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The Affective Dimensions of Service Learning

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Service learning presents students and teachers alike with emotionally fraught moments. Before these moments shape ideologies and worldviews, they give us sensations. Understanding these sensations is part of what theorists label the affective domain. Affect is a notion garnering much critical attention from compositionists writ large but little attention in the service learning literature. The field has much to gain from acknowledging that students and teachers both experience civic engagement rationally as well as affectively. One of the potential benefits is a more sensitive understanding of how various modes of civic engagement (e.g., volunteerism and activism) are socially, ideologically, and emotionally constructed.

One of the dynamics of service learning that continues to fascinate and trouble the scholarly community is the gulf between teacher and student perspectives regarding various types of civic engagement. Oftentimes (though by no means all the time) professors profess belief in an ethic of action while students buy into an ethic of volunteerism (Bickford and Reynolds; Herzberg). This gulf has much to do with contrastive ideologies: *volunteer work has legitimacy because it involves direct service and engages the experiential and kinesthetic* as opposed to *an ethic of action is better equipped to engage with root causes of social problems*. These apologia of two contrasting modes of civic engagement represent moments of logos—the construction of rationale, defensible ideas. But the aforementioned gulf also embodies feelings: *volunteer work*



gives me a sense that I'm giving back as opposed to *activism feels more substantial and rewarding*. It is that affective gulf—a difference informed by ideas as well as felt senses—that I would like to explore in this essay.

By analyzing the (perceived) gulf between faculty and student points-of-view, I realize that I am buying into a somewhat false dichotomy. In reality, attitudes toward civic engagement represent a wide and complex spectrum of beliefs and values. Likewise, some faculty members certainly support an ethic of volunteerism just as sure as some students support an ethic of action. But the professional literature clearly suggests that teachers and their students frequently have very different ideas and feelings about citizenship. These contrasting ideas and feelings circulate in a complex economy, an agora where the two groups end up talking at cross purposes and defending ethics that inevitably are informed by affective affinities. This article is primarily a work of theory, albeit pedagogical theory that draws on classroom data as well as anecdotes and experiences that have informed my own thinking about the relationship between affect and civic engagement. Further, the essay offers a rhetorical analysis of recent service learning literature in the discipline of composition studies. My intention is to use this content to 1) build an argument for more careful consideration of the affective affinities of both students and teachers involved in the service learning enterprise, and 2) explore the affective dimensions of discourse surrounding charity and activism.

Defining Affect

Affect refers to the extra-discursive ways we interact with the world and begin to interface with people, places, ideas, and experiences. Before we form a rational response or even begin to attach language to our own sensations, we have an affective relationship with some stimulus. We *feel* the world around us, although affect is not just *feeling*. Shouse offers a helpful distinction: “Without affect feelings do



not ‘feel’ because they have no intensity” (par. 11). Affect is the first wave of not-yet-conscious awareness we have of any outside stimulus, “a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” (Shouse par. 5). Of course Shouse borrows the term *potential* from Massumi, whose theorizing of affect emphasizes “capacity” and “potential.” Massumi reminds us that bodily experience with various stimuli can lead to various responses, various actions, and—of particular interest to the rhetoric and composition community—various utterances. During my commute to work through Detroit, I may encounter a homeless person standing along the entrance ramp to the freeway. That homeless individual prompts a sensation or a wave of sensations in me. She represents a phenomenon, an experience of the material world. To borrow once again from Massumi, she provides a sensation. After that initial sensation, a number of things might happen on my end. I might feel guilty about my own privilege. I might become sad. But those are emotions, what Massumi calls “*qualified* intensity” (28, emphasis mine). By the time I feel specific kinds of emotion, I have begun to process and attach language. Further, I may take discursive and/or material action, giving her my lunch or writing a letter to the editor or emulating St. Francis of Assisi and deciding to give away all my worldly possessions. But, initially, my body merely experiences. Affect is that first sensory experience.

Rhetorically speaking (that is to say as deliberate and conscious users of language...), what happens after that initial sensory experience and the wave of emotion that follows? Worsham has written extensively on the “schooling of emotion,” the ways that a violent “hidden curriculum” controls affective behavior and “binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings” (216). Formal education and other Althusserian state apparatuses, writes Worsham, reinforce the notion that affective potential exists in a private realm and ought to remain internal, especially among women and other subordinate groups purported to be overly emotional (224). Worsham writes, “[D]ominant pedagogy...schools anger to



