

Lessons Learned While Developing a Community-Based Learning Initiative

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Abstract

With the increasing emphasis on civic engagement through community involvement, educators are faced with the task of developing effective strategies to integrate service-learning and other community-based initiatives into their courses. Much research has been published on the different types of service opportunities, the benefits of experiential learning, and the application of experiential learning. Little research, however, documents how to begin the process of incorporating a form of experiential learning other than service-learning into the curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to describe five lessons learned while developing a course designed to introduce students to the applied aspects of sociology. These lessons are not restricted to sociology faculty; individuals from a variety of disciplines can utilize the lessons to assist with the implementation of community-based learning into their courses.

Three forces have led colleges and universities to begin implementing a variety of community outreach efforts: a criticism of the disconnect between higher education and the community; a narrow definition of research; and a recognition of the need to develop students' civic capacity and prepare them to actively participate in their communities once they leave school (Strand et al. 2003). These outreach efforts have largely taken the form of service-learning, which incorporates student volunteering into a course's academic curriculum (Mooney and Edwards 2001). Examples of service-learning include building community gardens, community education, tutoring, and becoming a victim's advocate; these and other experiences are designed to foster a sense of social responsibility through an active learning environment.

Service-learning is one of the most popular and well-known types of community involvement. Growth in service-learning and other community-based learning initiatives is attributed to several factors. First, legislative mandates such as the Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 resulted in institutions incorporating community involvement directly into their academic curriculums (Kozeracki

2000). Second, these mandates led community colleges and universities to formally recognize the importance of service in their mission statements; in an American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) national survey to identify community colleges' community programs and services (2001), more than 82% of respondents considered community service to be part of their institutional mission, and 45% provided service-learning opportunities (Phinney, Schoen, and Hause 2002). Finally, growth has occurred because institutions recognize the benefits of community involvement to students as well as to the institution itself. Students benefit from career preparation, an increased awareness of their communities and problems, and learning how to connect classroom theory to practice. Institutional administrators see service-learning, and other types of community-based learning, as a bridge between the institution and the surrounding community (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000). This bridge is valued because of the belief that universities should not operate in isolation but should become more involved in the communities in which they are located, whether through opening facilities for community meetings, providing students for service work, or utilizing the expertise of faculty and staff to facilitate research or social change.

According to results from the 1995 AACC survey, social sciences and humanities courses are most likely to incorporate service into their curriculums (Robinson and Barnett 1996). These results are not surprising; the social sciences, especially sociology, have service-oriented activities at their roots. These activities were not limited solely to service, however; many included research-based activities. For example, the Hull House, founded by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in 1889, not only provided services to the community but also implemented a social action agenda that directly involved community members in educating themselves for social change. An additional example of social research activities is the participatory research

model, which utilizes and values community members in the data collection and analysis processes (Strand et al. 2003).

This community-centered focus has continued, resulting in attention from researchers. Researchers and organizations have defined the different types of service opportunities (Mooney and Edwards 2001), discussed how to implement a service-learning program (American Association of Community Colleges 1995; Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges; Pickeral and Peters 1998), examined the benefits of experiential learning (Carter et al. 2002; Jakubowski and Burman 2004; Oates 2001; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000), and illustrated the application of experiential learning (Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Collier and Morgan 2002; Jakubowski and Burman 2004; Mooney and Edwards 2001; Potter, Caffrey, and Plante 2003). Little research, however, documents how to begin the process of incorporating a form of experiential learning other than service-learning into the curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to describe five lessons learned while developing a course designed to introduce students to the applied aspects of sociology. These lessons are not restricted to sociology faculty; individuals from a variety of disciplines can utilize the lessons to assist with the implementation of community-based learning into their courses.

Background of the Course

A combination of personal and departmental interest led to the creation of an undergraduate/graduate student course, "Community Sociology," designed to introduce students to different communities and to show them how to use their sociological skills to work with and improve aspects of the surrounding communities. Community sociology is taught as an upper-level course, required for the major, with the prerequisite of a research methods course. The course uses community-based research, a form of community-based learning, to achieve these

ends. Community-based research creates partnerships with community agencies to identify and prioritize needs, and then addresses those needs through a research project (conducting focus groups, needs assessments, telephone surveys, program evaluation, etc). At the completion of each research project, a report is prepared, often in collaboration with the community agency, that analyzes the data collected and makes recommendations for action or identifies potential solutions.

