

The Self-Empowerment of Students and Communities in Community-Based Learning: How Feminist Pedagogy Creates Successful Partnerships

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Introduction

Throughout my college experience, I interacted with community-based learning (CBL) in myriad ways, beginning with student participation as a volunteer and donating my time within the structure of a course, progressing to researching the theory behind CBL and solutions to its common problems, and concluding with my unusual experience as a community partner leading an on-campus organization through the maze of working with student volunteers. In all of these varied interactions, the problem of less-than-satisfactory partnerships continued to plague my experiences with CBL, changing but never disappearing as my roles within the CBL structure shifted.

Experiences with Community-Based Learning

My first community-based learning experience in college was the Introduction to Gender Studies course I took my sophomore year, and our community partner was the local women's shelter, A New Day. This course required two weekly volunteer hours in addition to completing a "community service" campaign on our own campus for our final project. This ultimately meant that we did our service hours both on and off campus; since the shelter considers our campus a part of their catchment area, they wanted us to help them get to know the campus and uncover issues that they could help us eradicate.

I suspected, as seemed natural at the time, that this relationship would end with the class: I would go on to other Gender Studies courses and A New Day would or would not continue its work with the campus, regardless of my participation. I should have known better than to expect an end to this relationship. The next fall, I found myself in my former Gender Studies professor's office talking about reviving the Stonehill College Women's Center in collaboration with A New Day. The agreement was that A New Day would provide a staff member for a few hours per week, and the Stonehill administration would support the Center through the Gender and Sexuality Studies Program. I was again in a relationship with A New Day, positioned between the school and the community partner.

Throughout the initial two semesters of reviving the Women's Center, renamed "The Moore Center for Gender Equity," A New Day provided money, staff support, and advice from professional counselors. Within the first semester of existence, the Moore Center quickly became well known on campus. Its high-profile campus activism and much-needed community-building and outreach initiatives attracted interest and attention from faculty and administration at Stonehill. By the time the Center's second semester began, two professors approached the Center to inquire about the possibility of a community-based learning collaboration between the Center and their classes. They saw the Moore Center as an appropriate partner for their classes—Introduction to Sociology (SOC101) and History of Sexuality (HIS230)—and as more low-key and accessible than off-campus partners. Because my co-director and I both live and study on

campus, the professors also had greater access to us as contacts with the community partner, which helped with their planning and last-minute questions about the collaboration.

During the Moore Center's third semester, the Center participated in two separate, and very different, CBL partnerships. Simultaneously, in addition to playing the role of "community partner" as the director of the Moore Center, I continued my relationship with A New Day as a student intern. In my capacity as an intern at A New Day, I experienced the frustrations and challenges of working with a community partner with too many interns and not enough projects. Reflecting on this during the semester informed my actions and shaped my decisions as a community partner working with Stonehill students through the Moore Center. My varied experiences working with the Moore Center and A New Day, in addition to my research about other community partners, showed me from all angles that these community-based learning relationships were not as beneficial to either party as they could have been. Because the primary goal of CBL is mutual benefit, it is imperative to ensure this first and foremost in every relationship.

Two Experiences as a Community Partner: SOC101 and HIS230

Though it wasn't completely without room for improvement, the Moore Center's project-based collaboration with HIS230 was our most successful endeavor, as defined by the goals of CBL. Success, in these terms, is a relationship in which both the student and the partner organization participate fully and contribute equally to solve a common problem in the community. Ideally, the student begins by learning about the community partner and its assets and needs and then takes on more responsibility. The community partner should then encourage the student to use his or her existing and developing skills to identify a problem within the community and work collaboratively to develop a solution. This model, following suggestions of feminist pedagogy for full engagement and equal power dynamics, assumes the student is an eager and genuine learner and that the community partner is providing the resources the student needs to develop a reasonable plan for solution.

In an endeavor to create this type of successful relationship at the Moore Center, the leadership team pursued group projects based around previously identified problems within the Center. This attempted to ensure mutual benefit and respect for both the history of the Moore Center as well as the skills and assets of the students who then had access to the expertise and skills of multiple students rather than relying on their singular experience. Once the collaboration began, students chose an item from the list of development needs identified at the Moore Center meetings and began to work closely with Center staff to develop an appropriate response to their chosen research area. Students were able to get involved with the inner workings of the Moore Center and begin to build solutions from existing structures in the Center and work on equal terms with the Center's leadership. This type of relationship allowed the leadership team to work with the volunteers in an equitable power dynamic: the Moore Center leaders knew the inner workings of the Center and the campus, and the volunteers brought their own expertise. Together, the teams collaborated to create effective solutions.

