Chapter 3.3: A Pilot Evaluation of a Community-Based Service Learning Pedagogy Within an Undergraduate Psychology Degree

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CbSL as a Transformative Pedagogy

Service learning is a pedagogical strategy in which students engage in community service that will enhance their understanding of course concepts and enable them to make contributions to their communities (Rhodes and Davis 2011). In Community-based Service Learning (CbSL) students learn by engaging with community partners in a range of ways including through research, advocacy and direct service. As Driscoll et al. (2014) point out, community engaged learning has its roots in the transformative and reflective pedagogies of Freire and others. It focuses on empowering and transforming students as well as developing

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critical thinking and civic responsibility. In theory, this engagement reflects Freire's learning principle of learning beginning with action, which is shaped by reflection and gives rise to further action.

The transformative effect of service learning in general and CbSL in particular has been documented in a number of evaluations. For example, Rowe and Chapman (1999) highlight that the experience of community service, in linking a student to an environment in which knowledge can be put to use and reality can be tested, can have transforming effect. Kendrick (1996) evaluated a CbSL component in a sociology module and reported that students had increased personal efficacy and greater ability to apply course concepts to new situations. McKenna and Rizzo (1999) conducted a study of student perception of the impact of service learning and the majority of students reported a positive impact on academic and personal development. Lundy (2007) integrated CbSL into a Life-Span Development course and reported that it resulted in higher exam scores and increased empathy (compared to students who undertook a research project or an interview project without interacting with community organisations). A study by Reed et al. (2005) suggested that even small scale, short-term experiences of service learning can have an impact on students' sense of social responsibility. Other documented benefits of CbSL for the student include making curriculum relevant, clarifying values, promoting community and civic responsibility, encouraging multicultural awareness, developing critical thinking skills, developing research skills, fostering personal development, fostering social development and building classroom community (Driscoll et al. 2014).

For CbSL to have value it must also contribute to the community partners. The community-based organizations involved in the CbSL program at DePaul University reported that the benefits of being involved outweighed any challenges (Worrall 2007). According to Driscoll et al. (2014) the benefits of CbSL for the community include providing meaningful services, creating opportunities for community members and agencies to participate in student learning, building community awareness of universal programs and services, and providing opportunities for collaboration.

CbSL Within the Irish Context

Universities all over the world are increasingly being called to engage with communities (Driscoll et al. 2014) and Ireland is no exception. Indeed the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Higher Education Authority 2011) recommended that 'engagement with the wider community must become more firmly embedded in the mission of higher education institutions' (p. 21). In light of this recommendation, a number of higher education institutions have taken action to encourage the involvement of the wider community in a number of activities including Community-based Service Learning. Campus Engage is a National Network set up to promote civic engagement as a core function of Higher Education in Ireland. The network aims to strengthen the relationship between higher education and the wider society, through civic engagement activities including community-based research and learning. As part of the strategic plan for 2017 (launched in 2013), All Hallows College (a small liberal arts college in Dublin) adopted CbSL as an institutional core learning strategy.

All Hallows College CbSL Pilot Study

In 2013, All Hallows College piloted a CbSL component in an undergraduate humanities programme. The module selected to pilot CbSL was Lifespan Development which was delivered to second and third year students completing a four year degree in Psychology and Theology.

Methods

Participants

Second and third year BA Psychology undergraduate students (n = 25) were recruited to participate in a pilot evaluation of the implementation of CbSL within a Lifespan Development module. A total of 21 students completed the questionnaire at Time One and 16 students completed the follow-up evaluation questionnaire at TimeTwo.

Measures

A self-report questionnaire was constructed with the goal of evaluating the CbSL component under a number of areas including (i) Civic Responsibility, (ii) Critical thinking, (iii) Collaboration and (iv) Academic development. Students were asked to anonymously and honestly rate their agreement with a number of statements under each of these headings. Total scores were calculated for the Civic Responsibility, Critical Thinking and Collaboration outcomes. The Academic Development items were not totalled as they measured separate constructs. Students were also given the opportunity to make additional comments under each of the headings. In addition, the students were asked to comment on the methods of assessment used in the module. The questionnaire was administered to the students at the beginning and end of the course.