I began teaching this course in the fall semester of my first year at ETSU, and have taught it in each of the Fall and Spring semesters since. While developing this course, I encountered several obstacles, both personal and structural, that made the process more difficult. Describing these obstacles and providing suggestions to overcome them will help new faculty as they develop community-based learning opportunities. With the increasing emphasis on civic engagement through community involvement, these “lessons learned” will help guide those who are interested in community-based learning but are not sure where or how to start.

Lesson 1: Clearly Define the Community-based Learning Opportunity

As the popularity of community-based learning increases, it is important for instructors to clearly understand and define their areas of interest. Mooney and Edwards defined community-based learning (CBL) as “any pedagogical tool in which the community becomes a partner in the learning process” (2001:182). Community-based learning can take multiple forms; Mooney and Edwards (2001) identified and discussed six distinct (but not exclusive) types of CBL initiatives: out-of-class activities, volunteering, service add-on, internships, service-learning, and service-learning advocacy. Using this framework, “community-based learning” becomes an umbrella that covers any academically-based, community-centered outreach that benefits both the learner and the community receiving the service. Confusion may occur because many faculty, students,

and researchers use “service-learning” as the umbrella, and may then perceive CBL and service-learning as competing against each other. This is not the case; as Mooney and Edwards (2001) argue, each type of community-based learning, including service-learning, has its own objectives and desired outcomes, making them complementary yet separate. Consequently, for purposes of this paper I will use “community-based learning” as the umbrella covering different applications of community-centered activities, including service-learning.

Individuals new to community-based learning and trying to establish a focus first must select the type of CBL to implement. Each type has benefits and limitations, making it more difficult to adequately differentiate between the types and get started (Mooney and Edwards 2001). Carter et al. (2002) agreed, stating that little information is available that illustrates how to select a form of community-based learning or “evaluate the pedagogical and participatory tradeoffs associated with different forms” (160). I experienced this difficulty firsthand because colleagues and peers found it difficult to differentiate between two types of CBL, service-learning and community-based research. Service-learning, according to the American Association of Community Colleges, is “an instructional methodology that integrates community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility” (1995:1). Key concepts of service-learning are reflection and reciprocity (Jacoby 1996). My course focuses specifically on conducting community-based research (CBR), which is defined as “a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change” (Strand et al. 2003). I envisioned a course where community agencies could identify a research need, such as a requirement to demonstrate effectiveness to receive future funding, and then partner with my students to gather data or information to meet that need. Many individuals,

both on-and off-campus, confused CBR with service-learning, and were not aware of the differences between these two CBL types.

Although both service-learning and community-based research address community needs and the acquisition of skills by students, a key difference is the emphasis of CBR on research and community involvement in all phases of the research project. Many learning opportunities have limited involvement with the community, often lasting only a short duration or completing service projects to meet a need. CBR bridges that gap by teaching students how to apply their sociological skills while also stressing the importance and role of the community *in the research process*. Students involved in CBR projects work with the community to identify the need, decide how to best address that need, and then collaborate during the data collection phase to ensure valid, useful results. (More information about the principles and practices of CBR can be found in Strand et al. 2003.)

Since my course's inception, more people on campus and in the community have become familiar with CBR, but with the prevalence and emphasis on service-learning on campuses nationwide, I still explain what I am doing and the purpose and goals of CBR at every opportunity. Regardless of the type of community-based learning faculty choose to implement, being able to clearly define and explain it to others will ensure that faculty, administrators, students, and the community understand what you are doing and will be better able to work with you to achieve your goals.

Lesson 2: Understanding How Your Institution Views Community-Based Learning—Is It Service or Scholarship?

