

# Service-Learning Programs and the Knowledge Economy: Exploring the Tensions

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Received: 9 June 2016 / Accepted: 18 December 2016 /  
Published online: 26 December 2016  
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**Abstract** Community service-learning (CSL) programs are proliferating in Canadian higher education. University programs promote students' experiential learning in community as part of a course; students most often engage in unpaid work in not-for-profit organizations and reflect on that experience in relation to their classroom learning. However, programs tend to occupy an ambivalent position in higher education—they are seen as important, but at the same time are often under-resourced and treated as marginal to universities' core activities. This paper argues that the contradictory position of service-learning is partly related to the bifurcated view of theoretical and practical knowledge perpetuated in knowledge economy discourse. Drawing on interviews with service-learning program leaders, it explores their responses to knowledge economy discourse. Findings suggest varying levels of resistance; some leaders comply with university pressures to engage in transactional approaches to service-learning, while others seek to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge through the creation of hybrid learning networks. This paper outlines the reasons for and implications of different responses and suggests that socio-cultural learning theories can inform pedagogical approaches within programs.

**Keywords** Experiential learning · Activity theory · Higher education

## Introduction

Community-university engagement, including community-based research, service-learning and community-based continuing education, is seen as an important activity

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in higher education in Canada and internationally (Hollister and Gearan 2013; Jackson 2008). Service-learning is a form of experiential learning in which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences which meet actual community needs, are integrated into students' academic curriculum or provide structured time for reflection, and enhance what is taught in the classroom by extending student learning into the community (Furco 1996). It fits with universities' concerns about preparing students for "real life" – that is, for entry into the workforce and participation in a "knowledge economy" that demands complex, higher order skills. At the same time, service-learning programs are often under-resourced and undervalued in university reward systems (Butin 2006). Programs therefore occupy a contradictory location within universities.

This contradictory location may be attributed to the effect of neoliberal state policies on universities; for example, service-learning is often seen as a counter-movement to academic corporatization (Raddon and Harrison 2015). But this paper argues further that the ambivalent position of service-learning in higher education reflects a long-standing bifurcation of theoretical and practical knowledge, which Guile (2010, p. 39) refers to as the "two-worlds" view of knowledge. This paper brings together insights from the literature on service learning and work-integrated learning, including socio-cultural learning theories, to examine how leaders from university service-learning programs across the country articulate and respond to epistemological as well as institutional challenges to service-learning.

The section that follows begin with a brief description of differences in service-learning in Canada and the U.S., followed by discussion of service-learning and work-integrated learning literatures and themes. After elaborating the method used in this empirical study, the analysis section examines service-learning leaders' ways of thinking about the different forms of knowledge. A section that considers the implications of these responses for service-learning programs and future research follows the discussion section.

## **Service Learning and Work-Integrated Learning Literatures**

### **Background: History of Service Learning in North America**

Service-learning is a recent phenomenon in Canada compared to the U.S., where it first appeared the mid-1960s expansion in higher education and focused on anti-poverty and social reform programs. But since the 1980s, service learning in the U.S. has been constructed primarily as a pedagogical strategy to enhance students' cognitive development" (Lounsbury and Pollack 2001, p. 332). The growth of centers within universities that play a critical role in coordinating institution-wide commitment is evidence of the institutionalization of community engagement in American universities (Welch and Saltmarsh 2013). Still, a 2016 report suggests that three-quarters of community college students have never taken a service-learning course (CCCSE 2016).

In Canada, the development of service-learning programs was partly stimulated by the JW McConnell Family Foundation, which granted \$9,500,000 to ten Canadian universities between 2004 and 2011 to support the initiation or expansion of service learning programming. The McConnell foundation also funded the establishment of the

*Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning* (CACSL) in 2004 to strengthen and promote service-learning across the country although CACSL has struggled since funding ended. One source suggests at least 50 campuses in Canada had service-learning programs in 2010 (Keshen et al. 2010) and this number has continued to increase. Despite this expansion, Canadian service-learning lacks the coordination evident in the U.S., where service-learning is supported by various levels of government, receives institutional and foundation funding, and has dedicated conferences and academic journals (Raddon and Harrison 2015). The Canadian situation has changed little since a survey of service-learning practitioners and community agency networks concluded that important work lay ahead in connecting practitioners, developing resources and research on service-learning, and linking national, provincial, and local organizations and associations (Hayes 2006).

### The Service-Learning Literature

A review of the literature about service-learning, which is mostly U.S.-based, suggests that there are diverse perspectives about what service learning is and should be (Taylor et al. 2015). For example, Chambers (2009) describes four theoretical clusters, which focus on service-learning as experiential education, social learning, student development, or liberatory education. The pedagogical aims within these clusters are quite different—for example, while the goal of service-learning as student development aims to maximize its impact on students' cognitive, social, and cultural growth and development, service-learning as liberatory education aims to develop students' critical consciousness for social change. Butin (2010) also describes four approaches to community engagement as technical, cultural, political and anti-foundational, which vary in their pedagogical assumptions and aims. He sees technical approaches, which aim to identify “best practices” in service learning in order to generate desired student outcomes, as a major strand. O’Meara and Niehaus (2009) add that the most common objective articulated by over one hundred faculty who applied for a service learning award was to help students achieve disciplinary learning aims. These writings, along with our synthesis of the academic literature (Taylor et al. 2015), support Kajner’s (2015) suggestion that the literature on community-engaged scholarship reflects “a disproportionate interest in the pragmatics of engagement” (p. 2).