Procedure

The Lifespan development module consisted of 12 × 90 minute lectures and 1 × 50 minute seminar, over one semester. This module introduces students to the important developmental stages across the lifespan and aims to develop greater understanding of different theoretical perspectives and how these contribute to our understanding of adolescent and adult development. The aim of the CbSL component of the module was for students to interact with relevant community-based service providers and to apply their knowledge and research skills in a real-life context in a way that would benefit the community partner. The community partners were chosen on the basis of relevance to the class material and were invited to participate by the Director of Community-based Service Learning in the college, who also arranged student site visits. The community partners served a range of client groups including homeless people, young people in disadvantaged communities, elderly people and people living with chronic illnesses. Students were randomly assigned to the sites in groups of three or four.

As community organisations often have an interest in research related to their work, but do not have the time or resources to explore the relevant literature, it was decided that the students would use their research skills to identify and evaluate research on a topic of relevance to the community

partner. Assessment for the CbSL component was based on a focused literature review and poster presentation. Students undertook an initial site visit to the service provider to learn about their work and to discuss possible areas that they could research. Students then had the opportunity to discuss their ideas with classmates and teaching faculty in class. The teaching faculty helped the students to conduct literature searches and identify relevant research. Finally students prepared posters based on their literature reviews and these posters were shared with the community partners. The questionnaire was handed out on the last day of class as part of the feedback solicited for the course. Students were assured that their responses would not be examined individually but that they would be pooled for analysis.

Results

Prior to, and following the completion of the module, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire to evaluate the pilot module. A number of areas were explored including (i) Civic Engagement, (ii) Critical Thinking and (iii) Collaboration. In addition Academic Development was explored in the post module evaluation. The reported levels of agreement and student comments are reported below. Table 1 shows the average level of agreement for each item at Time 1 and Time 2 (with lower scores representing greater agreement).

(i) Civic Engagement

When asked to evaluate their level of civic engagement following their involvement in community based service learning, 81% of students reported that they felt that they could have a positive impact on local social issues. However, as shown in Table 1 the average agreement with statements relating to their concern for local community issues and their belief in their ability to change their community slightly decreased. Further research should explore if this trend is statistically significant and if it exists in other CbSL programmes. Students reflecting on their experience reported "*I see the needs in the community and would like to participate in the future*" and others note "*Through education I can contribute to my disadvantaged community*".

Table 1 Mean rating (and standard deviations) for each item at Time 1 and Time 2

	Time 1	Time 2
Civic responsibility		
I think people should contribute to their community	1.57 (0.59)	1.75 (1.18)
I have shown concern for local community issues	2.48 (0.87)	2.06 (0.93)
I believe I can have a positive impact on local social problems	2.38 (0.92)	1.63 (0.96)
Critical thinking		
I can identify assets in my community	2.48 (0.81)	2.06 (0.68)
I can identify needs in my community	2.05 (0.92)	1.94 (1.06)
I can generate solutions to community needs	2.86 (0.85)	2.25 (1.00)
Collaboration		
I have leadership skills	2.05 (0.81)	2.25 (0.68)
I can work well in team with others	1.90 (0.99)	2.06 (1.06)
I can take initiative	1.71 (0.96)	1.94 (0.85)
I can work with people from cultures other than my own	1.92 (0.87)	1.88 (1.09)

(ii) Critical Thinking

Students were also asked to reflect on their perceived ability to assess needs and assets in their community and to contribute to novel resolutions to community partner needs. Following participation in the CbSL module, 75% of students agreed with the statement that they could identify needs within the community, with only 50% agreeing that they could generate different solutions to community needs. Students reflected that "*CbSL helps to look at service provisions in the community with new eyes*". Others noted that "*My new understanding helps me to think outside the box*" and interestingly "*Working in different parts of the communities leads to frustration as I feel we are working against each other*".

(iii) Collaboration

In relation to leadership and teamwork 81% agreed or strongly agreed that following the CbSL experience they could work well in a team. Students reflected that "*I don't have leadership skills, but thanks to the CbSL placement, I have learned to take initiative and work in a team*". Other students reported that while they developed new team skills on site with the community partner, they also brought these new skills back on

campus reflecting that "*Site visits helped my team skills, working with others helped in developing a new initiative in college*".

(iv) Academic Development

A key component of the evaluation was to determine if CbSL enhanced student learning in the lifespan development module. These items were included in the Time Two questionnaire. Table 2 below shows the level of agreement with each of the relevant statements.

