

Transcript of Interview with Rooks, Derreth, and Walter Pedagogy in Health Promotion podcast

[00:00:00] Well, hello, everyone. Thank you for listening and allow us to introduce ourselves. So I'm Ronica Rooks. I am an associate professor in the Department of Health and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Colorado, Denver. And

[00:00:13] my name is Dr. Gayle Walter, and I am a lecturer in the Department of Health and Human Physiology at the University of Iowa. And both Dr. Rooks and I are guest editors of a special issue in Pedagogy in Health Promotion on the pedagogy of anti-racism, along with other guest editors, doctors Kelley Bentley and Deborah Fortune. And

[00:00:39] our purpose for the podcast today is really that we're here to discuss one of the articles from the special issue called "Preparing Public Health Professionals to Address Social Injustices through Critical Service Learning" by R. Tyler Derreth and his colleagues at the SOURCE, the Service Learning and Community Engagement Center at Johns Hopkins University. So, given our ongoing societal challenges with racism and COVID-19, leading to health disparities and other issues like Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impacts on population health, we think our listeners might appreciate a message about social injustice, injustice practices, and students as social change agents. Our listeners include national and international audiences of faculty and students in public health and population health who read Pedagogy in Health Promotion for curriculum and activities to use in their courses. So

[00:01:30] we would like to welcome Dr. Tyler Derreth. and Dr. Derreth is an Associate Director of SOURCE and a faculty member in the Department of Health, Behavior and Society at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. His research concentrates on the role of universities in cities, urban community university partnerships, and social justice-oriented pedagogies. In particular, he is focused on developing urban university community partnerships through service learning and other academic practices that seek social change in local environments. He applies his research through active collaborations with faculty, community leaders, and students to develop partnerships that address the social determinants of health. So welcome, Tyler. Thank you for coming today and talking with us. So glad to be here. Thanks for having me. Thank you. Can we ask you our first question? So how can service learning teach students about addressing and advocating for racial and social justice? Yeah,

[00:02:44] it's a good question. I'm going to go back to talking about a specific kind of service learning. I like to use the language of critical service learning, which I guess started about 15 years ago now. And now there's a great article that Dr. Tania Mitchell wrote that defines in great ways what critical service learning is. And very simply, she talks about three major elements that are going to structure how our courses can look when we do this kind of service learning. First, building authentic relationships and that goes in all directions. So how do we build authentic relationships as instructors with our partners and with our students? But also, how are our partners and students doing that across the range of all three of those constituents in the course? The second element is redistributing power. And which means acknowledging that power is imbalanced to start off with. Right. You're coming into a university environment. Faculty probably have the most power there, but students need to reckon with their relationship with that power dynamic and community does as well, especially as we're crossing boundaries between university spaces and community spaces. And both of those things are important for us to be thinking about and building towards so that we, here's the third thing, can build towards social change. And when social change becomes the core objective of our course, then everything else that we're designing, our curriculum, our activities, our assignments, the project that we're engaging with in community, are scaffolded towards the

ultimate aim of the specific kind of social change that you're engaged with in the course. And when that's happening, the actual activity of the class, learning that you're doing with students in community, the work that you're putting into it, the things that you're designing should be aiming towards social change, which in other words, is hopefully enacting justice alongside community members and in the case of faculty, alongside students as well. And so when you're talking about addressing or advocating for racial and social justice, I think that's part of the element of social change. But more than advocating, I hope that service learning provides a frame for how to actually commit to action and commit to action well, alongside community leaders.

[00:05:14] And building on that, when you mentioned building this framework, I'm also curious as to how you measure that or how do you assess that? So how can faculty assess the skills that students obtain during this experience?

