

## How Service-Learning Enacts Social Justice Sensemaking

Tania D. Mitchell, *University of Minnesota*

### Abstract

This qualitative research seeks to understand how students' experiences in service-learning contribute to their understanding of and commitment to social justice. Sensemaking theory is applied to unpack how students make sense of social justice—expressly, how the service-learning experiences (both community and classroom processes) provide students the opportunity to consider and conceptualize issues of justice. The findings demonstrate that students' experiences in service-learning facilitated a more complex understanding of and expressed commitment to social justice. Key to this process of social justice sensemaking were six properties: students' developing understandings of themselves and their role (identity); revisiting and reconsidering their positions (retrospect); connecting to new concepts and understandings that they wished to integrate into their own (referencing); recognizing conflicts between what was expected and what was experienced (contradiction); interacting with others (social); and developing confidence in their understandings, even if they were unsure about the accuracy of meaning (plausibility). These properties also reveal the aspects of a service-learning experience that provide the needed environment to enact social justice sensemaking.

### Recommended Citation

Mitchell, T. D. (2014). How Service-Learning Enacts Social Justice Sensemaking. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 2(2), 73-95. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp-180810-22>

### Copyright and Open Access

© 2014 Tania D. Mitchell



This article is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial \(CC BY-NC\) 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits any sharing and adaptation of the article, as long as the original author(s) and source are credited and the article is used for non-commercial purposes.

## **Introduction**

Service-learning is sometimes touted as an opportunity for students to develop social justice commitments or to educate and inform students about social justice issues and concerns. Eyler and Giles (1999) and Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, and Ilustre (2002) reported that students' experiences in service-learning increased their awareness and value of social justice. The processes, however, that lead to those value shifts and develop commitments have not been explored thoroughly in the research.

This qualitative study seeks to understand how students' experiences in service-learning contribute to their understanding of and commitment to social justice. Written assignments and interview transcripts from 11 women who participated in a two-year service-learning experience were analyzed using a method informed by grounded theory to explore students' social justice meaning making (Charmaz, 2006).

The research identifies six properties of social justice sensemaking that appear to influence students' understanding of and commitment to social justice. A conceptual framework is presented to show how students' experiences in service-learning facilitated a more complex understanding of and expressed commitment to social justice.

## **Sensemaking**

Sensemaking is a conceptual approach designed to understand the active and intellectual processes "that permit and explore the movement from confusion to clarity" (Glynn, 1997, p. 1). Weick (1995), in his sensemaking theory, described how we actively attempt to understand the world around us. "People make sense of things by seeing a world on which they have already imposed what they believe" (p. 15). Thus, Weick differentiated sensemaking by viewing it as a process of invention. Sensemaking theorists asserted that knowledge is a product of social action (Glynn, 1997; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking allows us to understand how individuals and groups create meaning and build context around complex projects and concepts. It requires active and intellectual engagement, combining authorship and interpretation.

To differentiate sensemaking from other processes of distilling knowledge, Weick (1995) encouraged us to remember that the activity or process is foregrounded rather than the product. The theory described "the ways people generate what they interpret" (p. 13); how they got there, not just what is understood. Sensemaking is a reflexive process with no ending or beginning; it is ongoing and constantly changing as the environments and situations we attempt to make sense of also change.

## **Methodology**

Karl Weick's sensemaking theory has been applied to organizations and institutions, and more recently to cognitive processes of individuals, adapted to classroom and educational research to understand processes involved in making meaning of concepts, strategies, and practices (see Coburn, 2001; Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Kezar & Eckel, 2000; Pickeral, Hill, & Duckenfield, 2003; Smerek, 2013).

Butin (2005) contended that service-learning "is a pedagogy immersed in the complexities and ambiguities of how we come to make sense of ourselves and the world around us" (p. 98). In this research, sensemaking theory is applied to service-learning aiming to understand how students in these experiences make sense of social justice. Expressly, the research seeks to understand how the service-learning experiences (both community and classroom processes) provide students the opportunity to consider and conceptualize issues of justice.

This is a qualitative study of the Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. A four semester academic service-learning experience, students in the Citizen Scholars Program (CSP) take four courses in four consecutive semesters as a cohort while engaging in 60 hours of service each semester at their respective service placement. Eleven women in the CSP constitute the participants in this study. Each student contributed her written work from the four courses and participated in a two-hour interview as part of the study<sup>1</sup>. This multi-method approach examines students' meaning making processes over time as well as establishes relationships between their conceptualizations of social justice and the service-learning experience.

The "constant comparative method" (Merriam, 1998, p. 18) best reflects the cross-sectional analyses used to understand the process for making sense of social justice and the service-learning factors that supported this process. The constant comparative method served to explore cross-cutting themes. In this process, "The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident...These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances" (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). This description follows grounded theory methodology, which allows themes to emerge that describe the collective elements of the students' meaning making processes as well as document the particular aspects of the service-learning experience that either support or hinder those processes. Data were coded using codes that emerged in the analysis like: *social justice definition, role conflict, commitment, plausibility, and relationships*. The codes came from sensemaking theory, but also inductively, representing themes that surfaced through the process of analysis.

Spradley (1980) viewed data analysis as “a search for patterns” (p. 85). Overarching themes extracted from the data provide insight into the elements of the service-learning experience that influence students’ social justice sensemaking. Patterns within individual student experiences and among all of the participants in this research were revealed, marking the organizational process consistent with sensemaking theory. The themes that emerged in this research reveal insights into the practice of service-learning to understand the effectiveness of this pedagogy for educating about (and developing commitments to) social justice.

### **Service-Learning and Social Justice Sensemaking**

According to Kezar and Eckel (2000), “Sensemaking is the reciprocal process where people seek information, assign it meaning, and act” (p. 33). The process of sensemaking happens both individually and collectively. Individuals are able to structure meaningful sense of an ambiguous concept through personal beliefs and experiences, and collectively groups work together to attribute meaning to a concept in order to understand their individual and collective roles. “Sensemaking allows people to craft, understand, and accept new conceptualizations...and then to act in ways consistent with those new interpretations and perceptions” (Kezar & Eckel, 2000, p. 33). By viewing the process of sensemaking as an attempt to tie beliefs and actions (Weick, 1995), the process is evident in the Citizen Scholars’ efforts to understand social justice.

In practice, service-learning invokes a number of cues to facilitate sensemaking regarding social justice. Most obvious may be the service experience and the reflection (formal, informal, individual, and in groups) that follows. The Citizen Scholars’ curriculum asks students to engage in service while contemplating their responsibilities to create justice in the world. Students are introduced to different strategies for change, asked to look at concepts of privilege and oppression and how they manifest in society, and required to engage in projects they believe will contribute to meaningful social change. Sensemaking recognizes that previously held perspectives influence both how a concept is understood and the reactions to new information and experiences. The different activities of the CSP curriculum may serve as cues that contradict a student’s initial values and beliefs. The student’s work to integrate the multitude of cues into her frames of belief represents the sensemaking process.