When handling individual students rather than groups, however, as in our relationship with SOC101, we did not experience the same successful project outcomes. We began by requiring individual students to attend Moore Center meetings on Sunday nights to meet our other students and gather a basic understanding of the Center's rhythms and routines. Afterward, we met with them to discuss their thoughts about where they could best be of service to the Center. During these meetings, we highlighted specific upcoming projects with which we could

use their help. Rather than collaborating with us to define a space for them within the ranks of the Center, most were happy to have tasks assigned to them. Though this evaded the model of equity that we hoped for in our CBL relationship, the volunteers generally showed up when and where they were required, so there were no outstanding problems. Some volunteers, however, showed leadership potential throughout the semester, which the leadership team made sure to capitalize on.

As the weeks progressed, we handed the eager students from SOC101 more responsibility and eventually encouraged them to take charge of entire projects. To one student, we assigned the project of coordinating publicity for our next event, and another took on an outreach campaign to introduce the Center to incoming students. With both situations, however, once the student took on the responsibility, the student faltered and lost confidence, requiring the leadership team to intervene to ensure completion of the tasks. This individualized method of depending on one unreliable student was ineffective, inefficient, and served more as a drain than a benefit to the Moore Center. Despite our attempts at creating equitable relationships and avoiding the typical CBL power dynamics, students proved more successful when we simply assigned roles and duties rather than when we collaborated to identify areas in which they could be of service.

The project-based collaboration between the Moore Center and HIS230 was more equitable and beneficial to the students and the community partner than the relationship between the Center and SOC101, which ended up in little benefit to either the students or the Center. The group project-based model utilized with HIS230 values students' input and experiences, encouraging them to select a challenge faced by the Center in which they are interested and wrestle with it on behalf of the Center. This encourages them to use their expertise and skills to solve the problem given the structures already present in the community partner. This model validates students' experiences and draws on their expertise from within the class or from past experiences, prohibiting either party from becoming an authority in the relationship. Because the students used their skills to creatively solve problems for the Center, they contributed equally as partners instead of taking the typical student role of subordinate.

This model did fail in some cases, as well, however, when student groups presented products or solutions that were unrelated or unhelpful to the Center. Around mid-March, the responsibility for communicating with the Center leadership shifted from the professor to the individual student groups. Because the student groups did not communicate well with the Moore Center representatives, the resulting final projects did not ultimately benefit the Center. If the Moore Center staff and the students had better stayed in touch as student groups created their projects, staff could have guided students towards projects that were more useful to the Center: it became evident to the Moore Center team that lines of communication must stay open throughout the semester in order to ensure benefit to both community partner and students.

Despite this breakdown in communication, however, the Moore Center's collaboration with HIS230 produced more equitable and productive relationships than that between the Center and SOC101. The method of CBL utilized with SOC101 did not create a relationship of mutual benefit and resulted in frustration for both the Center and the students. The Center leadership team was never able to easily integrate the volunteers into the organization and finally simply began asking them to show up at certain places and times when they were most needed. This model does not benefit the student in any tangible way other than to allow him or her to accumulate required hours. Additionally, because of the importance of the tasks assigned to CBL volunteers, the leadership team was unable to provide the authentic learning experience of

potential failure to the student and had to step in at the last moment to ensure success. Center leadership would have benefited greatly from extra hands to share daily duties with, but relying on students who fail to execute tasks necessary to the Center's operation simply puts the work back on the leadership team and at inconvenient moments. Attempting to integrate students individually into the Center and assigning responsibility to those who showed promise did not result in benefit to the Center, and simultaneously provided little empowering service experience to the student volunteer.

Applying Feminist Pedagogy to Community-Based Learning

Previous research reports on the experiences of community partners in CBL relationships and their recommendations for creating partnerships that provide them with greater benefit. David Blouin and Evelyn Perry (2009) explore the benefactor from and benefit of service-learning relationships and report that the community partners believe CBL relationships do benefit their organizations overall but also hope to increase their benefit from these relationships. Ultimately, Blouin and Perry suggest the need for greater communication between professors and community partners, a greater role for the community partner in shaping classes, and an explanation of students' duties to the community written and agreed upon by the professor and community organization and distributed to each student (2009, 132-33). Though this research outlines the complicated relationships between students, professors, and community partners, it does not report on the effect of these relationships on students. Blouin and Perry's research does, however, report that community partners will continue to pursue CBL relationships and believe in their overall benefit.