My department created my position specifically to provide opportunities for undergraduates to apply their sociological skills in the community. After working with CBR

projects for two years, I came to realize that many of my peers and members of the administration viewed these projects as service, with little ties to scholarship. Few recognized that CBR integrates teaching, scholarship, and research (Pestello et al. 1996; Porpora 1999), viewing it simply as a service activity. CBR, however, goes beyond service by conducting research that provides useful data for community members to understand and then address their needs (Stoecker et al. 2003). It also integrates teaching by directly involving students in the research process; they become active learners instead of passive recipients (Carter et al. 2002). This lack of understanding may be tied to the confusion of CBR with service-learning mentioned in Lesson 1; when the most popular form of community-based learning uses the word “service,” it stands to reason that many may not see the ties to scholarship. In addition, often the scholarly work involved with CBR is not easily reported in traditional research journals (Pestello et al. 1996). As a result, proponents of CBR are now suggesting that faculty may benefit from joining a CBR network, which would promote visibility and could “support junior faculty to do CBR and not suffer in the tenure process” (Stoecker et al. 2003:45).

Institutional understanding and support is a key component of all types of community-based learning. To help ensure the success of CBL, I recommend talking with department chairs and college deans to ascertain how community-based learning initiatives will count toward promotion and/or tenure. If, as on many campuses, it is viewed as service, then limits on service on campus committees may provide adequate time to engage in scholarship. Receiving course release time to work on a CBL initiative may be another option. Data from the 1995 AACC survey on the status of service-learning indicate that insufficient funding and a lack of faculty release time are the two most significant impediments to successful service-learning initiatives. Knowledge of the value placed on CBL initiatives will help structure the time leading up to

applying for tenure and/or promotion to ensure that faculty members achieve the required balance of teaching, service, and scholarship.

Lesson 3: Be Proactive

Lessons 1 and 2 focused on determining the type of CBL to implement and understanding how your institution views the CBL. Lesson 3 discusses the next step: finding organizations to work with. I wanted to start big with my CBR class, and have an immediate and large impact on the community. I thought projects would find me; in reality, I quickly learned that I had to seek them out. Word got out *after* I began conducting CBR projects, not before. However, I was new to the community and the region, and had not experienced many opportunities to meet members of community organizations. Personally, I had to re-evaluate my “grand” ideas and start smaller to build community interest and trust. This was one of the hardest aspects of implementing my CBR course; developing partnerships and opportunities takes time, and I was frustrated by the slow start (accompanied by my lack of patience). As a result, I would like to present four options that, regardless of location, individuals new to CBR or another type of community-based learning can utilize to develop projects.

First, start with campus organizations. I had a student in another class of mine who was attempting to gather students’ opinions about the campus newspaper, and I realized that with guidance, students in my CBR course could design and implement a questionnaire to gauge student satisfaction with the paper and identify areas of improvement. I contacted the advisor of the paper, and the following semester I conducted a representative telephone survey of the student body using my Graduate Research Methods class and student volunteers. Although it was not an ideal CBR project in terms of affecting social change, it opened numerous doors for future projects. After the survey report was completed, I received a request to partner with Greek Life

and to attend a Student Life meeting; this meeting resulted in four different projects over the next two years.

Second, contact campus service-learning offices. While the goals of CBL initiatives may not directly mirror those of service-learning, this office, by its very nature, is heavily involved with community agencies. Office staff can help make contacts. Our service-learning office moved into a new building a few years ago. I attended the ribbon cutting and the director introduced me to an individual from a local therapeutic horseback riding program who needed assistance developing program outcome assessments. This program has partnered with my CBR course for the past two years.

Third, utilize a church affiliation. Individuals who attend church are more likely to be involved in community organizations, and church leaders can identify those individuals. In addition, many churches are now developing models to engage their members in community service, and are thus aware of community needs. For instance, a church staff member at my church had previously worked with the local branch of Girls Incorporated, an after-school program for girls, and she introduced me to the program's director. This meeting resulted in two years of collaboration on various projects. I also attended a six-week seminar sponsored by the church on "Social Responsibility" and met the president of a domestic violence shelter; he was interested in improving the shelter's services and needed assistance modifying the client satisfaction survey. At another church meeting, I sat at a table with the head of another city's Chamber of Commerce; once we started talking, he broached the idea of conducting a needs assessment in his community that would enable the Chamber to better allocate funding to service agencies.

Finally, talk to students in your classes. Although it will take some time for students to become familiar with what you are teaching, they can be valuable resources for finding additional projects. After teaching at ETSU for two years, I was approached by a student who thought my class could do some work for a free medical clinic with which she was affiliated. I met with the board of directors and this student; this meeting resulted in a long-term partnership in which my students worked with the clinic staff and patients, both designing and implementing a patient satisfaction survey as well as an assessment of need for a dental clinic.

