Fostering Self-Authorship and Changemaking: Insights from a Social Entrepreneurship Practicum

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Like many universities, ours has an overarching goal that its students learn to become effective citizens. Experiential courses that expose students to the complexity of the real world through community-based projects are designed to achieve learning outcomes associated with becoming a conscientious and socially responsible adult (Cornell University Office of Engagement Initiatives, 2021). These courses also promote the capacity for self-authorship, or the ability to define, for oneself, one's own beliefs, identity, and social relations (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Self-authorship, which often begins in traditional college-age years, emerges with a shift away from accepting uncritically the values, feelings and meaning of external authority and is fundamental to becoming a responsible citizen (Mezirow, 2000; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004, pp.6-8). Thus, many recognize that curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities can support students in this important transition (see, e.g., Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Ignelzi, 2005; Hodge et al., 2009). To this end, Baxter Magolda has developed the Learning Partnerships Model (LPM), a framework for promoting self-authorship that challenges learners with epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal complexity. In this model, students are supported as learning partners by being validated for their capacity to know, having their learning situated in experience, and constructing meaning together with peers and the instructor (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Our social entrepreneurship practicum reflects the core tenets of the Learning Partnerships Model and contributes to it by shining a light on the capacity of students to become changemakers in pursuit of social, economic, and environmental justice. Given the magnitude and severity of intractable human and environmental crises worldwide, we believe it is imperative we prepare students not only to make wise and conscientious decisions within existing systems, but also to be changemakers, able to engage others in creative, innovative, and practical ways that ultimately transform the root causes of these crises.

Background

In 2016, a group of students at our university established a volunteer-run, nonprofit grocery store to address alarming rates of food insecurity within our student body. They secured start-up funding from the undergraduate student assembly, permission from the university administration, and a legal home within a university-affiliated nonprofit organization. Yet, by 2018 Anabel's Grocery was floundering. In the spring of 2019, the student team decided to pause operations and, with the guidance of an instructor of social entrepreneurship, reimagine the store's business model, organizational structure, and overarching purpose. Together they created a practicum-based course to better understand the systemic roots of food insecurity, learn from their customers, and consider nonhierarchical leadership. Anabel's relaunched with a new revenue model, leadership framework, and staffing structure, which, while still volunteer-based, provides course credit through the now mandatory practicum. In this course, students apply principles of social entrepreneurship to examine how forces of racism and capitalism produce inequities in the food

system and discuss how alternative food initiatives, such as this nonprofit grocery store, can become public spaces for food justice (Holt-Giménez, 2017) and anti-racist action (Kendi, 2019). All of this is made real as they run every aspect of the grocery and its educational and outreach programs.

Line of Inquiry

The question we are exploring is how a collaboration between a practicum-based course and a social enterprise encourages students to examine, discuss, and apply complex social justice concepts and frameworks. Specifically, we investigate how this experience fosters in them a sense of self as changemaker, a form of self-authorship that includes the confidence to tackle justice issues in collaborative, creative, and practical ways. Applying the LPM framing, we first describe our pedagogical practice and then illustrate outcomes by drawing exemplars from student self-evaluation papers. The prompts for this end-of-the-semester self-evaluation ask students to reflect on 1) what they learned, in comparison to what they originally thought they might learn, 2) whether they had met their goals for the practicum experience, 3) unexpected outcomes and key takeaways, and 4) how this experience might inform their lives going forward. The prompts were purposefully open-ended and did not inquire explicitly about self-authorship or change making.

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Of the 99 students over the four semesters captured by this study, 3% were first-year students, 18% were second-year, 32% were third-year, 43% were fourth-year, and 3% were Master's students. Fifty-one percent of the students identified as White, and 49% as students of color, of which 31% identified as being of Asian heritage. Regarding their major college, approximately 51% were in Agriculture and Life Sciences, 22% in Business, 11% in Human Ecology, 7% in Arts and Sciences, 4% in Industrial and Labor Relations, 3% in Engineering, and 1% in Architecture, Art and Planning.

