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Developing Community-Based Learning in an Action Model Framework: Faculty Reflect on their Development as Teachers and Scholars

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Keywords

Community-based learning, service learning, faculty development, teaching

Disciplines

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Faculty Reflections on Community-Based Learning

Abstract

Faculty reflect on their participation in a Community-Based Learning (CBL) Fellowship designed to create a community of teachers and scholars immersed in an integrated model of academic-community engagement at a small liberal arts college. The program created a space to grapple with CBL principles together, provided accountability and encouragement, and became a source of support through isolation and tensions. Traditional philosophies of teaching and scholarship were challenged and faculty embraced their roles as partners in advancing social justice.

Keywords: Academic-community engagement, higher education, service learning, teaching, scholarship

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Institutional Context

Since 1991, the Center for Public Service (CPS) at Gettysburg College has facilitated partnerships built on an institutional history of engagement with local, national, and international communities. In 2006, CPS reframed its mission, moving from "numbers involved" as the measure of success to a change-focused model, engaging students, community members, faculty, and staff to facilitate partnerships, education, critical thinking, and informed action. Through these alliances, the focus of CPS is to foster social justice by promoting personal, institutional, and community change. In order to translate the reframed statement into practice, CPS developed an integrated model for action, linking partnership work in dialogue, collaboration, policy, direct action, education, and research to collectively impact community-identified issues, including food justice, immigration, youth education, and poverty eradication ("Gettysburg College - About the Center for Public Service," n.d.).

Implementing this action model challenged CPS to reframe service-learning as community-based learning (CBL), uniting classroom-based work with meaningful community involvement connected to long-term change initiatives. Within the context of equitable partnership, faculty, community organizations, and students mutually benefit from the CBL experience both by meeting course objectives and by addressing community-identified goals. By providing students with the opportunity to apply course content in community settings, students and community members can work together to share knowledge, analyze problems, conduct research and develop innovative approaches to effect positive change ("Gettysburg College - Community-Based Learning," n.d.). The change in language from "service-learning" to "community-based learning" was a concrete way to signal an intentional shift in practice and focus.

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With an overarching aim to create a community of faculty immersed in a more integrated model of academic-community engagement, the Directors of CPS and Faculty Director of Community-Based Learning and Research (an associate professor of Health Sciences) created the CBL Faculty Fellow program, inviting faculty to apply for the first cohort beginning in the fall semester of 2016. The membership of the fellowship during the first year included six faculty members in the disciplines of Psychology, Education, Religious Studies, Environmental Studies, and Sociology. At the time, one was a full professor, three were associate professors and two were assistant professors.

Fellows explored local issues, including immigration, food production and socio-economic conditions, through an opening institute, as well as reading and discussing Randy Stoecker's *Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education Civic Engagement* (Stoecker, 2016).   The year-long program included meeting with community organizations and interactive bi-weekly sessions to explore pedagogy, models of engagement, elements of successful partnership, approaches to reflection, preparing students for community work, assessment of learning and scholarship of engagement. Three faculty members continued for a second fellowship year to reflect on the implementation of their CBL courses and their experiences in the program.

In this article, the members of the CBL Faculty Fellow program reflect on the experience, identifying areas of insight and applications that emerged. Reflections are based on four sources of evidence: (1) the authors' direct participation in the program, (2) formal and informal assessment of CBL teaching activities, (3) a focus group held after the first year of the program concluded (informed by (Miller-Young et al., 2015); this focus group conversation is the source of quotations from program participants below) and (4) a writing retreat in the second year

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during which the fellows further analyzed and documented their learning and implementation.

Below, the group reflects on how a small, thoughtfully designed, intensive, and long-term faculty

development program, in conjunction with intentional community engagement practices, can

advance community-based teaching and scholarship at a small liberal arts college. The group

identifies essential components of the CBL Fellowship experience and examines tensions present

in facilitating CBL. Three examples of translation of the fellowship experience into faculty

teaching and scholarship are also explored.

Essential Components and Tensions

Creating a space to grapple with CBL principles together

The fellowship offered a forum for faculty to learn deeply about CBL and constituted a

vital source of moral and scholarly support for those who were involved. Initial field trips and

meetings with community organizations stimulated faculty to think actively about what CBL

represents. According to one of the facilitators, "the hope was to model the immersion project

type of activity, and also to build a relationship [with community partners]." A fellow said that

faculty in the program began "thinking outside of their own head and research and classes [and

instead began] to think about, 'Right, so these are community issues that people are facing. How

can I connect into . . . a more community-driven agenda, as opposed to a faculty-driven agenda?"

