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## In Their Own Voices: Assessing Student Learning Through Analysis of Reflective Writing

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**In Their Own Voices:  
Assessing Student Learning Through Analysis of Reflective Writing**

Patti Haack, Seanna Kerrigan, and Vicki Reitenauer

**Abstract**

In order to assess students' experiences of their service-learning Capstone, researchers used a qualitative design to study 50 students' reflections from seven distinctly different Senior Capstone courses. In these reflections, students demonstrated integrative learning while deepening their understanding of communication, critical thinking, diversity, and social responsibility.

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In the past five years Portland State University has surveyed over 5,000 students upon completion of their required Senior Capstone service-learning course. Each year approximately 3 out of every 4 students report that they advanced their learning in the four primary goals of these Capstones: enhancing their *communication* skills, furthering their *critical thinking* abilities, deepening their *appreciation of diversity*, and enriching their sense of *social responsibility*. Up to this point there has been a paucity of data documenting the ways in which students have enhanced their abilities in these goal areas. There has been no evidence to illustrate how students are defining these goals and how they are demonstrating their growth and understanding in these areas. Due to this lack of data, the authors decided to analyze 50 Capstone students' final written reflection papers to see how students described their learning in the four goals of Capstones. The goals themselves are more clearly defined in each section area.

**University Studies Program Description**

University Studies is the four-year general education requirement program at Portland State University. This program is based on four central student learning goals: communication, critical thinking, diversity, and social responsibility. These four goals are woven into the interdisciplinary four-year curriculum.

Freshman Inquiry is a year-long sequence of thematic courses that uses an interdisciplinary approach to explore topics from different perspectives. In the Sophomore and Junior Inquiry, students continue to build on skills developed in Freshman Inquiry with a focus on communication and critical thinking skills.

The Senior Capstone serves as the culminating course in the general education program. Each year, PSU requires over 3,200 seniors to complete a six-credit service-learning Capstone as part of their requirement for graduation. Over 220 Capstone courses give students from a variety of majors and backgrounds an opportunity to work in a cooperative learning environment on topics relevant to them and their communities. Capstones courses are designed to provide an opportunity for students to apply the expertise learned in pursuit of their major to a real community issue. The students work in interdisciplinary teams and engage the community through their work on important social issues. Each Capstone course has approximately 16 students in it. Typically, these courses divide up into four-member teams and complete a final product such as a grant, business plan, community-based research project or educational curriculum. Capstones operate as a community-based learning seminar rich in student interaction and classroom discussions.

As part of the Capstone proposal process faculty must show that the course will attempt to address the four University Studies Goals which are defined below:

- **Inquiry and Critical Thinking:** “Students will learn various modes of inquiry through interdisciplinary curricula—problem-posing, investigating, conceptualizing—in order to become active, self-motivated, and empowered learners.” (Portland State University [PSU], n.d.)
- **Communication:** “Students will enhance their capacity to communicate in various ways—writing, graphics, numeracy, and other visual and oral means—to collaborate effectively with others in group work, and to be competent in appropriate communication technologies.” (PSU)
- **The Diversity of Human Experience:** “Students will enhance their appreciation for and understanding of the rich complexity of the human experience through the study of differences in ethnic and cultural perspectives, class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability.” (PSU)
- **Ethics and Social Responsibility:** “Students will expand their understanding of the impact and value of individuals and their choices on society, both intellectually and socially, through group projects and collaboration in learning communities.” (PSU).

The purpose of this article is to document how students experience Capstone service-learning courses in the context of these learning goals.

### Methods

In order to better understand the ways in which students experienced and demonstrated their learning in these goal areas, the researchers analyzed student reflection papers from Capstone courses offered at Portland State University. To gather the data, the researchers e-mailed 20 Capstone faculty seeking voluntary participants for this study. Seven faculty representing seven unique Capstone courses chose to volunteer. Each of them sought voluntary participation from their students. As a result 112 students volunteered to have his/her final reflection paper analyzed for this study. The range of courses included those that addressed women’s issues, juvenile justice, immigration, homelessness, K-12 environmental science education, intolerance in America, and K-12 music/art programs. These courses offered an accurate representative sample of courses offered at the Capstone level. Each of these seven courses required students to write a reflection paper that spoke to at least one of the four primary learning goals of the Capstone. From a collection of 112 student papers, 50 papers were randomly selected for analysis.

