been conceptualized is through a concept called *ruptura*, borrowed from critical pedagogy theorist, Paulo Freire.

Ruptura

Brazilian Philosopher Paulo Freire is well known for his work on critical pedagogy through his writing of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). In this work, he proposed that education has the ability to dehumanize people, and it is our responsibility as educators to ensure that education is a humanization process enabled through critical thought and reflection, eventually culminating in productive action. In constructing the process of enabling critical thought in such a pedagogy, Freire proposed a concept he called *ruptura*, originally introduced in his landmark spoken book "*We make the road by walking*" (1990) in collaboration with Myles Horton. *Ruptura* was introduced in a part of their conversation about transformation in learning and the role of discomfort in this process. Freire proclaimed:

I am sure that one of the most tragic illnesses in our society is the bureaucratization of the mind. If you go beyond the previously established patterns, considered as inevitable ones, you lose credibility. In fact, there is no creativity without *ruptura*, without a break from the old, without conflict in which you have to make a decision. I would say there is no human existence without *ruptura*. (Bell et al., 1990, p. 38)

For Freire, the critical learning that happens during an experience like service-learning cannot happen without some form of disruption and dismantlement of existing ideologies, and systematic and structural imbalances. In South Africa, the disruption of pre-existing beliefs about things such as race and class can be argued to be particularly important as a learning experience for South African higher education students because of the large inequalities that characterize these dimensions. For Freire, disruption meant that previously held beliefs and ways of thinking and feeling about social and political issues were interrupted and interrogated with a critical lens, usually with the outcome of harmful beliefs or stereotypes being transformed in a way that mitigates inequality in society. *Ruptura* therefore captures a process in which we momentarily interrupt existing power structures and interrogate them for their role in perpetuating inequality in society. These inequalities are often the reason why the service-learning program was necessary in the first place. Prompting students to see this first-hand by impelling them into an uncomfortable reflection is the first step in enabling emotional and cognitive shifts in the students.

Carrick et al. (2000) have drawn on the concept of *ruptura* in framing service-learning as a practice that necessarily requires students to become uncomfortable as their core beliefs and ways of thinking are interrupted and they are forced to interrogate the structures and systems that they have thus far only taken for granted without examining the ways in which these things can perpetuate inequality and suffering for others. Carrick et al. (2000) argue that "recognising *ruptura* allows us to resist the master narratives of service-learning, reciprocity, happy endings, and the public discourse of activism" (p. 72). Essentially Carrick et al. (2000) position the concept of *ruptura* as a useful way to imagine service-learning through a critical model. This paper argues that in South African contexts, this can be particularly useful, though not simple. The use of *ruptura* in recalibrating a critical service-learning model that speaks to the South African context is a powerful movement forward in higher education research that has the potential to produce

innovative methods of improving people's lives—not just students' lives (as their learning experience deepens) but the lives of the communities with whom they are learning.

The employment of *ruptura* (as a concept borne of critical pedagogy) is most useful alongside Megan Boler's pedagogy of discomfort to reimagine the two contributions as one: a critical pedagogy of discomfort. This is not to say that without *ruptura*, the pedagogy of discomfort remains an uncritical practice. Rather, drawing on the concept of *ruptura* provides the language to enact the 'unsettling' that a pedagogy of discomfort calls for. Both theoretical contributions are complimentary to the other and drawing on both in one reimagined framework makes each more powerful in their impact in our conceptualization of a critical South African service-learning model. However, drawing on a model such as this one does not come without risks such as those exemplified by the Masibambane case study discussed earlier. We have a responsibility to contain anxiety and discomfort generated in a critical pedagogy of discomfort to guard against the experience unintentionally further entrenching prejudicial beliefs because of students' (unconscious) defensive positions. Carefully structured supervision of students and ongoing mentored reflection are important practices to include in a service-learning experience to manage the unconscious emotional processes that are triggered by a critical pedagogy of discomfort.

