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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Pedagogy Matters: A Framework for Critical Community-Engaged Courses in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article describes specific pedagogical components of a community engagement project between students in a psychology course and youth at a juvenile justice centre (JJS). The purpose of the research was to illustrate how feminist and critical pedagogies can create reciprocal community engagement that provides a space for learning at both college and community sites. The researchers involved in this study included the professor of the Psychology of Women course, a senior college student who previously took the course, the JJS volunteer coordinator and an education professor. Together, they employed qualitative, single case study methodology in order to understand the complex social phenomena of this community-engaged course. The results demonstrate that lessons addressing social inequities are beneficial for youth in JJS and offer a way to alleviate the gap in gender-specific programming. They also create community and offer an empowerment lens. By explicitly focusing on the pedagogical choices of the partnership, this research contributes to an understanding of how critical community engagement can provide mutual benefits.

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Keywords

Community-Engaged Learning; Critical Pedagogy; Juvenile Justice; Service Learning; Civic Engagement; Community Partnerships

Introduction

Critical community-engaged pedagogy matters. The way instructors thoughtfully, intentionally and systematically design their community-engaged courses is essential if they are to challenge social inequities rather than reify them ([Tinkler et al. 2019](#)). However, pedagogical support for instructors at colleges and universities, even those focused on teaching, is often limited ([Berrett 2012](#)). Thus support for understanding critical pedagogy and, even more specifically, critical community-engaged pedagogy is sparse at best.

While research is available on the theoretical foundations of critical community-engaged courses ([da Cruz 2017, 2018](#); [Hale 2008](#); [Latta et al. 2018](#); [Mitchell 2008](#); [Mitchell et al. 2012](#); [Rodriguez et al. 2021](#)), seldom are specific pedagogical tasks outlined. Thus, this article explains some practical pedagogical strategies used for a community-engaged project, and details results drawn from focus group data demonstrating their efficacy. [Note we use the language of community-engaged learning rather than the term service-learning as service can imply a unidirectional relationship where one group serves another. However, service-learning is used when we reference others who use this term.]

The community-engaged project examined in this article was undertaken in a *Psychology of Women* course taught at a small liberal arts college. An integral goal of the course was to provide students an opportunity to apply the theories from the course to social change efforts outside the classroom. The professor partnered with the volunteer coordinator of the state's Juvenile Justice Services (JJS), who co-taught part of the class on the college campus, to familiarise the students with the organisation and model co-teaching practices that blurred and blended teaching and learning roles. This modelling was important because students were asked to co-teach in the context of their work with youth in JJS. They also used this time to complete paperwork required of all JJS volunteers, structure the days and times of visits, and ask questions. It was essential for the professor to include the elements of critical service-learning pedagogy to foster critical consciousness ([Mitchell et al. 2015](#)). The professor and the JJS coordinator intentionally planned the partnership with all who were involved (professor, college students, staff and girls in JJS) through a dialectic and responsive process that encouraged analysis and action to address issues at both local and systemic levels. This partnership was initiated by JJS, which was interested in partnering with the college to offer more gender responsive programming for girls in JJS. The partnership continued for ten semesters. Like [Cipolle \(2010, p. 5\)](#), the professor encouraged her students to 'question the hidden bias and assumptions of race, class, and gender; and work to change the social and economic system for equity and justice'.

Framework

The design of the course was informed by critical ([Freire 2018](#)) and feminist ([Webb, Allen & Walker 2002](#)) pedagogies. Community-engaged learning involves individuals participating in activities of personal/public concern that benefit both their individual lives and the community ([Association of American Colleges and Universities 2009](#)). [Clark-Taylor \(2017\)](#) critiques dominant community-engagement models that are charity focused, or set up so that college students go out and 'give' to an organisation and or 'help' marginalised communities. These models of service learning, even if well intentioned, actually perpetuate the structural oppression of communities by falsely situating students as capable of 'fixing' problems that marginalised communities face through presumed superior knowledge or skills (e.g. White saviourism, paternalism) ([Mitchell et al. 2012](#)). [Note We capitalise White and Whiteness when referring to people who are racialised as White. To capitalise 'White' is to name it as a race as opposed to viewing it as a neutral

identity.] Further, these well-intentioned, or 'benevolent' service-learning projects can be more insidious that overt bigotry, as we know from research on ambivalent sexism, disability and racism (see, for example, [Glick & Fiske 2001](#); [Hayes & Black 2003](#); [Hughes 2012](#)). In short, students in charity focused service-learning courses do interact with the community, but they also implicitly or explicitly absorb hegemonic, racist, classist, heterosexist, cissexist, and ableist systems. Critical pedagogy offers a counter to these problems.

