



Transforming service learning through critical consciousness: From charitable assistance toward empowerment praxis

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Abstract

Service Learning (SL) has long been utilized in educational settings to foster social responsibility and community engagement among students. However, without a critical framework, SL often remains a charitable activity that perpetuates unequal power dynamics between students and the communities they serve. This study examines how the concept of critical consciousness, or conscientization, can transform SL from a charitable model to one focused on empowerment and social change. Through a theoretical analysis of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, the study argues that SL must move beyond providing services to addressing the root causes of societal issues. The study proposes a three-stage SL framework: deconstructing assumptions, engaging in authentic dialogue, and implementing praxis through problem-posing methodology. The findings emphasize that by integrating critical consciousness, SL can shift from merely addressing symptoms to challenging underlying social injustices. This transformation not only empowers both students and communities but also creates sustainable change through collaborative problem-solving. The study concludes that critical consciousness is essential for reshaping SL into a tool for social justice, where the relationship between students and communities is built on mutual respect, shared learning, and long-term engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

The ideal condition of education is a process of "humanizing humans," where individuals not only become intellectually intelligent but also, as expressed by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "just from the mind." Education should liberate students to become individuals capable of critical thinking and noble character. However, field reality often contradicts this ideal. Educational systems often fall into an oppressive "banking system" model, where knowledge is passively transferred from teacher to student (Freire, 1996).

In response to this problem, many educational institutions adopt Service Learning (SL) as a pedagogical approach. SL, as a form of experiential education, is viewed as capable of bridging the gap between classroom theory and community reality. Through direct involvement in humanitarian activities, students are expected to develop empathy and social sensitivity, making learning more relevant and impactful. Theoretically, SL is an ideal solution for building character and social responsibility.

However, in practice, good intentions are often insufficient. Many SL programs fail to achieve their goals because they are implemented with superficial approaches that

inadvertently perpetuate what Simpson (2020) identifies as the "charity mentality" within educational settings. This mentality is characterized by several problematic features: it focuses on poverty, helplessness, or lack of rights, concentrating on poverty reduction and the perceived helplessness of those in need; it emphasizes "our" role in solving problems, perpetuating unequal relationships that continue a "colonial framing of the world" where students from privileged positions solve problems of marginalized communities; it is driven by moral/emotive motivation, characterized by a "caring value" and an "impulse to help" or to be "good" rather than critical understanding; and it defines action as responsibility for the other, often taking the form of fundraising or sharing resources without genuine partnership.

This charity mentality risks negative outcomes, including encouraging a sense of "cultural superiority" or privilege, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices, leading to "uncritical action," and sustaining dependency. It also promotes superficial solutions that avoid questioning complex underlying issues and historical prejudices, acting as a "smokescreen of 'sanctioned ignorance'" (Simpson, 2020). Simpson, drawing on Andreotti, associates this approach with "soft global citizenship" that risks leading to "cultural supremacy," "reinforcement of colonial assumptions," and "uncritical action" (p. 40-52).

Students come as "givers" of solutions to passive "recipient" communities, embodying this charity mentality. This unbalanced relationship actually reinforces stereotypes and fails to address root problems. To overcome this failure, SL requires a fundamental foundation that can transform it from mere service into a tool of liberation. This foundation is critical consciousness (conscientization), a process of awareness that enables students and communities to critically read and transform their reality.

This study aims to examine how critical consciousness can transform Service Learning from charitable activities into empowerment praxis that benefits both students and communities equally.

METHOD

This study adopts a theoretical analysis approach through a critical literature review to explore the transformation of Service Learning (SL) through the framework of critical consciousness. The methodology is grounded in Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy theory, particularly his concept of conscientization, as presented in his seminal works *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1996) and *Pedagogy of the Heart* (2014). Freire's ideas provide the primary theoretical lens through which the evolution of Service Learning is examined. In addition to Freire's works, the study also draws upon Jacoby's (1996) foundational research on Service Learning, which emphasizes the importance of experiential learning in fostering civic responsibility, as well as Irwin's (2012) comprehensive analysis of Freire's educational philosophy, which further contextualizes the application of critical pedagogy within service-oriented educational frameworks.

