Is service-learning transformational? Should it be?

By Amy Jonason, Partnership Development

Calvin College’s stated purpose is “to engage in vigorous liberal art education that promotes lifelong Christian service.” The second prong of its mission statement reads “Through our learning, we seek to be agents of renewal in the academy, church, and society.”

Based on these definitions, the task of the S–LC seems clear. We are one place where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. We facilitate practice. Practice shapes learning. Learning fuels action – more practice. Faith works in and around it all, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Calvin College makes a difference in the world.

That’s what we hope for at least. The generally winding road of the day-to-day makes it unclear, sometimes, whether our goals are being accomplished. I was given the assignment this past summer of thinking about the ways in which the S–LC pursues societal transformation or what we call social justice. I began by digging into the literature about service-learning. What are concrete ways that service-learning is used to teach students about systemic social issues and encourage them to work for change?

Student reflection, it seems, is critical to this process. Time set aside to process what we see and do can allow tutoring or participating in an alternative spring break trip to deepen our understanding of poverty and inequality and what we can do about it. Sometimes the definition of service-learning is broadened to include activities like participatory action research and community organizing. Students take their knowledge a step further to survey community needs, write grants, or lobby local governments. In cases like these, service-learning, though never partisan, becomes unapologetically political.

I have also looked into the service-learning programs of more than 40 other colleges and universities in the United States, and it is clear that service-learning is embraced in many different ways in higher education. This is evident even in the names of the offices where service-learning is housed on different campuses. At Bates, it’s the Harward Center for Community Partnerships; at Baylor, the Academy for Leadership Development & Civic Engagement; and at Tulane, the Center for Public Service, to name just a few.

What is also clear from this preliminary investigation is that institutions of higher education all over the country are taking the call to step down from their ivory towers quite seriously and are raising the bar for a campus’s engagement in its surrounding community. This coincides with our own journey into self-reflection as the Service-Learning Center. As I have set off on this project, we have been re-visitng our office’s mission and goals and re-evaluating how we help fulfill the purpose and mission of Calvin College. Our self-examination has been facilitated by faculty, staff, students and community members at the “Think Tank Luncheons” we have had this fall semester.

We’re not sure what’s in store for the future of service-learning and societal transformation at Calvin College. Whatever happens will happen in a uniquely Calvin way. And by the grace of the Holy Spirit, I hope we will make something of a difference.
Service-Learning Beyond the College Years

By Deborah Walker, 2005 Service-Learning Center Alumni

I am currently the Community Relations Coordinator for Mustard Seed School in Hoboken, New Jersey. I oversee our service-learning program, family advocacy, church partnerships and assist with our music program. My main role is to be a listener and facilitator. I work with a variety of people. Whether working with school age children or meeting with community leaders and pastors I am always seeking to share the story of Mustard Seed School and partner with others in accomplishing their goals and mission.

I share the MSS story because I have first-hand experience with the transformative work that goes on at Mustard Seed School. Students and families are finding ways to be responsive to their world through academic study, service and worship of God. We form a community that is economically, culturally, denominationally and academically diverse. As the seventh grade teacher for two years, prior to my current position, I learned to listen and partner with my students, parents and colleagues. I learned so much about the complexity of each individual and the care it takes to foster healthy relationships in all of our life relationships.

Working at the Service-Learning Center of Calvin College as the Work-Study Coordinator and One-Time Opportunities Coordinator during my junior and senior years at Calvin enabled me to gain invaluable experience that prepared me for the work I do today. At the S-LC I learned the importance of collaboration. As a staff we constantly processed and sought to combine our gifts in ways that would better serve the Grand Rapids community. I recall brainstorming sessions on goals for the year as well as communal reading and discussion on many of the social ills that affected each of our specific positions. At the S-LC I developed a deep humility and awareness of our inability to “solve” the world’s problems. My eyes were opened to the complexity of poverty, hunger, racism, classism and the social injustices that affect our world and leave many people broken and in need of extra support.