### Data Analysis

The two researchers conducted separate but identical protocols for qualitative data analysis set forth by Tesch (1990) and Creswell (1994). This process required each researcher to read through all of the reflections carefully to get a sense of the whole and to note her initial ideas about the data. Second, the researchers looked through the data one reflection at a time and answered the question, *What is the underlying meaning of this written reflection?* Next, each researcher made a list of what she saw as the core underlying topics and clustered similar ones into topical themes. Patton (1990) describes these initial stages of analysis as a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data.

Each researcher then tested these themes by looking at the data to see if it could be organized according to the themes. Patton (1990) identifies this as a process of content analysis, in which topics are defined and labeled. Four of the overarching themes were pre-determined as each instructor asked their students to reflect on one of the four University Studies goals, but the readers wanted to confirm thematic analysis to see if additional themes were found. After organizing the data, each researcher categorized the data accordingly and looked for relationships between the themes in order to make final decisions about the themes and their coding. Patton suggests that this is a process of seeing relationships, “regularities,” and patterns in the data, and then developing a “classification system for the data” (p. 402). As Patton explains, the researcher “works back and forth between the data and the classification system to verify the meaningfulness and the accuracy of the categories and the placement of

data in categories” (p. 403). The data was analyzed and recoded until a coherent and comprehensive thematic analysis had taken place. The researchers compared and contrasted their individual thematic findings and confirmed the results. The results of their separate findings and their collaborative conclusions are described in the following section.

### Results

Each researcher identified six themes, although no set number of themes had been pre-determined. A comparison of themes identified by each researcher is presented in Table 1, located in Appendix A.

The researchers then spent several hours reviewing and describing their findings. They found substantial congruence between their two analyses as they described the student outcomes found in the reflection papers. They clearly agreed on the six major themes found. The first four were the stated University Studies goals of: communication, critical thinking, appreciation of diversity, and enhanced social responsibility. In addition to these four student outcomes, the researchers also discovered two unanticipated themes. First, students described how these distinct student outcomes were intertwined. Students articulated an experience of *integrated learning*, as they understood that critical thinking helped them both to appreciate diversity more deeply and to communicate more effectively. They recognized a relationship between deconstructing stereotypes and experiencing social responsibility to serve diverse communities. In addition, students described the pedagogy they observed which brought about these outcomes. While students did not use the term *pedagogy*, they described the learning environment, teaching methods, and the assignments that furthered their understanding of communication, critical thinking, diversity, and social responsibility.

As expected, students reported an increase in knowledge and ability in the four University Studies goals. Students discussed tangible progress they had made in the practical application of their acquired skills and its relationship to changes in their personal beliefs and practices. They also described newly acquired insights into personal growth within the framework of the four University Studies goals. However, taking their experiences one step further, students spoke of how they used their past experiences—from academic courses as well as from their personal lives—and applied that to the work that they were doing in their Capstone courses. Finally, many spoke of how this work was going to alter, even improve, their work in their future endeavors, whether that be in their careers or through furthering their education.

### Student Outcomes: University Studies Program Goals

#### Communication

As explained above, the Communication goal holds that “students will enhance their capacity to communicate in various ways” (PSU, n.d.). In their final Capstone reflections, students overwhelmingly spoke to their increased ability to communicate with others—in group settings as well as interpersonally—noting that this skill can be utilized in a variety of contexts in their future endeavors.

For example, in one reflection, a student wrote about his or her experience communicating in a team:

Since working in teams is almost unavoidable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I thought it would be important to improve my understanding of work within teams...I learned that communication can make or break a team experience. It was amazing to see how a positive change in how our group members communicated made the whole process of working on our project easier and more effective. (#6)

On an interpersonal level, one student wrote about how his communication skills changed, and how he was able to see the practical application of these newly-acquired skills:

This class for me has been a communication savior. It has helped me realize that what I have to share is important and people are interested. I noticed a change in my other classes too where I began to speak up more. Everyday [sic] I go and volunteer at the

club I feel the same way. When I say something to the kids they listened. It's good to know that I am able to communicate things clearly. (#32)

One Capstone instructor uses the language of "grateful listening" to identify a particular mode of communication. One of her students explains:

Lately, when I want to get an idea or point across to someone who is not familiar with grateful listening, I will tell them that I do not want them to respond and ask them to just listen without thinking of any reply. Whether they are or not, it at least appears to me that these individuals are paying more attention to what I have to say...[A]t least I feel listened to. (#19)

This same student takes her course learning to another level in her application of these skills outside the classroom and into her chosen place of service, creating links between her classroom learning and her service learning by noting that "improved communication skills and grateful listening techniques have proven invaluable to me...Hearing what the women have to say, without forming any judgment or making any comment, has been a wonderful experience for me" (#19).

