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## Service-learning in the COVID19 era: Learning in the midst of crisis

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### **Service-Learning in the COVID-19 Era: Learning in the Midst of Crisis**

Even in the best of times, service-learning can pose numerous challenges. As a unique pedagogy to traditional classroom structure, service-learning combines experiential service, academic content, and critical reflection in a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience. While there are many benefits to service-learning, the challenges to this unique way of teaching and learning are just as frequent. Breaking away from the traditional structures most common in higher education, service-learning educators must navigate new waters as they try to bridge the gap between university and community structures and needs. Due to these challenges, service-learning educators must have the ability to continuously pivot to account for shifting circumstances.

This ability to pivot was flexed in the spring 2020 academic semester due to unprecedented hurdles from COVID-19, a disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 that took the world by storm after its first appearance in late 2019. What was first relatively unknown about the virus became increasingly clear - it was highly contagious, and asymptomatic carriers could increase spread. When one became sick with COVID, symptoms could range from mild to critical symptoms, reaching lethality - at a higher rate for the elderly and immunocompromised (Stokes et al., 2020). As this virus became a pandemic, increasing measures were put in place to slow its spread.

Efforts were made to encourage social distancing and “flatten the curve,” slowing the peak of the crisis so healthcare facilities did not become overwhelmed. Higher education began to take steps to drastically change their campuses. In the matter of a week, many universities heeded the directives of public health officials and prepared to close their doors and shift to online learning. This shift has caused unprecedented, and as yet unimaginable, challenges for students, educators, and administration - as we work to adjust to a new world, the transitions are countless. In this online environment we question where service-learning, an experiential and hands-on pedagogy, fits. How do the budding relationships between the students and community partners adapt?

As educators teaching service-learning courses in the midst of a public crisis, we write to share the lessons we are learning. As this public health emergency descended and we adapted how we teach and learn, we came to realize how crises reveal the strength of relationships. Strong relationships grant us the ability to be flexible in our service-learning work, a skill required for continued success in uncertain times. We share these lessons in an effort to help educators center on awareness and the importance of strengthening relationships integral to service-learning partnerships: relationships within and between students, service-partners, and mentors.

### **Community First**

As critical service-learning educators, we must remain mindful of the power that comes with our position in relation to our students and community partners. Challenging this power differential often means reorganizing how knowledge is taught, learned, and distributed in the classroom and how we interact with our community partners. Critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) tasks students and educators to model the redistribution of power and share the responsibility for learning through co-creation of knowledge (Butin, 2010; Freire, 1993). By practicing ways of working toward redistributing power we can aid in the development of more authentic relationships. Relationships are the building blocks of critical service-learning classroom communities and the glue that sustains university-community partnerships.

While the challenges of engaging in service-learning in these unprecedented times are many, we also see opportunities to reshape and rebuild the communities that are an essential component of critical service-learning. As initial changes were made at breakneck speed, we worked quickly with partners and administrators to develop new service-learning plans for the remainder of the semester. Due to the time-sensitive nature of this transition, we distributed new syllabi and service-learning agreements to students in a unidirectional, top-down fashion, threatening the balance of power that we strive toward as critical service-learning educators. The closure of schools and community organizations shut people out of the physical spaces where they had been working in community in their service-learning partnerships. Additionally, the move to online learning forced a new style and structure of interaction on classroom communities. The service-learning classrooms that had worked to build a community adapted to this shift more easily due to the trust that was built and shared between educators and students.

In service-learning classrooms where a level of trust and open communication existed between educators and students, these mid-semester shifts affirmed the power of community. Shared commitment to course goals and to the importance of reflection enabled educators and students to reflect on the way decisions had been hastily made and to renegotiate the syllabi, partnerships and expectations of everyone involved. The loss of physical shared space forced creative and innovative ways of conducting service-learning that can stretch and expand everyone's ideas of community. While the move to online learning platforms tends to distance learners, it also provides learners and educators with new information about each other and a shared experience that if harnessed, can work to strengthen a community. Next, we provide suggestions on how to build community within service-learning classrooms.

