



Sincere Engagement: My Time at the Lexington City Office on Youth

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Community engagement facilitates a unique and sincere understanding of the complexities of communities. Pairing the act of thoughtful reflection with community-based learning opens a gateway for questions, passions, and applications that remains difficult to achieve in a traditional theory-based classroom. Developing a thorough understanding of one's community partnership requires a genuine humility and vulnerability that enables one to align empathy with knowledge. Indeed, "... learning needs to be 'wholehearted', tying feeling to intellect (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 84)." In Eyler and Giles' *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning*, emphasis on the role of contextual experience in education is highlighted. They write, "the combination of real community settings and structured reflection helped [students] construct rich and complex pictures of issues and processes (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 84)." In my own experience, it has been important to reflect on this multifaceted nature of community engagement; on the importance of learning through immersion, the value of authentic presence, and the emotional engagement that each necessitates. These thoughts characterize my experience with service engagement during college; with deeper involvement came a heightened sense of knowledge and fulfillment.

I was first welcomed to my community partner through the Campus Kitchen, a student-led organization that works to reduce food waste, combat food insecurity, and fortify sincere community connections in the Rockbridge County, Virginia region. Students' understanding of community engagement, nutrition, and advocacy are enriched via various "shift" opportunities. As an integrated member of the Campus Kitchen team, I've been able to navigate a variety of experiences- stretching from more mundane food recoveries to the immersive interactions with the children and adults of the Lexington City Office on Youth (LCOOY). Though I possess passion for working with children, I entered the fall semester with the intention to reflect more

thoughtfully about my role in the lives of the kids at LCOOY. My community engagement was paired with an in-class learning experience that served to hear, explain, and reflect upon our corresponding experiences. Through journal entries, readings, and discussions of central issues surrounding poverty, this course created a space to align our knowledge with our lived experience in the community. The class seeks to highlight the value of engagement in any academic path or career interest, including my undergraduate pre-health track. Thus, I will highlight the elements of serving at LCOOY that had significant impact on me this year. I only reflect my own unique perspective of the organization, which is but a small and intrinsically biased snapshot into the depth of this community.

When considering the role that LCOOY assumes for its members and the broader community, it might first be helpful to know the stated mission of LCOOY itself. The office website outlines it as “an after-school program for children mainly in elementary school and middle school... offering homework help, arts & crafts, recreational activities, and mentoring (‘Youth,’ n.d.)” Upon first entering the space, one might be inclined to write off a swarm of children screaming over jig-saw puzzles as little more or little less than a scheduled form of babysitting. And to be fair, between the puzzle wars and numerous piggyback rides that I am less than equipped to give, it occasionally did feel like I was simply managing two dozen sugar rushes. Yet, it is crucial that we unpack the underpinnings of all this chaos.

The final element of the Office on Youth’s mission statement outlines the role of mentoring, and that’s where I come in. LCOOY seeks volunteer youth mentors attending surrounding colleges. These individuals guide the day-to-day after-school activities for a range of age groups. Mentors might find themselves doing puzzles, monitoring crafts, or walking students through long division exercises. It is a flexible role, with ample volunteer opportunities

and simple requirements to participate. Still, volunteer coordinators reinforce that consistent and reliable volunteers will facilitate more valuable guidance for the children. In general, these mentors need only to be empathetic, open, and willing.

Entering this semester, I anticipated my mentorship role to be spotlighted primarily on academic help. I was fully prepared for interactions to inform my understanding about social and economic implications of underfunded school systems. And while this remains an important structural view, it fell to the background of my work. Rather, the majority of my noteworthy reflections stem from the emotional support I provided. My partnership charged me with the opportunity and responsibility to provide a thoughtful set of eyes to empathize and guide children. At a minimum, mentors can give kids a close attention that might be lacking in other domains of their life, to lead them in their interactions and push them further in their passions. Though, I was not prepared to artfully maneuver through the realm of the challenges faced by kids today, I found a simpler, more human way to grow in my relationships: presence. Throughout the term, I formed human, emotional connections with my kids by simply being present, transparent and vulnerable with them.

In Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2000) book *Respect: An Exploration*, she uplifts the narrative of Bill Wallace, a psychotherapist and activist who theorizes about the significance of "presence." Wallace highlights the importance of giving thoughtful effort in community engagement, without anticipating anything in return. Sincere presence facilitates respectful relationships which seek to mitigate the impact of the hierarchies implicit in service. Lawrence-Lightfoot illustrates that we are called to acknowledge the limitations of our role yet choose to pursue it with the same clear intent. Aligning this sense of humility with an informed intentionality creates a profoundly formative experience unique to this reflective learning style.