Our primary role was not as researchers, but rather as instructor (Anke) and team facilitators (Sarah, Kelsey, Emily, Deanna, Chelsea, and Ryan). The team facilitators were students and therefore also participants. We employed a constructivist framework in our review of the students' reflection papers to emphasize the importance of participants' meaning-making regarding their experiences and development (Charmaz, 2000). We read and analyzed students' papers for patterns and themes that might create distinguishing categories, starting with basic questions, such as, what did students learn, how did they learn, and what meaning did they make of it, specifically with respect to personal and social change? Through our analysis, we identified categories that align with the developmental framework of self-authorship with an emphasis on self as changemaker.

Description of Practice

Unlike most community-engaged course designs where students first learn about a community, then engage with a community partner, and, finally, step back to reflect (Bringle & Thatcher, 1995), our students are the community *and* the community partner. Moreover, because Anabel's is a student-run organization, the students and instructor are collectively the authors and the authority, wholly responsible for this venture's financial health and social impact. At the start of the semester, a new cohort of team members from the course joins those who have taken it previously. Early on, we signal our trust in everyone's ability, regardless of experience or academic major, to learn what is necessary to contribute fully. We encourage members to modify existing roles within the store to reflect their own skills and interests, recognizing that the knowledge and experiences each member brings contribute to our collective learning and success. These elements of our course design engage students as equal and capable learning partners, a central feature of the LPM (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Theories of systems thinking, antiracism, collective economics, social entrepreneurship, and distributive leadership provide intellectual frameworks that reveal the complexity of how systems produce inequitable outcomes, how they are rooted in deeply embedded habits of minds and norms that we seldom examine or question, and what we might do to change them. These frameworks help our students identify and act on the root causes of social and environmental inequities, thus furthering their epistemological growth as changemakers. While these frameworks provide important scaffolding for understanding and action, students also learn to trust themselves (intrapersonal growth) and each other (interpersonal growth) as they navigate the moving parts and unforeseen circumstances of a real enterprise together. Acknowledging that social change arises from leadership of the many rather than the few (Schmitz, 2012), the organizational model of Anabel's distributes power across four self-governing committees. Decisions are made following an advice process (Laloux

& Wilber, 2014) that gives every member the agency to take initiative on any matter as long as advice is first sought of those most affected by the action and those with the most expertise on the subject. This practice reflects the autonomy and mutuality characteristic of the LPM (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Since students manage the store for the entire semester, they engage in a continuous dialectic of learning, action, and reflection (Freier, 1993; Passarelli & Kolb, 2012). Multiple modalities of critical reflection provide opportunities to connect the dots between theory, action, and systems change. Three written reflection assignments are based on the DEAL model (**D**escribe, **E**xamine, **A**rticluate **L**earning) for critical reflection and meaning-making in service-learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009). In these short papers, students 1) describe and draw linkages between concepts from the course material, 2) examine and analyze their relevance for food justice, and 3) consider how what they have learned might inform their own actions and our work at Anabel's. In addition, a portfolio paper, with eleven prompts that ask students to reflect on their personal experiences with race, food, and leadership, is coupled with weekly meetings in groups of three or four during which students share their reflections. By hearing others' responses to the same prompts, students learn from multiple perspectives that deepen their own view, help build their intercultural competence, and challenge them to examine assumptions. Students build on this practice during class discussions where they explore the course material and consider its relevance to their day-to-day work of running Anabel's. Together, these reflection practices establish trusting relationships through vulnerability and openness that become the foundation for collective decision-making and problem solving.

In addition to the two weekly class sessions with concomitant assignments, students spend four to five hours a week helping run the store and its programs. At the end of the semester, each committee presents its accomplishments and updates the committee's manual with recommendations for the next cohort. This provides important continuity while allowing the store to evolve organically as a social enterprise and a venue for public action.

