The String Project Phenomenon: Portraits of Good Work

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Service learning has received increasing attention over the past few years. Leaders in our communities are calling for and encouraging people to meet the needs of those around them through service, and many universities and public schools are answering the call. The University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University and Syracuse University are all schools with vibrant service-learning programs as a part of undergraduate education. Eyler and Giles (1999) describe service learning as:

…a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. (p.)

In the field of music education, the University of South Carolina String Project has embraced this type of service-learning for the past 34 years and is now, through the National String Project Consortium, striving to spread comparable string education service-learning programs throughout the United States.

The University of South Carolina String Project (SP) service-learning model is designed to prepare undergraduate string education majors for the classroom. The program offers these pre-service teachers practical supervised teaching opportunities during their college years through engagement with students in the community who otherwise would not have access to stringed instrument instruction. The undergraduate students start as assistants and eventually graduate to teaching their own classes. Community children gain access to expanded cultural experiences and music lessons that may improve their self-growth, self-knowledge, enjoyment,
and, over time, self-esteem (Elliott, 1995). The reflective nature of the program is built into weekly classes for the undergraduate students where they can discuss and consider ongoing interactions with the community children. These meetings are guided by the master teacher and intended to promote both the action and reflection of the undergraduate students. Founded in 1974, the South Carolina SP has continued to garner attention and accolades as it clearly exemplifies the GoodWork Project® notions of excellence, engagement, and ethics (Overview, p. 5).

Inspired by the success of the University of South Carolina SP, the National String Project Consortium (NSPC) was established in 1998 under the auspices of the American String Teachers Association (ASTA). The consortium evolved over several years into its own independent non-profit organization. Robert Jesselson, Director of the South Carolina SP for many years, was involved from the very beginning to assist in reproducing the excellence of his project on numerous other college campuses across the United States. Achieving this goal would serve the purposes of both training new string teachers for a field experiencing a vast shortage of qualified teachers (Shumaker, 2005; Gillespie, 2002), while offering underprivileged students, who are typically underrepresented in performance ensembles (Smith, 2000), access to musical instruments. Jesselson’s long range vision is for the good work of the South Carolina SP to be replicated in every state across the country (J. Palmquist, personal communication, October 30, 2008). Over the past ten years, the NSPC has already supported the creation and growth of more than 30 String Projects on its way to realizing this goal.

My paper will look at the ability of the NSPC to reproduce the University of South Carolina SP model, as a site of good work, in new contexts, with new demographics, new instructors and new participants at three sites of interest: Wayne State University in Detroit,
Michigan; Brooklyn College, and California State University at Sacramento. Each of these sites illustrates the potential misalignments that can occur when we try to reproduce good work in a new setting, whether the tensions are external (e.g., societal pressures) or internal (e.g., disruptions caused by teacher turnover or lack of university support). This paper will also consider the influence that globalization has had on the three second-generation String Project sites. Data will be gathered qualitatively through phone and in-person interviews with String Project directors and master teachers, written correspondence, review of the literature available concerning each site, and relevant government statistics. My hope is to begin to address whether or not it is possible to replicate String Project good work practices from one site to another.

**University of South Carolina String Project Model**

In my estimation, the USC String Project clearly exemplifies the good work notions of excellence, engagement, and ethics (Overview, p. 5). The University of South Carolina SP was founded on the Columbia, South Carolina campus at a time when there was very little instrumental instruction occurring in the surrounding school districts. By engaging both students in the community and future teachers, the South Carolina SP played a considerable role in building the Columbia music programs that are flourishing today. The American String Teachers Association (ASTA) has nationally recognized the USC String Project for its work on multiple occasions; the String Project received a Verner Award in 1992 commending its outstanding contributions to the arts in South Carolina; and the surrounding school string programs have grown from one small program in 1974 to large and thriving string programs today in all five Columbia school districts as well as six regional youth orchestras (the faculty at most of these programs are graduates from the South Carolina SP). These examples offer evidence of the excellent work transpiring on the South Carolina campus. Additionally, engagement has been
noted by both outside observers of the South Carolina program and participants within the program (Holland, 2003). Owen (2004) recounts being tremendously impressed by the “excitement and vigour” (sic) of two student teachers working with second year students. Gail Barnes, the current University of South Carolina SP Director, has said of the model:

I am in awe at the degree of seriousness with which these undergraduates view their teaching responsibilities. I am also completely committed to the concept after seeing the degree of readiness they bring to their student teaching experiences. They leave with a much higher degree of self-efficacy than someone who has only had the typical student teaching or practicum experience. (Hurley, 1998, p. 51)

Student teachers are equally excited about their own real-life teaching experience. Julia Russell, a South Carolina SP fourth year student teacher, expressed recently that it is an “ideal program” (Dreis, 2008). Finally, the ethical component of this project is manifested in the way that the String Project reaches out to the under-privileged in the Columbia, South Carolina community. In a city of 115,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), recent survey information at the South Carolina SP revealed that 25% of their students live below the poverty line, 23% of students have female heads of households, and 49% of the students are non-Caucasian (Jesselson, personal correspondence, May 10, 2008).

While excellence, engagement, and ethics are visible elements of the University of South Carolina SP, the primary mission of the program is to provide college string and string education majors with first-hand teaching experience reinforced by pedagogy classes and supervision throughout multiple semesters, while promoting the talents of community string students who would otherwise not have access to musical instruction (Hurley, 1998; Jesselson, 1988). Each year, in Columbia, South Carolina, third and fourth grade students are recruited from the
community to begin lessons at the South Carolina SP. The cost of renting an instrument and participating in the program are kept at a minimum to allow access for all students because, unfortunately, access to stringed instrument instruction across the United States is often “divided along economic lines” (University of South Carolina School of Music String Project [USCSMSP], General information section, ¶ 2; Smith, 1997). The South Carolina SP is eager to help rectify that situation.

Students first take lessons in large, heterogeneous classes, called Silver Strings I, where they learn the fundamentals of string playing. The classes consist of approximately 25 students and are taught by two lead teachers and two assistants. During the second year, Silver Strings II, classes shift to smaller groups and students are additionally expected to perform with the Silver Strings Orchestra. From the third year on through high school, students take private lessons and participate in one of the three levels of orchestras: Concertino, Intermezzo and Sinfonia. Students are encouraged to participate in public school orchestra programs as they become available, as well as the youth orchestras affiliated with the South Carolina Philharmonic Orchestra (USCSMSP, General information section, ¶ 4-10). Today there are over 300 community students and 27 student teachers participating actively in the South Carolina SP.

National String Project Consortium

The National String Project Consortium (NSPC) has articulated a multiplicity of goals. They desire to bring stringed instruction to more students in the country, to help alleviate the current string teacher shortage, to increase the String Projects around the United States by supporting them with fundraising and grant-writing, to increase national awareness of String Projects, and to increase communication between functioning String Project sites (NSPC, Organization-Goals section). As a result of their mission focus, today there are over 30 active
String Project locations and more to come. Since the establishment of the National String Project Consortium in 1998, over 7,000 school age children have received stringed instrument instruction, over 400 string music education students have been trained, and over 200 new teachers have been added to the public schools. (NSPC, Progress to Date section, ¶ 1).

The question is, how successful are the second-generation String Project sites and is there a transmission of excellence from the University of South Carolina to the fledgling organizations? These second-generation String Project sites, located throughout the country, are in areas with very different demographics than Columbia, South Carolina. There are programs everywhere from rural Wyoming to Southern California to inner cities like Hartford, Connecticut. Additionally, a different director and master teacher run each program. Is it even possible to reproduce the good work of the South Carolina SP in so many diverse settings? These are some of the questions that I have asked in studying three unique second-generation String Projects for this paper. I have specifically chosen to examine the String Projects at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan; Brooklyn College, and California State University at Sacramento because of the very different circumstances that they represent. In many ways they show three different faces of globalization in the United States and the resulting challenges manifested for the implementation of the Columbia, South Carolina String Project model.