At the same time, within higher education literature and policy-oriented reports, loftier goals are frequently articulated for community-university engagement and service-learning. They are seen as a key part of the movement to make higher education more relevant to the broader society (Boyer 1990). Developing service-learning programs allows higher education institutions to counter the claim that they have become ivory towers, self absorbed and isolated from the world (O’Meara and Niehaus 2009). Service-learning is seen as a key way of fostering informed, engaged, responsible citizens.

In its report, “A Crucible Moment,” the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) argues that higher education can and should foster democratic voice, thought, and action *as well as* acting as an engine of economic growth. Authors justify these seemingly disparate goals by arguing that twenty-first century learning needs are different from those required by a nineteenth-century industrial model; they argue that higher education needs to cultivate in today’s

graduates “an open and curious mind, critical acumen, public voice, ethical and moral judgment, and the commitment to act collectively in public to achieve shared purposes” (p. 10). In contrast, Ronald Barnett (2011), a commentator on higher education, criticizes what he describes as the move from “research” to “entrepreneurial” universities; the latter’s focus on the exchange value of knowledge is seen to be incompatible with a more socially responsible “ecological” university, which aims to bring about a better world. Other critical writers echo concerns about universities’ pursuit of private funding as public funding declines, and lament the replacement of collegial decision-making with managerial professionalism as higher education embraces a new regime of accountability (Pannu et al. 1994; Aronowitz 2000; Newson and Buchbinder 1988). These authors consider changes in higher education to be hostile to a focus on community (broadly defined), democratic process, and the public good.

While there are clearly different assessments of the possibilities and constraints associated with trends in higher education, there is general agreement that there is a long way to go to realize a more democratic vision for higher education.<sup>1</sup> The National Task Force admits that the pursuit of democratic civic engagement aims for higher education will require significant change in academic norms around what counts as scholarship, what sorts of expertise are acknowledged, how to measure academic achievement, and what the content and pedagogy of the curriculum should be (see also Hartley and Hollander 2005). Several community-engaged scholars concur; for example, Saltmarsh et al. (2009) argue that the dominant framework of engagement in higher education privileges the expertise of the university, seeing it as something to then be “applied” in community:

Knowledge produced by credentialed, detached experts is embedded in hierarchies of knowledge generation and knowledge use, creating a division between knowledge producers (in the university) and knowledge consumers (in the community). (pp. 7-8)

With particular reference to service learning, Himley (2004) adds that the discourse of “service” continues to “reinforce the superior position of the university as ‘cultural benefactor’ with “superior knowledge, expertise and resources (p. 421).

As an alternative to the dominant approach to engagement, Sandmann et al. (-2008) suggest that a fundamental epistemological shift is required as the “eco-system of knowledge” is expanded to include the community (p. 47). Validating community knowledge requires movement away from one-way dissemination of codified knowledge toward an approach that includes community partners as co-educators. Other writers endorse this vision. For example, Hoyt (2011) calls for a new epistemology of engagement based on reciprocal knowledge—“knowledge development and real learning on both sides, achieved through a diverse, dynamic, and complex network of human relationships” (p. 266). Similarly, Holland et al. (2010), p. 6) describe community-based participatory research (CBPR) as promoting “a co-learning and empowering process that attends to social inequalities and seeks a “reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity, and power.” The intellectual contributions of

<sup>1</sup> The works cited here were written before the election of Donald Trump as America’s 45th president. This event has sparked even more discussion about democratic process and engagement

community-based participants are valued and the research process involves a conceptually informed intervention aimed at producing new knowledge. This kind of community-university engagement challenges hierarchies of knowledge as well as the disciplinary organization of knowledge in higher education (Kajner 2015).

The preceding discussion raises important questions about what and whose knowledge is accepted as legitimate in the academy. But with a few exceptions (e.g., Fredericksen 2000; Hugg and Wurdinger 2007),<sup>2</sup> there tends to be less attention given in the service learning literature to questions around how knowledge is constructed and the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge. The literature on work-integrated learning literature attends more to these questions, perhaps because there is greater agreement around the aims of this kind of education.

### The Work-Integrated Learning Literature

An important theme in the literature on work-integrated learning concerns the implications of economic changes for learning, in particular, the rise of the “knowledge economy” and related assumptions about the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge. In his book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Bell (1973) described the change from industrial to post-industrial society as a shift from manufacturing to services, the increasing centrality of new science-based industries, and the rise of a technical elite. Just over 20 years later, Castells (1996) considered the implications of the information and communications technology revolution. He suggested that knowledge of technology, information, and access to networks were key factors that determined competitiveness in the new economy. Around the same time, Stehr (1994) used the term ‘knowledge society’ to describe the penetration of scientific and technological knowledge into all spheres of life. According to Guile (2010), all three writers privileged theoretical knowledge as the critical form of knowledge for economic development, assumed that this knowledge can be easily transferred from one context to another, and saw knowledge workers as central to this process.