turn inward so as to become silent rage or passive bitterness where the energy for political action can be derailed in the pathos of the personal” (225). That is to say, despite critiques of Western rationalism, we still dismiss affect as something dangerous, personal, irrelevant, and counter-productive. Worsham argues that even critical pedagogies lack a useful understanding of affect and tend to reinforce a reason/mind-emotion/body binary by foregrounding ways that dominant culture is pleasurable—which translates as *bad*—and requires reasoned resistance: “Critical pedagogy does not make emotion and affective life the crucial stakes in political struggle” (235). Yoon extends Worsham’s critique and analyzes how discourses of critical pedagogies rely on affective appeals “to instill appropriate structures of feelings.” Yoon deconstructs tropes like the noble teacher and democratic ideals, pathetic appeals employed by proponents of critical pedagogy who, ironically, often dismiss affect and the emotional wave that follows as barriers to critical consciousness. If Worsham and Yoon are correct, then might service learning professionals be complicit in pointing at student ideologies like an ethic of volunteerism as “emotional” while failing to point out the emotional dimensions of our own points-of-view regarding civic engagement?

Worsham and Yoon both make compelling cases that even pedagogies that purport to be critical or transformative reproduce anemic or hegemonic understandings of emotion. Elsewhere in the professional literature, theorists have issued similar calls. Micciche extends the distinction between affect and emotion, framing affect as a wide umbrella covering the entire preverbal “atmosphere” and emotion as a rhetorical tool that we can experience, employ, and perform—*do*—for desired rhetorical outcomes. Micciche frames emotion as a component of our interactions with others in the material world. She advocates bringing this engagement with the world into the classroom. Her approach foregrounds teaching emotion as an experience but also “as a critical and generative category of analysis” (49). This middle ground approach allows Micciche and her students to consider how texts



perform identity and engage readers on multiple levels—including the playful level. She wants students to bring this performative stance to their writing in sustained “fluid” ways, but only insofar as such a stance helps achieve “critical thought” (70).

Cain also suggests that our discipline needs more engagement with social and critical contexts of emotion, given the “socially coded” nature of feelings (43). Bean argues that “the affective...[informs] the development of critical agency” (104). Quandahl suggests that the “development of the emotional capacity is simultaneously a development of ethical commitments,” arguing that the two are more closely linked than we often assume (18). Albrecht-Crane theorizes how “something political happens when we relate affectively to each other” (563). Writing specifically about the classroom, Albrecht-Crane makes the provocative argument that we need to stop criminalizing passion and desire since they have the potential to unleash radical agency among teachers and students. Affect, she theorizes, can allow a “community” of agents to coalesce: “affective linkages can form a strong, wondrous sense of vitality, potentiality, and creation” (587). Edbauer Rice has called for further attention to the affective sensations that texts generate, suggesting that critique and “the rush to uncover ideological meaning” (“Sensuality” 25) have caused rhetoricians to overlook how texts interface with their consumers. Elsewhere, Edbauer Rice frames this anti-body, anti-affect bias as a troubling, disciplinary imperative to locate significations at the cost of experiences (“Getting Up” 133). She writes, “Insofar as we are bodies always entering into compositions with other bodies, we do not only (de)construct writing but also experience its intensity. When we encounter writing, it not only signifies something *to* us, but it also combines *with* us in a degree of affectivity” (“Getting Up” 151). Crowley goes beyond the classroom and makes an especially compelling case for considering how affect shapes the social and the material. She cites one of the key markers of our own political climate—the stalemate between liberalism and fundamentalism—as an instance of the power of affective



associations.

I can think of few sites within our field that provide as intense an example of those powerful associations than service learning. Like the liberal and fundamentalist rhetorics that Crowley examines, student and faculty rhetoric within the realm of service learning draws on powerful emotions. To be sure, both students and teachers involved with academic service learning initiatives bring ideological beliefs to the classrooms and the community sites where service learning happens. Likewise, students and teachers both have the potential to have their respective worldviews changed. Yet before they begin to label the ideas, experiences, values, and political positions that comprise and challenge and revise those ideologies, students and teachers have initial felt senses. An encounter with a homeless person at a food bank. A breakthrough with a young child in a tutoring center. Before they begin to rationalize, analyze, critique, form a response, take action, or even just describe the experience (all of which are cognitive activities we ask service learning students to do as part of their writing assignments), a sensation occurs, contributing to a potential to feel, act, think, and formulate verbal responses.

When I talk about the affective dimensions of service learning, I am referring to moments above, beyond, and before our rational and discursive selves perform their functions. These affective moments continuously and recursively inform the emotions we feel as well as the claims we make about the worlds we enter into as service learning students and teachers. I recently accompanied some my students conducting field work at a walk-in center for the homeless in Detroit. Seeing dozens of homeless people lined up and noticing broken bottles and drug paraphernalia in the empty lots that surround the center causes just such a wave, an affective moment. Long before students write down what they see, discuss it in class, or begin to reflect on how the new sensory experiences confirm or challenge their notions, they feel that potential.