As the fellowship continued, it became a forum for faculty to learn and reflect and to

critique readings, assumptions, and course implementation ideas together. With an action model

approach, fellows identified two distinct, yet overlapping themes that were central to their

implementation experiences: collaborative goal-setting with community partners and relationship

development through communication. Fellows spent much time clarifying new expectations,

negotiating course goals through the lenses of community agency goals, and initiating purposeful

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experiences to enhance student learning. Balancing the goals for each entity, while ensuring that student learning and community change were at forefront, took more time than originally anticipated. The fellows also spent considerable time discussing the importance of establishing authentic partnerships and learning that clear and consistent communication was vital to creating a foundation for ongoing collaborative work with community partners. Fellows noticed that this level of relationship opened the door for richer classroom discussions with students. Because faculty members were more aware of the day-to-day activities and needs of the community organizations, they could connect classroom topics more effectively to students' CBL.

Accountability and Encouragement

Many fellows appreciated the fact that the program fostered accountability to one another and encouraged them to remain committed to CBL. Fellows often reminded one another that their long-term change goals may not be met within a single semester. Fellows recognized a need to shift from "making placements happen" to focusing on how the opportunities created through partnerships would impact both community stakeholders and students. Fellows supported one another as they identified effective ways to model the evolution of their partnerships for students. Students noticed the success of these partnerships as they witnessed, firsthand, the appreciation community agency members shared both directly and indirectly. For example, one course instructor returned to a site for a second year and brought new students. A member of the community organization greeted the instructor and hugged her, and students recognized the ongoing nature of the relationship. Fellows also became aware of the need for transparency with students both when plans worked and when they failed; they began to point out to one another and eventually to students that relatively isolated semester-long experiences

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were part of a longer trajectory of development of both the community organizations and the

relationship between CPS and those organizations.

Support through isolation and tensions

Fellows also valued having a group with whom to think together, especially those who

felt intellectually isolated in their home departments. As one faculty member said, "…the

biggest thing I missed [at a small college] was having other people around who were doing the

same stuff as me. You can't be one of many people doing the same things in a department of

only six or seven people. I think that makes a group . . . like this really important for supporting

those experiences." Ultimately, by creating a space, a supportive group, and a form of structure

or formal designation for CBL, the program became vital to faculty as they negotiated the

tensions inherent in the process of implementing CBL in their courses and research.

Some of those tensions inherent to CBL include how it is valued and recognized at the

institution and across disciplines. CBL is a time-intensive process that requires a major

commitment from individual faculty and their community partners. It can be challenging for

faculty to prioritize CBL when there is not explicit assurance from institutional and departmental

evaluation processes that CBL is valued and recognized, especially in the context of competing

research demands and teaching required courses. While these are not challenges unique to this

institution, the Faculty Fellow program provided a community from which to get feedback,

insight and support to make informed and ethical decisions.

Sometimes these deliberations resulted in faculty members deciding they were not yet in

the position to be able to offer a pedagogically sound CBL course. Some members of the group

shared concerns about a perceived disconnect between what their departments expected them to

do for tenure and promotion and what best practices for CBL recommended. These issues

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played an important role for the three faculty members who decided not to continue in the program for a second year. It is noteworthy, and indicative of the fact that institutional support for CBL is hard to establish fully even when highly-ranking administrators value CBL, that both assistant professors in the program chose to end their participation after the first year. They both believed that they needed to put their time and effort into pursuits that were more certain to be valued by their departmental colleagues. The members of the fellowship program discussed these situations extensively throughout the program.

Participation in the fellowship has helped some faculty to articulate their positions as CBL advocates and defenders, and to question assumptions and norms in their roles as teachers and scholars, grappling with the concepts of engagement, advocacy, and objectivity. Despite generally positive views toward CBL on campus, some faculty have been in the position of having to defend the use of CBL pedagogy. As one fellow said, "[we were able to] have conversations about our role as academics and professors, and to support one another when our colleagues tell us that...we're wasting our time, or…that it's not scientific, etc." Pushback from faculty colleagues outside of the fellowship, yet within the fellows' departments, sometimes questioned whether student learning is "better" than when it's not the primary goal. Some faculty have begun to view their disciplines with a new lens and embrace new teaching and research methods. One fellow commented, "I feel like that has also ultimately changed me some as a scholar….I'm finding myself questioning some of the assumptions in my field...I'm finding myself more and more committed to particular types of scholarship, and particular types of activities in my classroom, that are outside the mainstream of my department. I feel like I'm doing it intentionally and with some support."

