

# “Here We Come to Save the Day”: Exploring the Dark Side of Servant Leadership Narratives among College Freshmen

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## Introduction

I HAVE ALWAYS STRUGGLED with service projects and mission trips, and from the first community cleanup on the “black side of town” in my small home town, to the “Ecumenical Mission” trip to Kingston Jamaica, to the service trips to Carbel, Virginia, something always felt “wrong”. I was never able to put my finger on it, but I am coming to understand my discomfort is a naïve mix of the feelings expressed by the students mentioned in this article and a tragic paralysis of conscience. I find myself frozen within a growing understanding that any attempt to intentionally impact a community from the outside probably does more harm than good. As a younger person, my discomfort stemmed from the feeling that I was somehow unwelcomed in the spaces that I purported to serve, despite that my personal interaction with community members were often warm and inviting.

Clearly these critiques come from a bias of both space and place. My own value-laden responses are informed by the largely privileged life I was born into and in which I have lived ever since. At the authoring of this article I am a white 34 year old son of two history teachers who lives with his wife and two children in a middle class neighborhood of “cookie-cutter” houses and in a predominantly white college-adjacent town. I have served as a student affairs practitioner and most recently in a faculty appointment at a large research intensive university

having received my degrees from similar institutions. I was raised in the Presbyterian Church (which tends to be less evangelical or mission-based than many other Christian faiths), however this faith was still the source of many of my own service experiences. I encourage you to keep my relatively privileged positionality in mind as you read so you can “consider the source” of the critiques that follow.

In my adolescence, a youth pastor once challenged me to think more critically about who was helping whom, indicating a reciprocal effect of service that I dismissed out of hand from my privileged perch as a white, anglo, protestant and middle class citizen (?) of the United States. More recently, I have come to think of this discomfort as the self-inflicted wounds accrued through clumsy and insidious colonization of the spaces I sought to “improve” or “make better”; effectively, I was attempting to fix something that was not broken. As has been the case with so many historical acts of philanthropy (e.g. Howard, 2011; Illich, 1968), my current distaste for so much of our university service learning and community efforts is that they reify the inappropriate behavior in which I have participated. As such, when I speak below about privileged students and their interactions with curriculum, know that I do so recognizing my own continuing role in such behavior as a privileged individual.

I am seeking to trouble modern narratives of service learning in higher education in this article. As a practitioner, I am charged with designing meaningful service learning experiences for college freshman with the expressed outcomes of developing stronger citizen leaders. As a scholar, I am moved to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about service-learning pedagogies which often reify oppressive colonization of marginalized communities from the center of an unjust society. The article that follows has three primary portions. First, my own perspectives of the players and scenes in this narrative of service learning are introduced. Next, I highlight analyses of three student narratives which highlight three horizontalized themes among collective student narratives. Finally, I theorize a curriculum for replacing service learning with immersion projects which move toward caring for our separate and linked communities devoid of heroic and invasive service narratives.

### **Setting the Scene**

#### **As the vans descends...**

...down the steep hill on the road entering Carbel, Virginia, the surroundings begin to shift. The \$300,000 and \$400,000 colonial homes that were just up the road give way to old panel buildings that are missing planks, shingles, or even roofs and floors. The structures have paint jobs that were probably last freshened before most of the college freshmen seated behind me were born. As I turn down Main, I pass what used to be the post office. Now it is just a small bare-wood building with a sagging roof and a ten-foot hastily painted sign which reads “Carbel, lets fight to get our post office back!” As you travel 200 yards further up the road you reach the foot of the abandoned mineshaft tower which presides over the town. Beneath this rusted hulk - a visage of Carbel’s past prosperity - the vans come to rest between the two largest buildings in town: the masonic lodge and the civic league.

Carbel, Virginia was once a thriving community supported by carbide and nickel mining in the mid 1900’s, but as demand for such raw materials waned, the mines pulled out and the community began to falter. In recent years, the community zip code was consolidated and the post office was closed. Most importantly, the people began to become isolated, disconnected, and alone. Children are now bussed miles away for school and poverty is rampant. Though the GPS coordinates of Carbel and its catalyst of decline may be unique, such dissolution of community is a common narrative in the United States. As is the case in many such communities, in the midst of what might be described as hopeless decline, a grass-roots civic league, established and maintained by active Carbel citizens, has risen to meet the challenges of the community. While Carbel is far from problem-free, life goes on and many people work for the benefit of the community and each other in a fashion that is remarkable. Such efforts can serve as an example to all regarding a sense of community that contemporary life so often lacks.