A Critical Pedagogy of Discomfort for Service-Learning in South Africa

"If you've come to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together"

—Australian aboriginal activist, Lilla Watson (Gough, 1998, p. 3).

The sentiments expressed by Lilla Watson highlight the importance of reciprocity in service-learning, made possible by critical models of service-learning that might lean toward an integration of Western and Indigenous knowledge and embrace *ruptura* and a pedagogy of discomfort in service-learning. This appears attractive in our South African contexts because of the inequality that marks so many facets of our society. However, service-learning becomes complicated by our own social contexts and historical injustices unique to South African contexts, and it is unwise to facilitate service-learning uncritically, modeling versions of service-learning that have been imported from the United States. Service-learning becomes further complicated when we take into account the emotional processes (always underpinned by power) that guide students in their experience of service-learning, and in turn, their interactions with the community.

Service-learning is gaining growing interest in South Africa, ostensibly as a response to calls for transformation in higher education and redress of social issues couched in inequality. Service-learning, especially in higher education, has the potential to contribute to socioeconomic development in underprivileged communities and improving the well-being of selected communities. However, service-learning is a practice that was developed in a traditional model for communities in the North (specifically the USA) and it is imperative that service-learning is critically interrogated in South African contexts. This paper has explored the use of service-learning in South Africa and considered the lessons we can learn from the literature as well as from particular instances of service-learning practice such as Masibambane.

Service-learning can be a useful and productive pedagogical tool to address social inequality and work toward transformation in higher education, but certain conditions need to be held in mind when designing and facilitating courses in South African contexts. A critical theoretical model of service-learning is needed in South Africa—one that recognizes the pervasiveness of race, class, ability, socioeconomic status, and gender in the broader structures and systems that surround the service-learning experience. However, this is not enough. Our critical model also needs to acknowledge the emotional work, embedded in broader power structures, that occurs when we coax students toward *ruptura* using a pedagogy of discomfort. We need to understand students as psychosocial beings with their own unique subjectivities, existing psychologically within and because of broader power structures of which they are a part. Service-learning, when facilitated mindfully and critically, has the power to address the inequalities that may have

necessitated the service-learning intervention in the first place. For this reason, this paper has argued for the employment of a critical pedagogy of discomfort as a theoretical model for the development and facilitation of service-learning in South Africa. This model draws on Freire's notion of *ruptura* to exemplify the ways in which a pedagogy of discomfort can be enacted in South African service-learning contexts. Doing so is a useful movement toward productive and transformative service-learning initiatives in the South African context, specifically because of the way in which this model focuses on deconstructing taken-for-granted Western thought and problematic charity models of service-learning. In so doing, we may be able to practically integrate Western and Indigenous knowledge as envisioned by Hlengwa (2010).

Drawing on the concept of *ruptura* in a pedagogy of discomfort allows us to interrupt what we take for granted as "knowledge" and reposition whose knowledge we value in the service-learning context. In so doing, the pre-existing power structures that hold oppression in place in South African communities become dislodged and momentarily dismantled, just in time for our students to engage in deep, reflective learning and to truly work toward the aims of social responsibility as envisioned by John Dewey. This important work needs to be carefully managed so that justice is done to students, the communities, and service-learning as a practice, and to avoid accidentally further entrenching prejudice if the discomfort of the experience becomes overwhelming for students. I propose that we do this by making students aware of their own defensiveness in service-learning experiences through methods such as debrief groups and ongoing supervision. A first step in enacting a productive critical pedagogy of discomfort is to not only create uncomfortable experiences for students in which they are confronted with power differentials and the emotional unsettling that comes with this but also to create spaces in which students can reflect on their conscious and unconscious responses to the discomfort they experience in service-learning. In other words, we can and should invite students to engage with their own experiences of *ruptura* alongside others' experiences of *ruptura*, to become curious and talk about the discomfort, and what this means for students, the institution, the community, and South Africa. Being mindful of creating this space to reflect in service-learning is a crucial step in ensuring that a critical pedagogy of discomfort does not inadvertently achieve oppositional aims by invoking defensiveness and further entrenching prejudice and oppressive power structures.