Applying sensemaking as a theory to explore “the construction of meaning and its consequences” (Smerek, 2013, p. 373), this paper seeks to explain the properties that facilitate meaning construction for members of the CSP. Demonstrations from the students’ reflective writing and exit interviews invoke the sensemaking properties and provide insight into the processes utilized to construct meaning of social justice.

The findings presented look at the properties that facilitate sensemaking (see Table 1) and how they were invoked by members of the CSP to make meaning of social justice. The properties: (1) grounded in identity, (2) retrospective, (3) referencing, (4) contradiction, (5) social, and (6) driven by plausibility are described with details about their relevance to the social justice sensemaking of the participants. Examples from the students' experiences that reflect each property are included to provide context for the property's significance to the sensemaking process.

**Table 1. Social Justice Sensemaking Properties**

Property	Description
Grounded in Identity	Sensemaking begins with self-awareness (Weick, 1995). Identity ground sensemaking allows students to understand themselves and their relationship to the concept of social justice. Who we think we are (identity) shapes our actions and our interpretations (Weick et al., 2005).
Retrospective	Social justice sensemaking is based in experience (Weick, 1995). Individuals reflect on their experiences to reconsider their thoughts on and action towards social justice. This process allows individuals to evaluate their views and (re)align their actions to be consistent with their beliefs.
Referencing	Based in the notion of self-authorship (Kegan, 1994), referencing looks at the sources (reading, individuals, experiences) a person includes in her conception of social justice. Referencing is either isolated or integrated: isolated meaning the description of justice includes sources without benefit of the persons voice and/or perspective; integrated meaning outside sources inform the conception of justice but an individual's understanding is primary.
Contradiction	The discrepancy between the actual condition (Jasso, 1998) and an individual's expectations of community/society/the world triggers sensemaking (Glanz, Williams, & Hoeksema, 2001). The uncertainty and discomfort fostered by contradiction encourages and inspires a reconstruction of meaning and action.
Social	Sensemaking is based in our interactions with others (Kegan, 1994; Weick, 1995). The process of dialogue and relationship building allows for the introduction and integration of multiple perspectives as well as the collaborative construction of meaning which often brings validity to the process.
Driven by Plausibility	Plausibility relies on confidence more so than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Rather than dependence on the "right answer," social justice sensemaking pushes individuals to develop a conception in which they are confident enough to take action on these beliefs (Eckel & Kezar, 2003).

### **Grounded in identity**

Weick (1995) maintained that sensemaking begins with self-awareness. The invocation of identity into the social justice sensemaking process is evident on two fronts. First, the Citizen Scholars use identity (in the form of social group membership) to understand themselves in relationship to the concept of social justice. Primarily, the students question how their identities impact both how they experience the concept and their access to certain elements they demand

and see as essential to social justice. Additionally, the Citizen Scholars use identity to make sense of their role in bringing social justice to fruition. Kegan (1994) viewed this effort to align identity and understanding as an emergence into a new order of consciousness. This is illustrated by the Citizen Scholars' work to bring themselves and their efforts in line with their understanding of social justice and what an individual who believes in social justice should (or would) do. By grounding sensemaking in identity, the Citizen Scholars seek to understand their role in social justice so that their actions may be both meaningful and appropriate to the ways in which they understand the concept. Ryan's<sup>2</sup> service journal demonstrates how her identity grounds her meaning making regarding her role in social justice work. She wrote:

I feel that there are many places where my 'identity' overlaps. Yes, I am white. I am middle-class. But I am also young. I am bisexual. I am a woman. And while I have some intuitive sense that, at least in this point in my life, the privileges I get from my race and class overwhelm the ways in which I am marginalized, all of these "identities" are important to consider when I think about how I function in this world. (Ryan, reflective journal)

In this journal, Ryan is working to harmonize her identity and her role in the conception of social justice she adopts. This conception, which she sees as "free of hierarchies and power structures" and "ism-free," provides insight into why her own identity would be so significant in trying to understand her role. The conflict of understanding herself as both privileged and marginalized and yet working for a system in which there are no hierarchies creates a challenge for Ryan in determining both how she should act and how people will perceive her actions.

To understand sensemaking as grounded in identity construction is to understand that meaning is both a construction of the self and the concept being understood (Weick, 1995). As we work to attribute meaning, we can only do so from the level at which we understand ourselves in relationship to the concept. "Our meaning-making may derive from our membership in various subgroups of the human family, such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and culture" (Kegan, 1994, p. 206). In essence, the students are asking "Who am I, and how do I fit in this movement?"

Rebecca, Brynne, Kelly, and Sarah each reflected frequently on issues of race and class as they contemplated social justice. As mentors to young girls of color living in poverty in the local community, the discrepancy between their lives as middle class, college-educated, White women and that of their mentees informed much of their thinking about the conditions of a just society.

Often, this property of sensemaking emerged as a conflict the Citizen Scholar recognized between her own identity and what she felt was more socially just. Jess struggled

with the issue of heterosexual privilege and how others might perceive her relationship, and therefore her commitment to social justice. In response, she used language to ensure that she conveyed that she sees heterosexual normativity and issues of heterosexism as social justice issues: “Like in my relationship with my partner. Who I call my partner, for reasons because I feel like I want social justice, and not a boyfriend” (Jess, interview). Language, she insisted, is of incredible importance in living a commitment to social justice. Jess’s effort to use gender-neutral language in conveying her relationship gave her the opportunity to challenge stereotypes and assumptions, but also showed solidarity with people who experience oppression based on their intimate relationships (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people).

Weick (1995) argued that identity determines how concepts are defined. Table 2 outlines the tasks associated with this property. As Citizen Scholars worked to make meaning of social justice, identity remained important to that understanding. They struggled with whether or not identities they embody justify or malign the meanings they give to social justice, such as Joey’s claim that her understandings are associated with “white middle-class college bullshit” (reflective journal) or Jess’s concern that her language appropriately reflect her commitment to social justice. Social justice sensemaking appears to be grounded in identity construction as the self and the identities Citizen Scholars associate with provide a place to begin in conceptualizing social justice and a place to return for validation and confirmation.

