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Students Connecting with the University Community: The Learning Community as Bridge

Abstract

The purpose of this piece is to call attention to learning conversations—to bring forth an understanding of the power of storytelling, and how it functions to make communicative connections possible, thus helping students learn. I want to highlight the value of an embodied way of engaging students during service learning. I begin this perspective by telling the story behind the story of this “learning conversation.” Following that, I provide a rationale for building a communicative connection—a relationship—between the classroom and the community through service learning. Kolb’s (1984) “Experiential Learning Theory” is introduced as a means of building this relationship or bridge to connect the instructional environment of the classroom and the practices of the community through conversational learning. The final section describes a pedagogical praxis grounded in the experience of the learning community, its service learning initiative, and the power of organizing conversations through story.

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Keywords

Experiential Learning, Conversational Learning, Communicative Connection, Stories

A primary purpose for many freshmen learning communities is creating a comfortable college environment to assist students with their transition to college: “The objective is to create a sense of ‘home’ when entering college so greater learning can take place. The communities are a way to get to know people with similar interests as your own” (McDowell Marinchak & Deluliis, 2013, p. 1). A central dimension of this sense of “comfort” is the development of communicative connections. This article explores how a high-impact practice—service learning, embedded within a University Learning Community—fostered communicative connections, creating bridges among students, the university, and the community.

The story behind the story—the initial “learning conversation”

Once upon a time, an educator asked herself, “What does it mean to be a good teacher?” Every day, teachers face challenges and questions in the classroom. Regularly, “off the cuff” pedagogical moves are made in crucial moments. By attending carefully to those moments, this teacher began to notice how *learning conversations*—conversations that establish communicative connections—can transform individual experiences. Thus began a focus on uncovering strategies to establish and sustain communicative connections. In a way, this is the story of that journey.

At Duquesne University, following acceptance to the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts, students are asked to choose a residential learning community from among nine possibilities designed for first-year students—Amor, Civitas, Fides, Judicium, Litterae, Orbis, Personae, Ratio, and Virtus. Each learning community follows a “curricular approach that intentionally link[s] or cluster[s] two or more courses, often around an interdisciplinary theme or problem, and enroll[s] a common cohort of students” (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004, p. 20). Since one key program goal is to “connect the classroom with the community through service” (Duquesne University, 2014a), students in each learning community participate in a semester long service-learning project connected to the learning community’s mission. Prior to registration, students hear about each of the learning communities—who the learning community is, what it does, and how it serves the community—so they can choose the one that best matches their interests.

In fall 2012, I taught “Exploring Interpersonal Communication” for the Personae learning community, which “considers how individuals and groups shape one another” (Duquesne University, 2104b). Personae’s mission is for students to “learn about human diversity not only in class, but through their service” (Duquesne University, 2104b). The community partner for students in the learning community was a local organization that works with refugees.

At the beginning of the semester, Personae learning community students acquired more information about their community partner organization and received an overview of their service-learning project. Each week throughout the academic semester, Personae students visited the organization where they worked with refugees, assisting during English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Students were prepared for this experience through a class on intercultural communication, which provided a foundation for conversing with someone from a different culture. They also participated in a site visit. This session, facilitated by one of the organization's directors, provided background on the program, demographic information about the refugees, an overview about what to expect when working with the refugees, and an explanation about the roles Duquesne students would play in the ESL classes. After the preparatory session, I followed up in the next on-campus class session to address questions and/or concerns the students had regarding their service learning work.

Despite the extensive preparation, the subsequent meetings with community partners were not as effective as I had anticipated. In the class following the students' visits in the first week, my request for "first impressions" resulted in a teaching challenge. Initially the students claimed that their visits had gone well, but as the conversation unfolded it became clear that many had had trouble "striking up a conversation" with their partners. This was my moment of challenge—and so I paused. I reflected about my first experience working with a refugee and realized that stories might provide a key. "Do you enjoy a good story?" I asked my students, and their overwhelming response was yes. So I asked them to think of the last "good story" they had heard—who told it? Through this initially tentative conversation, storytelling began to emerge as a strategy students could use to develop communicative connections with the refugees they would be working with throughout the semester.

As an assignment for their next visit, I asked students to find out the "story" about how their partner ended up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When we met again, I asked whether anyone wanted to share a story, and in sharp contrast to the previous class, students had lots to say. At the end of the semester, I asked students to briefly reflect on this initial "story" meeting. One student wrote:

I had talked to a man from Syria, and he told me how he was a chef at a local restaurant. He described how even though he was not proficient in English he was able to use his savings to put all three of his daughters through college. I thought it was amazing how he was able to come together against all odds and provide a life for his daughters that many economically stable Americans find difficult to do.