Because of my time at the S-LC I left Calvin with a skill set and tool box that enables me to understand, seek out and continue developing my faith in a way that is informed, centered on knowing God and being in community with all of his children. Each day I am thankful for my real world experience gained at the S-LC. I sit in meetings sometimes and smile experiencing somewhat of a déjà vu of a similar scenario from my time at the S-LC.

AmeriCorps*VISTA

Each year more than 70,000 Americans serve through the AmeriCorps program to meet the critical needs of the U.S. in the areas of education, public safety, health, and the environment. The AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program in particular is geared toward addressing issues of poverty in communities, working to effect positive, long-term, sustainable change.

This year our office has partnered with Michigan Campus Compact (MCC) to bring an AmeriCorps*VISTA to our Service-Learning Center staff. MCC is an organization that works with Michigan colleges, promoting the education and commitment of students to be civically engaged citizens. Each year MCC places several AmeriCorps*VISTA as member institutions to help build sustainable programs on campuses and lasting partnerships between campus and community organizations.

The Service-Learning Center is happy to have Ryan Kruis serving as the MCC AmeriCorps*VISTA in our office. Ryan graduated from Calvin in 2007 with a double major in religion and English. As a student he worked in our office for three and half years in a variety of positions. Bringing a number of skills and experiences with him, Ryan will be coming alongside both our professional and student staff to enhance the overall effectiveness of our programming. Ryan will have his hands in a number of projects throughout the year, some of which include increasing faculty participation in academically-based service-learning through recruitment and workshops, aiding in the training and support of student Community Partnership Coordinators, assisting in the development of an interim course in Romania, exploring strategic ways to better cultivate within students an orientation toward social justice, and offering general administrative support in the office.

Our office is excited to have Ryan Kruis onboard with us for another year and also grateful for the opportunities this partnership with AmeriCorps and Michigan Campus Compact will bring us both in our continued work here on Calvin’s campus and in our partnerships within the Grand Rapids community.
Review of “Service-Learning as Postmodern Pedagogy”
From Service-Learning in Higher Education by Dan W. Butin

By Bryan Kibbe, Technology Coordinator

Is there a tiger in the corner of the room? Amongst the docile pedagogical strategies that pervade academia, there lurks a radical and subversive strategy. In his essay, “Service-Learning as Postmodern Pedagogy,” which is part of an edited collection of essays from the book Service-Learning in Higher Education, Dan Butin makes the argument that service-learning is best understood in a postmodern framework, and that it is precisely in a postmodern framework that service-learning maintains its potential to make a profound difference in both personal lives and the educational system as a whole.

Dan Butin does an excellent job in articulating four separate models of service-learning in the educational setting, which are the technical, the cultural, the political, and the postmodern. Utilizing arguments made by the high profile literary theorist, Stanley Fish, Butin sets forth clear reasons why the cultural and political models fall short of maintaining the transformative potential latent in service-learning. Following, Butin brackets a discussion of the technical model, and instead explores service-learning as a postmodern pedagogy.

A central theme in postmodern thought is the human inability to accurately reduce any issue, history, or person to simplistic or absolute terms. As a literary theorist, Stanley Fish utilizes this line of thinking in literary analysis to move the point of reading away from seeking to understand exactly what the author meant, and instead to explore the question of how the author changes the reader in the process of reading. In this manner, Fish regards texts as subversive by way of their ability to change previously unknown or unquestioned aspects of readers. Butin then applies Fish’s literary approach to the practice of service-learning. For Butin, service-learning functions as a text, which students read, so to speak, and in the process of this reading they are also reflecting. Reflection is the crucial element of service-learning. It is the process of reflection that serves as the locus for transformation and development. Through reflection, service-learners are exposed to biases, stereotypes, assumptions, and other subtle thoughts and behaviors that guide their interactions in different communities. This style of service-learning acts as what Butin calls a postmodern pedagogy.