[00:05:33] Yeah, this this is another good question. It gets at how to measure things that feel on a grand scale, pretty immeasurable. When we're talking about the fundamental changes that need to happen from injustice towards justice, I like to think about it, sort of breaking it apart into a few different pieces. And I'll try to add a couple of concrete examples because I know that that can be helpful. So I generally try to think about it in three ways when I'm thinking about what to assess and how to assess. Obviously, when you ask the question of what to assess, we're getting at the core objectives of the course. And so what are your learning objectives, and how do we design assignments that we can use as assessments to understand if students are making progress in that space? Some of those learning objectives are likely to be content based. So what is it within the field of public health very broadly or in any other field, to be honest, do you want your students to learn? And that's that there may be a few of those objectives. They're also likely to be objectives around your community engagement. And so what is the projects that you're actually engaging in? What is the potential product that students are creating for the community partners or with them? And then there's another third element that that I think sometimes folks wrap into community engagement. But, I like to think of it more broadly because it's really an intersection of the content and theory and engagement practices and the students experience. And that's the learning objective that gets at the student's own personal professional development. And how that blends with the community engagement experience, the service learning experience. And so across those three things, the learning objectives, community engagement experiences and individual development, we have three kinds of assessment that we can be doing there, very broadly speaking. So now the question is how do we actually do that? I think generally faculty have a pretty good picture of how to assess learning objectives in the conventional sense. We can use papers, we can use presentations, we can use sometimes, you know, exams or that sort of thing, right? And those are summative in a lot of ways. I would also suggest using informal methods of doing that, things that we don't necessarily think about as assessment, things like discussion, where you get a sense of where students are coming from, the things that they're saying, the ways that we listen in discussion more than we're talking, especially as faculty, are important ways of assessing how it's going in the class and helps you adjust in the moment or moving forward. And we talk about that, obviously, as formative assessments. So I won't spend too much more time there because I think that's part of what we do as faculty work anyway. The community-based elements are interesting. There are a few ways to do that. I generally try to ground that in very practical work. So what are you practically materially doing with community partners in this course? What are you developing? What are you creating? How are you engaging? And not only this is where we as faculty need to let go of some of the control that we normally have over course design and invite community partners to be a part of that process, especially - and even students right to do that sort of peer evaluation piece. But I really try and this is a tightrope kind of walk that we that we need to make because I really want to invite community partners to be a part of this assessment process so that, for example, I teach a class in community based evaluation and the product that students make is an evaluation tool and an implementation

and analysis plan so that organizations can take the tool and implement it however often they need to and whenever they need to, and have an analysis guide so that they don't get stuck with data that they don't have any plan with what to do with it. So we, on our ends, do the scientific analysis and assessment of what they've made. Are these questions designed appropriately? Are they designed specifically? Does the analysis guide fit the appropriate measures that you've put in place with the tool? But if that's where we stop, I still don't know if it's useful or effective for the organization. And so here's where the community partner element of assessment comes in. Having the measures put in place for community partners to say practically, is this going to work? What do you see in this? Is this a useful tool for you and your organization? Is the implementation plan actually something that can be implemented? Did the students consider the capacity that you have as an organization? Did they consider the skill set that you have among your staff at the organization? Did they consider the reading levels of the folks that you want to engage with? And those sorts of things are really, really important that I can get at some, but I would much rather trust my community partners to answer that appropriately. The tightrope walk that I mentioned is being able to do that in a way, and transparently with, your community partners so that they know the labor that's going into that. Yes, they're getting a hopefully very useful product out of this, but it is a mutual relationship. So coming to the table to say we would really love for you to be able to provide feedback to our students about how useful this is and then hopefully, right, the dream. And the really important way to do that is if they ever come back and say it's not working, is that there's still space to revise it so that they actually leave with something that they see as useful. The last one that I mentioned individual development is for the students. An individual development can be said in a lot of different ways and professional capacities and personal capacities and social civic capacities, all of those things blend and it's really hard to pull them apart. So I don't really try. Instead, what I do is, is ask students to engage in various activities and assignments of reflection, critical reflection, and that can look a lot of different ways. It can look like informal discussions, it can look like consistent journaling or memoing. If you're in qualitative research spaces especially, it can look like, you know, exit tickets or Post-its that you're posting up around the room. And anything in between. So from very socially engaged to very individual and personal ways of engaging in that kind of reflection. Now, actually trying to assign a grade to that is where it gets tough. And this is where I appreciate the language of assessment versus evaluation. I want to evaluate someone's reflection, but I am looking for when I do ask students to submit reflections, that is, or when I'm engaging socially in this kind of collective reflection. What I am looking for is signs of commitment to the work, signs of deep thinking. Critical reflection is not.... I think there's this misnomer that reflection is just how we feel about things. Certainly that's part of it. But it's a really complex, complex, complicated process of engaging developmentally. So we're engaging cognitively. We're engaging in hopefully, right, contextually and historically, understanding our position as individuals in relation to these systems. That takes a lot of work, and if I can see that students are engaging in those processes of thinking, then I'm satisfied in that process because that's showing real commitment to trying to think about who we are and the kind of work that we want to be doing. And as far as development goes, we don't we don't get to control that as much as guide it. And if we can guide it in a way that students are engaging in that, then, then I feel like that's a success.

