Teaching About Substance Use Recovery: The Pedagogical Power of Community-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Community-based learning (CBL) is a form of experiential learning that integrates academic theory and content with active service in an applied setting. CBL is especially well suited for teaching about complex social issues. We present the case study of a psychology course on substance use recovery that leverages CBL to dismantle stereotypes, humanize a highly stigmatized mental health problem facing society, and afford students the opportunity to consider their own privilege and positionality.

Keywords: community-based learning, social problems, substance use recovery, mental health stigma

COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING: INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Community-based learning (CBL) is a form of experiential learning in which students integrate their academic content knowledge with the applied practice of that knowledge beyond the classroom (Kuh et al., 2008). By providing active learning experiences and the opportunity to observe and interact with themes from the course content in their natural ecology, CBL develops critical thinking skills, not just in *acquiring* knowledge, but in *enacting* that knowledge. As such, CBL serves as a powerful complement to traditional classroom-based learning, affording what in-class learning alone cannot accomplish, namely, practice *being* in the diverse, complicated world. In turn, local organizations receive volunteers who can contribute to their daily operations, thus promoting their larger goals and visions.

CBL is particularly well suited to teaching about social problems. When students partner with community service organizations, they serve far more than their observational roles. In joining an organization whose mission aims to promote social justice, students can begin to see themselves as agents of social change and civic engagement (Egan-Simon, 2022; Green et al., 2022). By seeing how complex social problems unfold, students can wrestle with the structures and systems that maintain such problems, gain a measure of cultural competence and responsibility (Salam et al., 2019), and, through these often intangible learning experiences, encounter tremendous personal growth (Meyers, 2009). In particular, they can develop a sense of self that is positioned within the larger context of society (Brewster, 2018), where all selves necessarily exist relative to one another.

By placing students in professional situations in which they forge relationships with others who are often not their social peers, CBL also cultivates portable skills that will extend beyond their time in academic settings. Students improve their communication skills, develop independent work habits, and expand their critical thinking ability (Salam et al., 2019), thus contributing to their emerging professional identity (Green et al., 2022). It is possible to develop these skills in classroom settings, but the process is often slow and incomplete. CBL accomplishes this goal more efficiently and wholly. As the professional world becomes increasingly diverse, attending to this goal is ever more crucial to ensure future student success.

CBL also has implications for inclusive pedagogy. Higher education is known to produce equity gaps in access, opportunity, and, consequently, achievement that disproportionately affect students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Many of these equity gaps are linked to conventional ways of defining and constructing knowledge and traditional methods of student assessment such as standardized exams (Posselt et al., 2012). CBL is one alternative approach to traditional teaching that has been shown to promote academic success in students from historically oppressed groups (Sterk Barrett & Jenkins, 2018), with, for instance, some evidence of greater improvement in civic engagement attitudes and skills among students of color compared to white students (Elbers Carlisle et al., 2020). Because the *knowledge* that is derived from CBL is experiential in nature, the social dynamics that can especially thwart the expression of learning among marginalized students in a traditional classroom exert less influence. Thus, learning through doing empowers such students to voice their perspectives in an academic environment in which they are the frequent minority.

WHY COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING TO TEACH ABOUT SUBSTANCE USE RECOVERY?

Recovery from substance use problems remains one of society's more polarizing social issues. Stigma surrounding substance use disorders exceeds negative attitudes toward other mental health problems (Kilian et al., 2021); discriminatory attitudes and behaviors have been documented even among healthcare professionals (Bielenberg et al., 2021). Substance use problems are often perceived as the consequence of individual moral failing, with insufficient regard for the inequitable social structures that help create, then maintain, them. Thus, CBL provides at least two pathways toward greater understanding of substance use in societal context. By providing first-hand exposure to substance use recovery, CBL humanizes and centers the voices of people who use substances, thus helping to dispel myths, stereotypes, and stigma surrounding substance use behavior. To borrow the words of author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), CBL helps dismantle the "single story" students may have about people who use substances. This type of learning can be especially useful for students who lack experiential proximity to substance use problems, as it provides a tangible anchor for their conceptual understanding. There is nothing like seeing first-hand that which one is trying to understand.