**Wayne State University**

The String Project at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan is in its first semester of operation. The reality of the city of Detroit makes for a complex setting. Detroit is a city synonymous with the dying U.S. auto industry (Agnew, 2004; Maynard, 2004), and starved for cultural stimulation and investment. There are virtually no music programs in the public schools. At one time, over thirty years ago, the local schools had music programs, band and orchestra, but
these have all gone away (L. Roelofs, personal communication, October 27, 2008). Therefore it makes sense that the response to the Wayne State University SP has been tremendous. However, as Laura Roelofs and William Stern, the Director and Master Teacher, attempt to reproduce the University of South Carolina SP model in the Detroit community, they are faced with their own set of challenges.

Columbia, South Carolina is a city of about 115,000, while Detroit’s population is a little more than 800,000. Although it has been steadily decreasing since the 1950’s (Over 200,000 people have left since the year 2000), the Detroit metropolitan area is still huge when compared with Columbia. Additionally, “In the 1950s the Detroit area had the highest median income, and highest rate of home ownership, of any major US city. But times are very different now” (Schifferes, 2007). With the decline and potential collapse of America’s auto industry, outsourcing of jobs, downsizing of large corporations, and crisis in the oil industry, the city of Detroit is now listed in Forbes as one of America’s fastest dying cities (Zumbrun, 2008). If the “Big Three” U.S. automakers do not come to a potential solution for their economic troubles, some predict their collapse could lead to “direct and indirect job losses of 2.5 million to 3 million in 2009” (Rampell, 2008). Naturally this would have a dramatic effect on Detroit’s rate of unemployment, which is already nearing 10% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). There is more than a little irony in the fact that one of the primary sponsors for the Wayne State SP is the Honda Corporation.

On one hand, the Detroit community has embraced the SP eagerly. Families are starved for cultural enrichment and financially unable to provide “extras” for their children. The Wayne State SP has stepped into this role and is already serving and inspiring the community. Currently there are 93 community children, seven student “intern” teachers, and one master teacher
involved in the Wayne State SP. At least 150 community children wanted to enroll and a considerable number had to be turned away this year because the Wayne State SP infrastructure is not yet capable of accommodating that many students. On the other hand, challenging family dynamics make it difficult for parents to get their children to the classes on time, and people who live in outlying areas are reticent to even bring their children to downtown Detroit because of its dangerous reputation (Roelofs; Clemens, 2005). The leaders of the SP are striving to keep the focus on the children and build alliances with families. In this way they hope to alleviate behavior problems that arise, teach the value of promptness and consistent attendance, and continue to grow the program. Additionally, it is not clear how the partnership between Wayne State University and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) will materialize. The DSO appears to be primarily concerned with nurturing more advanced string students while the Wayne State SP is eager to recruit and train beginners. According to Roelofs, the DSO also doesn’t yet seem to understand the importance of the teacher preparation aspect of the program. It may take a few years for these two dynamic organizations to find a working synergy. In the meantime, Roelofs feels her primary responsibility is to bring music to this Detroit community in a powerful way.

Brooklyn College

The Brooklyn College String Project is officially “on-hiatus” according to the Brooklyn College administration. Unfortunately, it is not for lack of funding (over a five year period the SP Director, Jane Palmquist, brought in a quarter of a million dollars); it is not for lack of community support (community leaders, including local politicians, and parents attended concerts in dramatic numbers); and it is not for lack of enrollment (after three years over 120 community children were playing actively in the program). The primary reason the very
successful Brooklyn College SP is on hiatus is because of a lack of institutional support, which I will return to later.

