COMMUNITY-ENGAGED PEDAGOGY BY DESIGN: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

C.L. Blitz, I. Yanovitzky, D. Amiel

Rutgers University (UNITED STATES)

Abstract

Community-engaged learning (CEL) offers a rich, authentic, and motivating context for learning that stimulates academic growth and civic education. Despite the well documented benefits of CEL pedagogy, a robust approach to incorporating CEL into the curriculum is yet to emerge. Typical CEL applications include use of guest speakers, field trips, applied projects, and internship opportunities to connect students with communities, but the overall approach has been criticized for being overly student-focused with much less emphasis on the benefits to the partnering community. The integration of CEL with community-based participatory research (CBPR) has significant potential to transform students' learning experience while directly benefiting the community. This paper describes one such application and reports findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of contributions to students' learning experience and learning outcomes as well as to partnering communities. Based on multiple successful replications of this particular CEL model, a case is made for pursuing a university-community partnership model of CEL that builds on institutional infrastructure and a clear community-engaged educational vision to facilitate the system-level integration of community-engaged pedagogy into the learning experience of students by building and maintaining robust, long-term, and mutually beneficial partnerships with communities.

Keywords: higher education, elementary and secondary education, problem-based pedagogy, community-engaged learning, community partnerships.

1 INTRODUCTION

Community-engaged learning (CEL) offers a rich, authentic, and motivating context for deep learning and stimulates academic growth and civic education. By studying and addressing real-world problems facing communities—whether related to health, the environment, or social justice—student learning is transformed from a passive to an active form of engagement that is complex and challenging but also highly relevant and consequential. CEL is broadly defined as situating structured learning experiences within the context of a community setting [1-2]. CEL is firmly grounded in an experiential education pedagogy which seeks to connect abstract and concrete learning and encourage a deeper engagement by students with subject matters by including and incorporating communities into the learning experience, both inside and outside the classroom. By having learners be part of the learning process as actors, not as passive recipients of knowledge, experiential education can promote engaged and deep learning along four critical dimensions: the *developmental* dimension (intellectual complexity and growth); the *holistic* dimension (mastering multiple domains of learning, e.g., cognitive, emotional, and social); the *integrative* dimension (integrating knowledge from different perspectives and sources); and the *contextual* dimension (situating knowledge in relevant contexts). These dimensions, when activated, can make a student's learning experience transformational.

Despite the well documented benefits of CEL pedagogy [2], a robust approach to incorporating CEL into the curriculum is yet to emerge. CEL typically encompasses activities designed to connect students with a particular community such as via inviting guest speakers from the community, organizing field trips, designing community-based applied projects, and sponsoring internship and mentoring opportunities for students in a community setting. This form of CEL is very similar to traditional service-learning approaches in that it is almost exclusively student-focused [1]. That is, such community engagement activities are frequently completed during a specified academic schedule and are connected to specific course assignments students must complete to demonstrate mastery of knowledge and competencies. Many educational institutions readily embrace CEL to raise the profile or reputation of the institution as being integrated into the community. However, this approach to CEL is not necessarily community-focused because it tends to overlook issues or needs that matter the most to a community, generally ignores the burden imposed on the community from having to accommodate students' learning and schedules, and too often does not produce any tangible products of value to the community—all of which

appear to violate the key principle of reciprocity and mutual benefit that underlies community engagement [3].

The integration of CEL with community-based participatory research (CBPR) opens the door to CEL that is both student and community-centered. CBPR embraces principles of community empowerment and promotes collaborative and equitable partnerships that both leverage and build communities capacity to address local challenges and pursue opportunities to improve community wellness. Because CBPR aims to facilitate both co-learning (the reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, and capacity) and co-production (collaborations between producers and users of research to generate new knowledge), it provides the opportunity to connect learning with social action while incorporating mindful of equity, diversity, and inclusion principles, and therefore also stimulates greater critical thinking and reflection in the context of addressing real-world problems [3-4].