**Table 2. Identity Ground Social Justice Sensemaking**

Task	Example
Understanding implications of social group membership on meaning construction	“...the privileges I get from my race and class overwhelm the ways in which I am marginalized, all of these ‘identities’ are important to consider when I think about how I function in this world.” –Ryan (reflective journal)
Social group membership influences meaning construction	“I would like to live in a fair, just society...a society with love as the only form of money...[where] all the members believe in God, because He is our creator and deserves our eternal praise.” –Rebecca (“Good Society” essay)

### **Retrospective**

Retrospective sensemaking acknowledges that individuals can make sense only from what they have already experienced (Eckel & Kezar, 2003). “The creation of meaning is an attentional process, but it is attention to that which has already occurred” (Weick, 1995, pp. 25-26). Because of the curricular requirement of the CSP, retrospect was constant as the service-learning curriculum asked students to reflect on their service experience as a place of learning about themselves, the community, and the process of social change. Analyzing the role of retrospect in social justice sensemaking was challenging, however, because retrospection in the

process of social justice sensemaking needed to be distinct from the continual reflection prescribed by the CSP curriculum.

Retrospect is captured when individuals discuss “future directions in comparison to past beliefs and activities” (Eckel & Kezar, 2003, p. 46). Ryan offered a statement that conveyed the benefit of retrospect to the sensemaking process, “I think the first reflection we did, imagining the good society, was beneficial, especially when I was able to pull it out at the end of the semester and reconsider my answers” (reflective journal). Her use of an initial reflection as a tool to re-evaluate her position demonstrates retrospective sensemaking. Similarly, Rebecca offered:

After looking back at each journal entry in chronological order, I was astonished at my increasing pessimism...I felt as though the world was so ridden with poverty, inequality and apathy, that no matter what I did, it wouldn't be enough. And finally I accepted this. No matter what I do, it won't be enough to change the world into anything close to Utopia. However, that doesn't mean that I should give up, because if everyone does what they can, we can change things together—one person at a time. (reflective journal)

According to Weick (1995), “To learn what I think, I look back over what I said earlier” (p. 61). Here, Rebecca acknowledged her past perspectives and used them in retrospect to reaffirm her efforts and commitment to change.

Meredith's retrospective sensemaking is apparent as she relayed the connection she sees between understanding social justice and understanding self:

You have to create an understanding about where you are and what your surroundings are. And then you can come to a point where you start understanding the masses, and you understand the root causes and all the people connected. (interview)

She posited that she came to understand social justice by considering and reconsidering her place in the community: “You take all that and you move in a direction to making positive changes” (Meredith, interview). Using her previous actions as points for contemplation and to shape future action demonstrates social justice sensemaking as retrospective.

Jess demonstrated retrospection in social justice sensemaking as she questioned her actions, motives, and values to determine how she was contributing to social justice. In her first semester, as a program assistant at an afterschool enrichment program for middle school students she asked, “How can I have the ideal impact if I'm only there for four hours a week? What kind of relationship are we creating? How does this come into play with the bigger questions about what a good society is?” (Jess, “Good Society” essay). She used her service and her work at the middle school to re-evaluate her role in creating social change. Through



questioning her actions and whether or not they contribute to the good society, Jess worked to synthesize her actions with the meaning she attributed to social justice. She is looking to create alignment, and used reflection to “give definition” to her lived experience (Weick, 1995).

In her exit interview as she described what is included in her vision of social justice, Jess contended, “People can’t be hungry, and people can’t be searching for jobs, and people can’t be selling drugs to get enough money to buy the food” (interview). This vision is based in retrospect as she highlights conditions that she observes as problematic and proposes a vision of society in which those concerns are no longer present. The meaning Jess attributed to social justice is retrospective because the sense derives “from what has already occurred” (Eckel & Kezar, 2003, p. 41).

Social justice sensemaking is retrospective. Table 3 outlines the tasks associated with retrospective sensemaking. The Citizen Scholars use reflection to consider and reconsider their thoughts and actions as they work to attribute meaning to social justice. They consider themselves as agents in the process and reflect on their actions and experiences. They refer to previous articulations of meaning to re-evaluate their views and construct new meaning of social justice. Sensemaking “is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 415). The Citizen Scholars’ retrospective sensemaking process allowed the participants to construct meaning of social justice from their lived experience and to revisit their constructions to arrive at an understanding in which they can be confident. By utilizing retrospect, the participants gain clarity about their needs, values, and priorities and end with an understanding of social justice that accurately reflects their values and commitments.

**Table 3. Retrospective Social Justice Sensemaking**

Task	Example
Reflect on past beliefs and re-evaluate alongside new understandings	“I used to see social justice as this system of order that kept order among people, but justice can’t be given by authority it comes from the people, against those systems that claim to create order but succeed in exploitation, oppression, and marginalization.” –Meredith (response essay)
Consider how previous experiences align with understandings of justice (synthesize actions to meanings)	“How can I have the ideal impact if I’m only there for four hours a week?...How does this come into play with the bigger questions about what a good society is? –Jess (service journal)

## Referencing

Referencing marks when a participant returns to a particular source in order to communicate her understanding of social justice. It is a characteristic of sensemaking derived from Kegan's (1994) notion of self-authorship, meaning "to have a way of knowing rather than be *had* by it" (Kegan, 1994, p. 223, emphasis in original). Kegan (1994) described those without the habit of self-authorship as "capable of joining a community as a fellow participant" but vulnerable to socialization into communities of discourse (p. 288). His concern is that "learning" is substituted by "training" therefore, inhibiting individuals from creating their own knowledge to instead reflect the message of their community (Kegan, 1994).

Referencing, as an element of social justice sensemaking, then, emerges as a student's ability to grasp the concept, but not solely from a position of self-authorship—where the understanding emerges from the self either independent of or integrated with other sources. Particular to this property is the student's need to reference a particular source (be it a reading, an individual, or an experience) to define her conception of social justice. The meaning made of the concept originates from sources rather than from personal experience and knowledge. Students in the CSP utilized referencing in sensemaking in two ways: isolated and integrated. Isolated referencing indicates that the students' articulation of social justice comes primarily through sources she references (e.g., books, films, individuals, other readings) with little to none of her own voice, belief, or experience contributing to meaning. Integrated referencing may include sources, but the student has integrated those sources with her own perspective to create meaning.