Comprehensive in his analysis, Butin goes on to outline several important implications of this approach to service-learning. Most interesting is the resulting implication that just as a reader, upon having read a book, can never retreat to a time when they had not read the book, so also the service-learner cannot retreat to a time prior to having participated in the experience of service-learning. Readers live in the wake of having read, and service-learners in the wake of serving. On this model, education does not stop at the boundaries of the classroom, but rather continues in every moment of a person’s life thereafter, wherever they may go.

Butin’s essay presents a powerful framework to understand service-learning, and should be read by anyone that seeks to more fully engage the vast potential of the service-learning pedagogy. If there is any shortcoming in Butin’s work, it is that he fails at the end of the essay to leave readers with any resolve for action, but chooses instead to articulate a quiet tone of resignation and passivity in his practice and use of service-learning in the classroom. However, Butin’s own personal feelings and practices do not negate the otherwise substantive work of the essay in setting forth a model of service-learning as postmodern pedagogy. This is a model that utilizes the best aspects of postmodern thought to strategically position and coordinate learning so that change and growth can take place through the radical and subversive pedagogical method of service-learning.

Meet the Service-Learning Center Staff

Front Row (from left to right): Ivan Gan (ABSL Contextual Disciplines and LLA Coordinator), Elisabeth Heffner (Pre-College Programs Liaison), Katy Chadwick (ABSL Education Coordinator), Elise Ditta (Spring Break Trip Coordinator), Laura Wolff (One-Time Opportunities Coordinator), Amy Jonason (Partnership Development), and Jeff Bouman (Director).

Back Row (from left to right): Colin McWhertor (ABSL Social Sciences Coordinator), Bryan Kibbe (Technology Coordinator), Lori Gesink (Associate Director), Kelly Post (Communications Coordinator), Becca Timmermans (Transportation Coordinator), Krista Sneller (ABSL Spanish Coordinator), Ryan Krui (Americorps*VISTA), Kate Leese (ABSL Natural Sciences and Mathematics Coordinator), Kelly De Vries (Administrative Support), and Nick Thompson (Partnership Development).
Isaiah 61:1-4
1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.
4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

The Service-Learning Center partnered with 52 community agencies and sent over 1,000 students to serve in Grand Rapids neighborhoods.
By Laura Wolff, StreetFest and One-Time Opportunities Coordinator

This year’s StreetFest theme was “Renew. Revive. Restore.” Embedded in three circular arrows, the words are a reflection of the recycle slogan, “reduce, reuse, recycle.” While recycling is about how to properly care for our earth, the StreetFest theme captured not only this goal but also that of how to properly live in community with one another.

Isaiah 61:1-4 tells the story of Israel exiled in Babylon. The Israelites were in an unknown community and sought the Lord for guidance. The Lord replied through Isaiah, saying that they should be like oaks of righteousness. This oak tree was represented on each of the participant’s shirts in the center of the three arrows. The image of a tree is both biblical and significant as it represents the reciprocal relationship we call service-learning. A tree is not independent of its surroundings. A tree is tended and cared for so that it may grow. That same tree gives oxygen – it gives life to those around it that cared for and tended it. It is an act of both giving and receiving.

God’s message through Isaiah was not for the Israelites to consider themselves above anyone else, but to humble themselves and accept the task of restoring their community to God. They were to be present in the community and not draw away from it. This embodies what we often say at Calvin: all things belong to God.

This concept of renewing, reviving, and restoring is not a new idea, but it is a reflection of the nature of God. It is what God has been doing throughout all creation. The spirit of God has been breathing life into that which is dead and restoring that which is broken.

Our next step is learning how to follow God’s example of renewing, reviving, and restoring. The only way to learn is to look to the example before us set by Jesus. There are three ways in which Christ engaged in the renewing, reviving and restoring nature of God.

The first is that he paid attention to it. Christ saw the world through the eyes of God and therefore saw everything in the light of the process of restoration.

The second way Christ followed the divine pattern of restoration is by participating in it. He healed the sick and focused his ministry on those “without” not those “with.” It was a mission dedicated to the least of these. God through Christ committed to spending his time in the lowest of places, not the highest.

