Community-Engaged Learning: Sticky Learning About the Social World

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Experiential learning (EL) found me as a young adult. As a high school senior, I attended a retreat that incorporated group initiatives, a series of group challenges designed to foster communication and team building. The premise was often ridiculous, such as the group needing to cross a field of imaginary lava with only two pairs of imaginary lava-impervious shoes to share, and additional challenges were often added, like when the tallest group member was no longer allowed to use their arms when the challenge was for the group to get all members over a 10-foot wall. While sometimes uneasy with how physical the exercises were as compared to my perceived lack of physical strength, I was fascinated by what happened when the group "debriefed" the initiative at its end. The facilitators led discussions about participants' feelings during the activity, including at the points where it seemed like the group would fail; communication patterns, such as whose ideas were considered and whose were dismissed; and how individuals supported each other during the activity. The depth of the insights that these conversations produced fascinated me (I had no idea we had been ignoring her the whole time! How interesting that some of us respond to frustration with greater effort while others withdraw!). Facilitating group initiatives in ways that fostered this kind of learning about group dynamics, awareness of others, and feelings of closeness with my group seemed like a superpower at the time, but I knew it was a skill, and I knew it was one I desperately wanted to learn.

So after high school, I got a summer job as a camp counselor. Like most academics, I've had minimal formal instruction in teaching, but my summers working with children at a camp are the foundation for how I approach education, the art of teaching, and group leadership. As a camp counselor, I learned group facilitation skills, albeit mostly through on-the-job, all-eyes-are-on-me, trial-and-error experiences – a stretch for someone who had never taken a

test she hadn't studied for. The lack of formal training forced me to hone the very skills I needed for effective group facilitation: watching and listening. To be ready to "work the magic" of the debrief, I observed the group's actions that followed patterns and the actions that didn't, paid attention to individuals' and teams' changes in and diversity of emotions, and listened for what was said and what wasn't. These observations allowed the debriefing questions to center on the group's experiences, drawing out participants' thoughts and feelings, insights and questions, about the experience they had just shared. I watched teams grow more inclusive, individuals grow more confident, and leaders become more aware when facilitating – in other words, I saw groups learn. This is how EL found me.

This fascination with group dynamics, combined with a desire to work for social justice and tackle social issues, propelled me into the social work profession and specifically, social work education, when in graduate school. Put simply, I love the classroom. I enjoy few professional activities more than facilitating an engaging discussion of some aspect of the social world and watching astute students push each other to understand the causes of our current reality and ethical responses to it. And as a professor, when it comes to educating passionate adults, most of them adolescents, about the social world, I return to my teaching roots, cultivated at summer camp: I rely on experiential education, specifically community engaged learning.

Community engaged learning (CEL) is at the confluence of critical pedagogy, active learning, and Freire's (1993) dialogic model of education (Nagda et al., 2003). CEL promotes civic engagement, anti-oppressive action, democratic participation, and education through repeated cycles of action and reflection. It is often conducted in partnership with a community organization in a relationship of mutual benefit and reciprocity. Social work education, in most instances, prepares students to enact professional values, which include social justice and service

(National Association of Social Workers, 2017), by promoting the well-being of vulnerable individuals, families, groups, and communities. Thus, there is a natural alignment between CEL and social work education. In short, one of the most authentic ways to educate social worker students is through CEL.

In my academic career, I have attempted a variety of CEL partnerships. Some have been more successful than others. Some have lasted for multiple semesters and others have ended after only one. Common themes among the more successful experiences have been achieving "sticky learning" through recognition of emotions in EL, which I discuss first; next, achieving learning that I can't effectively teach students on my own; and finally, the importance of reflection. In my teaching practice as a social work educator, these are the elements that keep my work engaged in the present, fresh for myself and my students, and relevant to the needs of the world and the interests of (most) students.