But affective dimensions of service learning encompass more than just *initial* experiences at worksites or other single, isolated moments. Affect continues to be part of our experiences. We continue to sense in ways besides (prior to and in addition to) our rational idea-formation. This is true in any setting, though service learning situations tend to elicit particularly complicated feelings and present especially rich sources for examining the confluence of emotions, ideas, and actions.

Student Discourse

As a teacher of writing and rhetoric who has utilized service learning pedagogies for the past ten years, I have long been committed to the project of challenging students to move beyond an uncritical attitude toward community service. Students often come to service learning classrooms with familiar conceptions of civic engagement work—conceptions that paint the volunteer as privileged and heroic and simplify service as a top-down transaction—that need to be problematized. As Herzberg’s seminal critique of service learning suggested, this conception of civic engagement valorizes *charity* and fails to address structural injustices and the social context of service. Yet, this conception of civic engagement has its own logic and ideology as well as its own *affective dimension*.

Student discourse about volunteerism and charity circulates and, as theorists of affect have pointed out, creates its own economy. Service learning students experience the material world with one another, with community members, and with their professors—not to mention with parents, clergy members, and countless other agents. When they *feel* something (anger, pity, empathy, etc.) at a service learning site, their potential responses are informed not only by our lectures and readings and discussions but also by the myths, values, beliefs, and ideas that they brought to academe. Interested in mapping some of the student discourses surrounding attitudes toward civic engagement, I conducted interviews with students in my Composition 364: Writing for Civic



Engagement class (an upper-division course cross-listed to attract English and journalism majors), and asked them how they both *define* and *experience* various modes of citizenship. Their responses gave me a better sense of the affective economy of “service learning talk,” and, by extension, a better sense of the capacities, to borrow again Massumi’s terminology.

Students in the class invariably attached positive associations to the concept of *volunteerism*, emphasizing, for example, the agency and choice of volunteer acts. Students used phrases including

- “freely giving”
- “tak[ing] it upon yourself to do something”
- “taking action by your own incentive”
- “a personal decision”
- “no outside nudge”
- “giving your time”

The voluntary nature of the work suggests to students not only altruism but also pureness of intention. Students eventually articulate their feelings about volunteerism and those feelings take on meaning as they circulate. Theorist Sara Ahmed has suggested that economies are not psychic but rather “social,” meaning that only in their “exchange” do feelings signify (Ahmed 121). The rhetoric of volunteerism becomes meaningful—and ultimately mythic—as students’ felt senses are voiced (through interviews like those I conducted, but also through the writing our service learning students do).

Meanwhile, and in sharp contrast, the term *activism* elicited a variety of associations, some of them suspicious and dubious:

- “fighting”
- “violent”
- “controversial”



- “having an agenda”
- “fight[ing] for an issue”

Interestingly, students repeatedly associated the concept of activism with a physical altercation. Questioned further, one student connected *activism* to *politics*, which she called “the biggest swear word in the English language.” Very few students offered cogent reasons for their suspicions regarding activism and politics (to be fair, the interview questions asked for broad associations); most often they spoke of the pre-discursive emotions that the words themselves evoke.

The student responses underscore what theorists of affect have told us about the roles that emotion plays in our classroom. Of course emotion is an inescapable and legitimate component of argumentation and a potentially effective tool for social change. The bodily experiences of students who lack affective affinity for political engagement leads them to create the kinds of discourse we see in service learning response journals and term papers.

Service learning work is rich with experiences, emotions, and sensations. Compositionists have rightly suggested that affective moments have influence and significance on multiple levels, first inasmuch as these moments can lead to action and social change (see for instance Micciche) but also because the sensations themselves illustrate an interface among texts and users (Edbauer Rice’s work exemplifies this point). Service learning moments—engaging with students at a literacy center, conducting field work at a homeless shelter, and so forth—illustrate these multiple levels of affective significance. The experiences have *potential* in terms of the creation of critical consciousness and in terms of perhaps leading to action. But the moments are also moments in and of themselves—interfaces and experiences and sensations.

Individuals involved with service learning and other versions of community-based civic engagement profess loyalty to discourses



based on *both* ideological connections *and* affective connections. My students' discourse reveals a *desire* for a particular version of "civic engagement," a version they *feel* to be purer, apolitical, and, yes, potentially useful. I use the term "desirable" deliberately, because there does appear to be emotional affinity on the part of various agents (including students) for their competing visions of civic engagement. Volunteerism, which some students have not yet begun to problematize when they come to our classes, encompasses direct, hands-on community service work and is generally defined as doing good deeds and practical tasks. Volunteer work aims to help an organization or an individual. A student might offer a reasoned defense of the advantages of volunteer work, pointing out that those who provide direct care and service have first-hand knowledge of issues and can transcend thinking of issues only in the abstract.