In conclusion, students wrote about the importance of communication and how their communication—and their interpretation of communication—was changed or enhanced. They reported that they better understood how to communicate effectively. Conversely, they also reported how ineffective communication can often lead to bad team experiences or increased difficulty in community-based situations.

### **Critical Thinking**

Critical thinking is a catchphrase that has been increasingly discussed in recent educational literature and in classroom settings (Brookfield, 1987, 1990, 1997; Ennis, 1985): At Portland State University, the University Studies department notes that the objective of critical thinking is that "students will learn various modes of inquiry through interdisciplinary curricula" (PSU, n.d.). Critical thinking is approached differently in various Capstone courses. In some of Portland State University's Capstone courses students serve the community primarily by conducting research such as courses on investigating public ballot measures related to juvenile justice. In these types of courses students reported using critical thinking skills to analyze and evaluate data as well as summarizing complex information to present to public audiences. In other Capstones projects students work directly with clients of the agency. In these Capstones students reported demonstrating the concept of critical thinking through the analysis of interpersonal interactions with the community that they are serving.

For instance, in one Capstone course entitled "Science in the Outdoor Classroom," the instructor invites his students to find ways to encourage youth to explore their surroundings in a critically challenging way. One student described her experience with these words:

Now that I have been challenged to think more critically, to think more "outside of the box," I can see so many more possibilities within our...schools, classes, and teachers, in regards to teaching styles and teaching tools. Since I have left lower-level public schools and have now spent 4 years in college, I have experienced that there is much to be said for autonomy in the classroom, asking and answering my own questions, as well as being inspired by my classes and teachers...The idea of science inquiry was amazing to me; guiding the students to teach themselves, to ask their own questions, to find their own answers ... and to think freely and creatively, is brilliant. I have seen the different groups of kids, over the course of the days we would spend together, be inspired to learn ... and obtain knowledge. (#31)

Critical thinking is often thought of as a process that one uses to inquire about topics outside of oneself. However, critical thinking helped the following student empower himself not only for the goals of his service work, but also his own personal goals. In his reflection about his work with a local Boys and Girls Club, this student wrote about the "fears and costs" of mentoring:

One of my fears was that there would be times that I did not want to go [to] the club but felt rather that I had to. I feared that if I went to the club with an attitude of not wanting to be there I could not be effective as a mentor. This was tested throughout my time at the club. Fortunately, every time I went to the club I went with an attitude of wanting to be

there. Most of the time I really anticipated going to the club, and I looked forward to seeing some of the kids that I had been working with. (#29)

In summary, students reported that the meaningful moments of critical thinking took place when they reflected upon the context of their work with their service location. Practical application partnered with reflective practice offered many students the opportunity to think critically about work with different populations, as well as their personal ideals and beliefs.

### **Appreciation of Diversity**

The third University Studies goal—the diversity of human experience—articulates that "students will enhance their appreciation for and understanding of the rich complexity of the human experience (PSU, n.d.). In this sample, students reported deep learning in this goal area, which is reflected in students' profound comments about how appreciation of diversity was modeled for them both in the classroom and in the community. They saw faculty respecting diverse viewpoints and agency representatives serving as advocates for diverse populations. In addition, students wrote about how they learned to appreciate the diverse viewpoints, ideas, communication styles, strengths, and opinions expressed by their peers.

Many students recognized their own lack of exposure to diverse populations upon entering the course, realizing that the world is much more diverse than their neighborhoods of origin. As one student commented,

I grew up in Milwaukie, which has a very white homogenous [sic] population. In school most of my friends were exactly like me: white, middle-lower class, blue collar families...My experience in this class has also made me more accepting towards one group with which I have had literally no experience: [the] homeless. (#11)

Students' appreciation of diversity clearly deepened through their interactions with different populations. Many talked about their initial fears of engaging with new populations, and how, through the Capstone, they were able to address those fears and form deep connections with others. Furthermore, students became more aware and sensitive to the diversity of social class, which they reported not having thought much about until they encountered these issues in their Capstones. For example, several Capstone students wrote that they had assumed that the children they worked with in the community were being raised in similar economic situations to those they had experienced. Notions of homelessness, alternative living conditions, and varied family structures simply had not occurred to them. As one student who was working with children stated,

We thought we had come up with questions that were broad enough as to not alienate some students. [One] question asked "what color is your house?" This caused one girl to sulk and say "I don't live in a *house*, I live in an *apartment*!" ...I learned...each student comes from a different family structure and different ethnic and racial background and that can make quite a difference to a child. (#41)

Finally, students commented on how the Capstone taught them the dangers of reinforcing stereotypes. Students reported a heightened awareness of generalizing and spoke about trying to reduce that tendency in order know an individual more fully, rather than relying on the stereotype to form their opinions about the people they encountered. Additionally, students talked about gaining information about the lived experiences of diverse populations and simultaneously discovering their own privilege in the process. They became aware of their own privilege as they uncovered new information about specific populations who are marginalized from certain societal benefits.