[00:13:53] Thank you so much for sharing that. It sounds like you've got a very comprehensive assessment process for your service learning. Yeah, well, listen, when you teach a course called community-based evaluation, I feel like you need to come with some tools. Exactly.

[00:14:10] exactly. And while you were talking. I was also thinking about I'm going to be implementing a service living component into one of my courses in the fall. And I'm learning a lot about some practices that you've used that may also be absolutely applicable to the type of service that my students would be doing as well. So I thank you so much for being so descriptive with your assessment strategies, and kind of building on that, I know that you had talked about one of the

components was addressing professional development. So you told us about the assessment piece during the class. But do you ever monitor or assess the differences in their attitudes or changes in attitudes in your students as long-term professional development?

[00:15:03] This is this is a challenge for us. This is a challenge for the field of service learning to be honest. Excuse me. It. It's a difficult way. I mean, what you're talking about is moving beyond sort of assessment of learning in, I think correct me if I'm wrong, in an academic environment where the aim is education versus doing assessment and evaluation of development as a research practice. And, and that's where it gets tough because you're trying to draw lines potentially between correlations. It's really hard to get at causation. We're talking about any research, you know, at all. But if you can think about how to do that in a short amount of time, you can do some pre-post testing because you have a built environment where they're engaging consistently in that around a course. And even over a year, sometimes over the time that students are engaged in their programs, when you start to move beyond programs and they've graduated from that and they're out into the professional world, keeping track of that one is really tough. And we do a lot of that through just alumni engagement and trying to understand where people are and the work that they're doing informally, right, to not elevate it to a research study status. And we rely on that and talk about it as building and maintaining our own kind of community. And talking about that, we're lucky to be at a center that is devoted to service learning and community engagement. And so we get an advantage of being able to talk about how people come and intersect with the work that we're doing as building relationships and building a sense of community and try to keep our alum as engaged as possible. And a lot of that and so tracking where they are and what they're doing is one way informally of managing that. But when you talk about, you know, understanding the longitudinal development of individuals. There are few instances of really committed qualitative researchers who will make calls and engage in interviews years over years of time to understand how people are moving on their own trajectories. Sometimes you get those moments where it feels really transformational. And of course, and that sticks with folks as these moments that are personally defining. And I'm certainly not, I've had those experiences and I've had a number of students tell me about those experiences in these courses. And so I think that's a valuable data point to see the value of this kind of pedagogy. But trying to track that really, scientifically is a challenge. I invite my colleagues to think about this problem with me because it's a lot of labor to try and think about that trajectory. And there's just so many variables. You know, people live really complex lives. So when we send them out into the world, I hope and I believe that service learning is a really effective way of preparing students to live complex lives. But as much as people want to lean into that space and continue leaning into that space, the first question you asked about social justice, I mean, we can't talk about that without talking about the difficulty it is to consistently do justice work. And there are a number of reasons why people commit to it for a lifetime, why people burn out and can't do it for a lifetime, why people need to stop out of it for some time. People put it out of their minds when they leave. Right. And you have a full spectrum of that kind of work. And, you know, I don't condone it all, but I understand it all. It's really hard because you're just constantly, consistently trying to press edges that don't want to be pressed and that that's tough. And so we do need that kind of longitudinal work to understand how people are continuing to press against those edges and when they're not, what's going on there and how can we try to build that in more effectively when we have them here in our programs. But, also maybe think about what we can be doing beyond programs. How do we support our alums outside of curricular spaces here?