Individual CBL Implementations and Impacts on Teaching and Research

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Sijapati, a teacher and scholar of religion and contemporary Islam, developed a new course in the College's Religious Studies department titled *Islam in America: Cultures, Histories, Identities*, designed to integrate a CBL component that would foster dialogue between Muslim Americans and non-Muslim Americans and deepen awareness of the issues faced by American Muslims as students studied issues surrounding Muslim cultures, diversity, and experience in America in the course. Sijapati worked closely with the community partner for a year prior to the immersion experience in her field research with the community, and had received the initial idea for the immersion experience from the community partner's request to work with students in their interfaith and peacebuilding efforts.

Sijapati collaborated closely with the community partner to develop a program onsite at the Muslim community (a Sufi farm) that would meet the parallel goals of the community and the course. This process of developing the logistical program was stop-and-start at times and the instructor faced setbacks at points. The support and critical feedback generated in the CBL fellows' meetings, however, provided crucial support for Sijapati to overcome these challenges and ensure the immersion was a mutually beneficial community based learning endeavor, and not just a class visit or a field trip. This involved her shaping the course curriculum around the immersion experience, preparing the students in advance, and following the immersion experience with meaningful reflection exercises and assessments later in the semester. This process was instrumental in ensuring the alignment of community change goals and student learning goals.

The students' direct encounter with a Muslim community, in the context of the academic study of American Muslim histories and cultures, raised valuable questions for the instructor about the distinctions and tensions between advocacy and CBL, and the limits and possibilities

of college-based academic studies of racialized, marginalized, and vulnerable communities. In the instructor's words, "my work already has a kind of advocacy element to it, because of how charged the [political] climate is, and because of the way people think about the religion in this society, and about histories of oppression and so forth. But then, being part of this group, and doing the CBL component in the course, almost gave a formal stamp to that advocacy dimension that I was already doing in the classwork. It also raised fruitful questions about the potential of CBL for advancing more impactful forms of learning." Student evaluations of the course and the community partners' feedback reflected the success in meeting the aforementioned goals.

In line with the literature on CBL, this immersion experience underscored how foundational the instructor's investment of time in building relationships with the community partners is to the success of CBL --- in particular, the investment of time that revolved not around the student learning goals, but instead around the community's goals. To identify the latter required a long and intentional process of relationship-building, and listening to the community's needs, then foregrounding these in any collaborations. Other components critical to this CBL unit's success were the conversations with the group of CBL fellows over the year the course was developed and taught. For the instructor, the CBL experience raised questions about the meaning of engagement, and direct engagement versus less direct engagement. For example, in other parts of the course students read academic literature about and by Muslim Americans and while these allowed for student engagement with marginalized voices, they were through the lens of the academic study of religion. In contrast, the immersion experience involved a hands-on, direct way of facing the key issues of the course through in-person narratives.

Another instructor, Cain, a developmental psychologist, taught an upper-level psychology seminar titled "Identity, Immigration, and Development." Through the fellowship program, she

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was able to tap into established relationships between the Center for Public Service and the local

Latino/a immigrant community. She designed a CBL project in which students utilized

PhotoVoice, a qualitative research technique (Lopez, Robinson, & Eng, 2013; Wang & Burris,

1994). With PhotoVoice, research participants, typically members of groups with a limited voice

in majority society, use cameras to convey their lived experiences to others. For the psychology

seminar, students met weekly with local immigrant-origin middle and high school students

participating in an after-school tutoring program. The younger students took photos reflecting

their identities and discussed them weekly with their college student partners. The college

students also shared photographs reflecting their own identities. At the end of the semester, the

class hosted a joint public photography celebration entitled "This Is Who We Are/*Quienes

Somos.*" Parents, teachers, community members, and college faculty, staff, and students attended

the celebration.

Early planning and continuous communication between the instructor and the

community partner helped the project to run smoothly, and the community partner and the

instructor were able to model a collaborative relationship for the students and immigrant youth.

The community partner was invested in offering the immigrant youth an opportunity to explore

and reflect on their identities in a supportive venue. Her goal was congruent with the instructor's

goal of introducing college students to the complexities of identity formation in a society that is

sometimes supportive of and sometimes quite hostile to immigrant families. More generally, the

long-term relationship that the Center for Public Service had worked to build with the

community partner and the local immigrant community was crucial for establishing trust

between the instructor, the community partner, the college students, and immigrant teens.