The analytical approach utilized in this study follows a three-stage framework designed to critically engage with the current models of Service Learning. The first stage, deconstruction, involves a critical examination of existing SL models, highlighting their limitations and identifying areas where they fail to address issues of power, agency, and social justice. In the second stage, reconstruction, an alternative framework is developed based on the principles of conscientization, aiming to provide a more transformative and empowering approach to Service Learning. Finally, the application stage offers practical recommendations for integrating critical consciousness into SL programs, focusing on how educators and practitioners can implement these ideas to foster authentic empowerment and social change.

The analysis further integrates Freire's anthropological assumptions about human nature, viewing individuals as conscious and historical beings, with practical pedagogical

applications in Service Learning contexts. By integrating these theories, the study seeks to develop a transformative framework for SL that moves beyond the traditional, charitable models toward a praxis of empowerment that centers on mutual learning and collective action. This theoretical integration not only redefines Service Learning but also offers new insights into how it can function as a tool for social justice and meaningful community engagement.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Nature of Critical Consciousness (Conscientization)

Conscientization is a core concept in critical pedagogy aimed at liberating individuals from oppression through increased awareness of unjust social, political, and economic realities. Freire (1996) defines it as the process of "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of this reality" (p. 9). This concept is built upon several fundamental assumptions about human nature and knowledge.

First, conscientization is rooted in an anthropological view that humans are conscious beings and historical beings (Freire, 1996, pp. 71-75). Humans are not passive objects that merely "exist in the world," but active subjects who are "with the world," capable of reflecting, evaluating, and transforming their reality. This consciousness differentiates humans from other beings and gives them the capacity to make history. Oppressive education, conversely, treats humans as "beings who can adapt and be managed" (Freire, 1996, p. 46), thereby killing their transformative potential.

Second, the process of conscientization begins with a fundamental certainty that humans can know. Freire (2014) asserts, "The fundamental certainty is that I can know. I know that I know. In the same way, I also know that I do not know" (p. 31). Awareness of knowledge limitations actually becomes a driver to continue learning and seeking knowledge. Curiosity becomes an absolute requirement in the knowledge construction process. Therefore, education's task is "to educate the curiosity through which knowledge is constituted" (Freire, 2014, p. 34).

Moving from Charity Mentality to Social Justice Mentality

To address the charity mentality identified in educational settings, Simpson (2020) proposes that educators must engage in a continuous process of "learning to unlearn" this ingrained bias and adopt a "social justice mentality". This transformation involves several critical shifts:

Critical Reflection as Core Pedagogical Skill: Simpson advocates that critical reflection or learning to unlearn is invaluable for teacher practice and should be formally recognized as a core pedagogical skill. This process involves unsettling fundamental assumptions, recognizing their origins (e.g., colonial framing, media influence), reframing old assumptions, and implementing changes based on new understanding.

From "Helping" to "Understanding": The social justice mentality requires shifting focus from poverty and helplessness to inequality, social justice, and rights; changing motivation from moral/emotive "impulse to help" to "impulse to understand" centered on knowledge and equity; and redefining action as responsibility towards the other through solidarity and structural change rather than responsibility for the other through charity.

Critical Analysis of Educational Practices: Educators must move beyond "knee-jerk reactions" of fundraising and one-off campaigns toward a "more critical eye" that addresses complexity and underlying issues. However, Simpson cautions against superficial substitution—simply replacing monetary giving with giving "knowledge" or "skills" risks

creating "little developers" who maintain assumptions that the West holds "universal knowledge that others need."

Current Limitations of Traditional Service Learning

Building on Simpson's framework, traditional Service Learning (SL) models often fall into the charitable paradigm, which perpetuates several problematic dynamics. The first of these is the power imbalance that persists in many SL programs, where students, often from privileged backgrounds, maintain dominant positions while communities are positioned as passive recipients of assistance. This dynamic not only reinforces existing social hierarchies but also prevents students from critically examining their roles in perpetuating systemic inequalities. As Guerra (2017) discusses, this imbalance contributes to a paternalistic approach to service, where the focus remains on "helping" rather than fostering mutual respect and collaboration.

