



| CASE STUDY

UP CLOSE WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON ITS PEDAGOGICAL VALUE

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INTRODUCTION

Community-based learning (CBL) in higher education relates to the understanding that institutions must educate

students for effective citizenship (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, Donohue, 2003). Community engagement (CE), a higher form of CBL,

and also identified as the third mission of higher education by UNESCO, can extend the roles of institutions beyond teaching and research (Bernardo, Butcher

& Howard, 2012). However, designing a CBL-guided curriculum and developing a CE-enabled pedagogy are difficult endeavours. This case study shows how CE is used as a pedagogical strategy in the living-and-learning programme (LLP) of an undergraduate residential college (RC) within a university in Southeast Asia. In this context, CE refers to the intentions and practices, embedded in the formal and informal curricula, to engage with communities and promote active citizenship as part of the college's mission. We integrate findings from two research studies – a survey and a qualitative study comprising interviews and focus groups – to demonstrate the processes and outcomes of CE in contributing to student learning.

Close to 600 young adults aged 18-24 from diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds reside in the college. Under the formal curriculum, interdisciplinary and interactive classes facilitate academically rigorous discussions and promote critical thinking through a CBL-guided pedagogy. Through the informal curriculum, students work with community partners to build

awareness and a deeper understanding of marginalised communities, develop empathy and acquire skills (like leadership) in the development of active citizenship.

The college experiences a high volume of student-led CE activities, a testament to the students' commitment, motivation and involvement. In any given academic year, more than 80 per cent of the students participate in one or more CE activities, conducted in collaboration with an identified community partner through an iterative process of participation and engagement from both parties. Pre-briefings, de-brief sessions and reflections are key components of these activities.

Theoretical perspective of CE practised in the college

Service-learning in higher education has been widely promoted as a strategy to help students address social problems and meet the needs of rapidly changing societies (Boyer, 1990). Although service-learning can enhance students' compassion and social consciousness (Eyler & Giles, 1999), it does not prepare them adequately for active citizenship (Colby & Ehrlich, 2000). Active citizenship requires critical reflection on social policies and conditions, in addition to the moral commitments of empathy, altruism and concern for the common good (Boyte & Kari, 2000). The college's ethos is grounded in the belief that community engagement, with an emphasis on critical analysis and collaborative engagement, is a more powerful way to prepare students for active citizenship.

The college's LLP is also guided by the educational philosophy of critical

pedagogy. Critical pedagogy affirms that education must be liberatory and transformative rather than oppressive and oriented toward an unquestioned maintenance of the existing systems (Darder, Baltodano & Torres, 2003). It challenges existing structures of privilege (Noddings, 2009) by empowering students with the knowledge and skills to broaden their intellectual horizons, develop critical and creative thinking skills, and promote spoken and written articulacy. CE serves as a powerful form of critical pedagogy in fulfilling the aforementioned objectives.

This case study provides insights as to how college students can assume their civic responsibility of democratically engaging with different communities to address social problems and contribute to the solutions, and what it takes to do so effectively.

Findings and insights

Survey

Students participated in a pre-and-post survey at time T1 (June 2014; during the Freshmen Orientation Camp) and T2 (May 2015; after living in the RC for a year). We examined how the LLP influenced the students' personal and intellectual growth, self-confidence and the development of seven CE values (scale reliability of Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). Though no significant difference was found between pre-and-post CE values, the descriptive statistics of individual values were insightful. 100 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they had gained a better understanding of disadvantaged communities after living in the college for a year. In addition, while 8.8 per cent

TABLE 1.

AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE % FOR CE-VALUES AT T₁(2014) & T₂(2015)

	T1(2014)	T2(2015)	
I believe I have responsibilities to my community.	100	98.9	Chi-square (2, N=91)=12.41 p<.01
It is important to me that I play an active role in my community.	98.9	96.5	Chi-square (4, N=91)=39.27, p<.01
I have the power to make a difference in my community.	96.7	94.2	Chi-square (4, N=91)=33.83, p<.01
I participate in activities that contribute to my community.	95.6	93	Chi-square (4, N=91)=11.62, p<.05
I have gained a better understanding of disadvantaged communities.	91.2	100	Chi-square (2, N=91) =2.6.403, p<.05
I have taken the initiative to do something that will benefit the community.	87.9	89.5	Chi-square (4, N=91)=15.45, p<.01
I have become aware of the complexities of inter-group understanding.	85.7	95.3	Chi-square (4, N=91)=22.05, p<.01

disagreed with this statement at T1, no one disagreed at T2 [Table-1-Appendix].

The results showed clearly that the CE experienced by the students contributed to their critical understanding of the different communities (Authors, 2018; 2019). Significant and positive correlations between CE values and the different aspects of the LLP (i.e., involvement, interactions with peers, academic environment and diversity) further strengthened the results [Table-2-Appendix].

Interviews and focus groups

During 2016 and 2017, 30 semi-structured interviews and 5 focus groups were conducted with students to explore the socially-constructed meanings of CE. The perceptions of CE as an integral

educational practice were also solicited from 8 community partners. The themes highlighting the meaning-making processes of CE are briefly discussed below with illustrative quotes.

New experiences and challenges

The CE programmes provided students with new experiences of interacting with communities, which changed their beliefs, ideologies and world views.

“The more I knew about them, the more I understood their predicament, and the less I feared them. These conversations bridged my relationships with them, and broke down my walls of stereotypes and fears.”

The college supported this learning by providing “a safe ground”, and giving students “a lot of opportunities to start

their own initiatives and take on roles that they may not be familiar with”. This helped to strengthen confidence in the face of managing expectations versus reality. Some students admitted to being too eager to do CE without adequate thinking, but appreciated the room to experiment and fail.

The power of relationships

The CE programmes were enabled by the relationships built with community partners over time and over multiple events. The mutual benefits included emotional and social gains. From the partners’ perspectives, they appreciated how the youthful energy of the students “rubbed off” on the elderly, how the students served as good role models for children and youth, and the “voices



being heard” for migrant workers. From the students’ perspectives, the partners helped to build the safe spaces outside the college to enable deep learning through open communication and an “insider knowledge” of the communities they engaged with.

Boundaries and dialectics

While the CE programmes were well-received by most students, some felt that a deeper critical understanding of CE (e.g., with LGBTQ communities or sex workers as migrant workers) was needed beyond the

politically correct” CE practised within the college. They wanted a critical framework to differentiate between the effectiveness and the philosophy of CE. Additionally, the gaps in application (translating knowledge into daily life), and introspection (reflection process and its effectiveness) needed to be addressed.

Conclusion

The two studies highlighted the value of critical CE and how it is intentionally practised in the college. This helped students gain unique experiences

that enabled effective learning by the combination of critical reflection and collaborative practice (Kolb, 1984). The main contributing factors to this learning are:

- making CE an intellectual pursuit rather than a voluntary service;
- giving students agency in developing ownership of the CE programme;
- providing supportive resources; and
- facilitating collaborations with community partners.

These factors sustain a student-centric

TABLE 2.

BIVARIATE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CE-VALUES AND THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT IN 2015

OUTCOME ENVIRONMENT	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT VALUES
Involvement within the College	0.287**
Interactions with Peers Outside Class	0.229**
Interactions with Peers from Different Cultural/Religious Backgrounds	0.195**
Diversity within College's Environment	0.245**
Academic Environment in the College	0.246**

**significant at 0.01 level

process of changing mindsets, relationship-building and broadening perspectives. The critical CE with exposure to marginalised communities helps students develop their ability to interact with others in their professional and personal lives in the larger society.

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