Another student responded,

I talked closely with one of the students. He described all of the sacrifices he had made to come to America. Leaving his wife and children behind, he came to Pittsburgh for new opportunities and to provide a better life for his family. Touched by his story, I would look forward to meeting him every week to hear about his family's progress. Towards the end of the semester, he brought in a small photo album and showed me pictures of his wife and kids finally in Pittsburgh. With a tear in his eye, he described how thankful he was to have his family living in the "best country in the world." At this moment, everything I had done through service learning became worth it. I gained a further appreciation of my country while learning to value immigrants for their perseverance.

These student reflections showed me that, as I'd hoped, a focus on stories helped establish a communicative connection between students and their partners. In other words, for these students, "communicative connections" developed when active learning, in the form of narrative pedagogy, was grounded in reflective thinking and speaking. And, in listening closely to the students' initial struggles and empathizing with them, I had been reminded of what it means to be a good teacher.

The purpose of this piece is to call attention to learning conversations—to bring forth an understanding of the power of storytelling and how it functions to make communicative connections possible, thus helping students learn. I want to highlight the value of an embodied way of engaging students during service learning. I began this perspective by telling the story behind these "learning conversations." In what follows, I provide a rationale for building a communicative connection—and consequently a *relationship*—between the classroom and the community through service learning. Kolb's (1984) "Experiential Learning Theory" is introduced as a means of building this relationship or *bridge*, connecting the instructional environment of the classroom and the practices of the community through conversational learning. Finally, I describe a pedagogical practice that emerged from the *experiences* of the learning community, its service learning initiative, and the power of organizing conversations through story.

The relationship: The classroom and community

While learning communities are a high-impact practice, embedding another high-impact practice such as service learning within a learning community can create richer learning opportunities for students, including more opportunities to engage in communicative connections. Although many learning community faculty understand the educational potential in pairing these two high-impact practices (Oates & Leavitt, 2003), especially in regards to learning outcomes such as civic engagement, the complex logistics involved often serve as a deterrent. Eaton, MacGregor, & Schoem (1993) address this directly in their introduction to the National Learning Communities Project Monograph Series on *Integrating Learning Communities with Service-Learning*. Explaining that “learning communities can enhance service learning” through “building partnerships” (p. 4-6), they nevertheless note that such integration requires faculty to make adjustments in the organization, management, and planning of course activities to remain flexible and adaptable to change as the course develops.

Service learning can take many forms to “allow students to apply classroom knowledge and develop critical thinking while addressing human and community needs” (Nandan, 2010, p. 25). Course projects usually invite students to learn about surrounding communities while opening new communicative connections. Additionally, service learning guides students to understand “that although ‘learning is indeed a private, internal process that takes place in the head of the learner,’ much learning does occur through social interaction” (Wiersema, Licklider, & Ebbers, 2013, p. 15-16). Much of the learning in service learning is embodied as people in places come together through social interaction. Thus, an important pedagogical underpinning of the classroom/community relationship is the communicative connection developed between the students and their community partners.

Communicative connections constructed between students and community members create a bridge between the instructional environment and community practices. Kolb’s (1984) “Experiential Learning Theory” (ELT) can be applied to discover that bridge. Kolb describes learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). Experience is the heart of ELT, and both Kolb and McCarthy (2010) argue that experiential learning happens as the learner goes through four stages, including experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting. Kolb further notes that learners may begin in any stage but must follow each of the stages in sequence.

Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2005) propose a framework for grounding ELT in *conversational learning* through a “process whereby learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their

conversations” (p. 412). According to this framework, every communicative connection begins and ends with commitment, creating “learning opportunities that are larger than could be accomplished by an individual, acknowledging the relational, communal qualities.” Conversation thus opens up “experiential learning as people strive to increase understanding together” (p. 414). Baker, Jensen, and Kolb’s framework explains how, in the social context of the learning community, students’ reflections about their service learning experiences moved from individual knowledge sharing to opening a space for collective meaning-making and construction of knowledge. In the context of service learning, conversations that establish strong communicative connections among students and community members open an equally rich space for collective meaning-making. In this way, learning communities with embedded service learning help engender learning not only among students but also among students and community members.

Teaching in a learning community with multiple disciplinary lenses—communication, English, psychology, religion, and computer literacy—I experienced how, through its implementation of different perspectives, the learning community *did* enhance service learning; the students also had this experience. The impact was evident in student responses to the question: “Do you believe the learning community was a way for you to connect with the community? Why or why not?”