Many students reported that this awareness of privilege is not an easy one. It often caused them to question beliefs they have held about themselves and persons different from them, investigate how society is structured, and wonder who benefits from the established structures. Stated one student,

It was something that had been hard for me to acknowledge: I had an advantage over some people, [including] John [a homeless man]. It was something I had not realized for most of my life. It was my family that gave me my advantage. As simple as it might sound, it was one important component that was missing in many of the lives of people that were

homeless. The problem of homelessness is too complex to say that it is the most important...but this was a step in the direction to begin to understand the problem. (#30)

In summary, students reported deepening their appreciation of diversity. They reported being exposed to new populations and being supported to move beyond mere exposure to make deep connections with those with whom they worked. Students became friends with some, colleagues to others, advocates for still more. They came to recognize the complexity of the lives of various populations and develop new perspectives on social issues and related social policies. Ultimately, students reported being transformed in ways they had not previously encountered in their lives or in their educations.

### **Ethics and Social Responsibility**

The fourth University Studies goal—ethics and social responsibility—explains that “students will expand their understanding of the impact and value of individuals and their choices on society” (PSU, n.d.). Students reported that the Capstone provided them with the opportunity to deepen their sense of social responsibility and reflect upon ethical issues in the community, including complex issues about power and privilege. Many students described practicing social responsibility in service to the community partner, while others discussed the ethical value of civic activities like voting. Students also reported developing a long-term commitment to social responsibility, resulting in plans to serve their communities in the future through continued volunteering. Some even spoke about the desire to participate in careers that would promote this notion of social responsibility through service. Finally, students poignantly discussed the power of role models they observed in their Capstones. They learned that social responsibility takes real commitment and courage to create positive change.

Many students suggested that they deepened their commitment to social responsibility as a result of acknowledging their privilege. As they recognized that they had benefited through unearned advantage, they came to believe that it was their responsibility to give back to the community. Through the Capstone, many students were exposed to people who had unequal access to education, safe housing, food, money, and employment, and as a result these students developed a commitment to contribute to their community in hopes of building a more compassionate and just society. As one man stated,

as a child and a young man I would not have believed that being male and white was of any importance, but I know differently now. When I look at all the advantages I have had over the years, I see how these advantages have contributed to my success. As a successful person, as a person that has a home, I begin to comprehend my responsibility in contributing to a society that has provided me a wonderful life. A life that more than half the world's people would never dream possible. (#30)

Students also discussed political, social, and educational issues in the context of social responsibility. Many came to understand the importance of issues such as school funding, especially if their Capstones were directly related to youth or K-12 education. Many developed a perspective that voting was the social responsibility of citizens and that passing school funding measures was critical to the success of a community.

Most people vot[ing for] no more tax increases clearly didn't understand the negative impact to our schools and to the public services. What does it say about our value system when people vote against the schools that educate their kids?...A good public education is the basis for a healthy community that attracts big business. Without a skilled labor force, companies will pack up and leave. (#8)

Finally, students reported learning that social responsibility takes courage and conviction. Some witnessed these qualities at the community sites where they were working, some heard it in the guest speakers who talked about their engagement in the community, and some found it in the texts used in Capstones. One student referred explicitly to a character from her Capstone reading:

The most interesting character to me was a man that believed in equal rights for blacks, and had the means to help them, but never had the courage to stand up to [those with power]. It made me realize that equity is not achievable by simply believing in it. That nothing is accomplished by simply standing idly and watching the world go by. It takes

action and conviction to stand up and work on the issues that matter to you. It made me realize that to be truly socially responsible in fighting for such ethical issues as equal rights that it takes work and active involvement beyond education. (#15)

In summary, students reported deepening their social responsibility in varied ways. For some this was in the form of direct service in the community, which they hoped to continue; for others, this was through voting and the political process. Regardless of the means by which students planned to engage, most reported a deeper awareness of their responsibility to contribute to the well-being of their communities. They felt a relationship between themselves and the health of their local schools, their communities as a whole, and, especially, the individuals with whom they worked in the community.