Goals and Impact

One of our hopes for this practicum course is to strengthen students' capacity to respond to a rapidly changing world that faces widespread and destabilizing economic, social, and environmental crises. Our goals align with the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of the Learning Partnerships Model:

1. to foster the cognitive maturity to consider root causes of social and economic inequities and to act on this understanding;

2. to support the integration of this knowledge through an examination of multiple perspectives and a critical understanding of self in the world using reflective practices and dialogue;

3. to encourage interpersonal maturity by cultivating understanding and mutuality across difference through collaboration on a social venture; and

4. to strengthen self-confidence as well as confidence in others to transform systems by building a supportive community through the recursive cycle of action, reflection, and learning.

Our analysis of the students' reflections confirm that our social entrepreneurship practicum realizes these goals and helps build students' capacity for self-authorship and changemaking. Here, we offer brief exemplars.

Cognitive Maturity toward Changemaking
Systems thinking allows us to ask why the social and economic inequities that we observe in society are occurring. Generally, the complexity of how elements in a system interact and feed into each other to produce unjust outcomes are invisible to us. Yet, if we disregard these root causes, we perpetuate the problem. In her reflection, Julia shared that, to-date, her curricular and co-curricular work at the university hadn't asked her to consider the systemic roots of food disparities.

> I research human metabolism in at-risk populations, work with a start up company to develop a mobile app for personalized nutrition plans, and volunteer for the Food Recovery Network to reduce food waste and improve food access, yet I have never before considered the underlying cause of social health discrepancies in relation to food.

Our consideration of how forces of racism and capitalism give rise to food inequities challenged Matthew to rethink his own decisions about food. Moreover, the experience of employing resource and power sharing practices through Anabel's gave him hope that systemic change is possible.

The readings, guest lectures, conversations, and videos on capitalism in the food system have radically challenged the way I see the world. I can now place my food and decisions made around my food in this larger narrative of the commodification of life, land, and labor. I think this will inform how I approach almost every challenge or topic going forward in my life. Additionally, Anabel's has provided me with a greater degree of hope in effectively engaging in systems changing work, hope that I never really found in my developmental coursework. I have a newfound interest and hope in collective economics and coalition building—essentially more faith in the ability of humans to organize themselves.

For Natalie, the experience with Anabel's allowed her to connect theory to action and large scale to small. She was particularly struck by how intentional we must be in our everyday interactions if we are to create more equitable systems.

This semester showed me that changemaking does not happen without looking at the world under a microscope. In the act of tearing down oppressive systems, it is even more important to build a system of change that encompasses all of our goals and ideals. In building this system, we must be honest with ourselves and each other. In moving forward in my career and in life, I hope to take the tenacious work ethic with regards to changemaking that I have seen in my Anabel's peers. This outlook on life is essential in the creation of meaningful, interconnected existence on micro and macro levels.

Integrating Identity as Changemaker

Because conversations about race and capitalism are deeply connected to our personal and collective identities, they often engender emotion and anxiety. By framing racism and capitalism as complex and historically rooted systems of power, we are able to step back from the personal and avoid ideological positioning. Bolstered by our group agreements to listen with curiosity, suspend right/wrong thinking, and sit with discomfort, students develop the capacity to deconstruct their own and others' assumptions, consider diverse perspectives, and hold space for genuine dialogue. Joseph embraced the opportunity to unpack previously held beliefs. He realized that in order to truly hear different perspectives and examine his own identity, it was necessary for him to suspend his habitual right/wrong thinking.

Working at Anabel's, I did end up learning about food insecurity, racial justice, and ways to disrupt our capitalist food system, but in order to learn about these I had to remove some of my preconceived notions about them. Getting rid of previous ideas involved

diving deeper into the values of Anabel's. These values became especially important when it came to our small group discussions. I had to assume goodwill and acknowledge that there is no right or wrong way when it comes to discussing one's ideas. Coming from an upper-middle class household, I have been privileged enough to not have to experience food insecurity, so for that reason, I needed to suspend any judgement and actively listen.