Sticky Learning

Back at summer camp, before we started a teambuilding activity, we would encourage participants to consider their comfort, challenge, and panic zones. Ryan (2006) describes these zones as comfort, stretch, and stress. One's comfort zone is an emotional "place" of security and ease, while one's panic zone is the experience of being overwhelmed by fear. Neither of these zones are conducive to learning. In our comfort zones, we are often not aware or focused enough to gain new insights or have an experience upon which we can reflect. In our panic zones, we are hyperfocused on getting out of the situation causing panic to the point that we cannot observe or reflect upon anything else. (For example, the fear I felt when I fell out of the boat when whitewater rafting long ago taught me only that I never want to go whitewater rafting again.)

In between the comfort and panic zones, however, is one's challenge zone. In this emotional space, we are a little outside our normal environment or behavior, which allows us to be more aware of what we're experiencing and what's going on around us. This focus, then, permits us to reflect more deeply later and learn more from what we experienced. We remember these experiences, and what we learned from them, longer, too. What we learn when in our challenge zones sticks with us.

Studies of the neuroscience of learning and memory provide evidence for this theory. Emotions are essential to learning because they direct our mental energy to things that are important (Immordino-Yang, 2016). This has been evolutionarily adaptive for our species (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Polk, 2018): our emotions have kept us procreating, for instance, and steered us away from actual or potential sources of trauma, as experienced in the panic zone. In experiences with very little emotion, it is difficult for us to focus our attention for prolonged periods and achieve deep learning (death by PowerPoint comes to mind). However, short-term emotional arousal, as experienced in the challenge zone, has been shown to improve memory consolidation and focus our attention on relevant aspects of the experience (Polk, 2018). One reason EL is effective, then, is that it is likely to engage students' emotions and result in learning that is "stickier" -- more memorable, and therefore more formative over a longer term.

In order to encourage my students to engage emotionally and achieve this sticky learning, I preface EL with a discussion of the comfort, challenge, and panic zones. For instance, I teach a Community Practice and Research course that meets in a local church that has allocated space for classes. Each week, we attend a free lunch held at the church to observe the event, interact with people from the neighborhood, and experience receiving a community service. The lunch is our primary community-engaged learning (CEL) activity in the course and why I teach the class

at this location. Before we go the first time, I ask students to consider what is in their comfort zone as it pertains to attending the lunch. For some, talking to a new person each week is within their comfort zones, but for many students, sitting by themselves or at a table with only their classmates and not eating what is offered is an emotionally safer place. Next, we discuss panic zones. I emphasize that entering one's panic zone is not helpful to anyone: neither the student, their classmates, community members, nor I benefit or value an individual pushing themselves into a panic zone. We don't need emotional martyrs. Individually, students consider what could cause them to enter their panic zones and how their minds and bodies tell them when they're there.

Finally, I ask students to think about their challenge zones. What actions can they take during lunch that would push them out of their comfort zones yet keep them from panic? Some students decide to sit next to someone they don't know. For others, it's about the food and trying something they didn't prepare and cannot choose. And for a small group of students, entering the room of strangers and taking a seat is a challenge. To engage further would induce the overwhelming emotion of the panic zone. After encouraging students to enter the challenge zone that they have identified (but not disclosed), we go to lunch.

When we enter the large hall in the basement, there are about twelve tables set up with six to ten chairs and place settings. The room typically has three women filling plates of food, two men delivering food and drinks to guests and bussing tables, and ten to twenty people who have come to eat and/or get a haircut, offered at the far end of the room behind a partition. Usually, the crowd reflects the surrounding neighborhood: mostly African-American people with a handful of white people. Most people are over 50 years old, though some are younger, including those who come on their lunch break from local construction sites. Through

conversation over the years, I've learned that several are there for the social interaction that they don't often get from living alone, others attend for the excellent food, and some come because of economic necessity.