### **Additional Themes Identified By Researchers: Integrated Learning and Constructivist Pedagogy**

#### **Integrated Learning**

One of the most pervasive themes in the analysis of the data was students' integration of their learning around the general education learning goals. Students rarely described a goal in isolation but rather commented on how one learning goal helped inform another. The most obvious examples occurred in the area of diversity. Students consistently described their learning related to the appreciation of diversity in terms of critical thinking, specifically the process of deconstructing previously held beliefs. As one student described,

Outside of this Capstone class, I don't think I could have transformed my ignorant presumption that social class dictates the value of a person. I had to first recognize my desire to dissolve my belief systems that don't support my spiritual growth. Then by using the tools inquiry/critical thinking while interacting with different people...I was able to recognize and challenge a belief that was getting in my way. (#5)

Here the student explicitly acknowledges that the transformation of her belief around social class required two aspects of the general education goals: she needed exposure to diversity, and she needed critical thinking skills to analyze her belief system. The student doubts that she would have been engaged with diverse populations in a way that would simultaneously challenge her assumptions without this Capstone course. It appears that the transformations that students experience during Capstones involve moments when multiple powerful learning modalities coexist continuously throughout the course, offering the opportunity to transform thinking.

Of the 50 reflection papers that were examined, 44 contained explorations of more than one University Studies goal, although some of the writers did not explicitly state that they were addressing more than one University Studies goal. For example, one student chose to write about critical thinking. Her definition of this goal included using “research, problem solving, organization, and teamwork” to further her skills as a critical thinker. In many instances throughout her paper, she cites communication techniques as vehicles to critical thinking:

The class discussions also played an important role in shaping the development of my critical thinking skills. I think what made the class discussions so beneficial is that I was presented with differing viewpoints and I was able to take those in, and then respond with my own viewpoints. The class discussions provided an immediate share and respond session, requiring me to gather my thoughts quickly for a response, while at the same time causing me to think about an issue in a different light. (#4)

For this student, the acquisition of critical thinking skills was most important, and communication was a medium through which she improved those skills. Additionally, she explained that the weekly reflection papers helped further her skills. Each of these class activities—discussions and weekly written papers—was explored in reference to the Communication goal in other students' papers.

#### **Pedagogy**

In addition to describing their own learning outcomes, Capstone participants also described five common elements of their learning experiences which facilitated these outcomes.

First, students described Capstones as being congruent with a *constructivist teaching philosophy*. While not using this language, students consistently described Capstone courses as building upon their previous knowledge and connecting new information to their own personal experience. Second, students described Capstone courses as connecting *theory to practice*. Many times this was described as the use of texts that linked course content to the social issue investigated in the community. Third, they enthusiastically asserted that *the community was a powerful teacher* for them. They found community members, clients, leaders, and children to be significant educators who taught them how to create meaningful relationships, how to listen, how to find new insights regarding social issues, and how to deepen awareness regarding social policies. Their interactions with the community informed them of their own strengths, weaknesses, prejudices, privileges, fears, and gifts. Many of their most memorable moments happened when the community was their teacher!

Fourth, students reported that their *classrooms were themselves a community*, a community of learners where they investigated how to listen, respect, appreciate diversity, and contribute. Finally, students reported that these courses were *highly relevant* to their own lives, teaching them lessons that applied outside of class and assisting them at home, at work, in relationships, and in their communities.

### **Constructivism**

Constructivist pedagogy is informed by the idea that knowledge is a human construction, not an objective information set existing outside the self to be consumed (Gredler, 1997, p. 57). Individuals literally construct knowledge by synthesizing a variety of new experiences with their previously constructed knowledge base. As an integrated program, University Studies strives to engage students in constructivist learning through work that builds upon their previous learning as they move through all program levels. Since the Senior Capstone portion of the University Studies Program is at the end of their coursework, students often see correlations between the work they did in past courses—sometimes courses from years before—to the work they are doing in their Capstone.

For example, one student spoke of her experience in Freshman Inquiry—a course she had finished eight years previously. That course included a community-based service-learning project that focused on English language learners.

[Even] at [that] early point in my college experience I felt...that it was my social responsibility to help these people while I was there. Also I realized the importance of advocating things such as ESL and other programs that would help people from all different walks of life, so that they could live the better lives that they were hoping for when they came to America. Almost eight years later, I return to a classroom for my Senior Capstone experience, where I would again be a teacher. The world and I have changed since my last teaching experience. (#20)

The correlations, however, are not solely between University Studies courses. In a Capstone entitled "Grant Writing for Non-Profits," one student found a correlation between her academic major and citizenship, a theme covered in the course:

I feel that my career as an Accountant has been enhanced through this experience by understanding what serving the community truly means. As a public accountant, I have a responsibility to provide the public with confidence in our capital markets and the quality of information that citizens are presented with by companies. I have realized that we need to have intelligent, participating citizens in order for my profession to provide this service. (#14)

Unsure of how he wanted to apply his chosen major, one student found his focus at his service location, building upon his major's knowledge base and applying the concepts that he learned in his Capstone in coming to an understanding of his future career goals.