### **About an hour away...**

...in Shadeville, a small college town with a large land grant University, there is a living-learning community (LLC) housing just over 200 freshmen. The LLC boasts a programmatic emphasis in leadership and citizenship with the intent of developing more engaged citizens through transformational leadership (i.e. Bass & Avolio, 1994) and courageous followership (i.e. Chaleff, 2009). Through linked coursework and programs, live-in staff and highly engaged faculty members work with students in a variety of settings “meeting students where they are” in order to disrupt notions of top-down management/military focused models of leadership. The curriculum and co-curriculum in the LLC is designed to supplant such recognizable frames with more community-based narratives of shared gifts and communal accountability (Block, 2009). The Social Change Model (HERI, 1996) is among several core instructional lenses valued in the program. The model focuses on the importance of interactions between individuals, groups, and communities (articulated as society in the model). Further, the Social Change Model focuses on service (in the case of the LLC; service-learning) as a primary instructional method and a powerful tool for learning about social change.

Within the framework of service-learning, the LLC seeks to immerse students in Carbel’s social framework, if only for a short time, to see Carbel’s empowering civic leadership and citizenship in challenging real-world conditions. Three times during the Fall semester, the LLC sends a caravan of about 70 students down the interstate corridor and through winding Appalachian roads to Carbel. The “service” portion of the experience provided in the curriculum is designed to provide hands-on support for the Carbel civic league. As a complement, the prevailing “learning” intent is for students to witness and learn from the actions of the citizens who are working to revitalize their community. Assignments in linked coursework focus on several scholarly and archival readings telling the story of Carbel and explicating its socio-political climate in order to help prepare students for the experience. Furthermore, specific guidance is provided by faculty to help students recognize their roles as servants and learners rather than hero’s or saviors.

### **Service trip days start out early...**

Scores of sleepy eyed college freshman stand in the chilly parking lot waiting for the vans to arrive from the university’s fleet. When the vans arrive, everyone loads up quickly to get warm. The mood on the ride down is generally quiet and often shifts to nervousness and disbelief as we

draw nearer to Carbel. When the vans come to a stop, the drivers (who double as site supervisors) hop out and meet with Carbel citizens in a huddle between the civic league and masonic lodge that can only be described as minimally organized chaos.

Betty, one of the long-term fixtures of the civic league, casually introduces community members by first names, nick-names, and relational ties (e.g. “Jimmy’s cousin”) supposing that you know everyone in the community. She starts giving directions to the various service sites in colloquial, local terms rather than addresses than can be typed into Google maps. The van drivers, many of whom have never set foot in Carbel nod politely and look at the trip coordinator with a panicked look which says, “I have no idea who or what she’s talking about”. Back in the vans, some students complain about the lack of organization while others rebuke the former saying “this is like my home town, everything can’t be organized all the time!” Eventually, about fifteen minutes later, it all gets sorted out and students are whisked in twelve different directions to all corners of Carbel. When the vans arrive to their work sites the van passengers step out and stretch their legs. Almost immediately after exiting the vans the juxtaposition of a group of LLC students (predominantly privileged, white, middle-class, and “highly educated” young people) in the midst of the profoundly wise, decidedly less formally educated, and commensurately communal citizens of Carbel is startling. Carbel citizens spark conversations regarding the power of community and the meaning-making associated with serving and being served throughout the day. However, despite the rich opportunities for personal growth and the lessons about community found everywhere, student reflection explicates that students rarely connect to the citizens of Carbel as people. Rather, many are disappointed in the trip because they feel they had not actively helped, fixed, or saved, the community of Carbel.