Another challenge with traditional SL models is the reliance on surface-level solutions. SL programs often fail to critically engage with the root causes of social issues, instead addressing only the symptoms. This approach, as highlighted by Bennett (2018), may provide temporary relief to communities but does little to challenge or dismantle the structural inequities at the heart of these issues. The absence of a critical analysis in SL programs limits their potential for creating long-term, sustainable change. By merely addressing visible symptoms, SL can become a superficial tool that alleviates immediate needs without transforming the systemic conditions that cause them.

Furthermore, cultural assumptions often play a significant role in shaping the outcomes of SL programs. Students frequently bring preconceived notions about what the community needs and what constitutes an appropriate solution. This can lead to interventions that are not only ineffective but potentially harmful, as the solutions may be culturally inappropriate or disconnected from the community's actual priorities. Harrison (2020) argues that SL programs need to challenge students' assumptions and encourage a deeper engagement with the culture and lived experiences of the community. Failure to do so risks reinforcing stereotypes and marginalizing the voices of those being "served."

Framework for Critical Consciousness-Based Service Learning

To address these limitations, we propose a three-stage framework grounded in conscientization principles. Table 1 provides a comprehensive comparison between traditional charity-based SL and our proposed critical consciousness-based approach:

Table 1: Comparison of Service Learning Approaches

Aspect	Traditional Charity-Based SL	Critical Consciousness-Based SL
<i>Underlying Mentality</i>	Charity mentality: "helping the helpless"	Social justice mentality: addressing inequality
<i>Focus</i>	Poverty, helplessness, lack of rights	Inequality, social justice, structural issues
<i>Motivation</i>	Moral/emotive "impulse to help"	Educational "impulse to understand"
<i>Student Role</i>	External problem-solver, "savior"	Collaborative partner, co-learner
<i>Community Role</i>	Passive recipient of assistance	Active partner, knowledge holder
<i>Power Dynamic</i>	Unequal: students as givers, communities as receivers	Equal: mutual learning and empowerment
<i>Problem Approach</i>	Problem-solving (addressing symptoms)	Problem-posing (investigating root causes)
<i>Knowledge Source</i>	Students bring solutions from outside	Knowledge co-constructed through dialogue
<i>Action Type</i>	Responsibility <i>FOR</i> the other	Responsibility <i>TOWARDS</i> the other

<i>Timeline</i>	Short-term, project-based interventions	Long-term, relationship-based engagement
<i>Methodology</i>	Service provision and reflection	Praxis: continuous action-reflection cycles
<i>Desired Outcome</i>	Temporary relief, student satisfaction	Structural change, mutual transformation
<i>Risk</i>	Cultural superiority, dependency, "sanctioned ignorance"	Genuine empowerment, sustainable change