For Annabelle, being able to have conversations that stretched her beyond her comfort zone ultimately gave her the confidence to have similar conversations with friends outside of class. She now feels prepared to continue this practice and learn independently.

I found myself willing to contribute to discussion more often as we got deeper into the course material as a group, and it even made me more comfortable talking about [these issues] outside of class with my friends and getting to listen to their perspectives on the course topics as well. I can clearly see how [this] supported my learning experience and it has also sparked my interest to continue learning about these topics outside of the class.

Collaborating and Learning as Equals

Interpersonal maturity is fostered when students share authority and expertise with their peers and construct knowledge together. Our nonhierarchical organizational structure and classroom culture invite students to take responsibility vis à vis others without reliance on an external authority. While uncomfortable at first, Gabby recognized that being intrinsically motivated was an important adult life skill. Moreover, by working with others who were similarly defining their own way, she came to realize how enriching it is, personally and for the collective, to make room for each person to contribute differently.

Although I was a little lost at first, I realized that this was an opportunity to finally devise goals for myself, instead of achieving the ones that other people had already laid out for me in the form of essays and tests, and to measure them with my own metrics. This class fast-forwarded the realization that I won't have letter grades forever, and that in order to own my achievements later in life, I have to continue to devise my own goals and metrics of success. [W]e're constantly being told that 'everyone is on their own journey' and that we should 'take life at our own pace.' While those words are comforting at the moment, they are quickly forgotten in the rigorous work culture of our institution and society. It is through my experiences at Anabel's that I've finally been able to internalize these words. This practicum has made me realize that no matter our background, we all have something to contribute, and

that we need not rush change, because change is slow, and it must be so in order to be sustainable.

Amanda reflected on the significance of contributing to a meaningful project with peers of different backgrounds but similar interests. What stood out was not so much the end product but the sense of connection and purpose she enjoyed.

I hadn't realized until this course how much I value working collectively and collaborating with others in a space that I care about. While I've been enjoying my time in college I think a component that I felt was missing was being engaged in the community and feeling like I was making valuable contributions as an individual. I think as students, especially, we get sucked into a tunnel of academics and stress, and lose sight of how we are contributing to our greater community. Being a part of this class brought me out of that tunnel and reminded me of the value of learning about and connecting with things that I care about, and doing that with others who come from very different backgrounds, but share similar interests.

Self-confidence and Confidence in Community to Effect Change

In this social entrepreneurship practicum, students examine the ingrained habits of mind and ways of being that underpin the dynamics of inequitable power and opportunity. They imagine and act on possibilities for a more just society. This experience of tackling the roots of an intractable problem, while also addressing the immediate need of food access, fostered self-confidence. While overwhelmed by the thought of just one person trying to change the food system, Emma felt empowered by the knowledge that others were working toward the same goal.

I believe that my greatest takeaway from this semester is the inspiration I drew from the community. I find it so exciting and motivating to see that so many other people care about the same issues that I do, and that there is a network of people all working towards the same goals. I greatly enjoyed learning about social entrepreneurship and how to reconstruct the workplace into a more open and inclusive environment. At times, thinking about the global food chain is overwhelming and even more so when thinking about ways to address such large issues. However, having the knowledge that there are people out there working towards creating just and sustainable food systems, and having worked closely with some of them, inspires me to continue to want to work in the food industry even with knowledge of all its shortcomings.

For Matt, being part of a workplace community that was transparent and inclusive and where relationships matter was a welcome reprieve from the highly competitive environment he was accustomed to. He realized that this alternative not only works, but works well, and now envisions himself as someone who can help create similar spaces.