This paper has traced the development and evolution of service-learning as a practice of transformation from its inception in a traditional model to its transition into more critical models. The undertheorized nature of service-learning has been problematized, in the literature and again in this paper particularly because of the context in which this paper was written. South African contexts require a more nuanced lens to carefully dismantle frameworks that do not serve us and reconstruct frameworks that might. Power and emotion are important aspects of the experience that are often subjugated in service-learning practices but nonetheless play an integral role in the outcomes thereof. I have argued that by dovetailing Paulo Freire's concept of *ruptura* (from a critical pedagogy origin) and a pedagogy of discomfort, we can usefully and productively imagine a model of service-learning that is sensitive to a context marked by inequality, discrimination, racism, and violence (both interpersonal and systemic). This paper has therefore proposed, with the inclusion of a local example, a critical pedagogy of discomfort to forefront and prioritize power and emotion, on both personal and social levels, during South African service-learning experiences so that we can avoid unintentionally doing more harm than good with the communities with whom we practice.

References

- Barney, S. T., Corser, G. C., & White, L. H. (2010). Service-learning with the mentally ill: Softening the stigma. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, 3(1), 66–77.
<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0016.205>
- Bell, B., Gaventa, J., & Peters, J. (Eds). (1990). *Myles Horton and Paulo Freire: We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change*. Temple University Press.

- Bennett, J., & Sanchez, K. (2023). Antiracist praxis in community engagement: A partnership rubric. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 11(1), Article 11. <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.91724>
- Bernacki, M. L., & Jaeger, E. (2008). Exploring the impact of service-learning on moral development and moral orientation. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-learning*, 14(2), 5–15. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0014.201>
- Boler, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. Routledge.
- Carrick, T. H., Himley, M., & Jacobi, T. (2000). Ruptura: Acknowledging the lost subjects of the service-learning story. *Higher Education*, 4(3), 56–75. <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/32>
- Celio, C., Durlak, J. A., & Dymnicki, A. (2011). A meta-analysis of the impact of service-learning on students. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34(2), 164–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382591103400205>
- Compare, C., & Albanesi, C. (2021). Belief, attitude, and critical understanding: A systematic review of social justice in service-learning experiences. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 33(1), 332–355. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2639>
- Conner, J., & Erickson, J. (2017). When does service-learning work? Contact theory and service-learning courses in higher education. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, 23(2), 53–65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0023.204>
- Conner, J. O. (2010). Learning to unlearn: How a service-learning project helped teacher candidates to reframe urban students. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(5), 1170–1177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.02.001>
- DeMarais, S. C., Mumford, S. W., & Ryan, T. F. (2022). The transformative potential of service-learning in an African religious context. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 10(1), Article 11. <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.66270>
- Department of Education, South Africa. (1997). *Education white paper 3*. Government Printing Works. <https://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/feeshet/docs/1997-WhitePaper-HE-Tranformation.pdf>
- Eppler, M. A., Ironsmith, M., Dingle, S. H., & Errickson, M. A. (2011). Benefits of service-learning for freshmen college students and elementary school children. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 11(4), 102–115. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ956756>
- Fenzel, M. L., & Dean, R. J. (2011). Changes in students’ social justice and racial attitudes in an undergraduate child psychology service-learning course. *Journal of Research on Service Learning in Teacher Education*, 1(2), 20–30. <https://public-test.library.uta.edu/>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum Books.
- Gough, N. (1998). Decolonising sustainability: Subverting and appropriating mythologies of social change. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*, 18(1), 3–13.
- Grewal, I. K. (2023). Seva +: A framework for ASLCE practice and research. *International Journal of Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement*, 11(1), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.37333/001c.91722>
- Haselau, T. (2020). *Defended subjectivity in service-learning: A psychosocial analysis of students’ talk about service learning in psychology* (Unpublished PhD thesis). Rhodes University.
- Haselau, T., & Saville Young, L. (2022). Co-constructing defensive discourses of service-learning in psychology: A psychosocial understanding of anxiety and service-learning, and the implications