CBL also helps position substance use recovery in the context of social structures. Research reveals inequities in resource allocation for substance use recovery, with people of color and others with marginalized identities frequently excluded from research (e.g., Eghaneyan et al., 2020; Gilbert et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2020). These omissions contribute to epistemic injustice and highlight the inadequacies of treatment approaches that were historically developed for (and often by) members of the majority.

For instance, recent evidence indicates that many extant approaches to substance use recovery underperform among people of color (Jordan et al., 2022). These findings reflect broader underlying structures of privilege and power that transcend the substance use field. These themes can sometimes prove elusive to students in the classroom, but CBL provides an opportunity to *see* them operate in societal context.

SUBSTANCE USE, MISUSE, AND ABUSE: A CBL CASE STUDY

Substance Use, Misuse, and Abuse is a seminar-style psychology course populated by third- and fourth-year undergraduate students who have previously taken several psychology courses, including a survey course about mental health that covers basic content about substance use disorders. In order to facilitate class discussion and otherwise preserve the intimate seminar environment, enrollment is capped at 12 students per offering. The course, which meets weekly for two and a half hours, addresses a range of topics in the substance use field, including familial transmission of substance use problems, legal debates such as the minimum legal drinking age and the legalization of cannabis use, and structural barriers to treatment seeking and receipt. Course objectives include the development of content knowledge about substance use, the ability to critique common assumptions about persons who experience substance use problems, interrogation of the historical, social, and cultural context of substance use, improvement in written and oral communication skills, and the application of scholarly knowledge from the substance use field to a real-world setting. To achieve these objectives, students read a combination of primary and secondary sources from the academic substance use literature throughout the semester, and class meetings are organized around instructor- and peer-led discussion (but not lecture) of these sources. Course assignments assess comprehension and engagement with the substance use literature in both written and oral format. For instance, students prepare a formal oral research presentation and written research paper on a substance use topic of their choosing. The applied, experiential aspects of the course goals are addressed through a formal CBL placement that occurs outside class time, as described further below.

CBL at our institution is formally sponsored by an office of CBL, teaching, and engaged scholarship that is staffed by a director, an associate director, and an assistant director. The office supports individual faculty members who wish to incorporate community engagement into their teaching and/or research and offers professional development opportunities, such as teaching and scholarship resources, workshops with other community engaged faculty, information about academic journals and conferences on engaged learning, and small grants for engaged teaching and research. The CBL office builds and maintains relationships with community organizations who can offer, and would themselves benefit from, student volunteers and researchers. The office helps match these organizations to specific courses whose content aligns with the services they provide and then, during those course offerings, coordinates communication with the organizations to ensure that their goals are being met through our students' contributions. CBL occurs in person and on site, and the office provides transportation for students. Students are expected to participate in CBL at least two hours per week for the duration of a semester-long course, and many sites have a manager who delegates their tasks and supervises their activities. Students who successfully complete the CBL component of a course receive a CBL designation on their academic transcript in addition to the course grade to recognize the additional time and effort required. Successful completion of CBL is determined in large part based on feedback from the CBL site regarding each student's

attendance and active participation in the activities of the organization; this feedback is solicited and collated by the CBL office to finalize the transcript designation. The resources provided by the CBL office greatly assist faculty in their teaching and scholarship and represent a substantial institutional commitment to the success of experiential learning. Without this extensive support, execution of CBL, in this and any other course, would require much greater labor on the part of the instructor.

For the CBL component of *Substance Use, Misuse, and Abuse*, students worked with a community organization in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts. Community partners fell into two broad categories: organizations that directly serve individuals in recovery from substance use problems (e.g., residential treatment centers), and those whose clientele may well include individuals recovering from substance use problems but whose primary objective is to provide other types of social services (e.g., food distribution programs). Different types of community partners were selected for this course to capture the multitude of ways that substance use affects individuals and society. Limiting CBL experiences to contexts that directly interface with substance use (for example, treatment centers) would miss crucial opportunities to connect substance use problems with the larger societal structures that help create them and influence how they are experienced and resolved. Thus, by offering students CBL options that relate to the course topic in different ways, our goal was to expand the breadth of our students' CBL learning. For each course offering, we partnered with two recovery centers and one or two other service organizations, with 70-75% of the students being assigned to the former. Students self-selected their CBL site primarily based on their weekly schedule (as many community partners accepted volunteers only at specific times). Depending on the students' schedule, they visited their CBL sites individually or in groups of two or three. Although students only worked with one community partner, because our class discussions fostered an open exchange of perspectives from different CBL sites, they learned, from the testimonials of their peers, how substance use operates in society in ways other than what they themselves observed at their own site.