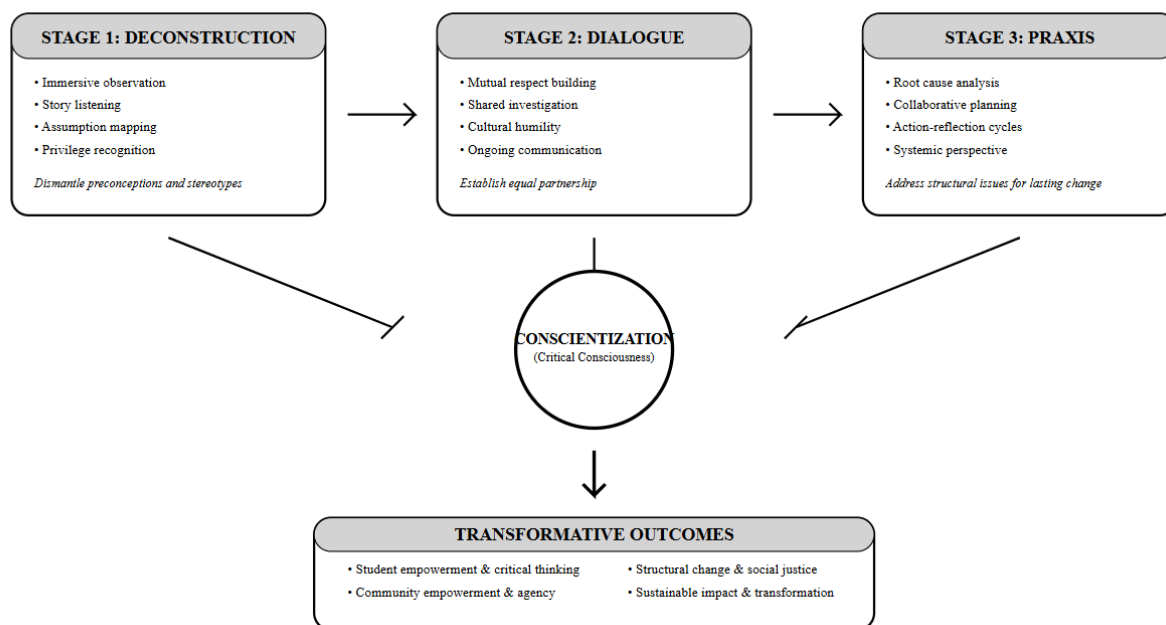


Figure 1. Three-Stage Critical Consciousness Framework for Service Learning

See Figure 1 - Visual framework showing the sequential and interconnected process of the three stages leading to conscientization and transformative outcomes. This framework operationalizes the shift from Simpson's charity mentality to social justice mentality through three interconnected stages.

Stage 1: Deconstruction of Assumptions as Initial Phase

Before undertaking any service activity, SL programs must begin with a stage of investigation and critical reflection. The goal is to dismantle assumptions and stereotypes held by students. Instead of immediately designing projects, students must be facilitated to live alongside communities, listen to their stories, and understand reality from their perspectives. This stage represents the first step toward conscientization, where students begin to recognize their privileged positions and view community members as equal subjects.

The deconstruction process in this study involves several key activities designed to critically engage students with the community and challenge their existing perspectives. Immersive observation is a central aspect, where students are encouraged to spend extended periods within the community without predetermined agendas, allowing them to experience and understand the environment in a more authentic, unfiltered manner. This process is complemented by story listening, where priority is given to hearing community narratives directly from their voices, fostering a deeper connection and understanding of their lived experiences. Additionally, assumption mapping is employed as a method to explicitly identify

and examine the preconceived notions and biases students may bring to the learning experience. This step is crucial for challenging students' perspectives and ensuring that their learning process is reflective and open. Finally, the privilege recognition component encourages students to critically examine their own social, economic, and educational advantages, prompting them to reflect on how these privileges shape their understanding of the community and their role within it. This multifaceted deconstruction process lays the foundation for a more conscious and engaged learning experience, aligning with the principles of critical pedagogy and Service Learning.

Stage 2: Authentic Dialogue as Core Process

Every stage of SL, from problem identification to evaluation, must be built upon authentic and equal dialogue. This dialogue functions as a means of joint investigation, where students and communities collaborate to understand issues. As Freire (1996) emphasizes, a facilitator cannot think for the people, but must think with the people (p. 104). Equal dialogue, based on mutual trust (Freire, 1996, p. 83), ensures that programs implemented are truly relevant and emerge from genuine community needs, not external assumptions.

Key elements of authentic dialogue are essential for fostering meaningful engagement in Service Learning and community-based initiatives. Mutual respect is the foundation of such dialogue, where all participants are recognized as knowledgeable contributors, regardless of their background or role. This respect ensures that the voices of all involved are valued, promoting an atmosphere of equality and cooperation. In addition, shared investigation plays a crucial role, as it involves a collaborative exploration of issues and potential solutions. This approach ensures that the community and students work together, using their collective knowledge to address challenges effectively.

Cultural humility is another vital component, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging that communities possess unique expertise about their own contexts. By recognizing this, we move away from a top-down model of service, and instead, empower communities to take an active role in the process. Finally, ongoing communication is necessary to build long-term relationships. Unlike one-time consultations, sustained engagement ensures that dialogue remains open, adaptive, and responsive to the evolving needs and insights of the community.

Stage 3: Implementing Praxis through Problem-Posing Method

Critical SL must move from problem-solving (addressing surface issues) toward problem-posing or problematization (investigating root causes). Praxis—the continuous cycle of action and reflection—becomes its methodology. For example, instead of directly donating books, students and communities, through dialogue, are invited to ask: Why is reading interest low here? What structural barriers exist? Are books the most appropriate solution? This process, "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1996, p. 57, cited in Irwin, 2012), ensures that actions taken aim for long-term change, not superficial instant solutions.