The discourse of feminist pedagogy comments similarly on the successes and challenges of these same relationships but from the vantage points of the student and teacher. Jennifer Gore (1992) illustrates that feminist pedagogy departs from traditional notions of the clear power dynamics of the classroom and instead aims to place teachers and students on a more level playing field, stressing the equal value of each person's experience. The importance of sharing of power also extends to the practice of empowerment within the classroom and troubles the accepted model of teacher as harbinger of student empowerment. Gore argues that empowerment must always be a reflexive act and argues that no one person can empower another. Teachers can only provide their students with the opportunity to empower themselves, she writes, using their power "in an attempt... to help others exercise power" (1992, 59). Rather than striving to empower their students, then—an act which slips backward into the unequal dynamic of teacher as dominant and student as subordinate—teachers facilitate their students' self-empowerment, maintaining an even subject-subject relationship within which both parties have power.

The notion of teacher as a facilitator of self-empowerment rather than a powerful figure bestowing empowerment on the oppressed shines new light on the basic premise of student empowerment through community-based learning. Instead of requiring the professor to carry the responsibility of empowering students through a CBL relationship, the idea of the importance of self-empowerment suggests a more *laissez-faire* approach to facilitating a successful relationship. Based on my reading and my work as a community partner and as a student volunteer in multiple capacities, I recommend a refined model for partnerships between classes and community partners. This model puts the opportunity for self-empowerment squarely on the shoulders of students as facilitated by a committed community partner with a clear connection to the class or other issues of pertinence to the student.

Though the Moore Center's first CBL partnerships provided varying degrees of benefit to both the organization and the student volunteers, the preexisting literature encourages continued attempts at successful CBL relationships. Feminist pedagogy stresses the importance of equitable relationships in fostering true student growth and self-empowerment, and Blouin and Perry's research suggests that CBL relationships do create overall positive experiences for the community partner (2009). As evidenced by the Moore Center's CBL relationships, the crucial requirements for a truly beneficial CBL partnership are persistence, understanding, and dedication: it is imperative that the faculty member, community partner, and students reach an understanding of the effort necessary and agree to dedicate the time and energy necessary to crafting a successful relationship. Without these elements, a CBL relationship will not be mutually beneficial to the student and community partner nor will it foster an authentic learning experience and opportunity for self-empowerment. With no promise of mutual benefit, it is important to reassess the impetus for completing a CBL project at all: if agreement cannot be reached on these fronts, the relationship will not benefit any party and is not worth the time and effort of any party.

Part of the understanding necessary to creating successful relationships is the commitment to an egalitarian power dynamic between student and community partner. Because the student volunteer and community partner have equal power and authority in the relationship, both give to and receive from the relationship. This necessitates that the student find some aspect of the community partner's work to which he or she can contribute as an "expert." Through the student's expertise on a given subject, the partner organization considers him or her an expert and the student begins to see him/herself in that same light. This crafts a CBL partnership in which, unlike many, the community partner's energy and resource output is worthwhile and the student recognizes his or her own value to the community. This also enables self-empowerment on the part of the student, who begins to recognize himself or herself as a valuable resource through the eyes of the community partner. If the community partner finds this too difficult to enact, the organization must evaluate whether a CBL partnership is feasible at all.

Conclusion

Blouin and Perry identify the main goal of CBL as a part of the educational experience that "address[es] community needs while giving students hands-on practical experience and encouraging civic responsibility" (2009, 121). In order for CBL to have a lasting effect of self-empowerment and true knowledge gain for student volunteers, however, I argue that the goal of CBL must be much more than simply "practical experience" and encouragement toward responsible citizenship. Community-based learning is unpredictable and real and can give students feelings of true value and worth in relation to persons or organizations outside of the academic bubble. To settle for the mere attainment of practical experience is to sell CBL short and prevent students from gaining experience and knowledge and growing to their fullest extent—a possible consequence that represents the opposite of feminist academic goals. This perhaps illuminates the reason for the lackluster response to CBL partnerships on all sides: student, professor, and community partner. But by shifting our goal from simply "addressing community needs" to creating spaces in which students can attain self-empowerment and grow as individuals, we can reinvigorate the field of community-based learning to make it attractive and worthwhile for all parties involved.

References

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- Gore, Jennifer. 1992. "What We Can Do for You! What Can 'We' Do For 'You'?": Struggling Over Empowerment in Critical and Feminist Pedagogy." In *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy*, edited by Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, 54-73. London, England: Routledge.