However, Guile and others critique such assumptions. In addition to questioning whether the term *knowledge economy* accurately describes the current economic context (Brown and Lauder 2006; Livingstone 1999; Lloyd and Payne 2002; Keep 2005), writers have focused on what kind of knowledge is valued (or valuable). Brint (2001), for example, argues that *knowledge work* should include only scientific professional knowledge generated and transmitted in universities. Compared to practical knowledge, Brint describes this knowledge as more complex; as requiring advanced or refined judgments; as more capable of generating abstract concepts and propositions that can then be used to investigate other problems; and as based on highly investigative methods and analytical tools (p. 14). It is thus assumed to be superior to practical knowledge in its ability to transcend specific contexts and be transferred across them. Brint’s discussion is reminiscent of sociologist Basil Bernstein’s distinction between vertical and horizontal knowledge structures (Moore 2009). *Vertical* knowledge

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<sup>2</sup> Fredericksen (2000) and Hugg and Wurdinger (2007) discuss the influence of John Dewey on service-learning; in particular, they address the idea that effective learning requires contextualization through application and experience.

structures are seen as transcending specific contexts while *horizontal* knowledge structures are rooted in local, everyday knowledge cultures that are highly context dependent and limited in transferability.

But in Guile's (2010) view, a focus on differences rather than on interrelationships between practical and theoretical knowledge promotes a problematic "two worlds view of knowledge," which distinguishes between a *mental world* accessed through thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and interpretations, and a *material world* consisting of natural, physical, and social structures existing independently of thought. While writers like Brint (2001) implicitly privilege the mental world, others (e.g. Gibbons et al. 1994) privilege knowledge learned in the context of application (Guile 2010). But this "two worlds" view fails to explore the profound interconnections between theoretical and everyday forms of knowledge.

Writers drawing on the work of Vygotsky and cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) in discussions of workplace learning provide an alternative to the "two worlds" outlook (Guile 2010; Miettinen 1999; Niewolny and Wilson 2009; Sawchuk et al. 2006; Taylor 2014). Instead of being constructed as separate, everyday and theoretical knowledge are seen as the product of a conceptually structured mind, since our experiences of the world are always mediated (Guile 2010). The experience and knowledge of previous generations are evident in objects, norms, values, and other aspects of culture that mediate human interactions with the world (Lompscher 2006). Historical social structures incorporate established patterns of thought, modes of signification, and modes of cognition (Livingstone 1981). Therefore, theoretical and practical reasoning are both reflective of the mediated world in which we live.

The idea that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge is also proposed by Polanyi in his book *Tacit Knowledge*. Polanyi (1966) suggests that we "interiorize" theories – that is, we identify ourselves with the teachings in question by making them function as the "proximal term of a tacit moral knowledge as applied in practice" (p. 17). He argues that a true knowledge of the theory can be established only after it has been interiorized and extensively used to interpret experience. To know, we move from particulars to a comprehensive entity connecting them through tacit knowledge in a way that we cannot always define. The process of learning therefore involves using the generality contained by a theoretical concept to restructure our use of existing theoretical and everyday concepts (Guile 2010). Importantly, the discovery of new abstractions and connections occurs through continuing practical activity *in* and critical inquiry *into* social reality (Livingstone 1981). Structural tensions or contradictions are often the impetus for change (Engström 2004).

In sum, although the theory-practice bifurcation is not new (Rose 2012), it has been reinforced in contemporary knowledge economy discourse. Instead of constructing these forms of knowledge as separate and distinct, sociocultural learning theories emphasize their interconnections, which is promising for advocates of experiential learning. The preceding discussion suggests that work-integrated learning and community-engaged learning literatures share an attention to learning outside of classrooms but differ in their emphases. While sociocultural writings about professional-vocational work learning (PVWL) raise important questions about how knowledge is constructed and the relationship between different forms of knowledge, proponents of community-engaged learning attend to equally important questions about the politics of knowledge, including whose knowledge and what knowledge is valued

within higher education. This paper draws on both literatures to explore how leaders of Canadian service-learning programs discuss their work.

## Method

Sociocultural learning theories involve shifts away from a view of knowledge as fixed, universal, and generalizable toward a view of knowledge as shifting, dynamic, local, and relative. They also represent a move away from the individual as the unit of attention and analysis toward a focus on collective activity in disciplines, organizations, institutions, and other communities of practice (Paré and LeMaistre 2006). In data collection, a sociocultural learning theory approach translated into an interest in exploring the assumptions about knowledge as well as the relationships and activities associated with service learning in different institutions. The goal was to create a multi-perspectival description of participants' experiences as service-learning leaders, recognizing both their unique locations and their shared experiences within a changing higher education context. This study assumes that how we explain service-learning impacts its practice (O'Meara and Niehaus 2009).

**Research Context** McConnell-funded universities range in size and geographic location (see Table 1 for a list). For example, the student population at St. Francis Xavier University on Canada's east coast is just over 5000 while at University of British Columbia, on the west coast, it is almost 60,000. Service-learning programs in Canada are diverse partly because of their lack of institutionalization within higher education. Programs occupy different locations within universities (e.g., under Student Affairs, under the Vice-President of Research, within a faculty) and have different staffing configurations. Canadian universities generally differ in size, location and status although the system is generally not as stratified as that in the U.S.