Wendy relied on isolated referencing as she worked to define social justice in her third semester as a Citizen Scholar. She began by articulating her concerns:

When I consider social justice, I think of social injustices and how social justice is supposed to correct them. So, social justice should be defined as the correction of social injustice, but this does not tell us much as one does not know what kind of things are covered here. (response essay)

Wendy's recognition that her definition of social justice lacks the details to instruct people how to bring about a just society is problematic to her and she seeks to correct it. Isolated referencing appears as she works "systematically" to consider social justice (Wendy, response essay). She considers each term individually, defining "social" and "justice" to arrive at, what she hopes, is a more detailed understanding of the concept:

The word social generally refers to an environment of people and the kind of behavior related to this environment. Specifically the way that any one individual interacts with other individuals, be it in groups or one on one. The people and their action towards one another creates the social environment

that must be addressed in this questions of what social justice is. Still, before addressing all that I need to consider the other half of this topic; what is justice. Justice has been defined over and over again by many individuals and groups, but these people seem to be in disagreement about exactly what words to use. Not to say that the definitions differ by great length, but that they use different wording and sometimes they are understood differently in their relation to different situations. To use a simple definition I will say justice is the process and result of correcting an injustice or wrong doing that had been carried out against an individual or group of people (though this can be extended to include the environment and other organisms). (response essay)

After spending several paragraphs unpacking social justice with dictionary definitions and the encyclopedia, she concluded:

Generally at one point in time a social injustice is thought to be justified, by a majority of the people in the social environment or simply ignored by the majority as a result of real or perceived ignorance. Then at some time later enough people change their thinking and actions to deem that same thing socially unjust and work to correct and remove the problem, once created by the same social environment. (response essay)

She defined social justice, once again, as the correction of injustices. In this passage she gained more insight into the ways something once considered just becomes unjust in the minds of society's members, but she does not demonstrate any level of integration. Wendy does not include any examples of what might be considered unjust, what needs to be corrected through social justice, or what actions might be required to bring about justice. Her concluding understanding of social justice did not change from the initial definition she shared even though she expressed a desire to "understand [social justice] as something more" (response essay).

An example of integrated referencing in the third semester of Citizen Scholars is demonstrated by Brynne:

The existence of the phrase 'social justice' implies that there is something unjust about the society in which we live, otherwise, why would we need to verbalize this state? It is a fact that our society provides for some people's well-being better than it does for others. The US system of education, for example, dictates that children living in poor communities will attend under-funded schools. Surely having access to only under-resourced schooling because one lives in a poor neighborhood is socially unjust. (response essay)

In this example, Brynne presented the same concern as Wendy: that the need for social justice is generated by injustice seen and experienced. Brynne used her reference of the education system, not as a tool to repeat her initial definition, but to amplify her understanding and provide evidence. Her concluding definition integrated this education reference into her articulation of social justice. She offered, "Social justice implies equal access to education, economic and other resources simply because one is a person in society" (response essay).

Table 4 outlines the tasks associated with referencing. Examples of isolated referencing occurred most often as participants struggled to articulate definitions of social justice. In constructing a definition, however, either for brevity or confidence, participants sometimes referenced other sources to make their points, inadvertently losing presence in their statements. Integrated referencing was more common as Citizen Scholars took notice of things in their environment and “framed” those messages to make sense of social justice (Coburn, 2001). Using concepts learned in reading or research, experiences from service or activism, and images from media, participants were influenced by those messages and integrated them into the meaning constructed of social justice.

**Table 4. Social Justice Sensemaking Spurred by Referencing**

Task	Example
Utilize sources, exclusive of own voice to articulate meaning ( <i>isolated referencing</i> )	“...to each what he or she is due” –Sarah (response essay)
Utilize sources to expand and enhance comprehension ( <i>integrated referencing</i> )	“It is a fact that our society provides for some people’s well-being better than it does for others. The U.S. system of education...dictates that children living in poor communities will attend under-funded schools. Surely having access to only under-resourced schooling...is socially unjust.” –Brynne (response essay)

It is important to acknowledge that much of the data are comprised of students’ written assignments, where expectations of referencing (in the form of citing sources) may be assumed by or required of the students. Students’ use of sources as either isolated or integrated, however, still provides insight into the complexity of their cognitive processes (Ignelzi, 2000). The messages considered influential, and therefore referenced, by the Citizen Scholars differed for each participant and led to diverse understandings of social justice and the commitments required to bring it to fruition.

**Contradiction**

“Explicit efforts at sensemaking tend to occur when the current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). Contradiction describes the challenges one encounters that causes individuals to question their meaning making process. These challenges can and often do arise spontaneously, or they can be deliberately created. Kegan (1994) asserted that most people’s meaning making is inspired by contradiction, and Weick (1995) attributed sensemaking to interruptions experienced. Interruptions cause “people to become highly aware” and notice disruptions that are in contradiction with how they believe things should be happening (Eckel & Kezar, 2003, p. 42).

Contradiction poses “challenges to meaning frames” (Hess, 1996, p. 9). Through their experiences in Citizen Scholars, students were being introduced to contradictions both spontaneously and with deliberate intent through the focus of the curriculum. Louis (1980) characterizes contradiction, or differences between expectations and experience, as “surprises.” Pleasant or unpleasant, students must adapt to these surprises and find ways to reconcile their meaning constructs with the new information discovered. Social justice sensemaking based in contradiction refers to the ways in which students used the challenges they encountered as Citizen Scholars to shape their understandings of social justice. The contradiction experienced and recognized serves as a place to reconstruct meaning.

In their first semester as Citizen Scholars, contradiction as an element of sensemaking was evident as the students worked to reconcile their visions of justice with the injustice they saw as prevalent in society. Kelly described the dilemma as she worked to communicate her vision:

I find I am unable to ignore lingering thoughts of problems of my country, the land of prosperity, the society in which I live. Isn't America, itself, the place where its residents are promised the pursuit of happiness, bestowed the right of liberty? How could a society that vows that it values all these virtues not be good? How does one explain how homelessness, racism, and violence fit into our forefather's intentions for their own good society? (“Good Society” essay)

Beth noted, “Because everybody thinks that we all start from the same point and that it's all what you do. I used to think that. It's like ‘The American Dream.’ Everybody can get what they want if they work for it. But it's not true” (interview). Similarly, Ryan offered:

I know that, officially, I already live in a democracy, but I think that's more a matter of labeling than reality...I want to live in a society where every single member has an equal (equitable?) amount of influence in society. I want to live in a privilege-less world, where what you are does not silence you or others. (“Good Society” essay)

For these students, meaning making was shaped by the contradiction they saw between the messages they associated with social justice and the realities of the society in which they lived.

Students, like Rebecca, also found contradiction in the assignments of the CSP. The challenge of writing down her vision of a good society is an example of a deliberate contradiction put in place by the curriculum of Citizen Scholars:

I just found that paragraph extremely difficult to write because it's strange going outside what we know and believe to be an ultimatum. I rarely imagine things not within what is now considered to be a norm. I don't know how I would achieve any of these qualities of the good society, but writing about it is the first step. I keep thinking, “well that's dumb, it would never happen”—but isn't that the point? (Rebecca, “Good Society” essay)

Commitment and action regarding social justice is also shaped by contradiction. Meredith wrote, “I think my work is inspired by the fact that this is not how I envision my society” (reflective journal). Aida shared, “Those injustices, as well as all the things that make our society problematic, inspire me to be part of the solution by being an active citizen working towards social change” (reflective journal).

