Tania Mitchell: Celebrating the Heart of Service Learning at Stanford

Dr. Mitchell built an initiative that incorporates three key aspects of successful Service Learning. First, faculty engagement and course development, to identify course opportunities that are ripe for service learning and enhance faculty experience with teaching. Second, student advising and student support, to help students become more thoughtful about their interests and how to involve community work in those interests along with critical thought. For example, if a Stanford student plans to go to East Palo Alto, they must think critically about what the change is that they want and expect, and find ways to monitor progress. Third, community based research, originally offered as community internships, now offer students opportunities to develop collaborative community research projects. This also entails outreach to community organizations to develop effective partnerships, matching communities with student interests and strengthening research methods.

Service learning as a concept emerges from a nineteenth-century American philosophical tradition that understands community engagement as democratic practice and as a transformative educational experience. The establishment of ethnic studies programs in the 1960s helped redefine the relationship between public service, higher education, and minority communities. For example, at San Francisco State University, service learning became a needed tool for education as it replaced textbooks that were yet to be written. “Where books did not exist, the community did,” Dr. Mitchell explains. Academic learning could be translated into community learning. Service learning also functioned as a way to demonstrate appreciation for the contribution of community leaders, ultimately bridging concepts of democracy, citizenship, social justice, and social responsibility.

Dr. Mitchell explains that at some point service learning became comfortable as pedagogy for student learning, disconnected from community change or development. “When student learning is the top priority, and there is a disregard for community change, then programs are missing the chief reason for service learning as pedagogy and thus missing opportunity for change. What is necessary is an effort to resolve and not just contribute.” Dr. Mitchell’s work reminds us that there should be ongoing, serious debates asking if universities are only in the business of educating people, or if they carry responsibility for engaging in community change.

In her work she has remained acutely conscious of various approaches to service learning to shape and design an effective program that has had an important impact on students and faculty. In fact, The Service Learning Initiative has transformed how faculty and students understand and practice service. Both students and faculty agree that Dr. Mitchell’s leadership helped them develop a deeper understanding of Service Learning as a complex academic practice.

Stanford Lecturer Kathleen Coll is a cultural anthropologist working on citizenship and immigration in the US. She was “looking for a way to give undergraduates the opportunity to study with and learn from community activism by immigrant women in San Francisco.”

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In her experience, students say they learn a lot about theories and ideas in their classes, but cannot quite see how they relate to pressing social concerns, real world politics, and policy issues. Dr. Coll worked with Dr. Mitchell to develop a course entitled "New Citizenship: Grassroots Movements for Social Justice in the U.S." that included a focus on the Domestic Workers Alliance efforts to pass the California Domestic Workers Bill of Rights.

Although Dr. Coll has over 25 years experience working in the community in San Francisco, she says, “I owe Tania Mitchell everything that I know about best practices in service learning and ethical practices in community-based research.”

Her partnership with Dr. Mitchell was the first time that Dr. Coll had worked with service learning. “Before Tania I viewed service learning with a great deal of skepticism. I was concerned that service learning was primarily about serving the needs of students and not the community. I was also concerned about resource impact on community partners; that is, the extent to which I would have to make demands on partners to meet the needs of the students. Tania provided me concrete models and also theoretical conceptual frameworks for thinking differently about service learning. I never would have taught a service learning class at Stanford without Tania Mitchell.”

Dr. Coll explains how Dr. Mitchell understands the ethical and pedagogical complexity of service learning at a deep level. “It was clear from the first time I sat down with her that I was sitting down with an expert in this field. For me it was the most incredible gift to have her as a colleague. I learned more from her than I learned from anybody about how to teach Stanford undergraduates about my area of expertise in new and effective ways. She attracted the most amazing students to CSRE and to Service Learning.”

Dr. Mitchell’s success is also reflected in the success of her former students and their thoughtfulness about their purpose after graduation and in life. Many of her former students have chosen careers centered on issues of social justice. Aria Florant names Dr. Mitchell as one of her closest mentors at Stanford. Aria is currently working at Mural Music & Arts Project in East Palo Alto. She articulates a sentiment expressed by many students, “prior to taking service learning classes I considered service, volunteering.” Through the work of the initiative she “realized that service learning was a rigorous academic project that required careful thought and practice.”