Those associated with critical pedagogy ([Freire 2018](#); [Giroux 2011](#); [hooks 2003](#); [McLaren et al. 2004](#)) assert that teachers should push students to develop critical consciousness by learning to question knowledge as an objective 'truth', and instead uncover how it is hegemonically situated through historical socio-political power dynamics. [Freire \(2018\)](#) and [Shor and Shor \(1987\)](#) conceptualised critical consciousness as a borderless dialectical process of thought, action and reflection. The course utilised the Freirean assertion that true critical reflection leads to action. Pivotal to critical reflection is Freire's idea of *conscientização*, which occurs when stakeholders 'achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities which shape their lives and discover their own capacities to recreate them' ([Baltodano, Darder & Torres 2009](#), p. 14).

The course also utilised feminist pedagogy to enrich Freire's idea of *conscientização* by addressing issues left unexplored in Freire's work: that is, questioning the role and authority of the teacher in the course, recognising the importance of personal experience as a source of knowledge, and explicitly exploring intersectionality ([Weiler 1991](#)). This extension was essential for two reasons: first, because the college students would be inhabiting a teaching role with the youth in JJS; and second, because the college students and community participants occupied different social locations that were embedded in inequitable power relationships. Freire's students held relatively similar places within social hierarchies and this was built into his pedagogical choices. Thus, it was essential that power imbalances were interrogated inside of the class, in addition to questioning societal power imbalances more broadly. Additionally, utilizing personal experience and intersectionality as knowledge sources obligates instructors to design curricula that centres voices that are often silenced. In this class, that meant centring the voices of youth in JJS. [hooks' \(2003, p. 197\)](#) framework for Teaching Community articulates the goals of this community-engaged project, 'Dominant culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community'.

Thus, critically conscious engaged pedagogy, where the students, professors, community partners and community members at the site developed a community of conscience was key ([Kornbluh, et al. 2020](#)). To promote examination of injustice in society, it was necessary to create a community of conscience in the classroom that did not erase the contradictory positions of oppressors and oppressed that the teachers/students occupied, and that further asked, 'How are we to situate ourselves in relation to the struggles of others?' ([Weiler 1991](#), p. 455). Creating a community of conscience required fostering an environment where students' lived experiences, thoughts and ideas were encouraged by their instructor and peers, and that this was continued through to the exchanges between college students and the youth in JJS. [McDonough \(2015\)](#) writes that, when performing *conscientização*, not enough attention is given to how it is developed. Indeed, [Watts and Serrano-Garcia \(2003\)](#) pushed against critically conscious pedagogical framing that reproduced individualistic cognitive approaches to youth development. Focusing on individual development while ignoring the collective frameworks that communities develop within the dominant historic, sustained, historical colonial power dynamics, could mean power structures are reified. When partnerships pay attention to 'thick' reciprocity that 'emphasizes shared voice and power and insists upon collaborative knowledge construction and joint ownership of work processes and products', all involved benefit ([Jameson et al. 2011](#), p. 264).

Developing critical consciousness among students in experiential minded courses creates community. Critical consciousness refers to a reflective awareness of the inequalities embedded in the social relationships

in society ([Camus et al. 2021](#); [Carmen et al. 2015](#); [Roberts et al. 2016](#); [Smith 2012](#)). Course content that focuses on structural inequities requires all involved, including students, instructors and community partners, to unlearn a narrative myth of fairness and equality. This discussion almost always includes people with a myriad of life experiences. Therefore, in these varied and fluid spaces for developing critical consciousness, a pedagogical task that may be effective in initiating one student's step towards developing a critical consciousness may not be effective for another student who is further along their journey (or vice versa). Importantly, critical and feminist pedagogy is highly contextualised and localised, and based upon the mutually determined needs and foundations of those involved in critical inquiry at a particular moment in time and a particular site of inquiry. Despite the complexity of these movements, we attest that developing and engaging in these spaces, all in the collaboration, are more apt to move towards *conscientização*.