Personal experience can also be a contradiction in social justice sensemaking. Rebecca presented her definition of social justice, “a right to basic human necessities. People need food, water, clothing and shelter” (response essay). She was concerned that her lifestyle and experience negated her ability to determine what was just for others:

I struggled with how to limit basic human needs. I don't know how I could say that justice is simply food, water, clothing and shelter. I have never experienced anything but middle class living, so I have no right to impose such a scant definition of justice on anyone else. On the reservation [where Rebecca did service during her time as a Citizen Scholar], I was definitely challenged with that. Sure, the people had enough to eat, a roof over their head, etc., but the conditions they were living in, leaky roofs, ant infested bathrooms, were deplorable. I could never say to anyone on the reservation, “well your basic needs are met – looks like social justice has been achieved.” (response essay)

Sometimes, the service experience proved to be the contradiction that spurred students' social justice sensemaking. This example from Brynne reveals how she saw her service as a mentor to a young African American girl in conflict with the meaning she attributed to social justice:

In a working society, [my service as a mentor] would not be needed. By hanging out with Felicia once a week am I enabling her mother to not have to keep track of her as much, not have to make the effort to guide her daughter into engaging activities? It makes me feel good to hang out with her, I have fun interacting with people younger than I am and I enjoy thinking that she looks forward to the time we spend together. At the end of the year though I will have completed my service hours for Citizen Scholars, satisfied that I have learned so much from my active learning experience, and will move on...while Felicia will be entering the ninth grade dealing with the same shit...The faith I have, I guess, is that from the time we spend together she will continue to grow more confident in her body and mind, in herself, that she can overcome the challenges she was born into (being female, black, never having a father, living with a mother addicted to drugs and alcohol). I am aware of some of the broader issues surrounding social justice in our society and am committed to other movements to this end and I think this is where I can be confident that I am not just continuing to benefit (by calling it my education) from the disadvantage of others in the name of service. (service journal)

She described several contradictions in one paragraph: her service itself was evidence that society is unjust, her service may in fact perpetuate injustice, Brynne was learning from the

experience at Felicia's expense, Felicia may not have benefited from the experience (though Brynne hoped she would). She reconciled the contradictions by affirming her commitment. The fact that she was committed to social justice and knew that she would work to live her commitment in other ways after her experience with Felicia ended helped Brynne bring some resolution to the contradictions she encountered.

Ryan also found contradiction in her service experience. The contradiction she named was magnified in the work of the homeless shelter where she did her service. Could situations of injustice be present within service agencies and still be considered social justice work? While she struggled to reconcile this conflict, Ryan believed it was possible. "I can still believe [this] is social justice work even when we are not advocates, even when we may be creating a hiding space as we develop a community" (service journal). Ryan believed that social justice required advocating for systemic change and working for a "privilege-less society," but she found that while she could identify issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia at the shelter she could also see that it was providing services and safe spaces for people marginalized in other ways, and for Ryan that was an important aspect of social justice. In the end, her experience gave her strength to challenge the injustice she witnessed at the shelter and also be content with the work she did there.

Contradiction in social justice sensemaking is represented by challenges, surprises, or interruptions to the meaning making process. For the Citizen Scholars, contradictions provided the opportunity to recognize and analyze problems in society and to reaffirm commitments to act for social justice. At the same time, it gave them the chance to express confusion, hesitation, and to acknowledge doubt. When contradiction occurs, "these kinds of experiences can unsettle...but on the other side of this sense of loss they can also promote the process by which one puts together one's own psychology, one's own program" (Kegan, 1994, p. 298). See Table 5 for the tasks associated with this property. Through their ability to "recognize contradiction" and work with and through it (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002), the Citizen Scholars were able to make new sense of social justice. Early on, the contradiction sensed between values and reality made it difficult for students to share their articulations of a more just world. As the students questioned the meaning and purpose of their service, contradiction supported a reframing of meaning and action in work for social justice. Contradiction also served as inspiration. At the end of their experience, it was most often a belief that change is possible, that "there is a better alternative—the world does not have to be this way" (Joey, reflective journal), that motivated students in their commitments to social justice.

**Table 5. Social Justice Sensemaking Spurred by Contradiction**

Task	Example
Reconcile vision with actual condition	"...a just society should lack all the problems we see in our everyday lives...no discrimination of any kind, no injustice, no moral wrongs committed against others." –Wendy (response essay)
Contradiction as a source of inspiration	"Those injustices, as well as all the things that make our society problematic, inspire me to be a part of the solution." –Aida (reflective journal)

## **Social**

Meaning making is interactive, it is "about talk, discourse, and conversation" (Eckel & Kezar, 2003, p. 41). Both Kegan (1994) and Weick (1995) viewed the process of making sense as shaped by our interactions with others. Since service and service-learning pedagogy are social by design (shaped by community or community building), the experience of the CSP is based largely in social relations. Social justice sensemaking for the students in the CSP seems to be largely influenced by their interactions with others.

Through the curriculum of the Citizen Scholars, which relies on weekly class meetings and 60 hours of service each semester, the social activity is obvious. However, the influence of these interactions on social justice sensemaking is more difficult to capture. Through student writings and the exit interviews, the impact of social relations on making sense of and developing a commitment to social justice is made clear.

As Joey shared her conceptions of social justice during her time in Citizen Scholars, she pointed to the different conversations and experiences (i.e., the social interactions) that brought her to these understandings. In her first semester she shared, "Reading with Lani helps me form these opinions and questions. Why did Lani fall through the cracks like that...does she really have a learning problem, or is it the system?" (Joey, service journal). Through her tutoring experience with Lani, Joey questioned what would be needed to prevent people from "falling through the cracks," key to her understanding of a just society. She was able to use her service experience to raise her awareness of social problems and to ask questions and form opinions about the systems that caused Joey and Lani to be matched and how those systems could be changed.

A year later, Joey commented on the importance of the classroom component and the cohort experience of Citizen Scholars to her learning and to her process of coming to understand social justice:

Citizen Scholars...set the foundations for creating a lifestyle oriented around social change, community, giving of the self, and even more radical politics. They helped me realize that anyone and everyone can be empowered, and



how important that is...it reinforces the idea that a community is important and valuable, and secondly that in the community, we have stability with each other, watching each other grow and try new ideas. Being in a setting where we are all together with at least one thread of community for more than one semester can build our confidence and trust in one another, and in the educational process. (reflective journal)

The comfort and trust established with other members of the Citizen Scholars gave Joey both the safety and confidence to take risks and make mistakes. Through the experience of interaction, she challenged herself to express new thoughts and ideas, receive feedback, and use that dialogue to consider her positions and actions. And while the social environment created by the CSP created a space for dialogue and conversation that facilitated social justice sensemaking for Joey, the information exchange and opportunity to hear others' ideas was also influential. In an experience during the third semester of the CSP, Joey was challenged by a conversation in which the class was working to define social justice. She was not convinced that the process or the task was useful. In reflection, sharing her understanding of social justice, she offered an example of how this conception was shaped by another student in the class:

As I was thinking about this, I was reminded of something [Brynne] said in class...I tried to use the reasoning that the term was too broad and that we could not define it so quickly but she deftly pointed out that we all need a place to start from, a focus point so that we can then manipulate the definition to fit our own lives and experiences. (Joey, reflective journal)

This revelation was important for Joey who was then able to open herself up to creating a definition that could guide her life and her action. Through Brynne's statement, Joey no longer felt stifled by the permanency of a definition. Viewing it instead as a starting point, Joey shared an understanding of social justice that fit her life and understanding at that point, with the knowledge that there was room and time to change this definition as she continued to learn about the issues important to social justice.