It is from this curious sincerity that my relationship with Marlene¹ grew. During one of my initial visits to LCOOY, I overheard some other students making fun of Marlene for taking kindergarten a second time. I won't dramatize this interaction; I didn't heroically navigate it and alleviate all tensions. I accomplished the introvert's version of sticking up for Marlene and correcting the judgements of her peers. But, as it turns out, a B+ job was all it took. From that moment forward, I was Marlene's go-to person from the moment I entered the door to the moment I left. And in total transparency, she initially wasn't the easiest or most pleasant individual. She displayed all of the tumultuous behavior of kids who necessitated more attention from teachers- constantly screaming, hitting, and starting arguments when situations didn't go her way. Even with a thoughtful background built through my coursework, it was easy for me to liken her to those kids whom I couldn't make sense of during my youth. Not fully understanding how to mitigate the complexities that brought about this behavior, I did my best to connect with her for a few hours each week. And, despite the initial fussiness, I began to look forward to seeing her each Friday, feeling her energy and appreciation for the volunteers there. We made friendship bracelets, shared drawings, and I engaged in multiple "real" marriages in order for us to play "family."

As with the experiences many have with children, some days left me more confused than satisfied. I would catch her in trouble with the program director again or find myself on the receiving end of a tantrum. I was often left feeling insufficient at preventing and navigating these outbursts, and I couldn't make sense of the seemingly senseless behavior. But it was these moments of doubt that I reflect on as the most innately human. Unable to rationalize, I put meaning to meeting someone where they are. Eventually discarding my expectations, I was

¹ Names in the paper were changed to protect the privacy of community members

simply there for her, over and over, a reliable and kind presence. This is how our relationship grew. Amid one of her outbursts, my supervisor pulled her aside for an emotion filled lecture that stuck with me. She stated plainly that she wouldn't be disrespected, and that she has seen people in Marlene's life throw in the towel rather than deal with her behavior; "You keep pushing and pushing to see who will break... I'm not going to give up on you." Irrelevant of the specifics of Marlene's circumstance, this interaction shed light on a fundamentally emotional and intentional act. My supervisor simply agreed to be emotionally present for Marlene- to be with her and feel with her.

In Marlene's case, I could conclude that she likely faced a degree of adversity and complexity at home that might contribute to her behavior. However, even if there exists some relationship between adversity and her irrational behavior, my interactions with Marlene underlined the importance of intentionally building trust with each individual. This is but one story among many that belong to the children and families of the Lexington City Office on Youth. While Marlene's story is intersectional with questions of poverty and opportunity, the circumstances of our bond apply regardless of social and economic background. Any successful and sincere relationship requires you to meet an individual where they are, to discard your assumptions and simply value their presence and authenticity. I have internalized that some behaviors might be rational reactions to irrational situations. Through my reflection on this very notion, I formed connections that were valuable for the children while further deepening my understanding and growth as well. I am consistently rewarded with the appreciation and love shown by my mentees, as well as the frustrations that accompany this sort of honest and intimate relationship. As I volunteer more with the LCOOY, I feel increasingly welcomed into the community and homes of these children.

From these connections also came a sense of accomplishment, a feeling of some tangible impact I had at LCOOY. Though this personal reward was not a primary motivation for my service work initially, we shouldn't overlook this as an additional element of learning. As Eyler and Giles recount, "Our service-learning students talked of the same rewards... Genuine problems provide the most powerful need to know and are thus motivating for many students (Eyler and Giles, 1999, p. 91)." The emotional investment and reward which are accompanied by community engagement anchor our learning in complex contexts. We are driven forward in our understanding and knowledge by these emotional ties.

Pairing the act of thoughtful reflection in class with my vibrant experiences at LCOOY enabled me to internalize these takeaways and translate them into other spheres of my life. I have delved deeper into my university's engagement-centered poverty studies program, seeking out other service and engagement opportunities as well. My growing relationship with the Rockbridge community has challenged my core understanding of service, and how it will intertwine with my own future career in medicine. I hope to marry my passion for the sciences with my increasing interest in connecting with under-voiced populations, with intentional, thoughtful healthcare at the core of this junction. I have channeled my experiences at the Lexington City Office on Youth into a desire to emotionally serve individuals (in whatever domain I find myself) through authentic presence.

My initial interactions with the individuals at LCOOY have been profoundly formative to my understanding of service and empathy, and the surprising number of elements that connect them. While course-based reflections about systemic injustices should remain at the forefront of our understanding of poverty, small scale engagements such as my LCOOY partnership uplift a different narrative that is uniquely constructive. These experiences create informed

understandings of diverse communities, which can then be translated and advocated for in other domains. In my senseless- but informing- quarrels with Marlene, I developed a heightened sense of understanding and compassion that stemmed from nothing more than my sincere presence. They brought the notion of the individual human experience to the center of my partnership. In forming fundamentally human connections with our community, we can begin to understand the narratives and intricacies that lie within them. Community engagement, paired with thoughtful reflection, serves to equip individuals with the proper questions to open important new dialogues about their service, and the motivation to seek answers to these questions, even when complicated. This pattern of active learning and reflection enabled me to internalize a colorful image of the complexities faced by my community, partnered with a sincere drive for its improvement.

References

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