More often, though, "affect" is part of the process of forming these identifications as well. Those involved in service learning work—students and faculty alike—form affinities and emotional bonds, and experience sensations of community work. While teaching service learning courses, I have heard students report time and again about feeling good about moments of contact—experiences. Likewise, I have heard activist-oriented faculty members say things like: *I bristle when students say they feel good*. That bristling is a moment of intensity. It works both ways.

The Affective Affinities Of Volunteerism

I start this section with two contrasting anecdotes. Several summers ago, I joined other anti-war activists and passed out peace literature at a vintage car rally in suburban Detroit. The rally is an annual event that attracts thousands of car enthusiasts who line a major thoroughfare, listen to Baby Boom-era rock-and-roll, and watch a daylong procession of muscle, vintage, and tricked-out cars. Our objective consisted of



raising awareness about the hawkish voting record of a local legislator. On that sunny afternoon, a soundtrack of the Beach Boys, Temptations, and roaring motors provided a background to voices who called my colleagues and me anti-American.

Several weeks later, I spent a Saturday morning with my service learning students working in a community garden at a Detroit foster home. The residential facility had recently become an urban gardening site and the young residents, staff, and my students and I were preparing the post-harvest ground for the cold season. As we worked, a group of the young, adolescent males who live at the facility pretended to bury a time capsule, laughing with one another about what they might include in the capsule. A simple moment of play and imagination, certainly the experience did not erase the material realities of the young foster kids, housed at this particular facility largely due to histories of abuse and neglect. Yet for many of my students, and perhaps for the foster kids as well, the moment represented hope.

I would like to comment on these anecdotes on a number of levels. Firstly, they illustrate why volunteerism often feels good and activism can sometimes feel bad. The experience at the foster home is the type of the anecdote that often makes its way into the reflection journals that service learning composition students—including mine—keep. Anecdotes like this often illustrate the discourse of volunteerism: *I felt a sense of hope. I felt like I was giving back. I empathized. I realized that underneath it all we're really the same. I felt good.* Yes, certainly we should question and challenge this discourse and the attendant underlying assumptions and values. Anecdotes have limitations in terms of what they prove. Anecdotes do not prove homogeneity or equality. And of course sometimes volunteer work does more to benefit the server than the served. But of course the moment felt good to us.

The activist moment felt bad to me, in the meantime, because the issue at stake was a contested political issue, and because the tactic and the



crowd response were somewhat agonistic. The rhetorical situation was completely different, of course, but so too was the mode of civic engagement I was working within. I wasn't providing any type of direct "service," per se, but rather advocating for a political outcome. Unlike the volunteer service at the foster home, not all agents present at the car rally were in agreement. Simple anecdotes, not groundbreaking in anyway, but they exemplify why many have an affinity for volunteer work. They are suggestive of why the students I interviewed praised volunteer work so enthusiastically.

But they also exemplify affective moments and the potential that such moments represent. Speaking for myself, I had a sensation, a moment of felt sense, during both of these encounters. Being called anti-American, the smell of beer in the air, the oldies playing in the background, the summer sun, the Detroit humidity. This was a sentient experience. Certainly I quickly began to size up the situation, considering whether or not a physical threat was present, for instance. Certainly, I spent time later that day intellectualizing the experience in various ways, considering the race and class dynamics of the rally attendees, thinking about the artifacts (flag pins, "Buy American" paraphernalia, and so forth) and their implications. But affect is not just about what comes later, affect encompasses the moment too. Yes, this experience could have prompted action (maybe motivating me to work hard to advocate for peace among working-class audiences) due to the potential the moment represented. But the moment itself felt.

Same goes for the experience at the foster home's garden with my service learning students. Later, students used the experience in reflection journals and other written documents. The experience provided fodder for classroom discussion, intersecting with other experiences and other types of data such as the contextual research students were doing. Like the activist experience, the morning in the garden worked on various levels, providing potential for discourse, for action, for idea formation, for claim-making. Beyond future potential, though, the experience just was.



Faculty Discourse: A Rhetorical Analysis Of The Turn Toward Materiality

I turn now toward the affective affinities of activism. One of the sources of our disciplinary affinity for activism is the professional literature. I want to suggest the professional literature is every bit as affective a domain as the classroom. Just as the classroom is a site where service learning students voice feelings that embody their affective affinities, so too are the pages of our journals sites where our own *felt senses* speak. Looking at fifteen years of service learning scholarship in composition studies suggests that our discipline professes an intense, logical-but-also-emotive allegiance to activism and advocacy.

