

# Residing at the Intersection of Theory and Practice

**Review by Suzanne M. Buglione  
Johnson & Wales University**

---

Heather Coffey and Lucy Arnold. (2022). *Transformative Critical Service-Learning: Theory and Practice for Engaging Community College and University Learners in Building an Activist Mindset*. Myers Education Press. ISBN 978-1-975504-99-1

Having held an administrative role in higher education for many years now, my reading list has been confined to leadership and managing change. Consequently, it was a delight for me to read Heather Coffey and Lucy Arnold's book, *Transformative Critical Service-Learning: Theory and Practice for Engaging Community College and University Learners in Building an Activist Mindset*, published in 2022 by Myers Education Press, LLC of Gorham, Maine. In many ways, it was a homecoming for me as an educator at heart.

The book offers something for everyone: faculty, students who support service-learning, graduate students, community partners, and researchers. At a reasonable paperback price of just under \$40 and length of 126 pages, the book's structure builds on emerging theoretical frameworks to intersect with application by providing design, implementation, and assessment tools. The authors scaffold this work as good educators would for their students, with a theory-based foundation that is poised for student, partner, and educator growth. The authors' skillful integration presents opportunities for further investigation and a structure that marries theory and practice well.

## **Content**

The book begins with advance praise from a number of well-known leaders in the service-learning arena and a foreword by one of those leaders, Tania D. Mitchell. The foreword was well-placed, setting the stage for what comes later in the book as the authors focus on her work in critical service-learning. The book's content is structured into eight sections as outlined in the one-page preface, beginning with an introduction and ending with a conclusion. Two chapters set the theoretical frameworks, with a third further integrating them into an implementation model. Three chapters focus on the steps in implementation, and a fourth chapter is centered on faculty development to increase and build capacity for the work. The structure of the

chapters makes it easy to jump to the right section for future reference and practicality.

As I dove into the book with a pencil in hand, I found it easy to interact with the text, as is my practice. I appreciate the authors' tone, which is unified and accessible. The introduction presented a look into the lives of each of the authors, helping me to identify with them and to align my own journey with theirs as they described their work in service-learning. This section provided a reflective opportunity for me, and I appreciated how the authors' journeys, like my own, have grown and evolved. The authors continue to use this style to reflect on their identities and privilege, which we know is a valuable part of the journey. A standard biography for each author is in the book's appendices.

As the authors introduce theory, they note, "Theory isn't something that happens when philosophers sit and ponder how and why things work; we enact theory; we live and play in theory when we choose to live consciously and reflectively" (Coffey & Arnold, 2022, p.7). This challenges the reader to reside at this intersection of theory and practice. The first chapter begins with a statement about roles of education: transmitting and modifying culture, framing the cultural challenges of our current times. The authors use this to emphasize the social justice nature of education, introducing one of the two main theoretical concepts presented in the book: critical civic empathy. This theory promotes the embodiment, awareness, and sensitivity of others' existence, while recognizing differences in power and privilege. This theoretical framework is drawn from Nicole Mirra's (2018) research with middle school teachers. The second of the main theoretical concepts presented in the book is critical service-learning from the work of Tania D. Mitchell (2008). Critical service-learning links social justice and service-learning through transformative pedagogy to develop social change agents who work in tandem with communities.

The chapter provides further reflection on the prevalence of service-learning in feminized fields of study, where women are overrepresented and often pushed into areas such as nursing, teaching or administrative support. The chapter discusses the popularity of service-learning, the propensity for paternalistic research and the need for assessment of its degree of critical nature. A brief reference to the Critical Service-Learning Implementation Method (CSLIM) offers a preview of what is to come in the third chapter. All of this discussion sets the foundation for the second chapter, which further focuses on pedagogy.

Chapter 2 offers a snapshot of the history of service-learning. From my perspective, this was abbreviated and left out many of the field's pioneers. The authors discuss the difference between service-learning and critical service-learning, aptly painting a picture of the spectrum of practice in between. A wonderful diagram compliments the text and provides a comparison for those who appreciate the visualization. Then, the authors examine the human impact of critical service-learning, which is grounded in a number of studies. The authors are clear to note that these studies most often forward a white perspective, although practice has great impact with students of color and minoritized communities. It was interesting that there were no references to adult learners, nor the complexity and assets that they and students of color bring to critical service-learning.