**Procedures** This study involved purposeful sampling of service-learning leaders in universities that received McConnell grants. Interviews took place a few months prior to the researcher taking up a position overseeing the service-learning program at her university. For this reason, questions addressed both practical operational issues and

**Table 1** Interviews with McConnell-funded CSL programs

Name of university/organization (McConnell funded)	Province
Lakehead University	Ontario
Nipissing University	Ontario
Trent Center for Community-Based Education	Ontario
Wilfrid Laurier University	Ontario
University of Ottawa	Ontario
University of Alberta	Alberta
University of Quebec (Trois Rivières)	Quebec
University of British Columbia	British Columbia
St. Francis Xavier University	Nova Scotia

theoretical issues related to pedagogy. Participants were aware that the main research objectives were to learn about the pedagogy and operations of CSL programs. The primary data collection method was interviewing to understand how participants make meaning of their experiences (Seidman 2013). In preparing for interviews, the websites of universities and publicly available documents (e.g., applications for funding) were examined to learn more about the background of programs, information about how they operate, and the public image they present. This examination helped tailor interviews to participants; for example, references to web-based materials segued into other topics. Interviews then focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the history, aims, and institutional workings of programs, as well as their pedagogical assumptions. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were audiotaped and fully transcribed; a sample interview guide is included in Appendix 1.

All participants had the option of having their transcripts returned to them, and they could make changes if they wished; only a couple of participants requested this. Ethical guidelines were followed concerning the voluntary nature of participation, the ability to opt out, and the confidentiality of data. The researcher's subsequent experiences directing a service-learning program after the data collection for this project was completed, as well as her participation in three Canadian conferences related to service-learning and community engagement, provided insights into the field of service learning in Canada which no doubt inform the analysis of interview data. At the same time, coding of interview data by a research assistant as well as the researcher helped to address potential bias.

**Participants** Representatives from nine of the ten McConnell-funded programs across Canada agreed to participate in this study. All but four participants were female; only four had faculty appointments at their university. Participants included directors ( $n = 11$ ), former directors ( $n = 2$ ), program managers ( $n = 1$ ), and program coordinators ( $n = 4$ ), depending on the staffing and leadership structure of the service-learning unit. This count includes two interviews conducted with representatives from the McConnell Foundation and the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning to understand the vision of funders and context for service-learning in Canadian higher education. Eight of nine service-learning programs were located in a university; the ninth was housed in a non-profit center for community-based education located in the community. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 individuals between February and November of 2012; ten interviews were conducted in person and the remainder by phone. In four cases, two participants at the same university preferred to be interviewed together. In three of these cases, interview participants worked closely together and perspectives were complementary; in the fourth case, participants included the founder and his successor, who were able to speak to different phases in program's development.

**Data Analysis** Interview transcripts were the main data source, supplemented by materials about programs collected prior to or during interviews (e.g., a letter written by a program officer from the JW McConnell Foundation). Data analysis began with reading and re-reading interview transcripts to identify emerging themes and significant concepts across interviews (Merriam 1998; Oliver 2010). Coding was undertaken using NVivo software independently by the researcher and a research assistant focusing on themes related to knowledge, learning, expertise, and pedagogy. Assumptions about



knowledge and learning were revealed in participants' comments about the relationships between students, instructors, service-learning staff and community partners as well as questions about pedagogy.

## Findings

Discourse about the role of universities in a knowledge economy often reinforces the division between theoretical and practical knowledge, as noted above. It is therefore not surprising that “two worlds” thinking was evident in interviews with service-learning leaders. The sections that follow examine the ways in which funders and service-learning leaders talk about their visions for programs, as well as challenges and strategies for change. While leaders articulated the aim of increasing reciprocity between university and community, they differed in the extent to which they challenged predominant views of learning, expertise, and knowledge transfer.

### Privileging University Expertise or Community Knowledge?

The JW McConnell foundation, as funder, influenced the aims, organization, and evaluation of the ten service-learning programs across Canada. One of the objectives of engaging with universities, as expressed by a representative from the foundation in the following quotation, was to challenge predominant views about knowledge:

I don't underestimate the courage it takes for a university professor whose very success has been built upon focusing very much on the cerebral side of themselves and building up their expertise [to see] some Aboriginal blueberry farmer who dropped out of school at grade seven, and accept that his wisdom is equal to the university professor's, I can understand how this is not necessarily the easiest thing. It's only gonna happen if there's a safe space created between those people, that they respect each other enough that they feel comfortable feeling vulnerable in that grey zone between *their two worlds*. [emphasis added] (Interview participant from foundation)

In this quote, the participant distinguishes university expertise from community wisdom and privileges the latter. Service-learning in universities was seen as a catalyst for change.