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This particular course was unusual in the context of the instructor's academic department in that it involved students in qualitative and applied research, while the department as a whole values basic quantitative research. The recognition of the project by the fellowship program made it politically easier for the faculty member to justify the course project both within and beyond her department. Also, the fellowship group members provided invaluable advice throughout the design and implementation of the project, even introducing the psychologist to the PhotoVoice methodology in the first place. This kind of tangible support could not have existed in the course instructor's home department, as no one there had the requisite knowledge base. The experience of implementing this CBL project ultimately shaped the course instructor's future teaching, as she has now created a first-year seminar on immigration that includes a similar CBL project with a related community organization. In addition, she has begun to incorporate qualitative methods more broadly in her own research. Thus the fellowship program had both an essential immediate impact on the course project and a long-term impact on the instructor's development as a teacher and scholar.

Davidson, the instructor who serves as the Director of CPS and co-developed the CBL Faculty Fellow program, also developed and co-taught *(En)Countering Narratives: Storytelling, Identity and Social Change,* a First-Year Seminar. One intention of developing this new course was to practice CBL while facilitating education around it, so that both Davidson and her students could better relate to its challenges and opportunities at a small liberal arts college and in the field in general. The course engages students with four story types to consider how storytelling methodologies are used to enforce or dismantle oppression, mobilize or restrict change. By sharing and analyzing stories, students began to understand the complexity of race, class and gender and the power dimensions through which inequity operates. During the last

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third of the semester, students and participants of Work Ready, a program of South Central

Community Action Programs Inc. that assists individuals receiving Temporary Assistance for

Needy Families funds from the state of Pennsylvania to overcome barriers to long-term

employment, join together for a six-week Storytelling Institute.

Through team building strategies, guided activities and discussion, the Storytelling

Institute aimed to advance the long-term partnership between CPS and anti-poverty initiatives as

well as the specific goals of Work-Ready, CPS and the First-Year Seminar curriculum by

deliberately fostering connections between people while building listening, communication,

confidence and critical thinking skills. One activity was for pairs (a college student and a Work

Ready participant) to participate in StoryCorps' #WhoWeAre project, recording interviews

focused on a commonality. The edited projects, focused on everything from the impact of

addiction to the power of music to reconciliation, reveal that when we take the time to ask

questions and listen deeply to each other, we are able to develop empathy and make sense of

their own experiences, connecting the personal with the political, the individual with the social.

Davidson co-taught this course twice, while implementing the first and third semester of

the CBL Faculty Fellowship. Challenging, continuous and context-appropriate reading,

reflection, and discussion with the faculty cohort kept fundamental elements of CBL at the

forefront of planning and implementation. With energy being spent on maintaining a partnership

with a common vision, Davidson was able to stay focused on the foundational components of

CBL. The fellowship also highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining

relationships over time. In the second year, Davidson reflected, "[Work-Ready participants]

knew us and felt comfortable, and our students saw immediately that we were at ease." As a

result, the students and the participants "seemed to be more at ease, with less awkwardness and

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forced conversation." This enabled connections to be made, and therefore goals to be reached, more rapidly and with less hesitation.

Conclusions

The CBL Faculty Fellow program served to advance CBL, rooted in an action model framework, at a small liberal arts college by promoting educational and social support for a multidisciplinary group of faculty to discuss and debate CBL principles and logistics, offer feedback on implementation challenges, and provide accountability and encouragement, especially when encountering isolation or criticism. By creating a CBL community immersed in an integrated model of academic-community engagement, faculty deepened their understanding of CBL principles and implemented strategies that expanded campus and community partnerships.

In addition to expanding the network of CBL practitioners on campus, the CBL Fellow Program served as an intentional strategy for institutionalizing CBL at a small liberal arts college in ways that extend beyond tracking numbers of participating students and providing course designators, or explaining CBL to administrators, chairs, and senior faculty on personnel committees. The program engaged faculty at all ranks, increasing the number of faculty knowledgeable about CBL as a pedagogical framework, and provided model examples of how to do CBL ethically and rigorously. Moreover, central to the mission of CPS, the CBL Fellow Program facilitated significant dialogue on the intentional shift toward long-term strategies for community change, allowing faculty to challenge traditional philosophies of teaching and scholarship and embrace their roles as partners in advancing social justice.

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