As an instructor, it is fascinating to observe student behavior on the first day. Some are quickly chatting with someone from the neighborhood that they just met. Other students are observing the room cautiously but keenly on their first day. A few students often leave the student "pack" to sit at a table already crowded with neighborhood guests who seem to know the ropes of the community lunch, and a larger group finds seats together, often within proximity to one or two community members. At this point, it is difficult to refrain from assessing students' seating choices or number of words exchanged with those outside of the class as markers of whether students are challenging themselves or not. Yet, if I want students to attend to their own comfort, challenge, and panic zones, which is necessary for learning in this environment, then I must trust them to start where they need to start and watch for growth from there. My challenge zone when teaching includes trusting the process of experiential learning.

For, as I remind students several times during a semester, one's challenge zone moves (Ryan, 2006). As we become comfortable with a previously challenging environment or behavior, it no longer ushers us into our challenge zone. This is growth! To continue learning, then, we need to identify new bounds of our challenge zones. One way I measure success in EL is that where we start should not be where we end. In other words, what challenges us in week 15 should be different than what challenged us in week 1. In addition, one's challenge zone is influenced by other aspects of our emotional lives and therefore fluctuates. I observed this in a student who started the semester by disclosing to me that understanding her own challenge zone regarding the community lunch included acknowledging her experience of an eating disorder.

For this student, her behavior towards the food offered (eating some, eating a little, politely refusing when served, not attending the lunch) was highly dependent upon other stressors in her life and her levels of anxiety that week. Her challenge zone changed weekly and in a non-linear fashion, illustrating that learning outcomes in CEL are often different for each student.

In my experience, students readily adopt the language of the challenge zone. One student applied the concept to deciding what to do post-graduation. As one student reflected,

As I discerned if I wanted to do a year of service (what program, what placement, what city,
> etc.) I thought about how I really needed to do something outside of my comfort zone and do something in my challenge zone. And so I did! I surprised myself by choosing to accept a placement on the West Coast because I knew it was outside of my comfort zone. Now having been here for two months, it has been challenging but it has been so good for me too. I'm so glad that when I was going through the process of deciding, I had my challenge zone in mind. (L. Hannibal, personal communication, October 21, 2020)

 On another occasion, a student was able to articulate that her experience of going door-to-door in a neighborhood was abbreviated because a loose dog pushed her into her panic zone. From our prior conversations, she understood that continuing her work that day was not necessary. The concepts of the zones are accessible and helpful for students.

On course evaluations, students are asked to identify the aspects of courses that are most effective for their learning. For the Community Practice and Research course, students almost always discuss meeting at the community center and attending the community lunches among the most effective pieces of the class. Students' descriptors for this CEL experience have included "super beneficial," "special," and something that a student "loved." One student reflected,

> I think being in the challenge zone helped me overcome preconceived notions about people. I thought I knew what kind of people would be coming to the church for lunch, but I was (gladly) wrong and really benefited from conversations with neighbors. Being in the challenge zone does [cause] you to be uncomfortable with your own feelings and I

think it really is a place to learn, even if you thought you knew how something was...overall I like the concept of the challenge zone because it pushed me to challenge thoughts and ideas I had in my mind and pushed me to grow and learn, and be okay being a little uncomfortable along the way. (S. Heath, personal communication, October 16, 2020)

By utilizing CEL, I can facilitate "sticky" learning for students, which is further justified by students' generally positive response to it.

Learning What I Cannot Teach

Along with fostering "sticky" learning, CEL allows students to learn things that I am unable to teach them on my own. As I educate social work students, I am acutely aware of the bounds of my effectiveness due to my privilege as a white, educated, cisgender, Christian person. Since I teach at a private, Catholic, predominately white institution (PWI), my students often share some aspects of my identity and privilege, though there are always some who do not. I am not the right person to teach my students about many aspects of oppression, but it's critical that they—and I—understand how privilege and power operate in the social world, especially from the perspective of people with identities different than theirs. The Council on Social Work Education (2015) established "engaging with diversity and difference in practice" as a core competency for students to master, asserting that social workers "present themselves as learners and engage clients and constituencies as experts of their own experiences" (p. 7). CEL allows me to fulfill this mandate as a social worker myself, model a learning posture for my students, and facilitate education about the social world for all of us.

