Community-Based Learning and Community Psychology: Learning Through Experience

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I am often heard to say that I have been blessed as a professor with the opportunity to teach a course with a community-based learning component. One of the rewards of teaching is watching our students transform as individuals; community-based learning (CBL) has the potential to be transformative even if the professor does nothing to forward the learning process. Of course, our role as instructors is to attempt to ensure that the learning potential is actually fulfilled. In this essay, I describe my course in Community Psychology, which incorporates a semester-long internship, and discuss two techniques I use to create a learning environment where such transformation is more likely to occur. I begin by providing a description of the community within which my institution, St. Lawrence University, is located.

Community Setting

St. Lawrence University is found in the North Country of New York—the upper corner of the state west of the Adirondacks—in the village of Canton, population 6,000, in St. Lawrence County. Potsdam is about 11 miles away with a slightly larger population (8,000) and two additional universities—the State University of New York at Potsdam and Clarkson University. Another institution of higher education—SUNY-Canton—is also found in Canton. St. Lawrence County is geographically the largest county in the state but has only 112,000 residents resulting in the sixth smallest population density in New York. It is also predominantly white (95%).[1] Canton is the county seat and, as such, is home to two courts (both state and federal), the jail and the county Department of Social Services as well as all other county services. The nearest in-patient mental health services are located in Ogdensburg, approximately 18 miles away; a Chemical Dependency Unit is found at the Canton-Potsdam Hospital in Potsdam.

St. Lawrence County is large, isolated and not wealthy. The current unemployment rate for the county is 5.5%, somewhat higher than the national average of 4.9% (www.bls.gov). Median per capita income ($15,728) and family income ($38,500) are also lower than the state average. Approximately 12% of families exist below the poverty level, and single-parent families with a female householder are more likely to live in poverty especially ones with children under 5 years (56%).

This context suggests a few issues that must be kept in mind when we partner with the community. First, many of the human services settings in our county are understaffed. On the other hand, with four universities within a 12 mile span, we have lots of students. Therefore, without careful attention to the specific needs of our community partners, we could quickly overwhelm settings with student transforming a wonderful benefit into a burden. Second, our

community partners have to serve a very large geographical area with a lot of need. For example, caseworkers must drive hundreds of miles each week to see their clients many of whom have no transportation. With no public transportation, cars are essential for student interns, and many spend some portion of their internship behind the wheel. Finally, despite its small size, Canton provides more opportunities for human service placements than most communities of its size. For example, the only resource for domestic violence services in the county, Renewal House, is found in Canton.

University Setting and Course Overview

Against this backdrop is St. Lawrence University—a small liberal arts college with an average enrollment of 2,000 students. In relative contrast to most residents of St. Lawrence County, most students at St. Lawrence University enjoy economic security and all benefit from a plethora of readily available services provided by the institution. Although our students tend to have family incomes in the middle income level and most (over 80%) receive some form of financial aid, very few have experienced poverty and most have come from areas less secluded than Canton. Many of our students are interested in careers in human services and education; psychology is one of the most popular majors. Not surprisingly, community-based learning experiences are sought by many students. We have established the Center for Civic Engagement and Leadership (CCEL), one goal of which is to coordinate CBL activities across campus.

My CBL course is an upper-level seminar entitled Community Psychology, for which students are required to devote about 8 hours per week to an internship. Enrollment averages 10 students, and we meet once a week in the evening for three hours. All of the students are junior and senior Psychology majors, and almost all take the course *not* to learn about Community Psychology but rather to gain some hands-on experience in the community. Until recently, my course was the only course in the department to offer an internship experience.

Given the concerns articulated above, I work closely with the CCEL staff to match internships with my course content and not to overwhelm our community partners. My most common sites are Head Start, the Chemical Dependency Unit of the Canton-Potsdam Hospital, Reachout (a local resource hotline), and Renewal House. I also place at least two students per semester with the Department of Social Services in a program that the director of the CCEL, the agency and I developed together. The program, which is still evolving and has presented many challenges, pairs a student intern with at least one adolescent either in foster care or at-risk for entering foster care. The intern's responsibility is to act as a role model and support for the child while helping him or her develop social and cognitive skills.

Activities at the different internship sites have some common characteristics. Almost all include some form of training by the site itself. All include client contact, although this contact varies considerably from site to site. At Head Start, almost 100% of the intern's time is spent working directly with the children. At Renewal House, on the other hand, interns spend most of their time working with the staff rather than the clients. With the exception of the Chemical Dependency Unit, all of the sites involve the provision of community-based services, and the work often has a secondary prevention focus. Some internship sites also include primary prevention. For example, an intern working with an elementary school counselor this past fall delivered a bullying prevention program to several classrooms.

Teaching With Your Mouth Shut: Techniques for Engaging Students

My course has two main purposes—an introduction to some of the basic issues, concepts and methods in the area of Community Psychology, and experiential learning through an individual internship placement in a community setting. I make clear to the students that the substance of the field and the students' internship experiences will inform, influence and impact one another. Below I discuss two pedagogical strategies I employ to facilitate students' learning—reflective journaling and classroom discussions of the internships—and provide some feedback from student essays and course evaluations. However, before I discuss these specific strategies, it is important to set the philosophical framework for my teaching.

I am a great believer in the concept of "teaching with your mouth shut"—a phrase coined by Donald Finkel (2000). Finkel defines good teaching as "the creating of circumstances that lead to significant learning in others" (p.8). In some courses, such as Introductory Psychology, those circumstances almost inevitably incorporate the imparting of knowledge about the subject matter through lecture. In other courses, however, where we are not constrained by content requirements and students have a foundation of knowledge to build upon, teaching through telling is less necessary and, from my perspective, most often less effective at achieving learning objectives. In my Community Psychology course, I expect the students to learn by engaging with each other, with the course material and with their community-based experiences; I never lecture. Obviously, this teaching philosophy is highly consistent with the values of Community Psychology such as collaborative action and empowerment.