### Analysis

#### Who is served by service learning?

Our current postindustrial paradigm is marked by the fact that more resources in our society are exchanged for services rather than products (Rosch, Joseph, & Newman, 2011). It is easy to see how we might develop the sense that *service* has a self-referential inherent value and is thus always positive, useful, and, most importantly, desirable to the party that the provider determines to be in need. Many student narratives about service learning (and some from university offices, as well) suggest that service learners are providing solutions for needy communities much as an information technology firm might do for a bank. Critical analysis of service learning, however, highlights a taken-for-granted assumption of the value of charity among service learning proponents. Specifically, there is an assumption that service locations, or the communities in which service learners are inserted, are desperate for any help they can get (Grohs, 2012). Recently, the notion of charity as an element of applied critical engagement has been troubled in service learning and social justice oriented experiences (Eby, 1998; Howard, 2011). Viewing service learning through a critical lens, critics like Eby and Howard suggest such experiences are invasive colonizing acts, though most who seek to participate in service projects would likely be outraged to hear their acts of “charity” described in such “perverted” terms.

Many transdisciplinary programs in colleges and universities utilize service learning within the curriculum because such experiences claim to provide students the opportunity to observe so-called “troubled” or “needy” communities in a more authentic manner while also serving the public good. This certainly suggests that “service” is provided to all parties involved. In this

article, I imagine a curriculum wherein notions of who is *server* and who is *served* are complicated and ever-shifting, thereby challenging the traditional heroic narrative of charity. This is, in part, responsive to the recognition that students, on one hand, see themselves as providers of much needed aid and, on the other hand, expect certain “services” in return (e.g. gratitude, praise, etc.) These viewpoints were shared by students after the conclusion of the co-curricular service experience in Carbel. Students appear to situate themselves as either heroes, martyrs, or both. Further, many seem to need to be told that they have saved someone or sacrificed selflessly in order to have some sort of altruistic itch scratched. My own local observations of such phenomena are far from unique. Critique regarding the negative consequences of such programs has ranged from unpacking unintended harm (e.g. Eby, 1998) to exposing sophisticated, brutal colonization tactics (Howard, 2011; Illich, 1968). Ultimately, much of the power which enables such objectionable outcomes derives from the manner by which roles are assumed within the service learning experience. Grohs (2012) explains that, at its best, such a model can espouse a paradigm wherein community engagement can be viewed from anyone’s perspective as “about you and me and us all at the same time” (p. 6). In the narrative I am recounting, many students fancy themselves in the center as server all-the-while expecting praise and ultimately marginalizing community members.

### Themes from Student Responses

After concluding three projects in Carbel, student evaluation data was examined through a phenomenological lens and common, horizontalized (i.e. Colaizzi, 1978), themes began to emerge. Emergent themes were not surprising based on the content of a number of casual conversations I experienced surrounding the service projects. The narratives below recount three interactions between students and me. Through these narratives, the three essential themes are explicated students and material for further discussion follows.

#### Vignette one:

Meagan was is an upper middle class, white, systems engineering freshman. In her papers and discussions in class she frequently expressed a passion for social justice and was committed to changing the world and, as she would say, ending all of the “isms”. Prior to the Carbel trip, Meagan stopped by my office to tell me how excited she was about the upcoming service project. Upon returning from the trip, Meagan’s feedback primarily centered on the concern that she was unable to “save Carbel”. During the processing class after the trip, she specifically noted: “We spent *all Saturday* down there and I don’t feel like we changed anything”. Meagan was appalled by what she described as a lack of gratitude from the community. Although community members were polite and repeatedly thanked the students for their time and assistance at the end of the project, Meagan suggested “I just didn’t see many folks who were really grateful for what we did for them!” Meagan’s remarks underscore the first essential theme: *Student’s tended to situate themselves as the subject of the service experience.*

#### Vignette two:

Troy is an architecture major from a rural community similar to Carbel in many ways. He often cited a conservative, small town upbringing and highlighted hard work and sacrifice as surefire “can’t-miss” methods for success in life. Troy’s service group worked around several homes doing some general yard work for people who had been sick, injured, or depression-

stricken. Troy said “I think too much was made out of the service learning trip... that place was just like where I was raised. It’s a bunch of people who are poor because they expect someone to come give them a handout”. Troy cited his fundamental Christian faith and discussed the importance of service to him, but also shared it was important for him to help people with their outlook on life. He shared:

I told them (the young couple for which he completed some yard work), you’re not ever going to get anywhere if you just sit here and feel sorry for yourself. I was just like you and come from a place just like this and now I’m going to school to be an architect.