In order to help students integrate their experiential learning with the academic material of the course, we conducted several formal CBL-related class activities. For example, early in the course, students completed a "stereotype activity" (adapted from Hartman et al., 2013) that highlights the stigmatizing labels often placed upon people who use substances. At the midpoint of the semester, CBL office staff visited the class to facilitate a formal reflection session where students shared CBL experiences with their peers and connected them to broader themes of social justice and community engagement. On another occasion, students completed a worksheet in which they explicitly linked course themes (e.g., "Access to resources is inequitably distributed such that certain groups are less likely to seek and/or receive services to address their substance use problems") to specific CBL observations. In addition to these ungraded class reflections, students completed graded assignments in which they integrated their CBL experiences with academic course material, culminating in a formal oral presentation and final reflection paper. Source material for these assignments included not only students' CBL experiences and research articles from the substance use literature (from the course syllabus), but also scholarship on engaged learning that addressed some of CBL's more intangible learning outcomes, such as awareness of privilege, social positionality, and social transformation. In addition to these formal reflections and assignments, students were encouraged to discuss CBL experiences at any time in class. By infusing CBL throughout the semester, we aimed to connect students' experiential learning with the course content at

all times. This level of attention to CBL also provided sustained opportunities to address some of the more challenging aspects of teaching about substance use and the complexities of working with community partners.

Students accrued a variety of CBL experiences in this course. Students who partnered with treatment centers observed (or even co-facilitated) discussion groups with the residents about life in recovery, including their substance use history, triggers for relapse, and long-term life goals. During these discussions, students applied their course content knowledge, such as familial transmission of substance use problems or theories of behavior change in substance use recovery. A theme that often emerged in students' accounts was the importance of motivational enhancement for substance use recovery, which we discussed in class. The students also reported spending unstructured time with the residents, often during mealtimes in a social companion role. Here, too, meaningful human connections were forged. Without a formal agenda, the students and residents were free to share common interests in music, entertainment, sports, and food, all of which served to humanize the person behind the (substance use) behavior. As such, through explicit connections to course readings and class discussions, as well as through live, everyday human interactions with people experiencing substance use recovery, students acquired a more holistic perspective on the subject matter of the course.

Students who partnered with other social service organizations such as food distribution centers played a social service volunteer role. They greeted clients, stocked shelves, gave food and other supplies to clients, and cooked or wrapped food. These organizations often aim to serve the city's most vulnerable populations, disproportionately people of color, including those who use substances and/or have other mental health problems, experience prostitution, or are unhoused. Students who worked with them observed the multiple, complex contexts of the clientele and the ways in which societal structures interact with individual lives. As such, many of the broader themes of the course material, including economic disadvantage, structural racism, and social positionality and privilege appeared in students' observations. For instance, some monolingual students reported needing to become more attentive to their nonverbal communication skills in order to fulfill their volunteer obligations, as language barriers were common among the clientele they were serving. Others noted how leaving the CBL site at the end of a shift to return to their well-resourced campus environment highlighted their privilege. Because students who worked with treatment centers shared some of these observations, our class-wide discussions allowed students to connect their own CBL experiences to those of their peers and, in so doing, collectively make meaning of their experiential learning outcomes.

At the end of the course, students completed separate anonymous evaluations for the course overall and the CBL component. The evaluation forms for the CBL component, which include both quantitative metrics and qualitative assessment, were designed by the CBL office for use across all courses with a CBL component. The CBL office administers these forms and sends survey results to faculty after the course has concluded (and course grades have been submitted). The data presented below are derived from these CBL evaluation forms. This work was determined to be research exempt from the local Institutional Review Board.