Brooklyn College does face several other unique challenges, however, as a SP site. The population of the area being served includes 18 zip codes in the New York area, 2.5 million people, and multiple native languages spoken. Although Palmquist never took official racial/ethnic data from the student participants, she describes the program as including 95% minority children (90% either African-American, African or Caribbean; 5% other) when it was active. This is in dramatic contrast with Columbia, South Carolina. Additionally, the nature of immigrant family situations meant that many children were brought to the site by extended family members and not their own parents. In order to facilitate helpful communication with all families, literature about the program was often translated into other languages. Fortunately the number of college teachers who were immigrants themselves facilitated translations of the SP literature and even advertisements for recruiting. The diversity of staff is illustrated by Palmquist’s description of a performance: “I introduced the college string project teachers by name and home state or country. I introduced college students from Russia, France, Czechoslovakia, Greece, and Haiti, without reaction from the audience. However, the audience let out a collective "ooh!" when I introduced the final student--from Pennsylvania!!!” (Snyder, 2001, p. 38)

Unfortunately, the incredibly diverse and vibrant SP had to be placed on hiatus in 2006. Brooklyn college did not fulfill their role in the String Project partnership. They did not compensate the master teacher, Palmquist, for hours devoted to the program, nor did they provide release time for her running of the program. Additionally, Brooklyn College could never decide how to define Palmquist’s leadership in the program. Should it count professionally as
part of her research, or as university service? The institution did not seem to regard the SP as
Palmquist felt it should be valued. After persevering for seven years in her role, hoping that
Brooklyn College would make their match for the good of the project, Ms. Palmquist felt
compelled to set a boundary and place the SP on hiatus. In addition to the lack of bureaucratic
support at Brooklyn College, Palmquist felt that the institution at large might not have been
conducive to this kind of university-community partnership. She has noted a “commuter culture”
perpetuated at the institution and a lack of inter-departmental engagement. For example, when
Palmquist tried to offer opportunities for non-string music education students to work in the
“laboratory” program, she was accused of wanting to use the students for “free labor.”

Even now, Palmquist would love for the program to continue but she realizes that String
Projects are designed to be partnerships. This Brooklyn College example explicitly demonstrates
why Anne Witt has said, “The university needs to make a long-term commitment to this project
if it is to work” (Hurley, 1998, p. 61). Unfortunately right now there exists a misalignment
between the SP mission and the institutional culture at Brooklyn College. Until both of these
parties can come to a consensus about the purpose and value of the Brooklyn College String
Project, I am afraid that the SP will remain indefinitely “on hiatus.”

California State University, Sacramento

The String Project at California State University, Sacramento has been training students
and teachers since 2001. In fact, it was the flagship program of its kind on the West Coast
(California State University Sacramento [CSUS], General Information). The Sacramento SP is
generally modeled after the University of South Carolina SP, however there are several
noteworthy differences. A large group of the community children who attend (20-45 depending
on the semester) are actually bussed from Paso Robles, a nearby school district, as part of a
gifted and talented program. Although it seems beneficial to provide the students with transportation and enrichment, the downside of this partnership is that there is little direct parent involvement in the project and the buses are only provided for one hour of the two-hour program, limiting student involvement on a weekly basis. Another contrast with the USC model is that they recently began to implement private lessons for interested students. This came about last year after Judy Bossuat, the master teacher, observed the positive effect of private instruction at the University of Texas at Austin SP. Bossuat hopes that the addition of private lessons will continue to strengthen the program at Sacramento (Bossuat, personal communication, October 25, 2008).

According to the Center for Immigration studies, California is the state with the largest influx of immigrants, and Sacramento is a very diverse city within the state. Bossuat describes the program as “very colorful.” Children enrolled in the SP come from Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Central America, Mexico, the Ukraine, and more. This presents difficulty with distributing accurate program information. Many families do not speak English and siblings are often relied upon to transmit information. In addition, there are students living in poverty who need extra care. Bossuat describes keeping a closet filled with dress clothes and shoes for concerts so that any students with a need are provided for.