One student remarked,

I learned a lot about working together as a group and relating materials across classes from my learning community and service learning experience ... we also were able to relate a lot of information and class lectures [across] all our learning community classes.

Another student wrote,

The learning community enhanced my experience with the community because it placed me with a group of people I did not know and forced me to become close with this community. I loved learning with them because they provoked new ideas and gave me a new perspective on how to understand things. We also came together as a community to help others during service learning. Working together with others to make a difference felt so rewarding, and it made me feel like I was actually part of a team.

These responses showed me the importance of making interdisciplinary connections in the classroom as well as how the experiential aspects of service learning enhanced the learning community. Integrating service learning into learning communities created a space in which I could help students learn to build communicative bridges and, ultimately, relationships with community members.

The experience: A communicative connection through storytelling

Stories are accounts of people's lives, and storytelling often provides a way to engage others. Through stories, people become interconnected, bound by a common thread that directly or indirectly connects to our lives. In every communicative story interaction, there is a teller and a listener. As tellers, we are directly invested in the story. Listeners, however, may have direct or indirect connections with those stories, and both kinds of connections may be just as meaningful. So, regardless of their differences, "the stories we live" (McAdams, 1994) open the possibility for a communicative connection. In turn, every communicative connection has its own story that chronicles how that particular bond began, developed, and, at times, ended.

A communicative connection is made when active learning in the form of narrative pedagogy is grounded in reflective thinking and speaking. This convergence provides the basis for uncovering the storytelling connection. Storytelling in this situation served as the antecedent for the launching of Kolb's ELT. In this case, the learners entered at the experiencing stage (e.g., the doing) when they began actively undergoing the service-learning project (i.e., doing work with refugees). Students transitioned to the reflecting stage when the storytelling conversation provided an avenue to reflect back on their initial visit to the organization. Moving into the thinking stage occurred as the students attempted to conceptualize what they observed while listening to the refugee tell his or her story. Finally, students progressed into the acting stage as they planned for the forthcoming visits and met subsequently with their community partners. For us, the initial storytelling session helped establish a foundation upon which the students built throughout the entire semester.

Engaging in the act of storytelling helps students understand the intrinsic value of stories. As Brunson and Lampl (2007) note, "the use of narrative and stories in the classroom has been the focus of increasing attention among educators in recent years" (p. 59), among them Baxter Magolda (2001), Butler & Bently (1996), Kenyon & Randall (1997), Kerby (1991), Rossiter (1999), and Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler (2000). One student described how, in listening to the stories, she learned that, while the refugees did not speak English well, some

of them were doctors and professors in their country of origin. Another student commented,

As cliché as it sounds, I learned that it is important to not judge a book by its cover during my service-learning community experience. Going into the [organization], I had many preconceived notions about who the immigrants were I was going to teach and what they have been through [in life]. However, I was wrong in my assumptions and learned that most prejudices and stereotypes are wrong as well.

These reflections illustrate how in listening to the stories students learned about their biases, and, as I'd hoped, reflected on their positions. In those moments, narrative became much more than storytelling in the classroom. Story opened up a new space for conversational learning.

Conversational learning also made collective meaning-making and construction of knowledge achievable for students in this learning community. During a meeting, a refugee offered to tutor a student in Italian. As the student observed:

At this moment, I realized I was learning just as much from the immigrants and refugees as they were learning from me. Despite cultural and language barriers, each of us has something to offer to the world. Through this meeting, I was able to realize that ultimately, language and culture do not define a person, but rather what they are willing to contribute to society is what matters.

This reflection revealed that knowledge making was occurring between the student and refugee through a dialogue in which they were learning from each other. Reflection on the service learning experience, therefore, moved from individual knowledge-sharing to collective meaning-making through conversation.

As Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2005) might argue, students in this course constructed "meaning together from their experiences" throughout the semester (p. 414). And storytelling was the means of breaking the communication barrier students faced at the start of their service learning experience. In the end, as student, as teacher, as storyteller, and as listener, we share meaning directly and indirectly to connect with and shape meaning in our lives and in the lives of others. These stories, told and retold, will connect sense of place, sense of time, and sense of meaning in moments of reflection.

Conclusion

Learning communities cultivate community engagement, building a bridge for the student, university, and community to discover communicative connections. While service and learning are integral parts of learning communities, the significance of these components is often not grasped by students. However, participating in an environment that encouraged learning through experience and taking an active role in the community through their work with a local organization that serves refugees optimized both service and learning for these students. Hence, the learning community became a place for holistic and balanced learning to emerge through experience, opening the possibility for communicative connections and offering the students an opportunity to engage in conversation as experiential learning.

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