The third chapter begins with the authors' experiences as a lens that examines Mitchell's (2008) critical service-learning and Mirra's (2018) Critical Civic Empathy to present CSLIM (Coffey & Fulton, 2018). The CSLIM framework for service-learning implementation was previously developed by one of the book's authors, Heather Coffey. The authors are clear to connect the model with theory, which is an excellent element of this book. Here, the authors highlight questions and principles for use in practice, grouped into four areas: pedagogy, space, curriculum, and student behaviors. I believe that the pedagogy and curriculum areas are very strong and offer much to the practitioner. The space area is predicated on in-person classes, and the section on student behaviors is a combination of classroom management, with a reference to American public schools and engagement. It is also in this section that the authors missed opportunities to delve further into online classes and leveraging the cultural wealth of students.

The fourth chapter focuses on CSLIM in action, outlining processes and strategies for the

execution of each of the four areas. This chapter also includes a wonderful table representing these steps for the four areas. At this point in the book, there are the elements of a recipe, which will delight practitioners who are new or who want to grow their practice. These processes and strategies might also provide a framework for future research. I can also envision a rubric development for items such as observable behaviors.

The fifth chapter delves more deeply into the planning needs for readiness in critical service-learning, specifically in addressing privilege, identities, and the engagement of texts and the use of inquiry, secondary research and community writing and presentations. The authors again draw on their experience to present tools and strategies that have been effective in their practice. The brief reference related to students being a part of the communities served is an opportunity for further development. I think that there is more to share about these connections. The authors close this chapter with a discussion about achieving learning outcomes.

Chapter 6 focuses on reflection, bringing exceptional tools for facilitating this work with critical service-learning. Tables in this chapter outline goals, strategies, and prompts. Chapter seven is dedicated to numerous strategies for faculty development in critical service-learning.

The book's conclusion addresses emerging issues in teaching and learning, affirming recognition of this time of rapid change. The authors briefly discuss online and dual-enrollment critical service-learning, and navigating the political climate. Their recommendations continue to be authentic and helpful, drawing from their own practices. It is important to note that these areas are ripe for further exploration. There are additional models and two studies of courses that the authors facilitated in the appendices.

## **Recommendations**

There is a lot packed into this little book, probably accounting for the challenges of addressing some areas in depth, such as the contributions of the pioneers in the introduction of service-learning. The book offers a great value because it is complete with tools, strategies, tables and models for visualization, and suggestions for faculty development. All of these elements combine to create a type of recipe in applying CSLIM. The authors continuously draw from their experiences providing authenticity and helpful

perspectives that help the reader reflect on their own practice. Theory and practice are integrated throughout the book.

The authors embrace the cultural challenges inherent in critical teaching and learning spaces, calling out the limitations of the research and reflecting on their own identities. The book offers strategies and prompts for those practitioners who are new or emerging or seek to grow in integration of social justice in service-learning.

There are some lingering hegemonic elements in the book with references to two-year and four-year institutions. I suggest these are outdated given the new norms of completion. The reference to public schools seems to indicate that this book was aimed at both higher education and secondary education practitioners, but that remains unclear. In addition, students were most often addressed as homogeneous, with minimal attention paid to students who are living in the communities they serve. In addition, I would have liked to have seen more about the assets and cultural wealth, including existing civic and change agent identities that adult learners and students of color bring to service-learning.

There are many opportunities to build off of this book in exploring these elements, as well as the changing frame of teaching and learning. The authors' areas of space and student behaviors give pause for huge increases in online and dual-enrollment courses and the ever-evolving political climate. Another area for exploration is Mirra's (2018) critical civic empathy framework, which again was developed for middle school teachers. Does CSLIM further empathy in both development and action? How does that look among various student identity groups outside of middle schoolers? Is empathy in a time of decline? Can it create inaction, overwhelming students, especially those grappling with mental health? Finally, the authors introduce the idea of comfort in relation to becoming an agent of change, providing yet another area for further study.

I highly recommend this book, and I will use it to enhance my own practice as I return to teaching. It is a wealth of tools and resources, and we can all use a little more of that.

## References

- Coffey, H., & Fulton, S. (2018). The responsible change project: Building a justice-oriented middle school curriculum through critical service-learning. *Middle School Journal*, 49(5), 16–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2018.1509560>
- Mirra, N. (2018). *Educating for empathy, literacy learning and engagement*. Teachers College Press.
- Mitchell, T.D. (2008, Spring). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, 14(2), 50–65. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0014.205>