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# Community-Based Learning and Social Justice

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# Community-Based Learning and Social Justice

Karen J. Gibson, Portland State University, Oregon

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## Abstract

This is a reflective essay on the ways in which community-based learning (CBL) enriches the work life of a faculty member who retains working-class roots and an interest in social justice. Using examples from courses and applied research on community development, housing, and poverty, the essay explains how meaningful relationships with community organizations act as a counter-balance to the isolation of an academic career. It also discusses the value of community-based learning when teaching about social justice themes.

## Introduction

This academic year will be my eighth as a professor in an interdisciplinary, applied social science department with both professional and academic degree programs. Within weeks of arrival on campus I became involved with community-based learning (CBL). Over the years I have partnered with several organizations doing some facet of anti-poverty work in our region; these interactions have enriched my teaching and research. My students have reaped the benefits of engagement in projects with community partners: authentic learning experiences, cross-cultural experiences, and exposure to the professional field. Some students have even leveraged the relationship into an internship or paid employment. My community partners have also reaped the benefits of engagement: they have received expert technical assistance and students' intellectual and organizational energy.

Much of the literature on community-based learning stresses the impact on students. Yet involvement in community-based learning has benefited my professional development quite significantly, helped me survive the stress of working in the university, and allowed me to pursue the social justice goals I consider important. The experience of working with organizations outside of academia has increased my substantive knowledge far beyond that acquired in graduate school. Because I teach students earning professional degrees, this knowledge is invaluable in the classroom. In addition, regular contact with practitioners and ordinary people outside of the university reduces the sense of isolation I feel on campus. The vast majority of faculty members come from middle or upper class backgrounds. I grew up in a working-class community. Very few of my friends or relatives went to college. I still identify with working class and low-income people and the economic challenges they face. The need to contribute to the cause of social justice is ingrained in me---it is part of my identity. It is partly fulfilled through collaboration with community organizations on projects that integrate applied research, teaching, and service. This essay discusses the role that community-based learning plays in helping me to adapt to the challenges of an academic career.

## CBL Enhances Teaching and Research

While I work with an eclectic group of faculty (economists, geographers, planners, political scientists, sociologists) in a school of urban studies and planning, my focus is on the applied field of community development. We have undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students who emphasize this field. My own focus is on urban poverty, housing, and community economic development. I view community development as the grassroots response to poverty---neighborhood groups seeking to gain control over

decisions affecting their lives. It is important for me not just to know the scholarship of community development, but to be connected to the field to inform both my research and teaching. The first organization I partnered with was a non-profit community development corporation (CDC) that provides affordable housing to Latino immigrants. Students in my graduate course, Concepts of Community Development, wrote a history of the organization; one doctoral student parlayed that experience into a year-long paid internship assisting the organization's executive director. Students in this field must understand both the theory and practice behind CDC work. Through my partnership with Hacienda CDC, I learned first-hand about the daily challenges of fund raising, building low-income housing, and property management. I brought the executive director in as a guest speaker.

This partnership made my teaching much more relevant and lively. Because my students are concerned with uneven development (inequality) in urban settings, direct contact with community development actors is critical to a good learning experience. Students must conduct field-based research papers in the core community development courses. Exposure to local organizations engaged in community development practice provides them access to relevant issues and topics. Theory and practice interact. Live examples reinforce abstract knowledge accumulated from lectures and texts (Tannenbaum and Berrett, 2005).

In turn, community development practitioners, when invited into the classroom or when learning of the results of our research projects, gain an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their work within a theoretical context. This has led to "aha" moments for community development partners, while at the same time confirming theoretical notions found in the literature. These moments are perfect learning vehicles for all involved: researchers, students, and community partners. They are the essence of applied research. A good example comes from a long-running collaboration with staff at the local housing authority, which runs a Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program designed to help residents become self-sufficient (independent of public assistance) by building both tangible (savings, homes) and intangible (human capital) assets. Our evaluation showed that the residents considered the work of the housing authority staff to be pivotal in helping them achieve self-sufficiency, especially through the psychological and emotional support the FSS coordinators provided. Residents gained confidence in themselves and their own ability to change their situations, and in turn many of them succeeded in saving money and buying homes through this program. The FSS coordinators were very excited to know that their efforts were having such an impact on the residents. This was the "aha" moment. In fact, this was so important that they invited me to share the study results at a Pacific Northwest regional conference of housing authorities. The findings lent confirmation to the theoretical notion that intangible assets help produce tangible assets (Sherraden, 1991).