So wonderful. And so again, to go a little bit further, to think about things you've talked about with service learning already, how would you consider given COVID-19 and pandemic times to adapt service learning curriculum to online courses? And I've seen examples of what people have talked about in workshops previously. But can you give us your spin on how you might maintain the pedagogical foundation of the service learning projects that you've been working on?

[00:19:49] Yeah, thanks for this question because it's so relevant to our times and it's one that I've been working on with a few different people. I'll name one in particular because she's helped me with this community-based evaluation course. She's co instructor there. Her name is Dr. Maggie Wear. And the course that I mentioned is an online course. So we've worked on this idea of what we are calling critical online service learning or COSL, and it tries to take those fundamental pieces of critical service learning I talked about earlier. That's building authentic relationships, redistributing power, all in the name of aiming for social change and tried to place that in and not just thinking about online spaces as limiting, but how they are expansive. And there's a lot there. We've written a little bit about it, but the one thing that I'll focus on here because I think it's so to me it was really transformative in how I approach teaching in those kind of spaces. Because initially I was approaching it as a problem. How do we get over the problem of not being with community and in community spaces and in places as physical environments? When you think about service learning, that feels like a fundamental limitation, among other things, right? How do you build community? How do you build a sense of trust? How do you open up spaces for discussion that in many ways require lots of vulnerabilities without projecting a sense of being a whole and real person as often as you can in a physical environment? And so we thought about building a course around a lot of those issues, and I think it was helpful to try and think about what we needed to put in place. And so we said we need to put personality in place. How do we communicate ourselves as people who live in places and how do we communicate a sense of those places to people who might never have been here? And I'll say it here since you all are listening, wherever you are, that I'm talking from Baltimore as a person who grew up here and you know I love this place and I want people to know about it and to love it as much as they can, even if they'd never been here. And so how do we put that into our curricular spaces and make the city its own kind of character and partner to this process? In in doing that and sort of opening up that door, what we really started to lean into was what we call cross contextual reflection and cross contextual engagement. And we thought, you know, we're putting in all this work to get people to know who we are so that they trust us. Why wouldn't we ask that of everyone else? And and to lead by example and let people do that as they're comfortable. But this wonderful thing started to happen when we designed it that way, is that we don't have such a tripartite of participants whom we talk about in service learning a lot, where there's the instructor, there's the student and community partner, and we all know our roles and what we started to say and what I think online spaces really open up for us is that we all get to be all of those things at the same time. Because you are taking this class from us in Baltimore and you live in Seattle and you need to teach us about Seattle and you get to be the instructor there. And you're coming and you're coming to learn from us about evaluation or whatever other you know content piece you're going to do there and you're a student. But also, what can you learn about the process and project of social change here, which is fundamentally dealing with a social problem? And how do we understand that across contexts and the generalizability of that and the specificity of it? Homelessness is a problem everywhere, but it's a specific problem in each place. So what can we learn from each other about that, and what can we take home to our home places? And so now our students get to be community members in their home places as they're engaging in our courses. And the power of that in that moment is amazing to me, where a lot of students, if they're in a physical location at a university, may be displaced from their home communities. And online education removes now that barrier that in-person service learning has. And we get to think about the cross contextual cross places, reflections and discussions and ideas that can happen out of that and not just invest that into, in our case, projects and communities in Baltimore, but it sort of reflects back to the students in their home communities and how can they take that to their home places, in the places that they are working and serving as people, as professionals, and use the things that they're learning instantly in the places that they care about.

Thank you so much for that. You've definitely given the listeners a lot of wonderful suggestions, good recommendations on how to implement a service learning course while still maintaining that pedagogy, that element of having these very, very important discussions related to social justice. And we certainly do agree with you that service learning is an extremely meaningful experience for not only the student but for the community as well. So kind of going back, I really like that community element that that part of the assessment I think is just so, so useful. So beneficial. So in your article, you also mentioned that funding can be an issue. Do you have any recommendations on how to advocate for institutionalized service learning to obtain funding for that experience?