Through this program I learned a lot about myself and where I want to go in life. This program helped me discover and direct me toward a career I would enjoy. I am an administration of justice major and have been struggling to find what field I want to work in. My experiences at House of Umoja make me realize that I want to...focus on the juvenile system, particularly parole and probation. (#12)

Additionally, the idea of constructivist knowledge-building includes arenas outside of the classroom—one's work and home life. Some students wrote about how the skills they developed in the classroom and/or in their service work influenced their personal interactions. In the course using "grateful listening" as a tool for effective communication, one student previously unfamiliar with the idea of grateful listening found herself using her new communication tools with friends and family.

I feel that there is great value in this exercise, and I regularly practice it now. I find that my family and friends really are very grateful that I am able to just listen without giving any opinion or advice; sometimes it is the most valuable help that I can give...I especially like to use grateful listening with my son, [and] I feel as though more of what I have to say to him is actually sinking in. Our relationship has dramatically improved in the last five or six weeks, and I think that is a direct result of our improved communication. (#19)

### **Theory to Practice**

In Capstone courses instructors use a variety of texts to bring a more human element to the learning experience. Students reported that written texts were powerful tools to explore new communities and grapple with complex social issues which created positive learning opportunities. One student who volunteered with a seasonal service workers organization saw correlations between what he was reading in his text and the people with whom he was working.

This book is accurate in the way Mexican migrant workers are portrayed in society today. I get the feeling that a lot of people don't think of them as equals...I am very disturbed by that idea. This book inspired me in my community outreach project. I understood the difficulties that migrant workers faced and I wanted to help in any way I could... This experience truly meant a lot to me because of the discussion and reading a book about migrant farm workers. I came to the realization that if I were in their position I would do the same thing. Regardless of any laws or challenges I had to face, I would be willing to make any sacrifice in order to make a better life for myself. (#13)

This student was able to make his experience more meaningful through exploration of the topic with his classmates partnered with the practical application of his ideas and opinions.

One course involved readings that focused on prejudice in America, examining topics such as race, class, and gender intolerance during history. In this Capstone course, students worked with a local agency serving primarily those of Hispanic descent. This student noticed many similarities between the novel read in class and the real experiences of the population with whom she was working.

I imagined how I would survive living in a foreign country without knowing the language. I imagine the discrimination that [the organization's clients] must face everyday [sic] being poor and minority. Then I imagined again the couple from [the novel] . . . The race issues that [had] been brought up in most of my class discussions before my Capstone class were generally [about] black and white. The discussions of [the book and] my community involvement led me to broaden that definition of racial discrimination and examine the lives of all different minorities. . . The readings and community involvement in my senior Capstone class made me realize that just becoming educated on diversity was not enough. That simply educating yourself to value and embrace diversity does not fulfill your social responsibility of promoting and fighting for it. (#15)

### **Community as Teacher**

In several instances, students looked beyond the classroom and "formal" teaching to the community in which they were interacting. Many students spoke to their unfamiliarity with the population served by their community partners and how they had come to this work with many preconceived—and oftentimes incorrect—notions. Working with grade-school children, for example, can bring a certain level of expectation and some predetermined ideas about education and children's abilities to learn. One student in a course with an environmental focus was surprised by how much the students knew—and how much she learned from them:

I have to be honest and admit I never expected these kids to be this clever! I have always believed that these sorts of skills didn't develop until much later in the maturity process. The level of understanding these kids have about environmental issues and ecological processes challenged my own skill level, and [I] often times found myself in the position of the learner... My eyes have been opened to the critical thinking skills of children. Their ability to observe, question and hypothesize the way things work far exceeds any initial expectations I had prior to working with them...I have renewed faith in the education system and believe these kids will be well prepared for the challenges that face them in the future. (#3)

In this theme, the students described the community participants that they worked with as their teachers. Through the development of new understandings, students examined their own assumptions about a community with which they were not very familiar. The lessons they learned from the community were deep learning that no professor or textbook presented to them, but which emerged from exchanges in their lived experiences.

### ***Classroom as Learning Community***

The fourth element that students reported was that their *classrooms were themselves a community*. They described their peers as essential to their learning. Students found that the smaller class size of Capstones (about 16 students per course) allowed them the opportunity to know the names of every student in the class. This is fairly uncommon at such a large public commuter campus. For many it was the first time that they really knew the other students in their class. Students remembered icebreakers and interactive classroom exercises as being essential to developing a close-knit community of learners.