The first tool that I employ is a dialectical or double-entry journal, which must include a section of description and a section of reflection for each internship visit. Journals are electronic and submitted to me about every other week. I provide them with a series of optional and required prompts for each journal submission. The required prompts correspond to the material we are studying about Community Psychology. For example, one of the required prompts for the first journal submission is the following:

> All of your placement sites would sit at the organizational level of
> Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels. However, they all interact with
> individuals/groups that exist at some or all of the other levels. For example, St.
> Lawrence University is an organization, but it must interact with individuals
> (students, faculty, staff, alums, etc.), localities (Canton, St. Lawrence County,
> North Country), etc. Describe the systems with which the staff of your internship
> site must interact/work with/collaborate with to be able to do their work
> effectively. From your initial impressions, how well does your organization
> interact with those other levels?

Because some students find unprompted reflection difficult at times, I also provide some optional prompts for each set of journal entries based on the kinds of issues that either typically arise at different points in the semester or might be appropriate to consider at some point during the semester. Optional prompts from about half-way through the semester include: what are you the most proud of thus far at your internship and why? How can you learn from that success? What is frustrating you the most and why? How might you resolve the problem if you can? If you can't do anything about it, how are you going to cope for the rest of the semester? I find that about a third of my students make use of these optional prompts at some point during the semester.

I respond to their reflections within the journal itself and often include questions for further thought creating an opportunity for dialogue within the journal. I stress the importance of

the journal for the students' learning process, and it carries the most weight (equal to the internship itself) of any component of their course grade. Students report that the journal is often a key mechanism for their learning. As one student said in her final reflective essay this semester, "I could not have gained so much had I not kept a journal explicitly detailed…Now that I have it to look back on, I see how invaluable it is and will remain." Almost every student who continues to be involved in the community beyond the course vows to continue their reflective journal. Whether they do so or not, the consistency of this vow indicates the power of the journal to the learning experience.

Second, I make a very conscious effort to create a community of learners within the classroom where they are learning from each other's internships not just their own. The major strategy that I use for this purpose is classroom discussions and exercises relevant to the internship. Almost every class begins with an open discussion of the internships. Although I sometimes prompt the discussion with a question—such as "Anyone have something surprising happen this week?"—more often than not, the discussion needs no prompting. Three times during the semester, we spend the entire three hours on a series of exercises that relate directly to the internship experiences—one early on focused on getting the most from the internship, one half-way through focused on successes and challenges faced and one at the end focused on termination issues. We also spend a class on the BaFa BaFa cross-cultural simulation (Shirts, 1977), led by former Community Psychology students.

Although I use many different activities to develop an environment conducive to open dialogue among the students, one of the foundational tools is a set of guidelines for dialogue that the students develop themselves.[2] In the second class meeting, students throw out ideas about their expectations for our classroom dialogue. I type up their thoughts and present them in the next class where we categorize the specific items under themes; I provide them with the revised version in the next class. Twice more during the semester, we revisit our guidelines to evaluate how well we are following them and to determine whether we want to make any changes. Because the students feel ownership of the guidelines, this revisiting usually resolves any problems in the discussion dynamic—for example, one student monopolizing conversation or another not contributing enough—without the need for any additional intervention on my part. Students state that the environment is conducive to learning by, as one student put it, "being open to discussion, being realistic about all internship experiences and making all experiences—good or bad—learning ones." Every semester students report in course evaluations that they learned a great deal through these discussions and exercises where they shared and processed experiences as a group. They also report that the open dialogue was not confined to the classroom—"every class time was a meaningful, life applicable situation or scenario that created dialogue within the class that extended oftentimes to the walk home or lunch table the next day." Students often say they learned more *from each other* in this class than in any other.

I would like to end with a quote taken from the final reflective essay of one of my students this past fall semester. This student was placed with DSS in the program I discussed above. In the already challenging context, we struggled this fall with too many interns, communication problems, and case worker burn out. The student began her essay with an example to illustrate the importance of moving beyond first-order change: "[i]t may be found that elderly people are leaving the North Country in substantial numbers and that the one thing that would make a big difference would be someone coming to shovel their driveway!" After reflecting upon her challenging internship experience and our study of Community Psychology, she summarized her experiences as follows, returning to her example:

I cannot say my experience at the Department of Social Services was easy but I can say that it was an invaluable learning experience for me. My studies of community psychology this semester have also had a profound impact on me, for I am now considering this field for a career choice…My family and close friends tell me that I suffer from "change the world" syndrome and I believe that community psychology would enable me to do that one snowy driveway at a time! Problems between individuals and their community are often deep and complicated. This class has taught me that through a great deal of patience and hope, small changes can eventually turn into improved relations between individuals and communities.

Community-based learning is not easy—either from the perspective of the student or the faculty member—but it is worth it.

Endnotes

[1] Links to the data in this paragraph and the following can be found at http://www.co.st-lawrence.ny.us/Census2000/Census-home.html.

[2] My colleague, Dr. Traci Fordham-Hernandex, introduced me to this technique.

References

Finkel, D. L. (2000). *Teaching with your mouth shut*. Boynton/Cook Publishers: Portsmouth, NH.

Shirts, R. G. (1977). *BaFa BaFa: A cross culture simulation*. Simulation Training Systems: Del Mar, CA.   http://www.stsintl.com.