Troy shared later that his host family did not talk to him much after that conversation. Troy’s comments illustrate the second essential theme very well: *Many students blame the decline almost solely on Carbel’s people, and said students sought to correct or educate them.*

### **Vignette three:**

Mellissa is a human development major who’s assignment in Carbel was with a team of individuals that cleared out several tons of debris from a lot on which a man and his family were setting up a new trailer after a fire had taken their family home. Mellissa said

The experience was so powerful and moving...Nate (the father of the family) was so thankful for the work we did for him. We ended our day with a group hug and Nate cried when he told us he could move his family out of his neighbor’s basement. It feels good to know that you made such a positive impact on someone’s life.

While Mellissa’s comments were less critical of the trip itself, they are still indicative of a third problematic theme: *Students felt the experience was worthwhile when they were given concrete evidence that they changed something for the “better”.*

These brief narrative snapshots certainly do not make the nuances of 70 complex individual student experiences explicit. They do, however, serve as representations of the three prevailing horizontalized ideologies which were expressed during processing and evaluation of the service project:

Theme 1: Student’s tended to situate themselves as the subject of the service experience.

Theme 2: Many students blame the decline almost solely on Carbel’s people and sought to correct or educate them.

Theme 3: Students felt the experience was worthwhile when they saw evidence that they changed something for the “better”.

Students in the project often exhibited a tendency to self-identify at the center of the experience while marginalizing other participants and community members. Hereafter, critical and post-colonial trends are woven throughout the dialogue to imagine a curriculum which helps to counterbalance the notion of servant-as-hero.



## Discussion

### Summary of Student Response

The LLC (a leadership education living-learning community) engaged 200+ freshmen in service learning in Carbel, VA, with a focus on Appalachian culture, citizen leadership, and community development. Situated in a curriculum based on studying leadership and followership as modes of associative citizenship, students were encouraged to make relevant connections between their academic disciplines and the constructs addressed during this service learning experience. The results were troubling in many cases. While some students were moved to question their own privilege and power, others dismissed the experience as “useless”. Some students identified a positive impact from the experience, but rooted it in the gratitude and thanks they received rather than any shift in their own epistemology or ontology. Stated briefly, some students recognized the impact that the service experience had on their own world view (i.e. “How did the experience change me?”), but most based the validity of the experience on whether they felt they had personally made a lasting impact on the community (i.e. “How did I impact the situation?” or “How was I empowered by the experience?”). Further interrogation of student narratives revealed that students identified themselves as more equipped and capable than Carbel community members and were frustrated by the powerlessness they felt during the trip. In other words, many of our students assumed that the deep, complex challenges of this rural community only existed because of the incompetence and/or laziness of its people. As a result, our students believed that by inserting their own “superior” intellects, gifts, and work ethics into someone else’s community they could overcome a century of withering. When asked if they felt such a viewpoint was insulting to the community members of Carbel, one student captured the sentiment of the cohort perfectly: “We’re trying to help those people, how on earth could they be insulted?” Such perspectives demonstrate a dark side to modern narratives of the social-minded young person and represent a need for curriculum which underscores these challenges.

### A New Approach

A significant barrier within the service learning curricula nationwide has to do with the manner by which community boundaries are imagined. Indeed, even the narrative with which I opened this article described the LLC and Carbel as two separate communities. Furthermore, faculty, students, and program organizers viewed Carbel as the community which needed help and the living learning community as the one with superior resources and individuals who could meet those needs. While the distinction of two geographically and socially disparate societies must be considered, the assumption that one community is higher functioning is a mistake. When we suspend a focus on one community serving another in favor of concentrating effort on community members caring for and learning from each other, new possibilities emerge.

When faculty in our program discuss reciprocity between the LLC and Carbel communities with our freshmen (or even suggest that our students will be helped more by Carbel citizens than the other way around), the students are often bored or underwhelmed by the mundaneness of it all. One might read such a lukewarm reaction as rejection or distaste for a new paradigm which removes the empowering element of service or mission work from service-learning (as if those so privileged need to be further empowered!). When I speak of an empowering element, what I really mean is the *illusion* of such an element. Ivan Illich is among many to have exposed this

illusion. He did so in an address to the Conference on InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP) in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on April 20, 1968 sharing:

I am here to entreat you to freely, consciously and humbly give up the legal right you have to impose your benevolence on Mexico. I am here to challenge you to recognize your inability, your powerlessness and your incapacity to do the "good" which you intended to do.