I make this claim in part due to the ubiquity of professional literature that reflects a “social turn” in service learning. As I stated earlier, one of the key themes within published, service learning research in composition is that service learning programs can fail to contextualize social problems and move *beyond* charity. In an article that introduced much of the field to the problematics of service learning a decade ago, Herzberg suggested that community service learning often fails to address root causes of social problems and arguably initiated the aforementioned social turn. Implicit in Herzberg’s important call, of course, was the notion that structural questions *should* be raised by service learning initiatives, the notion that volunteerism is neither an end in itself nor a desired outcome of campus civic engagement initiatives (notions with which I agree). Picking up on Herzberg’s concern, the literature now tends to emphasize, quite sensibly, the need for initiatives to work toward social change among the agencies and community partners with whom institutions work (Cushman, “The Public Intellectual”; Cushman, “Sustainable”; Grabill, *Community Literacy*; Grabill, “The Written City”; Mathieu; Weisser). Elsewhere, recent scholarship argues for more attention to material rhetorics and the materiality of place (Brooke and McIntosh; Coogan, “Counterpublics”; Coogan, “Service Learning and Social Change”; Marback; Mutnick; Reynolds; Weisser).



Weisser in particular has argued for a more material notion of the public sphere, advocating community-based work directed toward changing lived realities as well as minds. Like Weisser's work, much of this current wave of scholarship problematizes relationships between discursive action and material action, advocating a shift to materiality. Hesford suggests that in the age of corporatization and privatization, service learning initiatives ought to pay closer attention to the labor practices that they are accepting and/or rejecting. Using her own experiences, Hesford explains that, at times, students are providing unpaid labor that public moneys formerly funded. She wonders the degree to which service learning programs—and volunteerism in general—might be facilitating the decrease in public support for necessary services. Hesford's work expresses a cogent set of ideas but, in equal part, expresses a certain amount of anxiety, an expression of a *felt sense* about what kinds of cultural work service learning ought to do.

Still elsewhere, recent scholarly work in service learning argues that we must attend more critically to the politics of difference (Green; Himley; Reynolds; Welch). Reynolds, for instance, worries that service learning programs entitle and normalize students and that community-based experiences can reinforce their pre-conceived notions about who is the Other. These examples all point to a growing activist ethos in the service learning literature and the privileging among many faculty in the field involved in service learning initiatives of an activist mode of civic engagement. In "Activism and Service Learning: Reframing Volunteerism as Acts of Dissent," Bickford and Reynolds offer a compelling defense of this ethos as well as the notion that we ought to push students along the spectrum toward activism. They review problematic aspects of volunteerism, emphasizing the lack of historical and geographic context and the homogenizing notion of community often associated with the service mode, and posit activism as a mode in which university and community acknowledge difference and then connect with "a shared goal of creating social change" (237). Their



specific pedagogical proposals include teaching consciousness-raising from an historical and critical perspective as well as engaging students with critical methodologies like mapping.

Bickford and Reynolds attempt to offer a corrective to what has become a dominant myth of U.S. American culture: the myth of the apolitical, heroic volunteer. Murphy outlines this mythology—embodied in the heroes gallery during presidential states of the union, the narrative of Rosa Parks that leaves out her work with advocacy groups, and the “everyday heroes” of September 11—and suggests that the myth works to marginalize and exclude a great deal of important civic work. The apolitical hero, Murphy says, is quiet, exists outside of electoral politics, and does not engage in collective action, organizing, or advocacy:

The heroic citizen as constructed sets a standard for ideal citizenship that depoliticizes the very idea of citizenship and works to further marginalize the legitimacy of more rhetorical, public, and potentially contentious aspects of democratic citizenship, Whether it is the broader image of all citizens as heroes who essentially disregard politics and quietly go about their daily lives without complaint, or the specific actions of highlighted representative characters who define the most admirable qualities of participation through romantic images of community service, the ‘good citizen’ as public image is marked by a quiescent and harmonious disposition which is antithetical to the types of rhetorical contestation and political action that is sometimes necessary in a democratic society. (203)

Murphy rightly critiques the dominance of the apolitical civic servant, joining Bickford and Reynolds in arguing for both a broader notion of civic engagement. Coupled with the move in the scholarly literature in rhetoric and composition toward civic engagement programs with greater attention to social change, material rhetorics, geographic



and socio-spatial context, and the politics of difference, this work collectively signifies what might be called a social turn—or even an activist turn—in the scholarly literature.

This turn offers theoretical frameworks (feminism, critical geography, materialism) as well as pedagogical possibilities that can challenge students enrolled in service learning courses to expand their notions of civic rhetoric and engage in transformative cultural work. Yet we also need to consider that as programs and faculty critique and challenge the volunteerism ethos dominant in their students, we also ought to look critically at the activist mode that—if the scholarship is any indication—has become dominant among service learning faculty. I don't think anybody is advocating that we accept activism uncritically. However, it's possible to read the scholarship and be left with the binary impression that one mode is naive and the other is a panacea for all the problematics of service learning. Put another way, the professional literature is an affective site—a place where feelings mingle with ideas and circulate.