Results indicate a positive impact of the CbSL component in terms of student learning, with 75% of students reporting seeing a connection between academic learning and service learning. Students reflected that "*Doing CbSL gave me a sense of mission to the society I live in – it was stimulating to study*", others note that "*I can now see how I link my academic skills to everyday life*". Students also commented implementation issues but acknowledged that the CbSL component of the module offered important practical applications, "*As a programme it had huge teething*

Table 2 Percentage agreement for academic development items

Academic development	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
I understand how the subject matter of this module can be applied in everyday life	18.8	43.8	–	31.3	6.3
I can see the connection between academic experience and real-life experience	31.3	31.3	6.3	25	6.3
I learn better when the course includes practical activities	37.5	25	25	6.3	6.3
I see the connection between academic learning and service learning	37.5	37.5	12.5	6.3	6.3
I have achieved the learning objective	18.8	56.3	18.8	6.3	–

problems but CbSL works fantastic as a practical application". However, almost 40% of the students did not see how the subject atter could be applied in every life.

(v) Comments on Assessment:

As it was a pilot implementation of the module, it was important to obtain student feedback in relation to assessment. In the self-report questionnaire, students were also asked to reflect on the methods of assessment. Results revealed that there was both positive and constructive feedback provided. Students reported that "*All methods helped me with understanding the material*" and "*All assessments contributed to my learning*". Others however, noted that there were too many assessments, placing a high and demanding workload on students. This was reflected in participant comments with students noting that there was "*Too much workload – I was not happy at first but not too bad in the end*". Others thought that the assessments were a good idea, however difficult to evaluate due to the wide variety of topics being conducted across the class; "*Assessments were a good idea but hard to evaluate as everybody was dealing with different topics/too many for one module*".

Reflection of the Director of Community-Based Service Learning

As already stated, the Director of CbSL was central to the delivery of this pilot module. She was responsible for implementing CbSL across the college, helping faculty members design CbSL elements appropriate for the module learning outcomes, co-ordinating site visits and liaising between the community partners, faculty and students.

Patience

When asked to reflect on her experience of piloting CbSL, she emphasised the need for patience. Her experience highlighted the importance of

careful planning and taking time to build up relationships with community partners. She advised against trying to introduce more than one new CbSL module at a time as each one needs a lot of time and resources to establish.

Working with Community Partners

Securing the commitment of community partners was labour intensive and time consuming. Many of the community partners with whom the director already had relationships were used to facilitating students in traditional work experience placements and were unfamiliar with CbSL so it took time and multiple forms of communication to explain the process and negotiate their new role. In addition, given the mixed ability in any undergraduate class, it was difficult but important to convey to community partners from the outset that the output of students would be varied and community partners could potentially receive work of lower quality. Given the generosity of the community partners in supporting the initiative it may be worth considering other ways to add value to the process for them in future.

Working with Faculty

In her experience of promoting CbSL to faculty within the college, she reported a mixed reception ranging from openness to ambivalence to antipathy. Given the critical importance of faculty co-operation in the delivery of CbSL, staff engagement presents a challenge.

Managing the Needs and Expectations of all Stakeholders

The director recognised the challenge that came with trying to meet the needs of all stakeholders within the narrow framework of any one module. Integrating a CbSL component that had value for all participants, while also meeting academic requirements and not overburdening the

students or community partners, was a difficult balance to achieve. The director had to deal not only with the community partners, students and faculty but also with senior management in the college who had high expectations for implementation. It is important that all parties have realistic expectations and achievable goals.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights the benefits and challenges associated with a pilot implementation of CbSL as well as areas to consider and develop in future implementations. While the self-report questionnaire findings support both a positive and negative impact of CbSL, it is important to note that the questionnaire itself may not have really tapped into the areas in which students experienced change. The written reponses to the open-ended questions on the other hand, give a greater indication of the potentially transformative nature of CbSL. It is also important to acknowledge that this was a pilot study carried out in a very small college and as such there is no comparison group. As this was not a controlled study it is not possible to conclusively say whether changed that occurred for the students happened directly as a result of taking part in the CbSL component. However, the feedback from students and from the Director of Service Learning is important and insightful and will guide further implementation of CbSL modules.

One of the most important learnings to take away from this is in relation to balancing student workload and community need. As indicated by the students' comments in relation to assessment, some students may have struggled with the task of conducting a focussed literature review so it would be advisable to consider other means of assessment. As expressed by the Director of CbSL and by research elsewhere (e.g. Worrall 2007) educators who hope to implement CbSL should take their time and work closely with community partners to build strong relationships and to discuss the range of ways that students could contribute to their service (e.g. service and advocacy options as well as traditional academic assignments).

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