There are currently 75 community students, nine pre-service college teachers and one master teacher participating in the Sacramento SP. Generally after six years of running a SP, the ideal goal for enrollment is hoped to include “60 new beginning students, 40 second year students, 30 third year students, 12 fourth year students, 5 fifth year students, and 1 sixth year student” (NSPC application, p. 5), which would be a total of 148 community students participating. However, the Sacramento SP is considerably behind this goal. They have faced
some internal challenges over the past few years that have caused the program to “still be in the
growing stages” (J. Bossuat, personal communication, October 25, 2008). Bossuat, master
teacher at Sacramento, left the SP two years ago to take a position at another university. In the
two years that she was absent from the Sacramento SP, the program declined dramatically in
both recruitment and retention. Regrettably, the philosophy of Bossuat’s replacement master
teacher was misaligned with the SP mission of providing instrument access for all students,
leading to a backward movement of the SP at Sacramento. Now that she has returned to
Sacramento, Bossuat would like to see enrollment in the program grow, but she acknowledges
that language barriers, dissemination of information, and even Sacramento’s poor traffic
infrastructure could be holding back the SP in certain ways. Hopefully, she will have the chance
to see the Sacramento SP blossom for many years to come. The words of Anne Witt seem
particularly insightful when considering the circumstances of the Sacramento SP, “The key will
be to find the right director who will ensure continuity over a period of many years” (Hurley,

**Mentoring Good Work**

As I began my investigation of these String Project sites, I fully expected there to be a
framework of mentoring or assistance to guide the second-generation operations in establishing
their projects. Since the SP is designed internally as an apprenticeship model, I anticipated a
vertical mentoring relationship between the USC String Project and second-generation SP sites.
By vertical mentoring I am referring to hierarchical mentoring intended to preserve tradition, as
compared with horizontal mentoring, between peers and intended to encourage creativity and
innovation (Keinänen & Gardner, 2004). However, I was surprised to find that String Project
sites are relatively independent of one another apart from their “loose association” through the
National String Project Consortium. Additionally, the mentoring relationships that do emerge between sites are more horizontal in nature. Rather than serving as a unifying organization with stringent standards of replication for member sites, the NSPC really serves as a facilitator of financial and administrative resources. Once String Project sites meet the requirements of the NSPC application and they are awarded monies for their program, they operate as autonomous organizations.

The NSPC is always available, and formal contact between all SP sites occurs en masse once a year at the ASTA national conference. However, most interaction and advisement situations evolve out of the initiative of individual SP directors and master teachers. All of the directors and master teachers I interviewed for this paper have explicitly sought after counsel from other members of the NSPC. In planning for the Wayne State SP, Laura Roelofs met with Jim Przygocki, Master Teacher at the University of Wyoming SP and board member of the NSPC, and she spoke with Robert Jesselson from the University of South Carolina SP to obtain their guidance. Jane Palmquist of Brooklyn College has been in contact with Jesselson, Przygocki, as well as other NSPC members. Judy Bossuat of Sacramento has traveled to the University of Texas at Austin SP to observe the success of their program and she remains in contact with other colleagues across the country.

The loose association design of the NSPC and lack of compulsory mentoring relationships means that the success of each String Project site is truly dependent on the leadership of the director and/or master teacher. Judy Bossuat’s experience with the Sacramento SP clearly illustrates this point. Several other sites across the country considered less successful also seem to be associated with leadership that is independent and unwilling to engage in interactions between SP sites. Palmquist, based on her experience as NSPC President several
years ago, describes some of these SP leaders, “Some people view it as a job description or an extra gig; not as a community of scholars.” She has always hoped for the NSPC to be more of a research network, raising the level of string teaching everywhere.

**Should the NSPC take a more active role in mentoring?**

Based on my findings that the NSPC is more of a facilitating network and less a mentoring framework, I am left to wonder if the NSPC should be taking a more active role in assisting the second-generation String Project sites. Does the NSPC have an ethical responsibility to provide more than financial support to programs based on their USC String Project model? Or does the autonomous nature of each String Project allow appropriate freedom and flexibility to negotiate the particularities of each individual site?