In this economy, the “activist” has the potential to become as mythic and iconic as the apolitical hero Murphy describes. And the activist has as much of an affective dimension. Activism is bodily. Activism represents particular feelings like nostalgia, which are reassuring. Activism can make faculty feel as if they are “doing the right thing.” Activism can slip into self-righteousness. Activism can reassure us we are more sophisticated than students, especially if we act under the assumption that activism is a more mature expression of civic engagement than community service. This is the affective dimension of activism.

If emotions can sometimes mislead, than perhaps the affective affinity for activism may sometimes lead faculty to misunderstand student positionality. Close to home, my own institution's recent Audit of Civic Engagement—conducted several years ago as the service



learning program was getting off the ground—found that faculty make erroneous assumptions about student interest in and commitment to civic work. UM-Dearborn faculty, according to the Audit, connect good civic engagement to critical thinking and issues of diversity and difference (5)—markers of a more activist mode. At the same time, faculty also have a “Misunderstanding of the students’ level of engagement and interest,” seeing the commuter identity of the student body and the attendant perceived lack of community as significant barriers to doing real civic work (12). The Audit found this perception to be incorrect, inasmuch as students not only had significant interest in more community-based civic learning, but also significant experience doing community work. The gulf between perception and reality becomes a barrier to effective programming. “Faculty,” the Audit states, “often assumed that students would resist service projects built into courses, while the students repeatedly told us that they would welcome such opportunities” (18). Perhaps this gulf exists in part due to the affective connection that many faculty have to activist models of civic engagement.

Students in the meantime have their own affective attraction to civic engagement, expressed differently than that of faculty. The Wingspread Statement on Civic Engagement, written by undergraduates gathered for a Campus Compact conference, rejects the idea that not taking part in activist work signifies political apathy. Titled “The New Student Politics,” the statement argues that civic engagement among undergraduates in the new millennium is increasingly multivalent and includes the arts (poetry slams and alternative ‘zines) as well as a frequent preference for involvement in local or global as opposed to national issues. They find “conventional politics...inaccessible” and state that “service is a viable and preferable (if not superior) alternative” (Long 1). Countering the binary thinking of much of the literature, the undergraduates at the conference argue that service is an “alternative politics” where they build relationships, learn organizing skills, increase awareness, and strategize for problem solving and social



change. In other words, it's a step toward more traditional politics and possibly activism (Long 2). They get involved for a variety of reasons (many overlooked or not well understood) including faith-inspired reasons and special interests rooted in identity markers. Service has more potential than traditional politics of bringing the voiceless into the process of decision-making. "Democracy," they write, "is defined less in terms of civic obligation than of the social responsibility of the individual" (Long 5). Long et al want to reclaim the rhetoric of the individual and frame engagement as personal and rooted in individual and/or sub-cultural identity. But they want critical context too: "The realization that individual choices have larger public repercussions is an integral piece of one's moral, social, intellectual, and civic development" (Long 6). They see the volunteer service that many of their professors critique as an incremental, developmental step toward traditional politics.

Interestingly, the Wingspread Statement posits a model of multiple modes of civic engagement: conventional politics, community service, and "service politics." They define conventional politics as electoral politics and/or working with institutions like political parties and special interest groups. Community service—individuals working with service agencies as volunteers—on the other hand is not necessarily any less engaged with/informed by social issues or critical understandings of social context. The latter is more desirable for many young people who "dislike the institutional focus" and have an "anti-institutional bias." They use the analogy of formal religion and say the service imperative is like having an individual spirituality that one follows. "Service politics," the third mode, becomes the means through which students can move from community service to political engagement. "Those who develop connections to larger systemic issues building on their roots in community service adopt a framework through which service politics leads to greater social change" (Long 18). They "find contemporary political life distasteful and unresponsive to their



efforts.” Service politics can look at root causes of social problems: “Service politics is a form of civic engagement that looks at systems, while service is typically geared toward symptoms” (Long 19). Activism can be a natural outgrowth of service politics.

In problematizing the service-activism binary and arguing for the existence of developmental movement from one mode to the next, the undergraduates who crafted the Wingspread Statement reveal the role that affect plays not only in motivating their civic engagement work but also the role affect plays in their own preferences for particular kinds of engagement. They talk about “disliking” conventional politics and having a “bias” against institutions. This diction reveals the visceral feeling, the pathos, which they rely on to inform and inspire their work. They revel in the individual—individual spirituality, individual choices, individual beliefs—which is in contrast to the more collective rhetoric of activism and organizing. Yet they are not simplifying or decontextualizing their own roles in civic life. They express desire to understand context and reflect on implications and move toward more systemic analysis and action (via their own notion of “service politics”). Their positions regarding individuality and distaste for institutions and bureaucracy and the like aren’t immature or underdeveloped or under-informed. They are aware of their own preferences and they aren’t afraid to frame those affinities as just that: preferences. This is affect in action.