These comments echo ideas expressed in an open letter written by a foundation program officer, which emphasized the need for universities to become more relevant:

Effective CSL programs challenge the conventional assumptions of the university that knowledge is created by tenured professors who, after years of climbing the academic ladder, work in their narrow discipline either in isolation or with a small group of similarly trained experts to *objectively analyze* the world and to publish the results in a peer-reviewed journal. The *democratization of knowledge*—in which many stakeholders with diverse backgrounds collaboratively engage in a process of sharing information and creating knowledge for use by communities—raises fundamental questions

about the relevancy of universities as we know them. If other mechanisms demonstrate that they are more effective and timely in *producing knowledge to address society's problems*, then taxpayers will question funding for universities and students will vote with their feet. (emphasis added) (Letter from program officer)

The comments above reflect criticism of the *research university*, concerned with its own knowledge production activities and disconnected from the broader society (Barnett 2011). The letter juxtaposes the aim of democratizing knowledge with a positivist knowledge regime in universities, which views knowledge as a direct, unmediated (and decontextualized) reflection of reality (Moore 2009). It further suggests that universities will be forced to change, as taxpayers demand different kinds of accountability. Taxpayers are thus constructed as a key “shareholder” in universities.

As a counterpoint to this perspective, analysts of higher education have suggested contemporary universities are under pressure to expand the kinds of knowledge they provide (Bleiklie 2005; Weiler 2005) and must compete to make their knowledge products and services perform in the world (Barnett 2011); they do not have the luxury of disconnection from society. However, writers note also the growing influence of an academic-capitalist regime of knowledge (Bleiklie 2005). From this perspective, corporate accountability may take precedence over citizen accountability and partly explains the tenuous position of community partners and service-learning, despite calls to move from *university* to *pluriversity* (Boidin et al. 2012).

Not surprisingly, given their locations within universities, most service-learning leaders did not privilege community knowledge over university expertise, although they did advocate for more reciprocal relationships between university and community. They also identified challenges to “democratizing knowledge” based on assumptions about pedagogical expertise and the low institutional status of service-learning. For example, a manager suggested that while her ideal is for university instructors and community partners to see themselves as *co-educators*, “there would be real pushback from faculty... It’s about who’s the authentic teacher” (Interview 1, Service-learning manager, February 2012). Similarly, the director of a center that houses a CSL program referred to professors as the “content experts.” Service-learning leaders and staff therefore walk a fine line between acknowledging the expertise of academics while trying to create more space in universities for community knowledge.

The structure and staffing of community-engagement and service-learning centres clearly affects their programming and ability to engage in faculty development (Taylor and Kahlke *forthcoming*; Welch and Saltmarsh 2013). For example, where service-learning programs were headed by tenured academics, more egalitarian relationships with instructors were evident. Non-academic service-learning staff members provided pedagogical support to instructors, but often lacked the background (and positional status) to engage with them as equals. When asked if there is much discussion about service-learning as pedagogy at her university, one participant commented:

[W]e don’t actually have a lot of actual forums for that discussion. ... We need to have someone [on staff] that can talk with some confidence about it. (Interview 6, Service learning coordinator, March 2012)

A manager of another program added, “I’m not a faculty member so I can’t tell somebody how to teach” (Interview 1, Service-learning manager, February 2012). A few leaders opined that “co-education” is only possible when faculty members are also willing to be learners.

Leaders variously described universities as “hyper political,” “territorial,” “self-interested,” “bureaucratic,” “competitive,” and “entrenched.” Within this context, they perceived service-learning to be marginalized and under-resourced. When asked about institutional challenges for service-learning inside and outside universities, a director responded:

One, I think, is really about owning the work, institutionally. I think it’s marginalized. I don’t think there’s a great awareness for the complexity of some of it. I think there’s a lot of lip service to service-learning. They’re happy they’re doing it but they’re not necessarily going to be doing much for the capacity. (Interview 8, March 2012)

Another director commented:

The university absolutely looks at things from a budgetary point of view and they want to make sure they’re not putting their resources into something that’s really not a big bang for their buck in terms of enrollment. (Interview 4, March 2012)

Another indication of the low status of service-learning programs was related to its institutional location:

[An observation made by a representative] from the McConnell Foundation... was that community service-learning units housed in Student Services were marginalized. In order to have any impact in the academic fabric, they needed to be housed in the academic world. (Interview 9, April 2012)

A U.S. study confirms that locating community engagement centres under academic affairs has pedagogical and political advantages (Welch and Saltmarsh 2013). In my study, service-learning was part of Student Services in three of the universities examined. In two others, it fell administratively under Research; in three, it fell within an Academic portfolio, and in one, it was within a portfolio that covered both. These locations reflect divisions between teaching, research and service, which reinforce traditional ways of thinking about knowledge production and dissemination within university structures (Kezar and Rhoads 2001).

In summary, while funders sought to reverse the privileging of university over community expertise, service-learning leaders (particularly those who were not tenured faculty) were confronted with norms around academic expertise and a lack of institutional power. Leaders also acknowledged that pedagogical discussion was uncommon in their sites, because they lacked a background in learning theories and/or lacked time and resources to feel confident engaging with faculty around pedagogy. Leaders were often in “survival” mode because of large workloads, university restructuring, and insecure funding, and spent much time trying to reconcile competing demands. The separation between university and community and their two worlds of knowledge was

implicit in the comments of these leaders. However, the next section suggests that some leaders were trying to resist dichotomous thinking.