In his sarcastic, scathing indictment of colonialism masked as service, Illich demanded that would be “do-gooders” should only come to what they would call “developing countries” to observe and learn so they can return home and benefit their own communities; but never to “help”. He went on to suggest that any further action was an invasion or attack on the community that service workers often believed they were improving. This illusion of missionary service seems to fool everyone except the victims: those who are reported to have been served. Ultimately his critique was fair: *help* and *Improvement*, to the privileged eye, means making the other look more like the privileged. This is a common narrative in post-colonial literature (e.g. Freire, 1998; Said, 1979; Spivak & Harasym, 1990). Such interactions focus on the privileged community’s perceived strengths while fixating on the other’s perceived limitations; from the viewpoint of the privileged, of course. In other words, service is one of the most blatant weapons of the colonizer.

An alternative, then, is to authentically focus on the gifts of both communities; to assume each community is viable and sustainable on its own; and to recognize that no one is providing service to any other, but rather all are sharing ideas and caring for each other equitably. Peter Block discusses the difference between service and care in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (2009). Block shares that organized systems of service create significant impediments to our abilities to care for and uplift each other. He says that if one speaks to any vulnerable person they can often recount the many ways in which they have been served, but articulate very few instances in which they have been cared for. Furthermore, Block suggests that service providers and communities think very differently about problems and possibilities. He shares that service providers want to identify your problems whereas community members wish to hear about your gifts. In other words, a powerful post-industrial ideology that has come to be infused in service learning narratives is an a priori assumption that the site of the service is a *broken* community. In such a paradigm, it is difficult for students to assume anything other than that they are riding in on a white horse to save the day. Alternatively, the benefits of the interactions described by Block are reciprocal and often the party formerly known as the “service provider” learns or benefit more than the community once known as “needy”. This care is what Peter Block calls associational life and we would be remiss if we did not link the concept back to John Dewey’s (2013) modes of associative living.

## A New Curriculum

In reimagining service learning, it becomes clear to me that it may very well be most appropriate to jettison to concept of service – along with all its baggage – entirely. For many of the reasons describe above, service is often felt as a violent co-opting of culture within a community from the outside (Eby, 1998; Howard, 2011; Spivak & Harasym, 1990). I have discussed an alternative wherein separate communities might come together to share of



themselves in order to learn reciprocally from each other (Freire, 1998; Grohs, 2012). Perhaps “dialogic immersion” would be a more apt term for the interaction which I am describing. This is a term I am introducing to describe an experience that centers on the act of spending a great deal of time in a community for no other reason than to converse and learn about the culture and its people. In using this term I should be careful to point out that I am speaking of immersion in the way that language educators might (e.g. Fortune, 2013) as opposed to the way service learning proponents do (e.g. Clark, Faircloth, Lasher, & McDonald, 2013).

Immersion is a term often used with some of the more developed service learning organizations. Viewed through the lens I have used above (e.g. Block, 2009; Illich, 1968), one might condemn cultural immersion in modern service contexts as a week or so of understanding a community in order to better identify problems and fix them. Alternatively, I suggest that we spend quite a bit more time with a community doing what a student of a foreign language might; *listening*. By observing and watching how a community functions insights into the beauty and gifts that a community offers might be better understood. The end goal in this paradigm is also different in that one is seeking not to “better” the other community, but rather using what s/he has learned to humanize his/her own community.

From a curricular perspective, such a paradigmatic shift is a tough sell to college freshmen steeped in the nobility-masked, colonizing oppression of missionary-style service. Many have remarked that oppressive tendencies of human beings, particularly privileged people, cannot ever be truly resolved (Freire, 1998; Said, 1979). Rather, they suggest that a “hygiene approach” is more appropriate. Here I am not speaking in the terms wielded by genocidal ethic cleansers, but rather referring to the habitual practice of keeping the potential to maliciously or unintentionally marginalize others in check. This notion is opposed to the idea that some sort of diversity training or certification permanently inoculates one against being or becoming a racist, sexist, homophobe, or any other iteration of the oppressor (or combination thereof). Employing guided initial forays into critical theory and postcolonial theory in linked coursework may be a viable means of providing a method of hygiene which students can practice on the immersion experience and beyond.