Like the architects of the Wingspread Statement, Morton sees volunteerism as a potentially positive version of civic engagement. Morton also develops a model of modes of civic engagement. He proposes three distinct paradigms—charity, project, and social change—each having a set of logics and the potential for thin or thick execution, integrity, and depth. Morton’s notion of “charity,” which corresponds to what I’ve been calling “volunteerism,” is limited in that the work is fragmentary, focuses on deficits, and can create a dependency (21), but potentially positive in that the work is person-



centered and spiritually rich (25-26). But project models as well as social change models—which more closely approximate activism, also have both positives and negatives. Social change in particular collaboratively reveals and analyzes root causes of injustices and power imbalances (22). Yet these more activist models of civic engagement work, in Morton’s assessment, have limits that include the possibility of unforeseen consequences, the tendency to conceive of the universities as saviors/experts, the lack of flexibility (22), and the motivator for addressing problems sometimes being a negative emotion like anger (27). Any of Morton’s modes, he writes, might be “thin” if “paternalistic” or if the project fails to offer alternatives or “leave[s] people tired and cynical,” or “thick” if they are “grounded in deeply held, internally coherent values; match means and ends; describe a primary way of interpreting and relating to the world; offer a way of defining problems and solutions; and suggest a vision of what a transformed world might look like” (28).

In his critique, Morton frequently uses the language of affect. In his defense of a more inclusive spectrum of civic engagement, Morton reveals the emotional component, the feelings inherent in describing community work. Like the architects of the Wingspread statement, Morton sees volunteerism (or “charity” in his parlance) as a useful expression of individual ideals. Without necessarily romanticizing the individual, Morton suggests that “person-centered” work can have integrity and thick significance. Further, Morton acknowledges the value of the spiritual component of volunteerism. And on the other end of the spectrum, emotion is a dynamic as well, particularly when Morton suggests that negative emotions like anger can sometimes prompt project-based and social change orientations of civic engagement work.



The Affective Affinities Of Activism

Service learning faculty sometimes (emphasis on *sometimes*, as there are certainly service learning faculty who identify with an ethic of volunteerism) offer a rational, logo-centric defense of activist work. Activism-advocacy usually encompasses work explicitly framed as political and having as its goal social change. Activist work aims to reveal and change systemic abuse or injustice. Students and especially students new to community-based work often (though by no means always) profess an identification with volunteerism. My point in the rhetorical analysis of service learning scholarship is that faculty express a kind of affective regret that students have affinity for the volunteerism mode of civic engagement, seeing such initiatives as being “too often infused with the volunteer ethos...that ignores the structural reasons to help others” (Bickford and Reynolds 230). Many critique the skeptical attitude that their students have toward activism and point out problematics of volunteerism, stating that the volunteer mode fails to contextualize social problems, get at their root causes, or change conditions that lead to such problems. Further, they suggest that volunteerism can foster a missionary attitude, a savior complex, or an us-and-them gulf between students and those they serve. At times, the literature argues, implicitly or explicitly, that faculty need to challenge students’ placement of volunteerism on a pedestal and move them beyond this limited purview of civic engagement (Bickford and Reynolds; Coogan, “Service Learning and Social Change”; Herzberg; Morton; Weisser). To be sure, the scholarly literature is full of compelling arguments about the problematics of volunteerism. My point is simply that an affective dimension (the bristling) underscores this position.

I return now to anecdote, this time an anecdote that I hope will reveal something about activism’s affective dimensions. Several years ago, I attended my first trip to the annual School of the Americas protest at Fort Benning, Georgia. Over 20,000 peace activists from all over the United States and beyond gathered that weekend to march on the



school where soldiers and paramilitary leaders from around the globe (especially Latin America) study psychological operations and counter-insurgency techniques including interrogation and torture. Manuel Noriega is a graduate. So are the fascists who ousted democratically elected Salvador Allende from power in Chile. The march commemorates the anniversary of the 1989 massacre of six Roman Catholic priests, their housekeeper, and the housekeeper's child at a Jesuit University in El Salvador. The Jesuit priests had become vocal in their opposition to both the Salvadoran death squads and the U.S. military which was funding and training those squads.