Aria explains that in her work, she applies her Stanford training through implementation of an asset-based approach, “meaning thinking about what communities do have instead of what they don’t have. For example, in EPA they have an incredible community of elders who have been in the community for a long time. There are so many organizations and people who care, and incredible cultural diversity, rather than thinking about bad schools and crime.”

Aria remembers Dr. Mitchell emphasizing commitment to communities. “When Stanford students are not able to fully commit to an organization there is an impact that has on that organization. Tania told students don’t make a commitment if you are going to back out.” She explains how she thinks about Dr. Mitchell’s teaching in her own commitment to community. Aria not only works in East Palo Alto, she lives there as well. “I live there for a reason. It makes a difference. I see kids at the supermarket, I know the parents, I run into kids in the neighborhood and encourage them. It makes a difference to the students.”

Recent graduate Danielle Beavers won the George M. Fredrickson Award for Excellence in Honors Research. With the guidance of Dr. Mitchell, Danielle integrated her work on domestic violence at a family law clinic in...
Redwood City into an award-winning thesis. She will soon begin a position at the Greenlining Institute, where she will work on issues of economic justice, including commercial bank lending practices. She expresses how she would not have followed her current career path without the Service Learning Initiative.

Through service learning she became aware of race at the systemic level. She explains that without the Service Learning Initiative she might have looked at race in a way that was self-reflective rather than understanding its deep systemic issues. At the same time, “Tania helps to lighten up the learning process of understanding the complexity of race, class, gender, and violence. Her lighthearted joking can ease the difficulty of grappling with the depth of these issues.”

Another student, Naomi Shachter, worked closely with Tania on her senior thesis, which won the Firestone Award for excellence in Undergraduate Research at CSRE. Naomi knew she wanted to study service prior to entering Stanford. Her freshman year at Stanford she attended a presentation by Dr. Mitchell on “Privilege in Service.” Naomi credits Tania for helping her understand that “service learning is not only compelling academically, it is infinitely dense and evolving. The Service Learning Initiative gave me the chance to look deeply at service and all the interesting ethical and political questions that arise when thinking about service.”

For Naomi, “Tania is the professor and mentor and boss that had the most impact on me at Stanford. All of her academic help is useful, but she is also fun and funny. Tania is always willing to slow down and spend time with the students. There is no way to repay Tania for everything she has given. I really appreciate it.”

Professor David Palumbo-Liu’s course, “Asian American Cultures and Community”, has also partnered with the Service Learning Initiative. His students have worked with The Manila Foundation in San Francisco and most recently with Asian Americans for Community Involvement in San Jose, which was established by a group of Chinese and Japanese American activists in the 1970s. With Dr. Mitchell’s guidance he was able to structure the class in a way that allowed him “to make a connection for students between the Ivory Tower and the rest of the world.”

According to Dr. Palumbo-Liu, Dr. Mitchell always carries with her a sense of why we do service in the first place. “Tania taught us not to overlook what might seem to be ordinary and less purposeful work, and see the connections between the everyday lives we interact with and the topics of the course. She saw the interconnectedness of everything and she formed bridges among so many different communities because she thought organically. It was all part of one big wonderful vision of what education could be. She just had it all and it didn’t seem forced. It just seemed like the natural flow of her energy. And it was so much in sync with what we need. It wasn’t just a matter of reinforcing what we have. The Service Learning Initiative was the most obvious way of implementing what we wanted to do, but almost spiritually she helped us grow.”

Commenting on Dr. Mitchell’s indefatigable spirit, Dr. Palumbo-Liu adds, “She set a huge example in terms of energy. You felt if she could do it, I can do a tenth of that!”

— Dena Montague

Dena Montague received her PhD in Political Science from UCLA. Her research interests are race and politics in the African Diaspora. She is also the Co-Founder of EnergieRich, a social enterprise developing the capacity of rural communities in West Africa for local production of solar products and small-scale computers.