

Community-Based Learning: Practices, Challenges, and Reflections

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This paper will highlight an innovative practice in teaching and learning by reflecting on two fourth-year sociology seminar classes that participated in a community-based learning project at York University. Fifty students collaborated in three to six person teams to work on a problem/issue identified by one of five not-for-profit organizations who work with and/or for women as victims, offenders, and/or professionals in the Canadian criminal justice system. Reflections on the process and outcome of the experience offer insights into organizing and engaging in a community-based learning experience as well as point to some of the substantive benefits. These include the opportunity for increased student engagement, access to, and awareness of, course and community related issues, and citizenship. The paper also identifies potential opportunities to incorporate the dimensions of participation and collaboration between institutions of higher learning and the community/world to mobilize knowledge and offer unique scholarship opportunities for faculty.

Last year, I integrated a community-based learning component into my sociology course curriculum. I had heard about this initiative from a colleague in my department who was a leader in broadening her pedagogical insights to increase student engagement and result in a richer, more successful teaching and learning environment for her students and herself. Although the language of ‘community-based learning’ was new to me, the idea of and enthusiasm for ‘mobilizing knowledge’ was not. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council defines it as “moving knowledge into active service for the broadest

possible common good” (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2008, p. 9).

For twenty years, I worked as an applied sociologist with communities throughout Ontario on social justice issues and engaged in activism and participatory action research. During this time, I organized conferences and events that facilitated dialogue and the sharing of experiences and knowledge between academics and not-for-profit organizations and committees working within their communities on specific practical issues. I have always identified myself as an applied sociologist and although mes-

sages from my discipline about the acceptance and value of applied vs. “pure scholarship” are contradictory, to say the least (Langan & Morton, in press), academics within the applied sociology movement have argued that “for sociology to be ‘workable’ and prosper, it must validate its knowledge and theories through practice in the real world” (Boros, 1997 as cited in Joyner, 2003, p. 5).

When I returned to academia four years ago, I felt even more committed to search for teaching and learning strategies to help my students and I make more explicit connections between theories of crime, social and legal policy, and front line work. During the past four years I have identified a number of benefits which come with integrating community-based learning into our curriculum. These include opportunities to embrace and assist in fulfilling the academic mission of the university and the Ontario Council of Academic Vice Presidents Guidelines for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations; student engagement and student-centred learning and evaluation; and scholarship opportunities for faculty. As an example, my personal interest in and commitment to designing learning outcomes which cohere with larger departmental and university curriculum came in part from my work with not-for-profit organizations on organizational planning and their attempts to stay true (vis-à-vis time and activities) to their organizational missions. A review of York University’s mission articulates its objectives and purposes as: the advancement of learning and the dissemination of knowledge; and the intellectual, spiritual, social, moral and physical development of its members and the betterment of society (York University Act, 1965). My interpretation of my universities’ mission fits well with a community-based learning model, which plays an important role in working in partnership with our communities to address community problems. As Lowe and Reisch (1998) predicted,

Urban universities and colleges are continuing to recognize that they are inextricably linked to their surrounding communities. Consequently, community development, community-based research, and commu-

nity practice will be areas of increasing importance to academic institutions and funding agencies in the decade ahead. (p. 296)

Community-Based Learning

In the 2007-2008 academic year, I incorporated a community-based learning component into two sections of *Women and the Criminal Justice System*, a fourth-year sociology seminar course, which aims to critically examine theory, research, policy, and emerging issues related to young and adult women. It analyzes their representation and engagement with the criminal justice system as offenders and criminalized women, victims/survivors/witnesses and practitioners/professionals. Topics addressed in the course include sex, gender, and legal regulation, the legal regulation of motherhood, violence against women and sexual violence, fear of crime and victimization, masculinities and crime, gender and policing etc.

A community-based learning initiative felt like a good fit with a course on women and the Canadian criminal justice system, since it would provide students with a unique opportunity to make relevant connections between theories which attempt to explain the reality of victimization and criminalization of women, current research on topical issues, social and criminal policy, and local organizational needs and issues. As Holsinger (2008) points out “linking community agencies with college students in two feminist criminology college courses meets a number of academic and social justice goals” (p. 319).

Since community-based learning was new to me, I found resources like the Canadian Alliance for Community Service Learning (CSL) very useful in helping to articulate what it was I was trying to accomplish. According to the CSL (2008), community-based learning and service-learning are:

carefully designed implemented CSL programs and courses to assist students to make meaning from their community experiences, to connect real-life experience to more theoretical classroom study, and to

develop as individuals, in relation to their values, their sense of social responsibility and their leadership skills.

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2008) defines service-learning as, “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” I find this definition to be particularly helpful to articulate the myriad of benefits and opportunities available by integrating this tool.

In order to ensure a good fit between the course expectations, requirements, and community partner needs, I worked with Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies, Experiential Education programme to help find and communicate with potential community partners whose mandates were relevant to the themes of the course. Once a mutual decision (between the organization and myself) was made about which community partners would be involved, they were invited to the classroom to present a problem, question, or area of research they wanted addressed by a small student team from my course.