[T]hrough Anabel's I have become part of an amazing community of people. Anabel's has been an oasis from the competitive, individualistic culture that dominates. The flat governance and open book financial structure was so different from anything that I'm used to that at first it was disorienting. I look forward to sharing this experience in the future, doing what I can do to cultivate this kind of workplace; work where social relations are not treated as irrelevant but are instead an essential part of the work itself. I do not think this diminishes or takes away from the work, but actually enriches it.

Implications for Teaching and Learning

Our practice contributes to the learning outcomes of community-engaged curricula by supporting students to become changemakers who:

1. analyze the systemic forces that give rise to social, economic and environmental inequities;

2. engage with others in honest, reflective dialogue and openly examine held beliefs and knowledge;

3. cultivate trusting, caring relationships as a foundation for collaborative action and decision-making; and

4. become confident in themselves and others to bring about meaningful change toward a more just world.

We ask our students to do more than just work together on a project; we ask them to step out of their comfort zones, be vulnerable, question held beliefs, and innovate and co-create across differences of identity and experience. These are fundamental skills and abilities for community-based justice work.

To this end, openness, listening, and empathy are modeled in the classroom and reflected in our organization's declared agreements (assume goodwill; be our word; experience the edges; respect autonomy; design for the margins; create to regenerate; and recognize that impact matters). Mirroring principles of intergroup dialogue (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012) and human-centered design (Sinha, 2020), these agreements provide an important touchstone

for how we work together and in service to others. Moreover, by studying the historical and interdependent dynamics of economic and social systems, students learn to appreciate how we are all affected by the inequities our current systems produce, yet none of us is personally to blame for their existence. Similarly, when mistakes occur at Anabel's, we look at our internal operating systems to ask why they happened, rather than seek blame or fault. Thus liberated from the fear of being wrong, students are more willing to engage in difficult conversations, take responsibilty, pursue creative ideas, and support each other in finding solutions. Reflecting on her experience within the dominant culture that prizes self-reliance, perfectionism, urgency, and productivity, Katie described Anabel's as a welcome antidote.

> This entire semester I feel as if I've been on the edge of an entirely new world at our university. For my first two years (pre-pandemic), my lifestyle revolved around studying in libraries until midnight and 'grinding' on problem sets non-stop on weekends. I was always rushing towards the next thing and stacking my calendar back to back with barely any time to breathe. Anabel's and the community I found here have been a breath of fresh air. Anabel's culture of listening and assuming goodwill has created a safe and open space for me to explore. I found myself encouraged to be curious and try out new things, and not only that, I felt it was celebrated. It made me all the more engaged. I've also changed personally. I can now go on hour-long walks without feeling anxious or needing to be working. I feel as though, finally, I can stop and smell the roses.

Herein, we believe, lies the genesis of the intrinsic motivation we see amongst our students and their growing sense of agency as problem solvers and changemakers. It's not so much what they are doing, but how. For Sylvie, this practicum in social entrepreneurship gave her a new understanding of herself in the world as well as the skills and confidence to work with others toward a more just world.

> Anabel's helped me be intentional with what I create and consume and how I relate with others and the world. It has helped empower me to share my thoughts with others in a way that helps promote justice. I hope to carry the confidence I have after being in this course with me as I continue to live and love and create and try to work towards justice in the world.

Next Steps

Cultivating and acting on being a changemaker are lifelong endeavors. Student reflections from this collaboration between an academic course and a social venture confirm that a community-based learning practice can support them on this journey. By validating students as equal partners in a real world social justice project, giving them agency to make decisions and mistakes together, and challenging them to examine systems as historically rooted and socially constructed, we embolden students to be creative, courageous, and connected to others. This experience fostered in our students a deeper understanding of injustices in society and cultivated individual and collective agency to effect change.

Yet, such intensive practicum experiences require considerable resources and university buy-in. If they are to be supported, assessments that confirm their short and long term impacts are essential. This article is based on evidence from students' immediate reflections of their experience. We plan to interview students at two and five-year intervals to understand how the confidence they gained from this practicum may inform their personal, professional and civic engagement as changemakers. ∎

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