1.1 CBPR-Based Community-Engaged Learning Model

Our program of applied dissemination and implementation research in the fields of public health (IY) and K-12 education (CB and DA) naturally invites opportunities to partner with diverse stakeholders and community-based organizations to improve health and educational outcomes for all individuals and communities. The research-based partnerships we established with organizations and/or groups of practitioners in the communities we serve closely adhere to CBPR principles and practices in that they center on co-learning and co-production to identify, analyze, prioritize, and address a diverse range of public health and educational challenges faced by local communities, including tobacco, alcohol and drug addiction; HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment; gun violence; food insecurity; childhood obesity; youth depression and suicide; improving access to STEM and computer science education to students from socially marginalized or disadvantaged groups; and expanding access to and utilization of mental health services to adolescents in schools, to name a few. This type of engaged research work affords significant opportunities for students (primarily college undergraduates and graduates, but also middle and high school students) to participate and benefit from CEL.

For the past 15 years, we have been teaching several college-level courses that integrate CEL with CBPR. These courses share a common commitment to problem-based learning and are pedagogically designed to allow students to acquire key competencies and tools needed to develop and implement effective interventions and/or solve problems of practice. Examples of competencies include informed application of relevant theories or frameworks; search, retrieval, and screening of problem-relevant information from diverse sources; appropriate use of research and non-research evidence to inform analyses; critical thinking; and communication and presentation skills. Example of relevant tools or practices include SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) and problem analysis; behavioral and audience/stakeholder analysis; intervention design; communication/engagement plan; and program implementation and evaluation. The curriculum and instructional design of these courses emphasize scaffolding (i.e., the delivery of content and learning experiences such that key concepts and competencies build upon one another): students first acquire key concepts and tools (e.g., major theories or analytical tools), they use these next to analyze and reflect on relevant problems or applications, and finally apply them first-hand to a real-world problem. The delivery of course content follows the same principle: students are instructed to read unit-relevant materials and produce a personal reflection in advance of each class meeting; they then discuss the topic with other students in class with the instructor acting as a facilitator of class discussion; they complete an initial series of assignments requiring them to critically reflect on major concepts, tools, or applications; and finally work to develop an intervention or a solution to a relevant problem of their choice using the knowledge and competencies they acquire in the course.

The community engagement component of these courses is designed to both reinforce and enhance students' learning experience. By actively collaborating with community partners on developing and implementing potentially effective solutions to problems experienced by the community, students are afforded opportunities to investigate and evaluate lived experiences of community members; compare and connect the knowledge and competencies they acquire in the course to these experience as means to forming a more complete understanding of problems, including greater sensitivity to equity, diversity, and inclusion dimensions; test and reflect on their ability to apply the knowledge and competencies they acquire in the real-world (i.e., outside of the classroom and college); and perhaps most importantly, learn from the experiences and expertise of the practitioners and/or community partners they collaborate with on the project. Because this type of project requires teamwork, students also have an opportunity to experience first-hand working in teams to produce solutions to problems, with all associated benefits and challenges of working in this setting. For their part, practitioners and community partners welcome

the opportunity to collaborate with students on solving problems of practice or addressing challenges identified by the community. Students use the knowledge, competencies, and tools they acquire in class to connect community partners with relevant knowledge base (since few, if any, have access to research libraries), translate or interpret knowledge for practitioners, support critical analytical and planning functions, and often provide a fresh perspective regarding problems and solutions. In this way, students and community partners/practitioners are able to engage in co-learning and co-production activities that are both rewarding and mutually beneficial despite being challenging.

1.1.1 Illustrative Example of Implementation

We briefly describe here a recent application of the CEL model outlined above to provide additional logistic and practical details for interested readers. The community partner for this particular class project was an organization working to mitigate the devastating effects of prescription opioid abuse in the community. Through its interactions with members of the community and other stakeholders (public emergency officials, law enforcement representatives, pain medicine experts, school personnel, etc.), the organization learned about the significant potential for adolescents to become addicted to opioids once that are prescribed these drugs by a provider for an athletic-related or other injury. Representatives from the organization came to class at the beginning of the semester to educate them about this issue and invite them to collaborate on identifying a feasible and timely potential solution. Students and partners collaborated on determining research questions of interests, potentially useful information sources that students may explore, and a co-production work plan (including frequency of interactions, major tasks and responsibilities, project timeline, and project deliverables). Students were divided into small groups (4-5 members each) and each group was tasked with exploring an alternative solution to the problem.