One student spoke to the variety of people in her course and how that enhanced her learning, both in the classroom and in her life.

Living in class with these other 12 beings over the past seven weeks has been a gift in diversity for me. Everyone has come with the uniqueness of sex, personality, wisdom tradition or spirituality, abilities and gifts and just who they are in this world. For me the openness of the structure of the class has offered for much more intimacy between students and teacher, not just based on the smaller class size. I have made deeper connections with people in this class than I have with any during my entire career in college and I am 28 years old now. That says a lot. (#24)

In addition, students reported learning how to have controversy with civility, because the courses taught them to express their opinions in a safe learning environment. Students learned how to examine conflicting views and engage in processes of inquiry to learn more deeply about complex social issues. As one student stated,

I signed up for this course because I was interested in the environment and I wanted to learn how to write grants for non-profits. What I learned, however, is how to live and learn from people with different, sometimes contradictory, opinions...I realized that the environment our teacher had created was an excellent place to learn how different opinions are necessary to gain a deeper understanding of problems...To me this was effective because it forced me to see things through other lenses. The ability to put your own biases aside and understand the opposing view is an invaluable tool for future business people such as me. (#36).

Students also became aware of what processes helped them to develop a safe community of learners. In most cases it was either a formal or informal process of naming ground rules for the course. When this was done informally, it was simply a matter of the faculty member modeling respect for diverse opinions, taking the time to acknowledge the contributions of students, and facilitating productive dialogue in the classroom. Students also reported learning formal processes to set ground rules to develop safe learning environments. One student stated,

...[Our] list of ground rules for everyone to follow throughout the class... included honoring diversity, respecting others' opinions, raising our own consciousness, compromising, being willing to be flexible, [and so on]...These group

rules served as guidelines for us in our interactions with other members of the class. They also set the tone for the class as a whole, with their focus on creating an open, respectful community of team members willing to help each other make progress with class work and personal growth in general. (#7)

### ***Relevancy***

The fifth element that was common across the various Capstone courses is *relevancy*. Students described the wide range of Capstones as providing lessons that could be applied beyond their course. This learning took many forms, including new insights regarding relationships, communication, professional applications, and the wider community.

Students frequently reported that Capstones caused them to reflect on the relationships in their lives. They had new insights regarding the patterns in those relationships (past and present) and new awareness regarding the quality of those relationships. One student said, In [one reflection] I took a long hard look at the relationships in my life and evaluated the strength of those relationships. I considered whether those relationships were conditional or unconditional. These were things that I had given limited consideration to in the past. I discovered that the bedrock of my own support was the unconditional love of my parents. From that solid foundation I believe I have been able to build more solid relationships with my wife, children, friends, employer, and acquaintances. (#21)

Students also found tremendous coherence between what they learned in their Capstones and the professions they were about to enter. They saw the relevancy of the general education goals to their future careers. They knew they would be required to work with diverse populations, communicate effectively, manage group projects, critically analyze problems, and generate solutions. Students saw Capstones as providing them with the skills necessary to be successful both in these general areas and in the specific Capstone activities related to their careers. One student remarked,

One extremely valuable thing I am taking away from my time in this class and working with [the community partner] is [that] my ideas that classrooms and my teaching style must be structured and controlled have been forever changed. I will use this learning whenever I find that I am working with children in a teaching, mentoring, and parenting environment. (#31)

### ***Conclusion***

In an effort to understand how college students experienced their general education goals within the context of a Capstone course, two researchers studied 50 Capstone student reflection papers. In these assignments students described in their own words what they learned about communication, critical thinking, social responsibility, and appreciation of diversity; described how they were transformed by these courses; and identified the pedagogical features of these courses that supported their learning. Students explained how these courses effectively wove together their learning from text, the classroom, and the community by modeling constructivist teaching practices. They also shared that these courses functioned as learning communities, as they attributed deep insights from their collaborative learning with peers and with community organizations. Finally, students reported that these courses were relevant to their lives as they learned more about themselves, the course content, and the multiple communities in which they are members.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Comparison of themes identified by readers in their own words.