As Weick et al. (2005) stated, "Communication is a central component of sensemaking" (p. 413). Classroom and cohort interactions, common to the Citizen Scholars, provided opportunities to discuss and rehash key concepts related to social justice and to explore and examine their roles in working for social justice. The community of the CSP cohort was very important to the students in social justice sensemaking. Kelly remarked that her understanding of justice was "questioned and tweaked with each conversation amongst the Citizen Scholars" (reflective journal) and Jess believed "the information and experiences we share demonstrate how much we can learn together and our commitment to social justice" (reflective journal).

Through their service, the students were challenged to develop an understanding of social justice that included those they served as well as themselves. These interactions gave the students new perspectives to integrate into their conceptions of social justice. Aida’s work with disabled survivors of violence gave her insight into their struggles for fair and accessible housing. She explains, “Before this, I don’t know if I would have thought about the needs of the disabled, but now I know...I can’t imagine a society could be just if it didn’t provide for them too” (service journal).

The service experience also shaped the meaning students attributed to their commitments. Rebecca was inspired by the “real people” with whom she made connections and by the effect that her work had on others (service journal). She believed that her impact and seeing the change that happened because of her work inspired her to continue working for social justice. Similarly, Jess was inspired by those “who spend their lives struggling for liberation” (reflective journal). Her commitment was encouraged by people she met through her service, people who were able to move others to action, and she desired to emulate them in her own life.

“Sensemaking is never solitary,” according to Weick (1995, p. 40). All of the members of the CSP utilized their interactions with others in the classroom and in the service experience to make meaning of social justice. Sense is made from the process of working together—from communication, information sharing, “acting and reacting” (Eckel & Kezar, 2003, p. 41). Table 6 describes the tasks associated with this property of social justice sensemaking. Students were able to use their conversations in the classroom to construct meaning collaboratively and openly and were able to use their service experiences as opportunities to question, to construct frames for evaluating their efforts at working for social justice, and to derive new meaning based on those interactions.

**Table 6. Social Justice Sensemaking as Social**

Task	Example
Used experiences with other people (e.g., in the service experience with peers and with teachers) to raise questions of concepts integral to social justice	“Why did Lani fall through the cracks like that...does she really have a learning problem, or is it the system? –Joey (service journal)
Communication and interaction with others to facilitate meaning construction	“This understanding [of social justice] is questioned and tweaked with each conversation amongst the Citizen Scholars.” –Kelly (response essay)

## **Driven by plausibility**

The notion of plausibility respects the fact that social justice cannot and does not have a singular definition. Instead, a plausible understanding of social justice is one that is believable and acceptable to the individuals making sense. “Accuracy is nice, but not necessary” (Weick, 1995, p. 56). In sensemaking, participants must have confidence in the sense they have made of the concept in order to take action, but the idea of being “right” is not vital to developing confidence or commitment.

Social Justice is something I feel I can't define. Not necessarily because it's indefinable, but because I just don't know enough yet! It's something I think I can point out if I see it...It's something I think I can just recognize (cocky as that might sound) just as I can recognize where to push a brush stroke on the canvas or where to put a word on a page. (Ryan, response essay)

In the passage above, Ryan invoked plausibility as she expressed validity in a concept she felt able to identify but unable to define. She conveyed confidence in what she understands, even as she felt unable to articulate that understanding. The “feeling” that Ryan maintained regarding her understanding of social justice guided her actions; she was certain that her work was aimed towards social justice without having an accurate definition to guide her.

Jess's confidence in her understanding of social justice was more certain when she began the Citizen Scholars Program than when she ended the experience. While she had doubts about the implementation of her ideas, she knew that social justice required a “relatively equal distribution of wealth” (“Good Society” essay). As she continued to explore social justice through readings, discussions, and service, she ended the semester with “less of an idea” and a realization that “there is no correct answer” (reflective journal). Her commitment, however, was not diminished, she added, “I hope that I continue to dream this up” (Jess, reflective journal) reflecting Weick et al.'s (2005) position that plausibility sustains motivation.

Moving into the third semester of Citizen Scholars, Jess felt that her idea of social justice was “vague” but showed confidence in her sensemaking, saying, “I'm somewhat closer than I thought I was before” (response essay). Her idea of social justice was “equality, fairness, or the struggle for those,” but she admitted confusion: “I'm not sure what to do next...What is the social framework surrounding this awesome change? What does the rest of society look like when this is possible?” (Jess, response essay). Sensemaking driven by plausibility reflects Jess's desire to bring her ideas to fruition. “People see and find sensible those things they can do something about” (Weick, 1995, p. 60), Jess wanted to understand social justice and create a clearer, more believable picture of a just society in order to guide her actions toward that goal.

But Weick (1995) also warned, “Accurate perceptions have the power to immobilize. People who want to get into action tend to simplify rather than elaborate” (p. 60). Meredith seemed to fall victim to this in her final semester:

What I am finding about myself is that sometimes I never come to a conclusion. I think that “oh no I can’t do that because it isn’t empowering to so and so” or “do I have the right?” or even “am I being racist/elitist, etc. by doing such actions?” There are times that I never do anything because I am not sure what that *anything* is. I am realizing it now because it is as if someone tracked my thought process and then asked “ok, now what [Meredith]?” Here I am saying, “but I still don’t understand the theory” when I really need to be thinking is screw the theory and do something. (reflective journal, emphasis in original)

Jess seemed to heed this warning as she offered her conception of social justice at the end of her experience as a Citizen Scholar:

So in my current life, social justice is more...something just out of reach that I don’t completely understand what it is, but I know that that is what I’m working toward...And I know my vision is probably not what would be socially just for everyone. So I have to try to, I guess be careful how I define it. Or maybe it doesn’t need to be defined. It’s just like everything else I’d be like at some point I’ll be like “Does it matter if I define it?” (Jess, interview)

Plausibility, or finding comfort in ambiguity, allows Jess to be assured that social justice is “what [she’s] working toward” while Meredith struggles to take action, overwhelmed by the possibility that whatever actions she takes will harm rather than help. Social justice sensemaking driven by plausibility eschews accuracy for confidence, ensuring that people act on their convictions rather than get stuck in uncertainty.