Lesson 4: Effectively Structure the Class to Maximize Learning through Flexibility, Multi-phase Involvement, and Solid Resources

Initially, I struggled with the class format as I tried to decide what to emphasize, how to structure the class, and how to provide students with instruction and practical experience. Because community involvement was a central aspect of the course, course requirements and assignments had to be flexible to maximize the opportunities for students to work on their projects and collaborate with community members. The idea of flexibility scared me somewhat; I worried that if the class was not “structured,” with firm deadlines and assignments, then students would not learn as much. I quickly realized, however, that rather than being a detriment, flexibility was a strength because it allowed students more opportunities to participate in the CBR project.

To that end, it is important to understand the priorities and time commitments of both students and community members. For example, students at community colleges are typically older, have additional responsibilities beyond school, and attend part-time (Kozeracki 2000). ETSU’s student body shares some of these characteristics; it is a regional university with many

commuter students who leave for work or home after class and do not stay on campus, so providing class time to work on projects is essential. The format I have found to be most efficient is, once the class has started and students have selected projects, to generally meet in class one day a week (for a Tuesday/Thursday class). For example, on Tuesdays class time is used to discuss the required readings, and on Thursdays students work on their CBR project, either in the classroom or with the community agency. If a group's project requires them to work at night, as did the project with the free medical clinic (students surveyed patients on-site), then having that second class day free allows students to complete work for other classes or take care of other priorities. In essence, if students are going to work in the community, I compensate with class time.

Another aspect of class structure concerned when to introduce students to the project—when a project is first identified, or once a project has been “planned out.” How much should students be involved? I recommend involving students from the beginning as much as possible, so they can view multiple aspects of the research process. Anyone can “plug in” to a project, but true understanding of community-based research—all the difficulties of getting started, identifying a specific research question, deciding on an effective strategy—is as much a learning benefit as the work itself. As one Community Sociology student wrote on a course evaluation, “It is hard to teach out of a book all the little things that may go wrong with a project and being in the field allows students to adapt and change on the project.” Another student commented that a strength of the class was “... it allows us to participate in so many of the aspects of CBR from beginning to end.” These comments are echoed by findings in the literature. Carter et al. (2000) stated that an advantage of direct community/client interaction is increased engagement with the project as students see, first-hand, the difficulties of conducting field research. Oates (2001)

believed that involvement also communicates high expectations of students—they realize they are being trusted with something important with real consequences.

Finally, do not underestimate the importance of solid resources for class discussion and assignments. Articles and texts that illustrate the principles and concepts of community-based learning and provide examples are key to facilitating student understanding. As community-based learning has garnered more attention, the number of resources available to instructors has also increased. Table 1, located at the end of this article, provides a list of sources illustrating concepts and examples of community-based learning. I have found that students and faculty learn from both excellent and poor examples of CBR, so I incorporate both types into class discussions and challenge students to critique the strategies and methods used as well as apply them to their own projects.

Lesson 5: Do Not Fear Failure

As mentioned above, flexibility and understanding the priorities of students is essential to a project's success. However, while the CBR project may occupy all of an instructor's and students' time, it may not be as prominent for a community agency. Although the project may be beneficial, it is often difficult for community members to focus all of their time and attention on it because of other responsibilities or obligations. Enthusiasm will rise and fall, which sometimes results in project failure. An earlier CBR project involved conducting focus groups to gather students' opinions and perceptions of on-campus extracurricular activities. Students involved with this project met with the program director, developed a focus group interview guide and participant selection strategy, and set up times and locations for conducting the groups. The campus organization was responsible for participant recruitment. Unfortunately, this organization failed to effectively recruit participants; my students showed up for three different

focus groups that had three, four, and zero participants. The remaining groups were cancelled. My students experienced a great amount of frustration with the lack of attention to detail exhibited by the campus organization, and felt as if the project was a failure. However, these students learned a great deal about the importance of collaboration, shared responsibilities, follow-through, and the highs and lows of community-based work, much more than some students whose projects were “successful.” Students will learn from the mistakes made in a CBR project, and instructors should not fear those failures, but instead focus on what was gained from the experiences.