Lastly Christ praised God for it. Some may find it strange that Jesus as God would praise, but Jesus constantly praised His father for the restoration he could see on earth. In Matthew 11:25 we read, “At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”

In order to commit to God’s call to join his work of renewal and restoration we commit to imitating Christ in these three ways:

We must pay attention to the restoration God is already doing. The challenge given to all StreetFest participants was to look around while at their site in the community and ask themselves where they could see God already working to renew, revive, and restore the community.

We must participate in God’s restoration. This is what StreetFest is all about: being an active player in God’s restorative work. Some students gardened and helped new life to grow. Others spoke with members of different communities. This is a very real way of participating in God’s restoration of individuals and relationships.

And then we are called to praise God for his restoration. We can do this in song, in prayer, and in thought. Whenever we notice God’s handiwork we should respond with praise, because each little renewal is a glimpse of the perfection that we long for. The Spirit of God is the gift that we receive on this side of eternity, and that spirit is one that is constantly renewing, reviving, and restoring.

The challenge for all students as they ventured out into Grand Rapids during StreetFest was to look around and notice what God is doing and how the Spirit is moving. It is my hope that they were able to participate with joy, knowing that our God is one of constant change and rebirth, a God whose Spirit breathes new life, and by engaging in service, each one of them have entered His story.
By Elisabeth Heffner, Pre-college Programs Liaison

The Service-Learning Center and the Office of Pre-College Programs have teamed up both to provide ACT tutoring for students from Ottawa Hills High School and to encourage more students to pursue undergraduate education at the college or university level. The ACT Tutoring Program seeks to prepare Ottawa Hills High School juniors and seniors for taking the mandatory standardized test required for college admissions. Through this preparation we hope to strengthen the average ACT score obtained by Ottawa Hills students, as well as promote continued education among Ottawa Hills High School students. Beyond the benefits of ACT preparation, we are also hoping to develop relationships with students at Ottawa Hills through the tutoring sessions. The goal is to create a vision for a successful future which includes the importance of education, time management, attentiveness and diligence, and planning for the future. We currently have twelve Calvin tutors participating in the program and each provides tutoring for two Ottawa Hills students before or after school twice a week for an hour. We are preparing the students for tests offered this December, as well as two test dates offered next spring. We hope it is successful and that the program will continue to grow.

Big Brothers Big Sisters

Information from Interview between Kelly Post (Communication Coordinator) and Eric Zoodsma (Sophomore Calvin Student)

“What is the Big Brothers Big Sisters program?” Big Brothers Big Sisters is a program for kids who lack the influence of an older person in their lives. The program matches up these children with an older mentor in order to provide them with a positive influence.

“How did you get connected with Big Brothers Big Sisters? How long have you been in the program?” Eric has always been interested in mentoring and knew that Big Brothers Big Sisters was one of the more prominent mentoring programs in the area. He has been mentoring in the program for almost nine months and plans to continue for awhile.

“What sorts of things do you do with your Little Brother or Sister?” There are many different things you can do with your Little Brother or Sister. The program often provides opportunities or free tickets to events such as a Griffins game. Eric and his little brother have also gone to Craig’s Cruisers. One of their favorite things to do is hang out at Calvin, eat in the dining hall, and play sports around campus. Eric wants his Little Brother to see that college can be part of his future.

“What have you learned through your work with Big Brothers Big Sisters?” Eric has always known that poverty was prevalent in Grand Rapids, but until he began spending time with his little brother he had never known someone in this situation. Eric realizes that many of us live sheltered lives and would be shocked at some of the experiences that are so normal for his eleven year old Little Brother. His Little Brother has grown up around gangs, shootings, and broken relationships. Eric wants to help his Little Brother get out of the cycle he is in and give him hope and goals for the future.