Plausibility appears to drive conceptions of social justice as the student prepares to leave the CSP and act on her understandings and commitments without the community and support offered by the program. According to Weick et al. (2005), “People do not need to perceive the current situation or problems accurately in order to solve them; they can act effectively simply by making sense of circumstances in ways that appear to move toward general long term goals” (p. 415). As it becomes more important for students to take action rather than to be certain regarding an exact understanding of social justice, sensemaking driven by plausibility is evident.

Both Wendy and Kelly struggled with conceptualizing social justice when presented with injustice so often. And though Wendy felt she “should know a better way to think of it,” she maintained that for her social justice is “the opposite of the injustice” (interview). The simplicity of her understanding was important because it was “more practical.” She elaborated, “Sometimes you don’t necessarily know what’s the best end result that you are looking for, but

you do know that it has to be better than what is there presently” (Wendy, interview). Similarly, Kelly posited that viewing social justice as the “alleviation of injustice” allows her to see “what’s wrong and how that can be made, not necessarily right, but better for everybody” (interview).

Meredith held on to her notion of “utopia” that guided her understanding of social justice, but resigned herself to find ways to make “my own utopia around me” (interview). The recognition that her vision would probably not “prevail in [her] lifetime” was difficult for Meredith. She countered immobilization by creating a plan to bring her understanding of justice to a finite group where she felt her ideas were possible to enact, “I guess I went from thinking really broad to really starting to understand sustainability in my inner circle” (Meredith, interview). This shift was important for Meredith to maintain her commitment and to encourage continued action. She invoked plausibility through her ability to adapt and adopt; making sense that is reasonable and aligned with her understanding and which provided a platform that allowed her to take action on her beliefs (Eckel & Kezar, 2003; Weick, 1995).

Joey’s exiting view of social justice reflected plausibility, “It’s the people’s voice ringing out and claiming what it needs, and what it wants, and what it knows it should have, and there are many ways of getting into that” (interview). She shared an understanding that is broad enough to encompass a number of perspectives, needs, and actions to bring it forward. It was important for her that the definition be both “personal” and “malleable,” able to fit the changes society will inevitably experience. Joey illustrated Weick et al.’s (2005) contention, “Sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right. Instead, it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism” (p. 415). Joey’s concluding definition reflected her efforts to continue to shape and present a definition that incorporates what she has learned about the community and society and could support action “across a spectrum, so that no one is left out” (interview). “People may get better stories, but they’ll never get *the* story. Furthermore, what is plausible for one group...often proves implausible for another” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415, emphasis in original). Joey’s articulation of social justice reflected this aspect of plausibility, as she attempted to present what is most acceptable for all people who would be involved in work for social justice.

Ryan explained how plausibility fit into her process of social justice sensemaking:

The more I learned about [social justice], the less and less I could put my finger on what it really was. But I also learned that it matters less and less, that I could still do work even if I couldn’t define things or put my finger on it. Like I don’t have to say, “I’m doing this. This is social justice work. Social justice work

is A, B, and C.” But I could still have an idea of what was important and what was right to do. (interview)

She continued, “I think that I get an idea of the complexity of it, which is really useful...I think that I know what I am doing. I feel good about it” (Ryan, interview). In sensemaking, this is the point: that an individual can create meaning for a concept that may not be correct, but has enough plausibility that the person can be confident in her actions (see Table 7).

**Table 7. Social Justice Sensemaking Driven by Plausibility**

Task	Example
Develop enough confidence to take action	“Like I don’t have to say, ‘I’m doing this. This is social justice work. Social justice work is A, B, and C.’ But I could still have an idea of what was important and what was right to do.” –Ryan (interview)
Develop comfort in ambiguity	“...social justice is more...something just out of reach that I don’t completely understand what it is, but I know that is what I’m working toward.” –Jess (interview)

“In an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests and inhabited by people with multiple shifting identities, an obsession with accuracy seems fruitless, and not of much practical help either” (Weick, 1995, p. 61). For the Citizen Scholars, accuracy in their comprehension of social justice was not something they could expect. The concept is too complex and too contested to strive for accuracy. Instead, the students aimed for understandings that were plausible, that were both believable and provided a template to take action. Students struggled to develop working definitions of social justice that they could believe in and from which they could take small steps towards social justice that were satisfying to them. Social justice sensemaking, driven by plausibility, allowed students to make reasonable and credible sense of social justice from which they could take action and live their commitments.

### **Implications for Practice**

Through exploring content, context, and chronology of student writing and interview transcriptions, this research reveals the sensemaking properties that prompted the construction and reconstruction of the meanings of social justice held by the students in the Citizen Scholars Program. This portrayal of sensemaking recognizes the properties that assist students in developing their understandings of social justice. While the properties have been organized to present them as distinct, it is important to recognize the process as complex. Sensemaking is dynamic: “Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). To understand sensemaking

is to understand that these properties overlap, intermingle, and transpose to foster meaning construction and give participants the confidence to take action. Retrospection can be social, just as identity can involve referencing. The properties work together to allow participants to engage with and interpret the different messages surrounding a concept. Social justice sensemaking happens individually and collectively, as the Citizen Scholars wrote journal entries and reflections, participated in classroom discussions, engaged in community service, read articles, researched issues, and reviewed their past work and conversations.

Service-learning experiences can support social justice sensemaking by creating environments where relationships are valued and developed. The cohort experience of the CSP created a community where productive discomfort and challenge were as important to the process as learning and celebration. The reliable space of the CSP classroom gave students room to be vulnerable, to take risks, and to give and receive feedback. Learning from and with each other, social justice sensemaking was in many ways facilitated by the learning community.

Meaningful exercises and activities in the service-learning classroom serve to enact sensemaking. The exercises and activities that constitute the CSP curriculum including writing assignments, service, class discussion and facilitation, course readings, and a capstone experience, provide the needed environment to enact sensemaking. The experience of the CSP allowed students to confront bias, clarify values and beliefs, ask difficult questions, incorporate new information, test theories about justice, and experience many other processes that supported meaning construction (Mitchell, 2007). The sensemaking properties bring clarity to the ways a service-learning experience challenges and supports students in their conceptions of and commitments to social justice.

At the same time, it is important to name that not every service-learning experience invokes social justice sensemaking nor does every service-learning experience lead students to social justice commitments. While some assume the connections between service-learning and social justice are inherent and unavoidable (Jacoby, 1996; Rosenberger, 2000; Warren, 1998), plenty of research demonstrates that students sometimes leave service-learning experiences with stereotypes reinforced and with little understanding of the systemic nature of social problems (Boyle-Baise, 1998; Green, 2001; Vaccaro, 2009). Indeed, as Joseph Kahne has explained, most service-learning programs “pay least attention” to the kinds of experiences that would best develop a student’s orientation toward justice (Tugend, 2010, para. 13).