Student Perspectives on CBL

Our assessment data are based on 32 student responses on the CBL evaluation forms from three consecutive offerings of the course (2018, 2022, and 2023). Enrollment in the course was similar across the three years (12 students in 2018, 11 students in 2022, and 12 students in 2023), and participation in the CBL evaluation process was also high (92% in

2018, 91% in 2022, and 92% in 2023). No student who was present for the CBL evaluation declined to participate; reasons for absences included illness and travel. Table 1 shows quantitative survey data collected from students in this time period. Students evaluated the extent to which their CBL experience in this course produced each learning outcome on a scale from 1 ("strongly agree") to 4 ("strongly disagree"). With few exceptions, students provided positive appraisals about their personal and intellectual growth, their appreciation for cultural diversity and societal issues, and connections between learning in the classroom and beyond. They also reported, with a high degree of uniformity, that incorporating CBL into the course was valuable.

Table 1
Student Evaluations of CBL Learning Outcomes (N = 32 from 2018, 2022, and 2023 combined)

M/SD	Observed Range	Question
1.25/0.62	1-3	My CBL experience increased my interest in community engagement.
1.28/0.52	1-3	My CBL experience helped me to grow intellectually.
1.25/0.51	1-3	My CBL experience helped me to grow personally.
1.06/0.25	1-2	My CBL experience helped me to gain a deeper understanding of problems facing society.
1.13/0.34	1-2	My CBL experience helped me to gain greater appreciation for cultural diversity.
1.16/0.57	1-4	My CBL experience helped me to see how the content of this course connects to the real world.
1.16/0.45	1-3	My CBL experience helped me to learn more deeply than I otherwise would have.
1.31/0.64	1-4	It was clear to me how the community placement or project component of this course related to course learning objectives.
1.16/0.37	1-2	I learn better when I apply classroom material to real experience.
1.28/0.52	1-3	The benefits of including CBL in this course were worth the time it took to fulfill the CBL requirements.
1.16/0.37	1-3	It was valuable to include CBL in this course.

Open-ended student comments from the CBL evaluations support the quantitative data. A commonly reported theme was that, through CBL, students learned to go "beyond their comfort zone" to embrace new experiences, often forging relationships with members of society they might not otherwise have encountered. In so doing, they humanized not only the particular individuals they met, but also, more broadly, people who use substances. These sentiments appear in the following two responses to the question on the evaluation form, "What was the most meaningful aspect of your community-based learning experience in this course?"

> I've been able to talk to the people that I would otherwise not have a chance to. It is important to me that, through the process of talking, I learned that my previous view on them was narrow. I learned that they are just the same human being as we are. I think it was most meaningful to get to know the men at [name of treatment facility] and break down my own preconceptions regarding substance use.

Relatedly, students reported that CBL helped dismantle the "single story" (Adichie, 2009) of people who use substances:

> I learned the danger of believing a single story or preconceived notion about a person, a group of people, or even a place. By spending time at my CBL site, I was able to see through the ideas that I had wrongly formed and get to know people for who they are.

Through CBL, students also connected the course content to broader social issues. In response to the question, "What have you learned through participating in CBL this semester that you might not otherwise have learned?", two students wrote:

> I would not have known as much about the connection between course topics and food insecurity and poverty that I witnessed during CBL.
>
> Systemic issues in substance abuse treatment… the people who often need more help are systemically given less.

CBL also provided students the opportunity to reflect on their own privilege and social position:

> I think it reminded me of my privilege, not that I didn't already know. However, I was able to see so many aspects of my privilege that I should be grateful for each day. Including, mental health and my [name of institution] education.

In sum, based on their accounts, CBL appears to be well received among our students. However, we do note that the assessment instrument we used to evaluate its success was developed by our CBL office for use across all CBL courses. Future research should consider utilizing validated measures that more directly address the unique aspects of experiential learning about substance use. In addition, our survey questions are positively worded, which could bias student responses in favor of CBL. Our small sample also precludes a systematic qualitative analysis of the open-ended student comments, and the quotes we include above were selected to support our argument. Relatedly, our small sample does not permit formal comparisons of student learning across CBL sites. These limitations notwithstanding, overall, CBL, as implemented in our course, appears to achieve many of the learning goals that the pedagogical integration of theory and practice would predict: Students dismantle previously conceived notions of the course's subject matter, consider the impacts of broad social systems and structures, and reflect upon their own positionality.