- **Learn who your students are and what resources they bring.**

Spending class time getting to know everyone is invaluable in building community. Sharing identity kits, reflections, experiences, and stories are all ways to build community and learn about each other's funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992).

- **Listen.**

Designing space and time in service-learning classes for student voices can reframe ideas about who has knowledge and who controls learning. For educators, the opportunity to listen to students can provide valuable formative assessment of students' learning.

- **Reflect and learn together.**

Reflection is one of the foundational components of learning in service-learning (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). Sharing and learning from other's reflections provides a powerful tool for building community.

- **Recognize and reshape power.**

Challenging dominance can occur when educators seek to share knowledge and power through such strategies as co-constructing class norms, providing choices in assignments, positioning learning as coming from the community partner (Stoecker, Tryon, & Loving, 2011) and students as bearers of this knowledge and teachers for one another.

Here, educator Elizabeth Robinson provides examples of how she builds community in her Introduction to Teaching Service-Learning classroom.

Community Building in *Introduction to Teaching Service-Learning*  
Spring 2020 Course

*Student led community building activities have been an important component of this course. In order to provide a bit of teaching experience and to support the goals of building community, at the beginning of every class time and space was made for one or two students to lead the whole class in a community building activity. The objective was to engage all members of our classroom in learning about and from one another. When we transitioned to on-line learning we continued with the community builders. We discussed how in a future with more virtual work scenarios and on-line communication we would all need to be able to build community in order to not lose our connections. Our community builders remain a highlight of our classes, lightening the serious mood in the midst of uncertain and scary times. These activities have created a unique classroom bond, shared teaching responsibilities across the class, and*

*also allowed us to play with different tools and strategies while learning innovative ways to engage virtually. -ER*

### **Anchor the Partnership**

Within service-learning courses, community extends beyond the classroom to the community partner. In times of crisis and transition, anchoring our partnerships between the university and community partners is at the center of the work and keeps service-learning working towards its mission of attaining justice-oriented outcomes. As higher education raced to reimagine the rest of the semester, community partners were working quickly to provide care and resources, and in many instances, stay afloat in a threatening pandemic crisis. In these transitions, it has become more important than ever to anchor the relationship between the community partner and the classroom, ensuring that the service is mutually-beneficial in all ways possible.

Critical service-learning (Mitchell, 2008) focuses on a mutually beneficial, balanced relationship between higher education and the community partner(s). Mutually beneficial practice embraces students working *alongside* and *with* community members rather than *for* them. Here, authentic relationships are built where both parties learn and benefit from the partnership. Developing connection and empathy within an authentic relationship allows us to cross the self-other binary to develop common goals and communicate shared understanding grounded in respect and trust. Relationships within service-learning must move from a transactional-based relationship to relationships grounded in solidarity, where service-learners see themselves on equal levels with community partners (Clifford, 2017). Moreover, authentic relationships allow us to recognize and critically analyze power structures in an effort to move towards social change and a more equitable society (Mitchell 2008).

Unfortunately, this core tenant of service-learning is threatened during this COVID-19 pandemic, as partners and educators must rally their emotional, physical, and social strength to revisit their previous arrangements and quickly reestablish agreements for the remainder of the semester. Partnerships that rely on face-to-face contact and direct service work were rendered near impossible with social-distancing restrictions leaving most educators with few choices: one option was to rework direct service activities to indirect activities when possible, or, conclude the relationship for the semester with hopes of revising whenever it was safe to do so. For community partners with marginalized, oppressed, or at-risk populations, the work becomes even more critical. Sadly, community partners who serve our highest-risk health populations or nonprofits are at risk of closing doors. Centering the partnership between educators and community liaisons to

support each other towards our common goals is essential during a time of crisis. Below, we provide suggestions on how to anchor a service-learning partnerships:

- **Check in with your community partner.**  
In these uncertain times, practice putting the relationship first and checking in with the liaison or support person at your partner community site. Making space for hearing the partner's needs during these shifting times will help deepen the relationship.
- **Revisit plans and agreements.**  
Service-learning work is more traditionally thought of as direct-service, but there are many opportunities to provide "indirect" service that allow for student learning and meeting community partner's needs. Work creatively with your partner to establish new arrangements.
- **Develop these agreements with your students and support persons.**  
Bring in perspectives from students and additional support persons as you develop your plans with the community partner to help ease the transition for all parties.
- **Embrace uncertainty.**  
With the unknowns that accompany crises, there is an overlay of uncertainty over our work. Embracing uncertainty and the fact that we do not have answers to all the twists and turns of service-learning, will allow for more flexibility and ability to succeed in times of crisis.

Educator Debra Harkins provides examples of how she anchors the service-learning partnership in her course, Community Psychology.

Shifting Service Projects in *Community Psychology*  
Spring 2020 Course

*Before COVID, my community partner and I had decided that service-learning students would provide mentoring and support to local alternative high schoolers as they attempt to create urban gardens in their schools. When the university closed, my community partner and I began to have daily conversations about how to meet the needs of these high schoolers and service-learners. My community partner stressed how dire the situation is for many of the students and families in this alternative high school and we began to rethink what we could do to meet the needs of both sets of students. From this partnership, we rallied quickly and created a Facebook page, CEEDS4Change Coronavirus Response: A Boston Resiliency Project. Service-learning students decided on the name of this project. The purpose of the project was to provide CARE packages for 200 of Boston's neediest students and their families once a week for four weeks. In the CARE packages will be food, books, cards with mental health tips and one-page educational curriculum ideas based on books. Donations from the university and local foundations provided the funds for food and books and the service-learners created the educational curriculum and mental health cards for the CARE packages. This project was a win for the university and the community partner mainly due to a solid and trusting relationship that developed over the past 3 years. We trust each other enough to know that we are both seeking ways to meet the needs of both the community and the university stakeholders and this has made all the difference to the positive outcome during this unprecedented COVID-19 crisis. -DH*

### **Mentors Provide Support**

Crisis reveals that service-learning partnerships with increased support may help ease unexpected transitions. In an effort to provide more support and an attempt to reach more critical outcomes of service-learning, a team of faculty and graduate students developed a multi-tiered service-learning mentoring program at an urban, private university in the northeast. This program encompasses multiple levels of mentoring: faculty-faculty, faculty-graduate student, graduate student-undergraduate student, and undergraduate student-undergraduate student. As a complex model, there are multiple mentoring relationships at play where mentors and mentees are both engaged in dyadic learning and reflexive processes. These relationships extend into community-partner contexts where community partner liaisons engage in relationships with student service-learners, peer mentors, and faculty. As critical reflection, or the reflecting back on one's experience to understand meaning, transform perspectives, and engage in social change (Freire,

1970) is a core to service-learning, mentorship provides space and support for educators and students alike to reflect and engage more deeply in their work, working to create stronger ties with their community partners.

While mentorship is typically defined as a relationship between two individuals or groups where the more experienced person provides developmental support to the other, less experienced person(s) (Kram, 1985), this crisis brought new challenges as it was a novel experience for all. With this crisis, an opportunity was presented to collaborate and engage in a shared learning experience that aligns with a critical feminist model of mentoring (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017). This framework is one that we draw from because it recognizes and redistributes power in a mentoring relationship.

While mentors may not have experience in this uncharted territory, they do have an increased opportunity to provide logistical and emotional support for their mentees. Mentoring provides increased opportunity to strengthen relationships between educators, students, and partners in service-learning partnerships. Peer service-learning assistant mentors not only are there to support students in the uncertainty of this new educational landscape, but also help educators coordinate with community partners and educators. Additionally, faculty mentors with more experience in service-learning can provide support for educators who are new to service-learning pedagogy in helping them create new pathways for indirect service-work.