“What advice or words of wisdom would you give to someone considering or just beginning in the Big Brothers Big Sisters program?” Eric would encourage people to really get involved. He says that Big Brothers Big Sisters is an “awesome opportunity” in which “you can learn from a child and a child can learn from you”. He tells people not to be intimidated because you do not have to be the greatest mentor in the world – you just have to be there for your Little Brother or Sister.

“Is there anything else you would like to say about Big Brothers Big Sisters?” Eric is “surprised how much fun it is”. It is sometimes difficult to figure out a time in which both of them can meet, but once the time is set Eric loves hanging out and being with his little brother.
By Sergio da Silva, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Calvin College

Lead-based paint has been banned in the United States since 1978. In Grand Rapids, however, many homes were built and painted before this date. The result is that many residents are still exposed to the poisonous metal. Studies have shown that even in low dosages, ingested lead can disturb the delicate chemical balance of children and pregnant women. If left untreated, lead contamination may result in irreversible brain damage. In 2006, 1.6% of the preschool children in the State of Michigan tested for lead content in their blood showed elevated levels of the metal. Grand Rapids surpasses this figure with a 4.1% rate of tested preschool children contaminated by lead.

Calvin College is helping to improve this situation. Students from Research Methods and Health Psychology courses have joined forces with Get the Lead Out! This program is an initiative of the Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan. Trained Calvin students are visiting Grand Rapids residents in their homes, guiding them in the collection of dust that may contain lead, and turning in the dust samples for lead content lab analysis. Residents whose homes are found to have significant levels of lead receive information about alternatives available to prevent contamination of their young children. In this way, we are working together to help keep our city’s children healthy.

2008 Service-Learning Spring Break Trips

This year students will be traveling to seven locations around the country to serve and learn in a community. The partnerships for this year are:

Habitat for Humanity: Kansas City, MO
CRWRC: Louisiana
Houma Baptist Church: Houma, LA
Florence Crittenton Agency: Knoxville, TN
Rehoboth, NM
The Boston Project: Boston, MA
Change a Heart Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh, PA

Spring Break trips are a meaningful, exciting way for students to spend their break. Stay tuned for updates in the spring newsletter!

Blood Drive Data
Our September Blood Drive, sponsored by Michigan Community Blood Centers was a huge success! Over 250 people gave, which resulted in 179 pints of blood. There were 80 first time donors!

Thank you!
By Katy Chadwick, ABSL Coordinator

This fall, when we sat down to write our staff covenant, the above three words came to mind to describe our work in the S-LC. In the past, the staff covenants have been long, beautifully written paragraphs that aptly describe our work, but unfortunately get stored away somewhere and rarely seen throughout the year. This year, we wanted a covenant we could easily remember and be reminded of during those tough times we would inevitably face. After three hours we came to consensus with the words CULTIVATE (hyphen) AGITATE. The word ‘cultivate’ is outwardly focused toward the community and describes our desire to develop and nurture relationships with our many community partners. The word ‘agitate’ is inwardly focused toward our peers here at Calvin and describes our desire to spur them into awareness and action of justice issues around our community. The hyphen is something we borrowed from the name of our office and is spelled out so it cannot be simply overlooked as an oddly-placed punctuation mark, but must be noticed as an integral part of our covenant. The hyphen represents many things, but mostly the reciprocity that we see in our work; our community partners are just as important to us as we are to them. Calvin students often receive more from their service-learning experiences than they feel like they are giving to the community. The hyphen also represents the connection between the other two words of the covenant. We cannot simply be cultivators or agitators; we must be both. Our work is built upon having a strong relationship with the community and the campus alike. Thus, we believe this covenant reflects both sides of our work and the necessary connection between the two.

Cultivate (hyphen) Agitate

”To me, the covenant is a commitment by us and a challenge to us. Making it helped us identify what we care about as an office. It also will hopefully be an ongoing reminder for us to put our values into practice.” – Amy Jonason

“We are supposed to be dissatisfied with the way things are and through our own dissatisfaction and desire for change agitate others towards awareness of present injustices. Along the way cultivating relationships, community and actions to see this change realized.” – Kate Leese