INSIGHTS FOR SERVICE-LEARNING PRACTITIONERS

As the assessment data above show, students benefit greatly from the incorporation of CBL in *Substance Use, Misuse, and Abuse*.

It enables them to integrate their learning, combat stereotypes, interrogate systemic injustices, and develop empathy for a stigmatized, underserved population. These results reaffirm our rationale for investing the time, energy, and space to incorporate CBL in this course. More broadly, the success of CBL in this course highlights insights for service-learning practitioners. Our first insight is that incorporating CBL into teaching is effortful (Cooper, 2014), and that, without that effort, CBL can be a pedagogy that seems supplemental at best or one that reinforces stereotypes at worst. But we maintain that the substantial effort required to center CBL as a fundamental, not auxiliary, component of a course is worthwhile because, when done well, it demonstrably transforms both students and teachers.

In order for CBL to be effective, considerable labor is required to develop student learning goals, reflection exercises, and meaningful assessment, especially as traditional modes of teaching and learning may not always be useful. Rather, creativity is required to establish attainable objectives that promote student success, from the development of interpersonal skills such as relationship-building and empathy, to the planning of class meetings to include critical reflection regarding self and society and the construction of assignments that capture seemingly diffuse experiential learning outcomes. This creative thinking requires research, collaboration with colleagues who may be in different disciplines and academic programs (or even at different institutions), and the willingness to remain nimble and flexible, as students' needs may shift unexpectedly as they encounter experiences beyond the relatively controlled space of the classroom.

Navigating student discussions about CBL also poses challenges. A common complaint from students is that their CBL learning is not sufficiently concrete or active. The shift from "doing" to "being" can create tension for students who have, perhaps throughout their academic lives, been asked to produce tangible evidence of their learning. Thoughtful responses to such critiques are necessary, not only to teach students the subject matter, but also to nurture their identity as meaningful contributors to a democratic society. When service-learning practitioners do not attend to positional identity—both of their students and of the people they encounter in their service activities—they risk doing exactly what some critics argue CBL may do: perpetuate stereotypes, alienate students inside and outside the classroom (especially students from historically marginalized social groups), and burden, rather than assist, community partners in meeting their goals (Mitchell et al., 2012; Tryon et al., 2008).

Despite the effort required to implement CBL well, we strongly advocate for this type of experiential learning. As the above assessment data demonstrate, we witness students experiencing immense growth year after year. As teachers, we have also evolved. The intentional creativity required to implement CBL effectively has transformed the way we understand teaching and learning. Rather than illustrating a one-sided practice flowing from teacher to student, CBL helps to redefine a shared process of knowledge construction in which the community partner and their clientele, the students, and the instructor all contribute. CBL also helps build interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and multi-institutional partnerships in teaching and learning. For us teachers, this evolution then influences how we approach our teaching philosophy, our scholarship, and service to our institution and to society. As such, CBL not only affects the specific courses in which we introduce it but also carries the potential to build powerful, reciprocal pathways that inform numerous realms of our professional practice.

CONCLUSION

Through the case study of a psychology course on substance use recovery, we have presented the power of CBL as a teaching tool that dispels myth and stereotype, facilitates genuine human connection, and links academic material to society in action. Our findings indicate that students respond favorably to this type of learning and, in the short span of an academic semester, undergo remarkable growth. We underscore the importance of prioritizing CBL in one's teaching, not as a supplemental activity, but rather for the core purpose of educating minds and nurturing identities, which ultimately benefits not only the students but also the instructor and the community partners. Future practitioners of CBL would benefit from reflecting on its many teaching applications, as well as its potential to influence other layers of their professional identities. Despite the considerable effort required to implement it effectively, we nonetheless strongly endorse adopting CBL for its power to transform students. In the case of this particular course on one of the most stigmatized mental health problems currently facing society, CBL constitutes a powerful mechanism for students to confront stereotypes, forge meaningful human connections, and reflect on their own social roles as they encounter civic engagement in their personal and professional development.

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