#### **Partnerships Help Reduce Sense of Isolation**

In a recent article, author Janet Galligani Casey described the isolation and identity conflict experienced by working-class students who, in the upper-middle class culture of college, feel estranged from their homes and neighborhoods: "Not fully comfortable in their new cultural settings, they discover that they are also irrevocably separated from their pasts" (Casey, 2005). Surely this also applies to working-class professors. While my institution serves many middle and lower-middle class students, the majority of faculty members are not from working class backgrounds. Even those who are often distance themselves from their origins and identify with the upper class values which

permeate university culture. As a woman and person of color I am even more culturally isolated from the majority of the faculty in the college.

Through my relationships with community partners I am able to reduce the sense of isolation within the university setting. While mingling with community development practitioners, I have many more opportunities to interact with working-class people and people of color than on campus. The sense of community I experienced growing up in a working-class neighborhood is restored when I interact with neighborhood serving agencies. I especially get satisfaction from attending events like open houses for new housing developments or award ceremonies to honor residents' achievements. Sometimes it is because I am witnessing the fruit of applied research, but most often it is just because I am connecting with the people for whom I ultimately do this work. Research on service learning shows that keeping in touch with community partners is very important (Tannenbaum and Berrett, 2005). Maintaining these connections re-energizes me. It provides a needed balance to the isolation of the academic environment and relief from the see-saw like demand on one's personality of teaching (extroversion) and research (introversion).

### **CBL as a Strategy to Teach About Social Justice**

I am fortunate to work at a university that supports service learning and community engagement as this enables me to pursue both teaching and research on social justice topics. Portland State University's motto, coined by our students, is "Let knowledge serve the City". This should resonate as a key theme of the 21st century university. Growing up in a poor, ethnically diverse neighborhood of San Francisco during the 1960s and 1970s, I learned at an early age just how influential the neighborhood environment can be on the life chances of individuals. I think that all urban universities have a responsibility to use their knowledge and resources to assist those marginalized by mainstream economic opportunities, and to inform the local community about economic injustice. One year in my course, Poverty and the Urban Community, I encouraged students to create a newsletter called "A Portrait of Poverty in Portland" that contained articles about the state of poverty and anti-poverty interventions in our city. (It was modeled after a newspaper on state-wide poverty written by Oregon State University's cooperative-extension service). Some students conducted research by interviewing community organizations and individuals while others used census data to describe the demographic and spatial characteristics of poverty. The plan was to disseminate the newsletter around the city as a means of stimulating an informed discourse. It is difficult to teach and learn about this topic without becoming depressed--taking action seemed a good antidote.

On the last day of class, students made oral presentations of their work which revealed how deeply personal this topic was in some of their lives. We were very surprised by one student's presentation on a drug treatment center. Throughout the term he had been very critical of the poor, and on the last day he revealed that he himself had overcome poverty and heroin addiction. One young woman, who seemed very uncomfortable in the academic setting, wrote about the experience of her friend who at 18 years of age left home and became a stripper to support herself. She described the cheap, roach-infested apartment she rented in a neighborhood full of drug dealers, prostitutes, and bad cops. While others wrote about issues such as predatory lending (e.g. payday loan shops) and educational attainment among Native Americans, these two students' projects demonstrate the power of community-based learning as a vehicle for teaching about social justice in a way that integrates experiential and abstract knowledge.



Students became much more aware of the immediate impact of poverty on our local urban community as a result of researching and writing the newsletter.

This kind of learning experience is especially important in educational programs that train future leaders in public policy fields such as urban planning, public health, social work, and economics. Ryan, an urban planning graduate student from a working-class background, expressed this sentiment in a letter supporting my tenure application: "Urban planning students are likely to come from a middle or upper middle class background and when they enter the professional field they are likely to experience pressures to work to the benefit of this same community. It is therefore vital for them to receive an in depth education about the causes and consequences of poverty...and how to address social equity concerns.....her unique and important perspective ...deserves recognition."

### **Conclusion**

Community-based learning has enriched the quality of my teaching, reduced the sense of isolation I feel on campus, and allowed me to engage with social justice issues. It has enabled me not just to survive, but to thrive in the academic environment. Colleges and universities that seek to diversify the class and cultural backgrounds of their faculty (and students) should consider the ways in which community-based learning can be used as an adaptive mechanism. The challenges of an academic career are stressful even for those who possess the racial or ethnic, class, and gender attributes of the dominant cultural group on campus. Those not in the dominant group must succeed professionally and also adapt to the mainstream culture of the academic work environment, which has changed little in the past thirty years, despite the rhetoric of diversity and inclusion. I do not claim that community-based learning will help all faculty and students of non-traditional backgrounds adjust to academic life. I do think it can be especially helpful to those who have a keen passion for social justice.

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