Reader One	Reader Two
<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Group and class dynamics as communication lesson</li> <li>2. Reflection papers</li> <li>3. Increase in speaking ability/"coming out of shell"</li> <li>4. "Communicate more effectively with myself"</li> <li>5. Skill: using "I/me" statements</li> <li>6. Thoughtful/grateful listening</li> <li>7. Discussions as open-forum reflection</li> </ol>	<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Group process—working in teams</li> <li>2. Effective communication with specific audiences (e.g. children, age appropriately)</li> <li>3. Confidence in public speaking to multiple audiences ("real audiences": community partner, clients)</li> <li>4. Listening</li> <li>5. Communication "in-class" and "in-community"</li> <li>6. Seen as transferable to professional life</li> <li>7. Reflection process enhanced communication</li> </ol>
<p><b>Critical Thinking</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Investigative work (research projects)</li> <li>2. Being an active participant requires critical thinking (class discussions)</li> <li>3. "Fears and costs" of service work (included analysis of community interactions here; also included examination of social issues)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Critical Thinking</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Research on social/environmental issues</li> <li>2. Personal analysis/deconstruction of fears and assumptions</li> <li>3. In-class discussions as examples of times when students engaged in CT</li> <li>4. Reexamination of social issues (e.g., rethinking ideas about homelessness)</li> <li>5. Critical analysis of specific interactions during the Capstone and the meaning they held</li> </ol>
<p><b>Diversity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In-class sharing of personal story contributing to classroom diversity</li> <li>2. Diversity within class</li> <li>3. Community service interaction involves diverse populations (agreed-upon recognition of privilege)</li> <li>4. Group work as diversity (appreciation for diverse viewpoints)</li> <li>5. Addressed stereotypes (including lessons learned about diverse populations)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Diversity</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Modeling of appreciation of diversity in class</li> <li>2. Discovery of one's own privilege</li> <li>3. Classroom diversity (ideas, communication styles, gifts/strengths)</li> <li>4. Interaction with diverse populations in the community</li> <li>5. Fears associated with diversity</li> <li>6. Developed respect for diverse viewpoints</li> <li>7. Learned new facts about diverse populations</li> </ol>



Table 1: Comparison of themes identified by readers in their own words (continued).

Reader One	Reader Two
<p><b>Social Responsibility and Ethics</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hands-on application with community partner</li> <li>Examination of “value-laden” language (including examination of personal ethics and community partners’ ethics)</li> <li>Social responsibility to diverse populations (including comments re: future acts of service and role modeling)</li> <li>Voting</li> <li>Career</li> </ol>	<p><b>Social Responsibility and Ethics</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examination of personal ethics and ethics of community partner</li> <li>Practice of social responsibility in service to the community partner</li> <li>Responsibility to vote and be aware of issues</li> <li>Commitment to future acts of service</li> <li>Realizing need for courage to take risks in being socially responsible</li> <li>Considering careers that promote the common good</li> <li>Roles models of socially responsible people</li> </ol>
<p><b>Constructed Learning</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pulling in previous University Studies work (FRINQ, SING)</li> <li>Personal interaction with others enhanced learning in each of the UNST goals (new insights re: diversity)</li> <li>Connected knowledge from field of study/major as part of community in the course</li> <li>Incorporating past educational journey/experience</li> <li>Taking lessons outside of class (sharing lessons with a friend or family member)</li> <li>Goals relating to each other; discussions (communication) seen as tool for critical thinking</li> </ol>	<p><b>Integrated Learning</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students see goals as connected to each other—hard to talk about one without connecting it to the other</li> <li>Students clearly demonstrated critical thinking skills when deconstructing stereotypes (appreciation of diversity)</li> <li>Students acknowledged enhanced communication (with others outside of class) because of new insights re: communication and diversity</li> <li>Students acknowledged enhanced communication (with others outside of class) because of new insights re: communication and diversity</li> <li>Students connected Capstone experience to prior learning</li> </ol>

Table 1: Comparison of themes identified by readers in their own words (continued).

Reader One	Reader Two
<p><b>“Grab Bag”</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Effective to connect text to service</li> <li>Telling of personal interactions as example of important learning (in reflections)</li> <li>Increase in self-knowledge/personal growth through interaction with community partners</li> <li>Career growth (via interaction with community partner in the “real world”)</li> <li>Application of critical theories and practice</li> <li>Community work as the most important part of the course</li> <li>Development of leadership style/skills</li> <li>Relationship with faculty as important (often seen as role models)</li> </ol>	<p><b>Pedagogy</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clear expectations for the course enhance student experience</li> <li>Clear connection between the text and the service is beneficial</li> <li>Courses (and faculty) which modeled “respect” enhanced students’ appreciation of diversity</li> <li>Collaborative learning was a powerful experience for students, leading to personal growth</li> <li>Positive relationship with the faculty enhanced students’ learning and their commitment to the project</li> <li>Students saw “real world” applications</li> <li>Direct-service Capstones provided students with meaningful relationship with community members which created powerful learning context</li> <li>Relevancy (Informed Career development)</li> <li>Application of academic material (text) to practice</li> </ol>