CONCLUSION

Developing a community-based learning initiative is a time-consuming, frustrating, and rewarding process. Community organizations, faculty, and students benefit from the process in a variety of ways. Community organizations enhance their skills and organizational capacity, and receive information to help them better direct or implement programs and services. As one student commented, “It [community work] gives support to the community when we reach out to them and let them know that we care.” Another wrote: “It is important to have an opportunity to apply what we are learning. It also connects the university to a larger community which fosters goodwill.” Faculty gain opportunities to conduct applied research that leads to community enhancement and/or change, which can be more rewarding than traditional, academic research. Faculty also get to see their students “get it” and apply what they have learned, seeing Sociology “come alive” for their students. Students enjoy taking what they have learned and applying it to a “real” situation with an observable impact or outcome. A senior psychology major stated, “This

is the first class that has taken me outside the classroom.” Another commented that the project “gave me a chance to witness first-hand the work that is put forth to gathering data and creating an equal partnership with a variety of communities.” Through community-based learning, we can help students develop knowledge and skills that they can take with them and use later, regardless of their career choice.

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Table 1. Sources Illustrating Community-based Learning and Research Activities

Author(s)	Title	Summary
Ammerman et al.	Research Expectations Among African American Church Leaders in the PRAISE! Project: A Randomized Trial Guided by Community-based Participatory Research	This article highlights the importance of trust and respect of community members when conducting research, and also illustrates the importance of generating useful and beneficial research for the community. It also outlines and applies the 8 key principles of community-based participatory research to this community project.
Bolland, John M.	In Search of a Few Hundred Good Kids: Three Months in the Life of a Community-Based Survey Research Study	In this article, the author describes how he conducted a community-based survey of adolescents living in public housing neighborhoods. The author encountered many difficulties during this project; as a result, this article is a good example of the importance of involving the community in the research process to facilitate trust, respect, and the collection of quality, useful data.
Carter-Edwards et al.	Church Rosters: Is This a Viable Mechanism for Effectively Recruiting African Americans for a Community-Based Survey?	This article illustrates the importance of involving key community members in the project; in this case, involvement with participant recruitment. It also discusses several key principles, such as establishing trust and clarity of communication, that must be present in successful research projects with African Americans.
Curtis, Karen A.	Help From Within: Participatory Research in a Low-Income Neighborhood	This article uses an ethnographic approach to conduct a needs assessment in a multi-ethnic, low-income section of Philadelphia. The author discusses the project implementation, and includes valuable information about the benefits of collaboration with an advisory committee, including community “ownership” of the research findings.
Hill, Sarah	Doing Collaborative Research: Doing What Feels Right and Makes Sense	In this article, the author discusses the formation and importance of an advisory committee in her research on the experiences of women offenders. The central aim of the author was to conduct meaningful and relevant research, and she discusses how principles of collaboration, sharing power, and gaining trust furthered that aim.

Latowsky, Gretchen	Report: Community-based, Participatory Research in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Flags Environmental Health Hazards and Fuels Education and Action	This is an excellent article that illustrates the benefits of collaboration among community residents, environmental scientists, and local health agencies and providers. It details a community-based strategy that provided the local Latino residents with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process for addressing their area's environmental health problems.
Plaut et al.	Combining Sociology with Epidemiology: Community-Oriented Primary Care in a Rural Mountain County	This article describes the community assessment conducted prior to implementing Community-Oriented Primary Care in a rural community. It specifically focuses on how the community members helped shape the assessment and also discusses an interesting strategy to help identify communities.
Schulz et al.	Conducting a Participatory Community-based Survey for a Community Health Intervention on Detroit's East Side	This is a good example of the process used to facilitate collaboration among community members, service providers, and academic researchers to address issues related to the health of women and children.
Strand et al.	Community-Based Research and Higher Education: Principles and Practices.	This text is geared toward faculty/practitioners who are interested in learning about community-based research (CBR). It discusses the history of CBR, the importance of collaboration, ten key principles of CBR, and methodological issues to consider when conducting research.
Weinberg, Adam S.	Negotiating Community-Based Research: A Case Study of the "Life's Work" Project	This article discusses how community-based research can be an effective form of service-learning in rural communities. It is an excellent example of how students benefit from working with the community, and the importance of flexibility and mutual trust. It also discusses how tensions can develop in community-based research.