### “Compliance” and Resistance

The fact that most service-learning leaders feel they occupy a marginal position within universities is not surprising given the pressures on “entrepreneurial” universities to generate revenue (Barnett 2011). One of the ways units have been expected to legitimate their work has been to grow their programs by engaging large numbers of students in community placements. Service-learning leaders distinguished between *placements*, which typically involve students working individually in a community partner site for a defined period of time (usually 20 hours over the term) as part of a course, and *projects*, which may engage several students, instructors, and community partners working in one or more sites on a community-defined problem with less defined time limits.

The pressure to engage in placements was discussed by one leader who, when asked how JW McConnell funding affected the development of the program at her university, replied that a lot of energy was focused on “pumping out placements” because the university did not feel “like it could take a risk and develop quality-focused programming” (Interview 8, Service-learning director, March 2012). This leader saw a trade-off between quantity and quality in the model of CSL that developed, as she explains:

I think it’s the way the whole program has been designed. Twenty hours, one hour of introductory lecture from our department, online signup – it supports large numbers of students. *It’s very transactive, it’s not very transformational.* There isn’t any deepening of learning that’s happening in that experience. The metrics have often been wrong. (emphasis added)

This service-learning program began in large undergraduate classes and leaders implemented an online sign up system for matching students with community placements to handle the large volume given limited staffing. There was little interaction between course instructors and community partners in these classes.

However, the new director hoped to change this approach by working with community to build their capacity to engage as co-educators. For example:

What we’re looking at doing is even just a basic connection of some of those [partnership activities across different university classes] and looking at how we might invest the resources of that organization so that they have greater capacity for student learning, to think about students that they’re onboarding and organizational learning and all that stuff. Then also thinking about, okay, is there a project ...that you as an organization could annually use assistance on, including ...an issue that [members] in our community have identified as needing more effort and focus. (Interview 8)

The rationale for focusing on community was expressed as follows:

[A community] organization that has no staff and is primarily volunteer driven and is primarily challenged for resources and says that they can’t continue to

operate unless they get service learning students, that is not a very great relationship. ... I just sometimes see it's a bit of a dependency piece. There are organizations that have structures in that there's somebody who can help students on board when they arrive, people who understand how to support student learning and help debrief student thinking and learning. I guess that's what I mean by the capacity, that they're not so dependent on students that they're not able to make it go if they're not there. (Interview 8)

Participants realized that programming around community partners and partnerships lags behind programming for faculty and students (cf. Welch and Saltmarsh 2013).

A few other leaders also reinforced the importance of structuring service-learning activities to make space for knowledge exchange. Their comments suggest that breaking down a "two worlds" view of university and community, theoretical and practical knowledge is more likely to occur when instructors have established relationships with community partners, when students have enough time to understand the cultures of partners, and when projects respond to actual needs in the community. Projects thus described also break down the divisions between research, teaching, and service—usually construed as separate activities. A director reinforces the need for a more holistic framework for organizing CSL:

I think community engagement can inform teaching, learning, research ... It cuts across different components of what the university does. (Interview 8, March 2012)

In summary, while a number of leaders felt pressured to comply with calls from university administration to expand the number of students in service-learning, some were resisting this approach, instead emphasizing the importance of relationships and developing the capacity of community partners to engage as co-educators. The next section further explores attempts by leaders to engage faculty, students and community partners in ways that blur boundaries between formal and informal learning, university and community knowledge.

### **Creating Hybrid Learning Cultures**

Initially we thought about [a service-learning initiative] as being a bridge between the [inner-city] and the university. Then I started to realize that's not really going to change or it's not going to transform people with epistemological assumptions about who has valid knowledge and how should we be making decisions as a society. With that model, the people who are learning are the people who are on the bridge, the people [students, faculty and community partners] who are going back and forth between one entity and the other. That's when I started thinking and talking about how we need to be creating *hybrid cultures* of those two entities... If the community and the university stay as separate entities the whole point of doing this will be lost. ... But if we really are going to change the academy and change the structure of the institutional role of the academy in society, we need to get administrative faculty members and staff members in

community environments, and we need to get community leaders comfortable and with a place in the academic environment. (Interview 10, Former director of service-learning, April 2012)

A small number of leaders envisioned networks of learning in which instructors, community partners and students collectively explore connections between formal learning in the university and informal learning in the community, between theory and practice. To achieve this vision, it is recognized that “gaps in terms of the pedagogy piece” need to be addressed (Interview 8, Service-learning director, March 2012). For example, faculty must help to “build the capacity of students or to help them to navigate and make decisions about community engagement more effectively” (Interview 8). Another leader adds, “even the faculty who are keen about [service-learning], they don’t get that you need to structure, you don’t just send students off and say ‘good luck’” (Interview 1, Service-learning manager, February 2012). Leaders see an imperative for instructors to help students make connections between formal and informal learning. To do this, faculty need to be connected to community organizations and the work students are doing, and willing to move in and out of teaching and learning roles.

For service-learning staff, preparing students to engage in service-learning was seen as a way of ensuring respectful relationships with community members:

It’s just as easy for a student to come into the [inner city] and have their stereotypes about homeless people reinforced as for them to come ...and have [them] unpacked... So in our context, we’ve had to be careful about orienting students, supporting students, being there when they come home from an experience that they don’t know what to do with. (Interview 9, Service-learning director, April 2012)

Instructors were also seen as playing a crucial role in moving students away from the mentality that “we are going to go out and work with these poor community groups and we’re going to give them something they don’t have because they’re not in university” (Interview 13, Service-learning director, April 2012). While such comments may be interpreted as embracing a social justice approach (Marullo and Edwards 2000; Mitchell 2008), given the power differential that often exists between university and community participants, promoting the co-development of projects by community organizations and faculty also engages with important questions about the relationship between codified and practical knowledge.