Service-learning experiences must be developed with an intentional commitment to social justice and social change in order to promote social justice sensemaking for students. The CSP has a curricular framework that centers social justice and social change. It is a

service-learning program that seeks to develop students to be active and engaged agents of change. In each of the four semesters of the program, students were tasked with assignments that asked them to reflect on their values and commitments and determine whether or not their actions are consistent with those ideals. The experience was complicated and messy—students struggled internally and with each other as they worked to clarify their understandings and do good work in their community placements.

### **Conclusion**

Messages, values, and beliefs about social justice were brought by members of the Citizen Scholars into the program. These messages were challenged, affirmed, discarded, and reframed during their experiences, allowing them to create new meaning. Key to this process of sensemaking were: students' developing understandings of themselves and their role (*identity*); revisiting and reconsidering their positions (*retrospect*); connecting to new concepts and understandings that they wished to integrate into their own (*referencing*); recognizing conflicts between what was expected and what was experienced (*contradiction*); interacting with others (*social*); and developing confidence in their understandings, even if they were unsure about the accuracy of meaning (*plausibility*). This process of social justice sensemaking sheds light on how students come to understand social justice through their service-learning experiences as part of the Citizen Scholars Program.

Each of the 11 women participating in this research left the CSP expressing a commitment to social justice, but they were also still engaged in a process of figuring out exactly what that commitment meant for the ways they would live their lives after the CSP ended. Weick (1995) affirmed that sensemaking is ongoing—there is no start or stop to the process. While this qualitative study explores social justice sensemaking at a particular moment in time—during the four semesters of the Citizen Scholars Program, the meaning made of and commitments made to social justice continue to be constructed and reconstructed as these 11 women grow, develop, and experience the world around them.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to name and acknowledge my relationship to the CSP and the 11 women whose experiences are included in this research. During my graduate studies, I served as a teaching assistant for the CSP. I worked with the co-directors of the program to develop outcomes and design curriculum. For three semesters, I sat alongside the 11 women participating in this research, learning with them and from them about their experiences working in the community and their reactions to the curriculum. Throughout this research, it was important that I remain conscious of the inevitable power dynamics in the research interaction. Although data collection occurred as the students completed the CSP, I recognize that the participants first knew me as a teaching assistant who made determinations about their grades and success as members of the program. The rapport I built with them over the three semesters, may or may not have lessened the discomfort created by that dynamic for the students. While this research study is designed to investigate the understanding about social justice developed through service-learning experiences for the participants, in some ways this study is also about my practice and my teaching, as my work is a part of the service-learning experiences studied.

<sup>2</sup> All names used in this research are pseudonyms.

## References

- Boyle-Baise, M. (1998). Community service learning for multicultural education: An exploratory study with pre- service teachers. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 31*(2), 52-60.
- Butin, D. W. (2005). Service-learning as postmodern pedagogy. In D. W. Butin (Ed.), *Service-Learning in higher education: Critical issues and directions* (pp. 89-104). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Coburn, C. E. (2001). Collective sensemaking about reading: How teachers mediate reading policy in their professional communities. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23*(2), 145-170.
- Eckel, P. D., & Kezar, A. (2003). Key strategies for making new institutional sense: Ingredients to higher education transformation. *Higher Education Policy, 16*, 39-53.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Glanz, L., Williams, R., & Hoeksema, L. (2001). Sensemaking in expatriation--A theoretical basis. *Thunderbird International Business Review, 43*(1), 101-119.
- Glynn, M. S. (1997, August). *Research methods to support sensemaking in information systems development: A conceptual method for bridging thought and action*. Paper presented at The Americas Conference on Information Systems, Indianapolis, IN.
- Green, A. E. (2001). "But you aren't white:" Racial perceptions and service-learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 8*(1), 18-26.
- Gurin, P., Dey, E. L., Hurtado, S., & Gurin, G. (2002). Diversity and higher education: Theory and impact on educational outcomes. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*(3), 330-366.
- Hess, M. E. (1996, November 25). "What if God were one of us?": *Using popular culture transformatively in adult religious education*. Paper presented at the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, New Orleans, LA.
- Ignelzi, M. (2000). Meaning-making in the learning and teaching process. In M. B. Baxter Magolda (Ed.), *Teaching to promote intellectual and personal maturity: Incorporating students' worldviews and identities into the learning process* (pp. 5-14). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Jacoby, B. (1996). *Service-learning in higher education: Concepts and practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jasso, G. (1998). Studying justice: Cross-country data for empirical justice analysis. *Social Justice Research, 11*(2), 193-209.
- Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kezar, A., & Eckel, P. (2000). *Examining the institutional transformation process: The importance of sensemaking and inter-related strategies* (Reports-Evaluative No. EDD 446 720). Washington DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.
- Louis, M. R. (1980). Surprise and sense making: What newcomers experience in entering unfamiliar organizational settings. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 25*(2), 226-251.
- Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study application in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mitchell, T. D. (2007). Critical service-learning as social justice education: A case study of the Citizen Scholars Program. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 40*(2), 101-112.
- Moely, B. E., McFarland, M., Miron, D., Mercer, S., & Ilustre, V. (2002). Changes in college students' attitudes and intentions for civic involvement as a function of service-learning experiences. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 9*(1), 18-26.
- Pickeral, T., Hill, D., & Duckenfield, M. (2003). The promise and challenge of service-learning portraiture research. In S. H. Billig & A. S. Waterman (Eds.), *Studying service-learning:*

- Innovations in education research methodology* (pp. 207-222). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Rosenberger, C. (2000). Beyond empathy: Developing critical consciousness through service learning. In C. R. O'Grady (Ed.), *Integrating service learning and multicultural education in colleges and universities* (pp. 23–43). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Smerek, R. E. (2013). Sensemaking and new college presidents: A conceptual study of the transition process. *Review of Higher Education*, 36(3), 371-403.
- Spradley, J. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Tugend, A. (2010, July 31). The benefits of volunteerism, if the service is real. *New York Times*, p. B5. Retrieved September 1, 2013, from [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/31/your-money/31shortcuts.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/31/your-money/31shortcuts.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)
- Vaccarro, A. (2009). Racial identity and the ethics of service-learning as pedagogy. In S. Y. Evans, C. M. Taylor, M. R. Dunlap, & D. S. Miller (Eds.), *African Americans and community engagement in higher education: Community service, service-learning, and community-based research* (pp. 119-133). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Warren, K. (1998). Educating students for social justice in service learning. *The Journal of Experiential Education*, 21(3), 134-139.
- Weber, K. & Glynn, M. A. (2006). Making sense with institutions: Context, thought and action in Karl Weick's theory. *Organization Studies*, 27(11), 1639-1660.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409-421.