[00:25:59] Yeah. I wish I could give you the secret plan to make it work every time, but it's so different. Yeah, we do too. It's so different across so many places. And you know, my advice might change depending on the kind of space that you're in. So for faculty that I work with here at our university, I already come in with the advantage of having a center that is its own form of institutionalized service learning. And the way that we advocate for that is by collecting data, community data, student data, faculty data, showing the progress that students make in comparison to school-wide data and how that is, generally speaking, better, you know, on a few different measures. We talk about the progress of community organizations and the capacity that's made from these projects. Some of our organizations are just incredible partners and do over and above sometimes in helping us communicate some of that to our leadership and sort of saying like, listen, you've done something that we would have had to hire a consultant for. Here's how much money that saved us. And being able to communicate that to institutional decision makers or funders is no small thing. And so one thing, especially if you have capacity as faculty or as directors or administrators in centers, is to be data driven in your decision making, because that's a really powerful tool in trying to convince folks. Another thing that you can do if you don't have the capacity to do that kind of data driven work. If you are a lone, faculty and there's you're thinking, I don't have a center, so what am I supposed to do? There's still a couple of things, right? And it, again, depends on the kind of institution. If you're a research institution, think about teaching practice as research. How do you integrate these things so that you can get research dollars and loop in your courses to that work? Sometimes that looks like training elements within your research project. Sometimes that looks like doing some education research that's committed to the content of the course. And that's how it lines up with your own research agenda in public health. And there's some space to be able to do that, and there is some dollars to go after in that space. If you're in a more teaching environment, a teaching school, and you still are out there on your own and don't have a center to be thinking about. And honestly, this is, I think, good for centers as well, is not being able to lean into the data side, but lean into the value and the narrative side. The mission of the school, because I do believe this and I think the literature in service writing points to this is that service learning, critical service learning as a pedagogy, as an educational practice, does so many of the things that institutions say they need to do. And when I say need to do, I mean that's written into bylaws. That's part of their organizational mission. That's what the board of trustees is responsible for ensuring its being carried out and say, listen, we don't do this as much as we need to or as much as we could, given that we're saying we're going to educate students and what they're learning in various fields, but we're also going to develop them as people. We're also going to be civically engaged with our communities. We're also going to be thinking about the public use of education and what we can do and how to build leaders in our environments and get students experience in that underneath mentorship. One practice to do all of those things. It's called service learning. We don't do enough of that right now, and we should. So to get us up and off the ground, we need to commit more funds to this.

[00:30:06] It's a way of just building a sort of rhetorical argument around the purpose of your institution and how you can commit to that. Now, whether the receptive to that, I'm not sure, but at least you got a pitch to make.

[00:30:23] Thanks so much, Tyler. I appreciate you thinking about the differences amongst our listeners, particularly at research universities versus teaching universities and still ways to think about achieving the goal of incorporating critical service learning. So we appreciate that. And so now I want to wrap up and ask if there's anything else that you want our listeners to know about your article. Any take home message, anything that you want to contribute?

[00:30:52] Thanks for opening it up. So and giving me the space to throw a few extra words in. I encourage everybody to read the article, obviously. But beyond that, if there's anything I can say as an additional sort of impassioned plea and what I hope our article sort of sounded like. This is all hands-on deck project. When we talked about advocacy as what faculty can be doing and the ways that that can look we were trying to give some tools and a vision for what it means to do this work as a practice of social change and consider our own institutions as places where social change needs to happen and where justice needs to be a bigger conversation and more than a conversation needs to be seen in action. And I think this is one way to do that. And when we talk about enacting justice, it is always an all hands on deck project. And so, after reading the article, I hope that you're compelled to think about what you can do practically to engage in that process and also in a more hopeful word. Not that that's not hopeful, but you're not alone in that when all hands are on deck, that there's very rich communities of work that are out there that you can lean on when you don't know the answers. And that you can share when you discovered a wonderful answer for your environment. I mean, it's a great community where that gets to happen in both ways. And I invite you to be a part of it. I'll be here as long as long as there are things to be working out. And so I'll be here a long time, I imagine. And it'd be great to be in community with

[00:32:37] you working on these issues. All right. Thank you so much for your time. I have to say, given this conversation, you might have people looking up your email and contacting you. [I was thinking the same thing.]

[00:32:48] But that's all right. That's all right.

[00:32:51] Well, thank you so much again for spending time with us and our listeners. We appreciate you and have a wonderful evening.

[00:32:58] Thank you. Thank you.