The problem-posing approach involves several key components that foster a deeper understanding of complex social issues. First, root cause analysis plays a critical role in this approach, requiring a deep investigation into the underlying factors that contribute to the problems being addressed. This step goes beyond surface-level symptoms, aiming to uncover systemic and structural issues that perpetuate challenges. In addition, collaborative planning is integral, as it encourages joint development of intervention strategies by all stakeholders. This collaborative process ensures that the community, educators, and other participants share ownership of the solutions and are actively involved in decision-making. The approach

also emphasizes action-reflection cycles, where continuous evaluation and adjustment of strategies take place throughout the process. This iterative reflection ensures that interventions remain effective and responsive to changing circumstances. Finally, adopting a systemic perspective is essential in recognizing the interconnections between local issues and broader structural problems. This holistic view helps to address not only immediate concerns but also the root causes that are often linked to larger societal structures.

Implications for Educational Practice

This critical consciousness-based approach to Service Learning has several key implications for educational practice. First, it calls for a pedagogical transformation. Educators need to move away from traditional, directive teaching roles and adopt a more facilitative approach. Instead of simply dictating predetermined learning outcomes, they should support students in developing their critical awareness. The focus shifts to encouraging students to reflect on their experiences, question assumptions, and engage more deeply with the world around them. As *Borg and Gall (2003)* highlight, moving from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach fosters active participation and deeper learning, which is essential for engaging students in meaningful societal issues.

Another important aspect is the emphasis on community partnership. In this model, true partnerships with communities go beyond short-term involvement. They require long-term commitment and the recognition that community members are not just recipients of service, but co-educators and holders of valuable knowledge. This approach promotes mutual learning, where both students and community members contribute and grow together, challenging traditional power dynamics in education. *Irwin (2012)* points out that community engagement in Service Learning should be reciprocal, where both students and community members share knowledge and insights, fostering an environment of collaboration rather than charity.

There's also a need for institutional support. Educational institutions must provide the resources and backing needed for sustained community engagement. This includes more than just offering a few hours of credit for service work; it means supporting projects that extend beyond the typical semester timeframe. Such support ensures that Service Learning initiatives can be meaningful and not merely a one-off experience. *Jacoby (1996)* argues that for Service Learning to be effective, institutions must invest in long-term partnerships with communities, which can only be achieved with institutional support that sustains both students and the projects they are involved in.

Finally, the way we **assess** Service Learning needs to change. Rather than focusing solely on the number of service hours completed or student satisfaction, assessments should evaluate how well students are developing critical consciousness and how they're contributing to the community. The goal is to capture the deeper learning that takes place — not just in terms of knowledge gained but in terms of real, tangible impact on both students and the communities they work with. *Wang, Li, and Zhao (2024)* emphasize the importance of authentic assessment methods in Service Learning, arguing that evaluation should focus on the development of critical thinking, civic engagement, and the overall impact on both the students and the community.

CONCLUSION

Service Learning possesses great potential as a humanizing educational tool, but only if it dares to transcend the charitable model that often actually dehumanizes. By grounding its practice in the principles of critical consciousness (conscientization), SL can transform into

a powerful educational praxis. A framework centered on assumption deconstruction, authentic dialogue, and collaborative problem investigation can guide SL to achieve its true purpose: empowering students and communities equally to become active agents in social transformation.

This transformation requires fundamental shifts in how we conceptualize the relationship between educational institutions and communities, moving from service provision to mutual learning and empowerment. When implemented with critical consciousness, Service Learning becomes more than just a service program—it becomes a truly liberating educational experience that contributes to sustainable social change.

The proposed framework offers practical guidance for educators and institutions seeking to implement more equitable and transformative forms of Service Learning. However, successful implementation requires sustained commitment to critical reflection, authentic community partnership, and ongoing dialogue that challenges existing power structures within educational and social contexts.

Future research should focus on empirical studies of critical consciousness-based SL programs, examining their effectiveness in promoting both student development and community empowerment. Additionally, an investigation into specific strategies for supporting educators in facilitating critical dialogue and implementing problem-posing methodologies would contribute valuable insights to the field.

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