A specific instance of students learning what I can't teach them occurred as part of a second CEL project in the Community Practice and Research course. Through a collaboration with a local community development organization, students assisted with the organization's

work to understand needs and clearly communicate processes and available resources with

residents of a local public housing development who are facing displacement due to property

renovations.

> Even though I was put in the challenge zone it helped me see the honest reality of what I was learning about in class. It made me more empathetic. One instance that will forever be ingrained in my memory is when a few of us went to [the public housing community] for their neighborhood meeting. I will always remember the residents' faces of feeling hopeless, confused, and angry about the uncertainty of when their home would be demolished. And that is something that cannot be taught in a classroom. (A. Tomayko, personal communication, November 8, 2020)

This student's reflection demonstrates the impact of CEL: sustained learning ("will forever be

ingrained in my memory") about the social world ("honest reality of what I was learning about in

class"), achieved through personal experiences ("something that cannot be taught in a

classroom"). As an instructor, I cannot achieve this depth of learning on my own.

A specific instance of students learning what I can't teach them occurred during the loose

dog incident described previously. Several students, most of whom were white, described

feeling unsafe when going door-to-door in a neighborhood near campus of mostly people who

are black. We talked at length about the observations that led to these feelings in our next class.

At the end of the semester, our culminating experience was participating in a neighborhood work

day to assist elderly homeowners with small maintenance jobs, such as painting and landscaping.

Though we were in the same neighborhood in which students had previously felt unsafe, the

same students reported feeling comfortable during the work day. Through reflection, some

students realized that their perceptions of safety were based on whether they felt racially

different from those around them, as they had when going door-to-door, or whether they felt

accompanied by a larger group of mostly white people. Through an emotionally-engaged

experience of racial difference, students were able to explore the concept of a "safe" neighborhood and understand that it sometimes has little to do with crime statistics.

Another example occurred during one of the weekly lunches. One of the hosts facilitated a short program during which one student introduced our class as "from UD." At this, a community member laughed dismissively, which insulted the student speaker as well as a few other students (still other students were angry with the upset students for being upset). Serendipitously, a lifelong Dayton resident was our guest speaker in the class following this incident. After the student described the experience, our guest said, "Are you familiar with white privilege?" This started an important conversation about the role of the university in the community, differences between the student body and the community residents, and race and class privilege. The discussion was lively because it was in response to an authentic experience in which students were emotionally invested. Though I can talk about privilege with my students and discuss university-community relations any day, CEL produced a more engaged and relevant discussion which is more likely to have contributed to deeper learning.

In spring semesters, I facilitate an Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (Pompa, 2013) course that's held in a correctional institution. Half of the students are university students ("outside students") and the other half are experiencing incarceration ("inside students"). It is a unique CEL opportunity for the outside students, given how few of us who have never been incarcerated ever enter a prison, and it's a unique educational opportunity for the inside students, given how few people who have experienced incarceration have access to college courses. The experience teaches numerous things that I cannot teach students without EL. For inside students, many learn for the first time that they can successfully complete a college course, that higher education can be for them. More deeply, inside students are reminded who they are. "This class

reminded me of my dignity," one inside student shared at the end of a semester. The availability, structure, and interactions in the class communicates the value and worth of all participants in ways that words alone cannot accomplish. For outside students, the class provides exposure to the carceral system and people—with names, families, and diverse interests—who are experiencing it first-hand. Further, I can think of few better ways to encourage social work students to apply the professional value of dignity and worth of individuals (National Association of Social Workers, 2017) to people who experience incarceration. CEL allows students to deeply learn what I cannot teach them as effectively on my own.

Reflection

During a neighborhood work day one spring--an occasional third CEL element of the Community Practice and Research course--our class was paired with a group of employees from the university. The staff members were so pleased that the students were, in their eyes, "completing a service project" as a requirement of their final exam. "It's so much better [that they're here] than writing another paper!" one staff member told me. The thing is, I assign a lot of papers. Students in my CEL courses write weekly three-page papers that include sections for reflection, and though it can feel like a lot to assess, I keep assigning them every semester. The reflection component is too valuable to their learning to lose.