Leaders shared examples of social enterprise projects focused on breaking down assumptions about university and community expertise and knowledge. Such projects were described as university-community *intersections*, which began from needs identified in the community and developed into community-based research involving collaboration among community members, students and faculty (Interviews 12 and 13, 2012). A service-learning coordinator shared another example where the faculty member developed a course “in close contact with community partners,” who work with groups of student on projects and contribute to lectures (Interview 6, Service learning coordinator, March 2012).

The preceding discussion highlights an approach that tries to integrate university and community learning by developing hybrid learning networks. Such an approach prompts a rethinking of dichotomies like teacher-learner, theory-practice, research-teaching, and university-community. However, predominant ideas about knowledge and expertise evident in interviews and in the service-learning literature (Himley 2004; Saltmarsh et al. 2009) help to explain why these approaches are not the norm.

## Discussion

This study suggests service-learning occupies an ambivalent place in Canadian universities partly because education for democratic citizenship has not yet taken hold in North American universities, which seem more intent on embracing an “entrepreneurial” rather than an “ecological” vision (Barnett 2011; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). Interviews with service-learning leaders confirm the pressures to perpetuate “two worlds” discourse that privileges university knowledge (constructed as theoretical) over community knowledge (constructed as practical) because of norms around academic expertise and directives to engage large numbers of students with limited resources. This discourse fails to acknowledge the interconnections of theory and practice as well as the challenges of knowledge transfer from classroom to community.

At the same time, service-learning leaders universally support reciprocity in university-community relationships, which is interpreted by some to mean taking seriously the idea of community partners as co-educators and seeking ways to develop hybrid cultures in which projects are co-developed and networks of learning unsettle persistent dichotomies between theoretical and practical knowledge. This section explores the potential of these more integrative approaches with reference to earlier discussion about the contributions of sociocultural learning theories.

Integrative approaches to service learning are characterized by respect for different forms of knowledge, opportunities for structured dialogue, and the focus on a common problem identified by the community. They seek to expand the “eco-system” of knowledge in the academy (Sandmann et al. 2008) through a reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, capacity and power (Holland et al. 2010). They also recognize that social, historical and material relations underpin what we think of as individualized thinking (Fenwick et al. 2011). Respecting diverse forms of knowledge and diverse ways of knowing is also consistent with the call for *epistemological pluralism* within higher education (Andreotti et al. 2011), which challenges dominant ideas about knowledge production in universities and society.

But the findings from this study suggest leaders have not engaged deeply in discussions about the relationship between practical and theoretical knowledge, partly due to institutional constraints, but also because of the available discourses within the service-learning community of practice. As noted in the review of literature above, academic communities of practice focused on different kinds of experiential learning, for example, service-learning and work-integrated learning

literatures, tend to be siloed.<sup>3</sup> As noted earlier, questions about “whose” knowledge have taken precedence over questions about “how” knowledge is constructed within service-learning literature, because of the power differentials present in many university-community partnerships. Therefore, while an integrative approach seems consistent with sociocultural learning theories, the conceptual basis for this approach is underdeveloped. However, drawing on ideas from Vygotsky and cultural historical activity theory can strengthen approaches that emphasize the connections between on- and off-campus learning (Taylor 2014).

For example, knowledge transfer can be described in more complex ways than the carrying of static knowledge from university to community in a unidirectional task-to-task way. Relatedly, the idea of “applying theory,” commonly heard in service-learning discourse, needs to be unpacked. Beach (1999) proposes the term “consequential transitions” instead of “knowledge transfer.” Consequential transition recognizes the potential for transformation as well as continuity in knowledge, skill, and identity as people move across various forms of social organization. Transitions are described as consequential when they are “consciously reflected on, often struggled with, and the eventual outcome changes one’s sense of self and social positioning” (Beach, p. 114).

The idea of consequential transitions reinforces the importance of supporting students to integrate their on- and off-campus learning, as well as preparing instructors and students to engage with community. Recognizing that new relations develop between individuals and social activities engaged in collective activity, both instructors and community partners play critical roles in providing this support. Beach (1999) distinguishes such *horizontal* development, which is never removed from social activities, with the idea of *vertical* development so common in academic discussions about knowledge work (Brint 2001), that is, movement upward through a hierarchy of knowledge and skills toward greater levels of abstraction and away from the specifics of human activities. Adopting the language of consequential transitions for service-learning participants helps distinguish integrative approaches from “two worlds” thinking.

