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The Impact of Community-Based Practice on Learning Across the Disciplines

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The community service movement of the past thirty years has left us with a heightened awareness of the possibilities in campus-community partnerships. Three elements must be present for community-based learning to be effective: 1) the importance of thinking through the alignment of community-based work; 2) setting learning goals for courses to identifying the appropriate community work and 3) constructing effective prompts and assignments. Most faculty perceive community work as an addendum *to* a course or an assignment *within* a course. Presenting community work as an assignment can yield some wonderful outcomes but these are often difficult to predict and to assess. However, when community work substantively informs the course *structure* faculty can plan to explore specific outcomes (cognitive, affective) and prepare assignments to accurately assess the learning that flows from the work.

Many faculty at Brown support community-based work but struggle with the process of how to *integrate* community work into a course. The most common question I get from faculty is, "If I add community work what must I remove from the course?" The question is not about what stays and what goes, rather the task is identifying pedagogies that best facilitate the learning goals of the course. This begins with asking: "why" and "how."

- *Why* community-based work?: Faculty must define the community placement or project in the context of the discipline. For example, in a public health course, work in community can be an opportunity to introduce students to the concept of "coalition building."
- *How* community-based learning?: Faculty must define the purpose of the community work and develop learning objectives/outcomes for the course. For example, how will student community-based action research or problem-based learning help them achieve the learning goals for the course?

Working from the *why* and *how* faculty can discern the positive impact of community work on the teaching and learning exchange. As a result, faculty reframe assignments and assessments to realize the course learning goals. Research suggests that community-based learning has specific benefits to learners, primarily in the development of creative and critical thinking abilities. The challenge for faculty is to identify which thinking skills and intellectual behaviors constitute critical thinking within a specific course or discipline, and to determine how community-based work enhances the substantive development of those skills and behaviors.

The most common misconception about community-based work is that it is anti-theory, often expressed in the belief that theory resides only in the texts and the classroom. However, theory does not stand in opposition to practice. Professor Ann Dill, *Sociology*, has observed,

The power of theory is that it allows you to identify processes that are similar across a variety of contexts that might appear dissimilar. When talking about human service organizations there are many theories that try to help us make sense of connections. Many human service organizations operate under similar constraints - they may seem dissimilar like Planned Parenthood and an art museum - but using theory we come to understand concepts that give us the language, a set of questions, observations that is between theory and practice. I teach this language - language that allows you to 'work up' or talk to general theory (broader conversations on resource development) or language that allows you to 'work down' for instance, knowing that agencies need funding to operate how does that work? Student's observations based on community work and projects can help us understand working up (inductive) to the concepts and then working down from the theory to the concepts and seeing the application. Students may or may not grasp all the theory but they should be able to understand the

project in terms of the concepts they have studied – by comparing notes with classmates they should see that what appears to be dissimilar can in fact be quite similar. [in an e-mail to the author]

Faculty who create engaging, sustainable community-based courses begin with what they know – their disciplinary expertise - and recognize that they need to construct their courses to be directly related to how students will apply knowledge. The key is to find an alignment between the cognitive demands the course will place on students, the reflective capacity of the students and the extent to which students are socialized into the discipline or course material. The community work experience should be a vehicle to facilitate this alignment. The course assignments should measure the degree of that alignment. As with any pedagogy, success depends upon the manner in which faculty scaffold and guide student learning throughout the semester.

Finally, one of the best arguments for the inclusion of community-based learning is that it invariably raises questions about the public and private utility of knowledge.

- Is disciplinary knowledge a private utility? Is it one that furthers a student's place in the private economy?
- Is knowledge a public utility? Is it one that nurtures or inspires a student's social imagination?
- Can disciplinary knowledge serve both private and public?

Faculty must be careful in how they use this binary conceptual basis, with its potential implication that public utility is inherently noble and private utility a moral and civic failure. Some students come from backgrounds that have prepared them to succeed in the economy or have safety nets in case of failure to give them the liberty to explore 'knowledge as a public good.' Other students, whose footholds in the economy are often tenuous, have fewer liberties to explore their social imagination as furthering ones own place in the private economy means improving the lives of extended family and the health of communities.

Community-based learning has moved firmly beyond the marginalized, co-curricular model of altruism to a sophisticated and integrated pedagogy of learning. The field currently boasts an interdisciplinary group of scholars and community partners committed to addressing a range of local, national and global concerns and engaging higher education in invigorating questions. Some of those scholars are colleagues here at Brown. Brown has a number of faculty and researchers who are innovating their discipline through

courageous and imaginative community practice. Many of these scholars do not refer to their work as community-based learning, but see it as good disciplinary practice or engaged scholarship. We hope that you will join the Swearer Center in conversations about community-based learning and engaged scholarship and see the Center as a resource for questions of teaching, research and community practice.

Ed. Note: Also in this issue see two articles by Brown faculty colleagues (Brown/Senier and Leslie) on the benefits of integrating Community-Based Learning into courses in their disciplines.