While some colleagues that I respect tailor their reflection prompts to course content modules, I err on the side of consistency by giving students essentially the same assignment every week, which is an adaptation of the reflection paper assignment from the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program curriculum (Pompa, 2013). The first section of the assignment asks students to report three observations they made during class that week and a short description of why that observation is meaningful. The observations can come from class sessions or time spent on

CEL. The second section is more difficult--an original analysis or integration of the week's readings and course materials. This section is required to be two pages in length, and some students struggle at first to avoid merely summarizing an assigned author. The goal here, however, is for students to make connections among sources. The final section of the paper is for reactions, where students can include their thoughts and feelings from the week. While I find it immensely valuable to understand how students are responding to the course, it is also helpful to students to have a spot to write about their intellectual and emotional experience so that these don't become the focus of the other sections of the paper. Once students understand the expectations for each section, they usually find a rhythm of jotting down observations during class, noting connections among readings as they go, and taking a breath at the end of the week to understand their reactions.

In my experience, reflection has been key for students to achieve sticky learning through CEL. Through verbal and written reflection, students establish narratives of events, clarify their emotional reactions in response to experiences, and articulate specific things that they've learned. In an academic climate that encourages a frenetic pace through coursework, extracurriculars, work, and social activities, time to reflect during class as well as written reflection assignments permit students the space to remember and evaluate their experience, further imprinting the memory of it and what they learned from it. It has also been helpful to have students review their own written reflections. When I ask students to review their earlier reflection papers, students are often pleased with the growth that they observe. This in itself can be affirming to students, based on their own observations and not words of others that can sometimes seem empty. One student wrote,

Reflecting on the first reflection paper, this class has helped me be more adaptable in different situations. In my first reflection paper, I wrote, "I was a deer in the headlights and did not know where I should sit." I remember going downstairs to the lunchroom, and being clueless and awkward. Now, I feel silly for thinking partaking in lunch, and sitting with strangers was the hardest thing for me to do at the time. Everyone that I had met through lunch has given me in-depth perspectives of their struggles and dreams that I would have not learned back on campus. In the later reflection papers, I wrote about the conversations that I had with people. It goes to show the growth of being able to communicate and feeling comfortable in discussing sensitive topics. (A. Tomayko, personal communication, May 4, 2020)

By recording her reactions and later reviewing them, this student was able to see areas in which she had developed competence and confidence during the semester.

In the same way, reflecting on the value of CEL to my teaching leads me to reaffirm my commitment to it, even though it can be more time-consuming and carries with it greater risk of failure than my courses that do not include CEL. I am reminded that CEL keeps me in my challenge zone as an instructor, since experiences are less predictable than lectures and my lesson plans are more often derailed. Recalling the memories of specific examples of important discussions prompted by CEL and my feelings of accomplishment on those days brings back the knowledge that memory and emotion are tied, so learning is facilitated by emotional engagement. Further, my sense of success came from getting students to confront aspects of the social world and consider challenging concepts in ways that I could not have accomplished without CEL. Reflection further ingrains in me what I have learned, what I know.

Stars in the Sky

Back at camp, the last night of the week was often very emotional for campers. Camp staff would hold candles, make a large circle around all of the campers, and sing a song about remembering the summer when you see stars at night. These days, I don't use the stars to

remember what CEL has taught me, and I don't think my students do, either. Instead, I

remember specific questions and phrases that have been spoken during important discussions. I

remember students engaging in a neighborhood in ways that seemed like too far of a stretch for

them during week one. I remember an inside and outside student genuinely laughing together,

when a few short months before, both were unsure and a little suspicious of each other. Through

these moments, CEL has taught me that CEL is worth it, and that there may be no better way to

engage students in learning about the social world.

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