Next, we provide suggestions on how mentoring can support service-learning.

- **Mentors provide logistical support for service-learning.**

In the unexpected pivoting during times of crisis, student peer mentors can provide additional coordination and support for the service-learning partnership by serving as a bridge between S-L students, faculty, and community partners.

- **Mentors provide emotional support.**

In addition to managing new expectations for the logistics of moving to remote learning, students, educators, and community partners alike are experiencing increased anxiety and concern related to the COVID-19 crisis. Mentors provide an additional space to relate, providing psychosocial and emotional support.

- **Mentors and mentees can learn from each other.**

Recognizing that this is a new experience for all in higher education, this balances the relationships between mentors and mentees. Redistributing power between mentors and mentees creates a shared, collaborative learning environment that can work towards a critical feminist mentorship (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017).



- **Open yourself up on both ends of the mentoring relationship.**

As an educator, you may find yourself in the position of both a mentor and a mentee. Relating to the experience that you may not have all the answers and it may not be a perfect semester, while opening yourself up to the possibility of new learning and experiences, along with your mentors, mentees, and community partners, may make for a meaningful semester in the midst of a crisis.

Educator Lauren Grenier provides examples of how mentoring can support service-learning in her course, Socially Responsible Leadership.

*Socially Responsible Leadership SLAM Course  
Spring 2020*

*As an educator for Socially Responsible Leadership, the upper-level service-learning course that provides training and community building for service-learning assistant mentors (SLAMs), the transition to online-learning during COVID-19 demonstrated how invaluable mentors can be for critical service-learning. SLAMs stepped up to the plate and worked closely with community partners, faculty, and their student mentees to provide logistical support in the transition to online learning. As students themselves, SLAMs had personal experience in order to provide emotional support to students, and relay student well-being to faculty members. Furthermore, SLAMs engaged in their own learning process, of critical reflection through their engagement with their mentees. SLAMs continued to grow relationships with community partners, faculty members, and students in this uncertain crisis, demonstrating just how valuable this position is for the success of critical service-learning partnerships. -LG*

### **Future Directions**

Research on online teaching is quite clear and consistent that student motivation and performance is positively related to relationships that are built with their teachers (Nilson & Goodson, 2018). Similarly, we found that relationship building between teacher and student; teacher and community partner; and mentor and mentee was key to a successful service-learning experience. What is still needed is research on how the strength of these types of relationships impact different service-learning projects within psychology and education, within other academic disciplines, and across other online experientials (e.g., project-based, internships, practica). As COVID-19 continues to be an ongoing threat, and remote learning continues to be a possibility, further research in these domains

will be critical to better understand how to adapt service-learning in times of crisis.

### **Conclusion**

During this unexpected shift in the landscape of education, service-learning educators were left to grapple with a difficult transition into remote instruction - pivoting to a new way of teaching and learning in a pedagogical frame that traditionally relies on experiential activities. As educators who pivoted during this shockwave of transition, we examined how critical relationships are in allowing this flexibility. If not for the trust that our students put in us through the community we have developed in the classroom, the mutually-beneficial relationships we have built with community partners, and the support we have received from mentors, this flexibility may not have been possible. We recognize the importance of building strong relationships within our service-learning partnerships.

Higher education in the shadow of a public health emergency renews perspectives on how we should educate the next generation. Students struggle to focus their attention on absorbing information from traditional lectures when they are concerned with the health safety of themselves and their loved ones. Travel restrictions, economic uncertainty, and grappling with the general unknown produces a world-wide trauma response that makes it challenging to stay present and find meaning in day-to-day activities. Here is where service-learning becomes an ever-important pedagogy: in times of crisis, the relationships that are built out of a service-learning partnership bridge connections and provide support. Students and educators alike see real-time the impact that their support has on communities in need, and in return gain real-world knowledge from these experiences. In times of uncertainty, communities come together, and deeper connections are built. This new way of engaging with the community in times of crisis may create lasting change in how we engage in service-learning and higher education more broadly.

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