The participating community partners included Yellow Brick House (a shelter for abused women and their children), the Ontario Women in Law Enforcement, Sex Professionals of Canada, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Toronto and the Ontario Association of Interval and Transition Houses. In January 2008, they made short presentations to the students about their organizations and their project ideas and students chose projects according to their interests. Some of the community partners presented one project idea for student teams to work on, while other community partners presented numerous projects.

Each of the two seminar classes had 25 students, and between the two classes there were 13 different projects available from which small student teams could choose. Examples of the projects available included the need to search for, and review scholarly literature, while other projects required students to find and review programs operating elsewhere in Canada that may be used by the community partner

as an alternative program model. Once small student teams chose projects, they worked together in and outside of the classroom to develop a project plan. This plan articulated key project deliverables and a time-management plan, which would help them fulfill the requirements of their project.

At the end of the course, community partners were invited back on the same day to hear short student presentations which summarized the process they used to fulfill their objectives and the product or result of their work. Community partners had an opportunity to reflect on the experience with the students and talk about the way their organization would be using the information provided by the student teams.

Opportunities and Challenges

As I become more familiar with the literature on best practices for evaluating community-based learning, I recognized that I did not include as many opportunities to obtain reflections from students or community partners about their experiences as I wanted. However, at the end of the course, I distributed a post experience questionnaire, which asked students and community partners to reflect on their community-based learning endeavour. This opportunity for reflection elicited feedback from students about outcomes, which I categorized into four main themes: knowledge mobilization; integration of theory, research, policy and service; active and student centered learning and assessment; and opportunities for research and pedagogical scholarship. These four themes identify the benefits I outlined at the outset for using a community-based learning approach. I will briefly expand on a couple of them.

To date, community-based learning is one of the best teaching and learning tools available within institutions of higher learning which actively works toward mobilizing knowledge. This provides academics and communities opportunities to work together to produce and share knowledge to meet real, defined community needs. In our case, a community partner identified the need for young women in their community to be provided more resources and assis-

tance in dealing with what they referred to as “community violence,” hate crimes based on their gender, race, and class. Another community partner shared with us that,

[t]his was an ideal opportunity for our organization, as it met one of our organizational goals for outreach to the community. It provided a two way communication opportunity, learning initiatives for the team participants which includes our organization, and information that can be used and published to enlighten our members.

The opportunity for students to integrate theory, research, policy and service was one of the most exciting outcomes. As an example of the student reflections, one student wrote, “the community-based learning project connected the theories we discussed in class regarding women in the criminal justice system.” Another student suggested,

[c]ommunity-based learning allowed us to work with a specific organization. It was a different experience to feel as though you are contributing to a real live organization and issue. Classroom work doesn’t really allow you to see what your findings do in the context of real life.

For instance, one student team worked on obtaining statistics and information for the Sex Professionals of Canada, which were to be used by them in their Supreme Court of Canada challenge of sections of the criminal code related to offences on communicating for the purposes of prostitution.

Through the projects and relationships, which developed between the community partners and I, there were exciting opportunities for faculty to incorporate research and pedagogical scholarship with community-based initiatives within our courses. Researching and writing about the process and results of community-based learning as a teaching and learning strategy provided an entirely new avenue of scholarship for me. Learning about the Society for Teaching and Learning annual conferences

was another new and exciting opportunity to collaborate and learn from other academics interested in university-community partners as a way to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom. In addition, it identified so many more opportunities for faculty to work with their community on mobilizing knowledge and contributing in scholarly ways to the literature.

Despite the many benefits and opportunities available for students, community partners, faculty and the university from community-based learning, there were also many challenges. The three main challenges included: time, the lack of feedback, reflection, evaluation, and issues pertaining to research ethics. My students and I were in agreement that engaging in a community-based learning project can take more time and energy than more traditional curriculum. Part of this was due to the fact that none of us had prior experience. It was also the case that it required students to employ good time management, organizational skills, communication and collaboration as well as teamwork and leadership to be successful in this endeavour.

A final insight from our experience was the recognition that the process required more opportunities, time, and space for reflection and feedback from all parties on what and how we were doing. More communication between the community partners and I was required as a way to help ensure that student processes and activities were in keeping with the organizational expectations. More communication between the student teams and I would have reduced some of the students’ anxieties and roadblocks to completing their projects. Finally, uncertainties about the procedures and requirements for research ethics approval for students and professors involved in community-based learning projects resulted in less opportunity for students to complete the requirements of their projects as fully as they would have liked.

In conclusion, despite our lack of experience and the challenges we faced, it provided the students, the community partners, and I a window into opportunities to facilitate knowledge mobilization, fill recent requirements for curricular learning outcomes, student engagement and student-centred learning and evaluation as well as unique scholarship oppor-

tunities for faculty.

I have just begun a new academic term with new students, new and old community partners, a new and enhanced passion for community-based learning and all the potential benefits and challenges it provides.

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Biography

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