- for social justice. *Teaching of Psychology*, 50(3), 009862832210772.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00986283221077206>
- Hlengwa, A. (2010). Infusing service-learning in curricula: A theoretical exploration of infusion possibilities. *Journal of Education*, 48(1), 1–14.
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2013). *Doing qualitative research differently: A psychosocial approach*. Sage.
- Kawai, T. (2021). A theoretical framework on reflection in service learning: Deepening reflection through identity development. *Frontiers in Education*, 5(1), 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2020.604997>
- Lazarus, J. (2007). Embedding service-learning in South African higher education: The catalytic role of the CHESP initiative. *Education as Change*, 11(3), 91–108.
https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/librariesprovider43/service-learning-documents/education-as-change-documents/change_lazarus-286-eng.pdf?sfvrsn=0
- Le Grange, L. (2007). The ‘theoretical foundations’ of community service-learning: From taproots to rhizomes. *Education as Change*, 11(3), 3–13.
- Leibowitz, B., Bozalek, V., Rohleder, P., Carolissen, R., & Swartz, L. (2010). ‘Ah, but the Whiteys Love to Talk about themselves’: Discomfort as a pedagogy for change. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(1), 83–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320903364523>
- Mahlomaholo, S., & Matobako, T. (2006). Service-learning in South Africa held terminally captive by legacies of the past. *Alternation*, 13(1), 203–217.
- Otten, R., Faughnan, M., Flattley, M., & Fleurinor, S. (2022). Integrating equity, diversity, and inclusion into social innovation education: A case study of critical service-learning. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 18(1), 182–200. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SEJ-11-2020-0101>
- Preece, J. (2013). Service-learning and community engagement in South African universities: Towards an ‘adaptive engagement’ approach. *Alternation Special Edition*, 9, 265–291.
- Saville Young, L. (2019). Psychosocial studies and the practice of psychology: A South African perspective. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 12(1–2), 115–128.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/147867319X15608718110970>
- Saville Young, L., & Berry, J. (2016). Slipping and holding minds: A psychosocial analysis of maternal subjectivity in relation to childhood disability. *African Journal of Disability*, 5(1), a266.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v5i1.266>
- Shiller, J. (2022). Critically engaged in a predominantly White institution: The power of a critical service-learning course to cultivate a social justice stance. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 26(1), 37–50.
- Stewart, T., & Webster, N. (2011). *Problematising service-learning: Critical reflections for development and action*. Information Age Publishing.
- Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in U.S. college students. *Education and Training*, 53(2/3), 207–217. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ923731>
- Wright, A., Calabrese, N., & Henry, J. (2009). How service and learning came together to promote “cura personalis”. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(2), 274–283. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mjcsloa.3239521.0023.204>

Zembylas, M. (2017). Practicing an ethic of discomfort as an ethic of care in higher education teaching. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 5(1), 1–17.
<https://www.ajol.info/index.php/cristal/article/view/158623>

Zembylas, M. (2018). Affect, race, and white discomfort in schooling: Decolonial strategies for ‘pedagogies of discomfort’. *Ethics and Education*, 13(1), 86–104.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.1428714>

About the Author

Dr Tracey L. Haselau, Ph.D (thaselau@varsitycollege.co.za), works as a Teaching and Learning Specialist at the Independent Institute of Education in South Africa. Although her background is in psychology, her work focuses on critical pedagogy and psychoanalytic perspectives of learning in higher education. She welcomes correspondence at traceyhaselau@gmail.com.