In reviewing the LLC’s pedagogy, I examined the pre-readings, orientation discussions, and processing sessions which served as bookends for the service experience itself. Present in this material was a dense historical narrative of the Carbel and several accounts from the people – many of whom were active in Carbel’s civic league – and a number of big questions designed to get students thinking about the relationships and engagement they experienced in the community. What was missing was a reality check; a process by which to trouble the assumption that students were going to rescue a community which had been staving off decline for well over half a century.

### **Proposed Curriculum Plan**

What would a service learning orientation that served as a cautionary framework against colonizing behavior look like? In keeping with the hygiene approach described above the curriculum needs to make participants acutely aware and sensitive to their own “footprint” in a given community. Furthermore, a critical lens that is self-reflective and evaluative of a student’s own thoughts, words, and actions is crucial to cultivating behavior that is authentic, thoughtful

and respectful in emergent experiences. Finally, we might clearly combat the invasion that Illich warns us of by framing the entire curriculum in post-colonial critique. Possibilities of such a curriculum are underscored below.

One powerful framework for self-reflection during the “immersion dialogues” about which I have mused is moral imagination. Werhane (2002) resituated moral imagination from its previous descriptions (Moberg & Seabright, 2000) suggesting that moral imagination includes: awareness of self and positionality, recognition of situation and script in order to identify or avoid injustice, the ability to imagine possibilities external to current contexts, and the ability to evaluate the current and potential contexts from a moral perspective. Using moral imagination as a framework may give learners a process by which to employ critical reflection and post-colonial lenses during immersion dialogues.

Contemporary students have been described as very adept at criticizing other’s roles in their own experience (Twenge, 2006), however they tend to be less developed at critiquing their own privilege and value-laden missteps. Employing a critical theory as a lens in regular reflection is crucial to a more just dialogue within immersion experiences. A critical approach affords us not only a method for unpacking (and hopefully preventing) colonizing tendencies, but a way of life that makes the familiar strange and helps to reflectively identify injustices propagated by our actions and the world writ large. Practical reflection through a critical lens can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Currently, students create five-minute video journals to record their own stories throughout class experiences. Ongoing immersion experiences may also be tracked in this manner. Through transcription and content analysis through a critical lens, students might better come to recognize their own positionality, the narratives in which they have acted, and the injustices which they have propagated. Peer reviewed critique across positionalities might also provide thoughtful insight.

Where a general critical perspective can allow students the latitude to question their own positionality and roles, post-colonial critique can serve as a method to stay the hand of the “do-gooder” whom Illich warns. Post-colonial critique helps one to specifically be on guard for any implicit or explicit expression of a desire to change or alter the other. Linking back to moral imagination, recognition of what it means to colonize a space can help students realize possibilities for new futures in two ways. First, and potentially most difficult, imagining a “service project” wherein one’s help is neither required nor desired is needed to authentically engage the immersion dialogue I have described above. Additionally, it is important for students to be able to take a step further and allow their own home places to be enhanced by the dialogue. If students, staff, and faculty associated with the service-trip-turned-dialogic-immersion are able to regularly practice near unrelenting critical and post-colonial self-awareness, real community care might be a possibility in lieu of invasive “service”.

### **Final Thoughts**

As is the case with all narratives, this article is situated in my own experiences and is bound by space, place, and my own value-laden perspectives. Readers should be aware of my own participation in similar roles as the student about which I have written. My comments assume that most communities experience and can articulate many of the same frustrations framed by post-colonial critique implicitly or explicitly. Viewpoints like Ivan Illich’s on the colonizing

effect of service on communities within service sites may not be fully mirrored and/or expressed among all communities; including Carbel, Virginia. However, critical viewpoints of service learning suggest dialogue with partner communities should be engaged first so curriculum coordinators can better take care to minimize harm and oppressive influence in such interactions or forgo damaging experiences altogether. A curriculum which situates community dialogues as balanced and maintains that the identities of all communities involved are non-pejorative is essential to minimizing the dark side of service learning and moving towards socially just dialogue across and with communities.

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