The protest consisted of a litany of the names of dead civilians (including many priests and nuns, who, not coincidentally, form one of the core constituents of the annual march), murdered in Latin America by alums of the school. We marchers carried white crosses with the names of "the disappeared" and responded with "presente" after each name was called, placing the crosses in the holes of the facility's fence. The litany is powerful, an aural commemoration of victims of fascism, victims of militarism run amuck, victims of U.S. tax dollars. Seeing that fence, drowning in tens of thousands of white crosses, is overwhelming. Many marchers became emotionally overcome at the fence. Here is another experience, another series of visceral moments that have the potential to be objects of analysis but, in equal part, are utterances in and of themselves. The sound of the massive crowd, joining in a common cause, yelling the word "presente." The appearance of the crosses stuck in the fence.

These moments feel. Let me take that notion a step further. These moments felt good. Not to negate the solemnity of the occasion, but there was something *satisfying* about being among so many like-minded individuals, doing something that *felt* righteous. No classic car rally attendees called us names. It was a moment where intellectually I supported the political cause I was marching for. But I was also experiencing something akin to an affinity and a felt sense. The



affective experience—again, despite the solemnity—was a positive one. I was not one of the marchers who climbed the fence, thereby trespassing and facing prosecution. That may have changed the affective dynamics, although some marchers had planned, happily, for just such a moment.

I don't think I'm alone in finding an activist experience to be a positive, uplifting, affective experience. In fact, I don't think I'm alone in the world of service learning academics in having had activist experiences that brought us pleasure, camaraderie, or satisfaction. This is not to critique those of us who are service learning academics and activists. There is nothing wrong with a bodily, affective, sensory experience. But my claim here is that we who are invested in challenging student "feelings" regarding volunteerism should challenge our own feelings about activism, thereby acknowledging the affectively and socially constructed nature of our identification with an ethic of action. Once again, it works both ways.

At work is a kind of converse to the affective dimension of students' desire for the comforting and happy work of volunteerism. Many of us have a desire—an affective attraction—for *activism*. Just as many students might find volunteering to be something that feels good, many faculty involved in civic engagement work seem to find activism equally desirable—in an equally bodily, experiential way. A bodily attraction and passion for what they desire: activism. Perhaps in part this is a nostalgia for the 1960s. Perhaps an expression of their own political leanings. Just as they bemoan students for an unchecked acquiescence to the joys of volunteering, they themselves at times romanticize the other end of the civic engagement spectrum: the activist side. One activist and critic, interviewed in a recent issue of the *Utne Reader*, suggests that leftist activism has become too taken with the entire performativity of familiar tactics like the sit-in (Hart 38). The piece charges that for many activists, this performance has become an end in itself. Attending to the affective dimensions of the ethic of



activism is one way to avoid excessive loyalty to the exhibitionism/bodily act of activism and expressions of regret that students aren't tied to the same modes of social change. Students are not necessarily passive or apolitical just because they take comfort in volunteerism. Maybe they just have a different set of affective connections, a different set of bodily desires.

Acknowledging Affect: Implications

Many service learning academics have an affective affinity for an ethic of action. That is not a criticism of service learning academics but rather an often-unacknowledged dimension of who we are as a scholarly community. By acknowledging the affective dimensions of our own conceptions of citizenship, we are acknowledging that an ethic of action is a social construct. The danger lies in taking for granted that an ethic of activism-advocacy is inherently superior. If we are listening to students who believe in an ethic of volunteerism, we are allowing student perspectives to intervene in our own ongoing processing of what and how service learning experiences mean. We are listening, maintaining an open stance, allowing for that intervention. But we also need to intervene in the process of students who are experiencing the sensations of service learning work and challenge their assumptions about volunteerism. The interventions must be two-way, and those interventions must acknowledge that, like ideology, affect also has material consequence. Clough points out, for instance, that the "circulation of affect" serves a disciplinary, controlling function (19). Feeling one way or another about a civic experience has consequences.

So we can learn from the sensations of our service learning students and we can explore how they form affective affinities for, among other things, an ethic of volunteerism. But not if we focus on disconnect between our ideologies and theirs, or for that matter our emotions and theirs. If we only rush to de-construct and critique and ultimately change their identifications with volunteerism, we haven't found out



anything about their sensations, or why and how they feel. Political significance lies not only in critiquing and changing, but also in exploring the everyday sensations, what Stewart calls “the politics of ordinary affect” (15). The danger is that we reach a point of impasse, akin to what Crowley describes in *Toward a Civic Discourse*, in which she suggests that liberalism and fundamentalism are worldviews whose affective intensities have led to a failure to communicate. Acknowledging that an ethic of volunteerism *and* an ethic of activism are both informed by affective sensations means ceding the power to deem one form of civic engagement as inherently better than the other. Our felt experiences with volunteer work *and* activist work affectively construct our points-of-view. Compositionists engaged in community service learning may consider how attending to affect might enhance a sense of faculty-student reciprocity. Furthermore, it’s essential that service learning practitioners wrestle with the notion of emotion, if only because so much emotion surrounds service learning work.



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