Interviews with service-learning leaders suggest that effective engagement between universities and communities requires respect for different forms of knowledge, providing opportunities for structured dialogue, and focusing on common problems. Service-learning embraces a conception of partnership predicated on communitarian principles—commitment to forming values, beliefs and courses of action in a public space through debate, deliberation, and collaborative inquiry. It is assumed that participants co-construct knowledge. At the same time, moving across different forms of social organization requires participants to make their assumptions, judgments and recommended course of action intelligible to others. This kind of collaboration has the potential to not only provide a service to community but also to support the development of epistemic cultures and practices that spawn the creative use of knowledge in society and transform our own learning and development (Guile 2010; Beach 1999). Learning then involves understanding the conceptualized nature of the world and using that understanding as a resource to expand the individual or group’s “action possibilities” (Roth et al. 2012, p. 187).

<sup>3</sup> Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.



## Implications and Future Research

The overarching issue in the theory and the rhetoric is, this is so good for community, all these resources from the university, wonderful knowledge exchange. We learn from you and you learn from us. It's all rosy and lovely. Is it? Our question is, how do we make sure that it is? How do we make sure, and what kind of processes and what kinds of things do we have to have in place for communities to really make good use of CSL? (Interview with representative from national service-learning association)

The aim of two-way knowledge exchange requires attention to the relationship between on-and off-campus learning, theoretical and practical knowledge. This study suggests that a bifurcated view of theoretical and practical knowledge, reinforced by knowledge economy discourse in higher education, puts pressure on service-learning leaders to adopt transactional approaches in their programs. However, some leaders are resisting approaches that reproduce two worlds thinking in favor of more integrative approaches that build capacity for co-education and facilitate sustainable learning networks. Their work recalls Hoyt's (2011) description of a continuum moving from the university providing expertise to community (one-way) to more sustainable engagement based on two-way networks of human relationships, which is reliant on universities engaging in more participatory methods of knowledge production. Hoyt and others acknowledge that this requires institutional change in universities as norms around academic expertise shift. As noted in interview findings above, institutional structures also include the staffing and location of service-learning within institutions, which affect its legitimacy.

But this paper argues also that the discourses about knowledge and learning adopted within service-learning programs make a difference, and can be usefully informed by sociocultural theories. For example, a more complex view of knowledge transfer requires instructors and community partners to work with students in developing connective skills. Instructors play an important role in preparing students for community learning, providing developmental direction throughout, and helping students integrate their in-class and out-of-class learning (cf. Beach 1999; Miettinen and Peisa 2002). As co-educators, community partners also play an important role in supporting the development of students. Students themselves can play a greater role in co-designing experiences in dialogue with other partners—our ongoing interviews with former students who took a service-learning course during their undergraduate program suggest they often “fall into” service-learning or engage reluctantly as a course requirement rather than actively choosing it. A key aim of service-learning is the development of networks of learning that involve socially shared intellectual work around the joint accomplishment of tasks (cf. Miettinen and Peisa 2002), while addressing the potential tensions between learning on- and off-campus due to the cultural and historical constitution of concepts and practices (Guile 2010).

Ironically, while service-learning leaders continually emphasize the importance of student reflection, there appears to be little time or space for them to reflect on their pedagogical practice. This could include providing more opportunities for students, instructors, service learning leaders, and community partners to collectively discuss

their different aims, expectations, and approaches to learning at work. As O'Meara and Niehaus (2009) suggest, service-learning is inherently value laden and perspective-driven. Multi-partner discussion should attend to the diverse aims of service-learning and share understandings about how to create hybrid spaces and expansive networks of learning. For example, many universities have teaching and learning centres, which could play a role in alliance with service-learning units to share promising practices and principles for effective partnerships. Community organizations with the capacity to do so, can act as hubs of experiential learning to engage different instructors and groups of students in cross-disciplinary dialogue around community needs.

This paper has also argued for more dialogue between academic communities of practice focused on work-integrated learning and service-learning. Conceptual and empirical research is needed which documents how effective experiential learning occurs. For example, adopting cultural-historical or community-based participatory action research approaches, which both attend to societal practices with an "ameliorative intention," would be instructive (Chaiklen 2011, p. 130). CHAT studies of service-learning and other experiential learning would also be valuable. The development of research communities of practice affiliated with service-learning programs would also provide the space for instructors, students and community partners to explore the connections between theoretical and practical knowledge.

**Acknowledgements** This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Insight Grant (435-2012-0301) as well as by a Killam Cornerstone Grant at the University of Alberta (co-investigator Milosh Raykov). Thank you to research assistants Zane Hamm and Renate Kahlke for help with data collection and analysis.

## Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Can you tell me about your own background and current role?

Where is service-learning located within your university?

Can you talk about the history of service-learning at your university?

What kind of model did you develop and has it changed over time?

How many staff are involved in service-learning and what are their roles?

Does your office play a role in preparing instructors, community partners, and students for service-learning?

How do students develop the skills to make connections between in-class and out-of-class learning?

How well prepared are instructors for service-learning? Do you play a role in this?

How do you define community?

How do you balance student learning and community development goals?

Is there much discussion involving instructors about learning theories and aims?

Is there a shared pedagogical focus across instructors? If so, how does that impact the program?

Is it more often academics or community people who initiate service-learning?

What does an ideal service-learning experience look like in your view? Can you provide an example?

How do you measure the success of your programs?

- Has research on service-learning been done at your university?  
 What are the greatest institutional challenges for service-learning within and outside universities?  
 What is your vision for growth and development of service-learning programs here and across Canada?  
 What insights or expertise have you gained that will improve programs?

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