Partners engaged with the groups throughout the semester to brainstorm, offer feedback and guidance, and update on any new developments or initiatives that may be relevant to this effort. Students were able to use regularly scheduled class time (one of two weekly class sessions) to make progress on tasks and to share their progress with other groups to enhance the collective learning experience. Teams worked progressively to analyze and synthesize research findings into an intervention plan using tools they acquired in class (e.g., logic models). Project deliverables included a strategy brief outlining the rationale and components of the proposed intervention and an oral presentation of the plan to the community partners. To incentivize teams' work, students were told that the community partners, by virtue of being seasoned professionals with relevant real-world experience, will be selecting the plan that has the highest likelihood of being effective in their judgment, and that members of the team "winning their account" will receive extra course credit, resulting in a higher final grade. Students presented their ideas and plans to the leadership of the partnering organization at the end of the semester (although, in general, students work to meet the timeline of community partners, which may or may not track the academic semester).

The plan selected involved distributing to parents or guardians of adolescents, with the help of youth coaches and schools, a wallet-size cards listing 10 important questions that parents should ask when their child is prescribed opioids (e.g., whether it was necessary to prescribe opioids, any alternative treatments to opioids, proper use of the medication, warning signs of possible addiction to look for, etc.). The organization moved next to mass-produce these cards and distribute them widely in the community, as well as incorporating this information in all other public communications (the organization's website, newsletters, outdoor advertising, and news coverage).

2 METHODOLOGY

To assess the degree to which this particular CEL model enhances students' learning experience and also benefit community partners, we utilized a mixed-method approach. Self-reported data regarding student experience were extracted from the anonymous teaching evaluations provided by students taking the course described in the illustrative example above. The course has been offered regularly for the past 15 years, each time using the same content, pedagogy, format, and instructor (which are therefore fixed across repeated applications of the same course) but with each application involving a different community partner and a different problem the class took on. Some examples include collaborating with a mental health advocacy organization to promote use of a new mental health emergency hotline; working with local school boards to address food insecurity among children from low-income families; partnering with local community groups to provide transportation to clinics and childcare options for parents coping with drug addiction; and, most recently, supporting efforts by community health workers to increase rates of COVID-19 vaccination in urban minority communities statewide. Anonymous course evaluations obtained from the pool of undergraduate students (N = 377)

who completed this course across 13 separate replications were included in this analysis. The inventory of self-reported learning experience measures collected from students (see Table 1) was identical throughout, and because the course was offered during different semesters, weekdays, and times, there is no a priori reason to suspect potential selection bias in the profile of students taking the course other than their interest in the topic.

Data regarding community partners' assessment of the co-production and co-learning process and any benefits to the organization and the community more broadly was obtained from brief qualitative interviews with individuals in partnering organizations or agencies who closely collaborated with students (N = 13). In all cases, the brief interview was conducted immediately at the conclusion of the class project (primarily for quality control and improvement reasons), and included questions regarding motivations to collaborate with students, highlights and challenges of the collaboration, evaluation of students' performance against partner's initial expectations, and any benefits of the collaboration to the organization and community at-large.

3 RESULTS

Table 1 compares the pooled means (or weighted means of means) of ratings provided by students across the 13 course replications to the pooled means of ratings provided by students in the norm group (i.e., students taking courses in the same major and the same level during the same semester). Rating data are summarized in this way to allow instructors to compare their course to similar courses taught at the same unit on an identical set of quality performance indicators. While the use of pooled means cannot support direct comparisons to other courses, it does provide a useful benchmark for comparisons given that data were pooled from multiple replications. The comparison of mean student ratings demonstrates that students who completed the CBPR-based CEL course consistently rated their learning experience more favourably than students in standard (lecture-based) courses in terms the instructional methods used, knowledge acquired, and overall quality. The nontrivial mean difference (ranging from 0.42-0.54, or about half a point on a 1-5 scale) is particularly impressive given that students completing the CBPR-based CEL course reported on average a lower level of interest in the subject matter compared to students in the norm group, and despite the average high ratings of courses taught by the unit.