The NSPC does state that one of its goals is “Improving communication among String Project sites and directors” (NSPC, Organization-Goals). While they do host a discussion forum on the Internet, there is very little activity on the site. As noted earlier, the String Project master teachers that I spoke with noted that the primary means of communication and interaction between sites happens once a year at the ASTA national conference and in privately initiated meetings. Jim Przygocki explained to me that the NSPC was more actively engaged with second-generation sites from its inception. There was initially more attention given to how second-generation sites implemented the University of South Carolina model. However, Przygocki confirmed to me that the evolution over the past 10 years toward flexibility has given second-generation sites more latitude to adapt to their own university-community contexts in a more effective way.

Would a more formal mentoring framework benefit second-generation sites and help to improve communication? In looking at the importance of apprenticeship relationships in
inspiring creativity, Hooker, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi express that mentors “who embody such estimable ways of being in addition to excellence in their field, have an especially profound and lasting effect on their students, both as professionals and as people” (2003, p. 226). Mentors provide models of excellence for imitation, and they can often serve as gatekeepers to the field and facilitators of social and cultural capital (Hooker, et al., 2003). As Laura Roelofs attempts to negotiate the dynamics of the Wayne State University String Project, wouldn’t a mentor like Judy Bossuat of Sacramento be helpful? Bossuat has had experience securing independent funds so that the Sacramento String Project is now self-supporting. Bossuat has also learned about the need to provide more than instruments to the children in her program to mediate success (remember the closet of clothes and shoes she keeps on hand for concert dress). Roelofs has not yet held a concert with her students and might not be aware of the far-reaching implications of working with students of low socio-economic status. Roelofs herself expressed that she would welcome more interaction and possibly exchange visits between string projects.

Wouldn’t a mentoring relationship between more seasoned String Project directors and novice directors engender a more fruitful enterprise? Novice directors and master teachers would be better equipped to deal with emergent situations, drawing on the knowledge of more established programs. Pairing sites with similar demographics could be helpful as well, such as Cleveland, Ohio and Detroit, Michigan or Austin, Texas and Tempe, Arizona. Additionally, the collaborative partnership between String Project sites could stimulate relationships as opposed to isolation and perhaps help prevent burnout (Friedman, 1999).

In referencing the String Project Consortium, Bernard Holland suggested, “‘Loose associations’ of small communities, each serving its own musical needs, might just be a source of health…” (2003). Perhaps this loose association and the horizontal mentoring framework
available is appropriate in a network where every individual String Project site faces its own challenges and opportunities. Keinänen & Gardner write, “having a network of mentors enhances the opportunity of choosing among different influences when developing one's own artistic voice” (p. 189). Hooker et al. came to the conclusion that peer relationships within a laboratory were just as important as traditional mentor-mentee dynamic. “Within the lab, peers serve as sources of emotional support and expertise; they provide one another knowledge and intellectual inspiration; they model effective skills and behavior, and thereby supplement many of the roles traditionally thought to belong to mentors alone” (Hooker, et al., p. 242).

Maybe more time could be spent reflecting on mentoring relationships at the ASTA national conference rather than teaching methods, and perhaps communication could be facilitated through a blog or social networking site, where master teachers, directors and pre-service teachers could offer support and advice to one another along their individual journeys. Although the horizontal mentoring seems to be very effective for those who initiate, it is distressing that all SP sites are not actively engaging in some sort of mutually-beneficial relationship. If we hope to see good work transmitted; to see excellence passed on through lineages of successful teachers, mentoring relationships will be key. Perhaps what can be added to the loose association of NSPC sites is an encouragement toward “lifelong mentoring as the process of continually seeking, finding, and reconstructing mentoring and co-mentoring relationships through which one can become enabled, empowered, and self-actualized” (Mullen, 1999, p. 189). Along the way, String Projects will be strengthened and supported to focus on their primary mission – preparing string teachers for successful careers in their field and bringing stringed instrument instruction to community children across the United States.
References