Table 1. A Comparison of Average Ratings for Course Quality Between Students in CBPR-Based CEL Courses and Students in Standard (Lecture-Based) Courses.

	Average Course Rating (SD)	***Average Rating of Norm Group Courses (SD)***	***Mean Difference (SE)***
I had a strong prior interest in the subject matter and wanted to take this course§	3.08 (1.04)	3.67 (1.10)	-.59 (.064)**
The instructional methods encouraged student learning §	4.64 (0.56)	4.22 (1.18)	.42 (.063)**
I learned a great deal in this course §	4.72 (0.81)	4.18 (1.27)	.54 (.069)**
I rate the overall quality of the course as: 1=P (Poor), 2=F (Fair), 3=A (Average), 4=G (Good), 5=E (Excellent)	4.59 (0.23)	4.10 (1.12)	.49 (.058)**

NOTE: SD = Standard Deviation of Pooled Mean; SE = Standard Error of Mean Difference.
§Rating scale: 1=SD (Strongly Disagree), 2=D (Disagree), 3=N (Neutral), 4=A (Agree), 5=SA (Strongly Agree).
*** p < .001*

The qualitative comments students provided are particularly telling regarding the impact of CBPR-based CEL course on their learning experience. Some representative comments include the following:

"Really loved the fact that we got to work with a real client! I wish all courses had the opportunity to work with a real client."

"I enjoyed the group project that spanned the entire semester the most, because it helped with networking with seasoned professionals and building friendships outside of the class."

“I learned a lot in this course, and it was beneficial working in groups every week to get to know other students, apply our knowledge to different scenarios, and hear other people's points-of-view.”

“I enjoyed having the ability to directly apply what I was learning in class through group work each week. I believe it reinforced what we were learning very well. I also appreciate the opportunity to receive feedback from [community partner] so that we could continuously improve our knowledge and performance.”

The community partners we interviewed were equally positive and enthusiastic about the experience they had collaborating with students. Key themes emerging from the interviews include (1) being impressed with how quickly students formed a complete and nuanced understanding of why and how the community is experiencing the problem; (2) students asking great questions and partners sharing from their knowledge and experience when answering questions; (3) students finding and sharing relevant research that offered new insights regarding the problem and/or its solution; (4) students proposing new and often creative ideas for partners to consider; and (5) appreciating students strong commitment and enthusiasm to collaborating with community partners. Some representative comments include:

“We were very impressed with the students’ quality of work—from their initial lines of questioning through their final presentations. As we work to improve our community outreach efforts, we will be using the suggestions from all three groups. They provided us with actionable items for the short and long term.”

“The commitment the students have shown to this project is impressive. We were surprised that, given their young age, the students have such an understanding of the scope of the problem and the role that theory and research play in planning the intervention. Their concepts and clever ideas were very helpful and really demonstrated their knowledge of the issues.”

“We were extremely impressed both with the time and effort that students invested in the project and the quality of the plans they produced. In fact, we were so impressed that we offered paid internships to several students and look forward to continuing our work on this issue.”

4 CONCLUSIONS

A CBPR-based model of CEL offers CEL pedagogy that moves away from a deficit-focused perspective on communities toward asset-based discourse that promotes quality co-learning and co-production between students and community partners [5]. Engaging students in the CBPR process enriches their learning experience and helps build community partners’ capacity to innovate and organize for action. This type of authentic collaboration with communities has significant potential to reduce the cultural distance between university students and researchers and the communities in which they work, improve the relevance of research questions to a variety of community needs, grow the pool of future change agents, and improve existing practices. Existing applications of this approach depend on ad-hoc opportunities for individual classes to collaborate with a community partner building on existing relationships between individual instructors and community groups [6]. Scaling up this approach requires adequate institutional infrastructure and a bold educational vision that enable system-level integration of community-engaged pedagogy into the learning experience of students by building and maintaining robust, long-term partnerships with communities.

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