In the 2019 special issue of *The Journal of Experiential Education*, [Warren \(2019, p. 3\)](#) questions how educators can share their research so that it answers queries such as, 'What is the place of experiential education in social change movements? Can and should experiential education be an educational agent of social justice?'. We answer this question with a resounding 'yes', acknowledging that more specific examples of praxis are crucial to support educators in implementing the sometimes messy and nebulous terms of social justice work. Because praxis is central to critical conscious pedagogy, educators have an obligation to share how this work is accomplished in contextual spaces. [Warren \(2019, p. 5\)](#) goes on to say that: 'the issues and examples they raise also remind us that just because a program uses experiential activities or claims to use an experiential approach, this does not automatically yield social justice related outcomes; programs using experiential activities can be sites of social reproduction as well'.

Therefore, the primary question of this case study project is: How can a critical community- engaged course be designed to impact social change for students and community participants without perpetuating 'benevolent' oppression through logics that result in White saviourism and paternalism?

Method: Case Study

The researchers included the professor of the *Psychology of Women* course, a senior college student who had previously taken the course, the JJS volunteer coordinator, now was a full-time employee of JJS, and an education professor. Together, we employed a qualitative, single case study methodology ([Yin 2017](#)). Our goal was to understand the complex social phenomena of this critical community-engaged course.

As such, we focus on the intentional pedagogical choices of the professor teaching this course, in collaboration with the JJS coordinator, to illustrate how these practices can move all participants towards *conscientização*. Together, we articulated the learning experiences of both the youth in JJS and the college students as they intersected with class material on structural inequities. Using qualitative methods, we explored the pedagogical methods implemented and how they enhanced the learning of both the college students and the youth in JJS, remaining aware that the learning on these structural inequities was informed by the positionalities that the participants held within these structures. We chose qualitative methods because of their attention to and valuing of contextual evidence in research ([Magnusson & Marecek 2012](#)). The Institutional Review Board Committee at Westminster College and the Department of Human Services approved the study.

Course description

Psychology of Women is a core course at this small liberal arts college, which focuses on: (a) psychological literature on women and gender; (b) how mainstream psychology is gendered, which explores feminist psychological approaches to studying women and gender; and (c) the diversity in women's experiences and

how their lives are shaped by their gender, race, class, age and sexuality. The instructor chose the course readings to highlight transformational feminist psychology through a critical theoretical lens.

College and youth participants

The participants included women college students in the class who agreed to participate in focus group interviews. Of this group of eight, seven identified as White and one was an Arapahoe Indian. In addition, 17 youth aged 13–17 from JJS participated. Thirteen identified as girls: three were Latina, nine White and one American Indian; three identified as bi-racial boys: Latino/Black, Mexican-American and Filipino/White; and one participant was transgender White/Cherokee.

Data collection

We collected and analysed data from the course material and four focus groups, three with youth in JJS who were still in JJS at the completion of the semester, and one with students in the course. The course material included lesson plans, rubrics and syllabus for pedagogical tools used to enhance the *conscientização* within the project. The focus groups lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. We chose focus groups because of their collective nature and structure.

Promoting social change was a goal of this critical community-engaged learning project; therefore, we used a method that feminist researchers have found helpful in fostering social change by allowing people to use their own voice to describe their experiences and reducing the self–other relationship that many traditional research methods create between the researchers and the participants ([Madriz 2000](#)). The semi-structured design plan for the focus groups was also intended to foster genuine responses and limit the researchers' input by having a loose set of follow-up questions to keep conversation flowing when necessary ([Madriz 2000](#)).

Questions centred around (a) gaining insight into how the JJS participants felt about having the college students work with them; (b) their perceptions of the content presented; and (c) the ways in which it was presented. JJS participants were invited to share in the focus groups what they liked and didn't like about the learning materials and activities, and their experiences with the college students. Similarly, in the focus groups with participating college students, questions focused on their experiences during the project, their reactions to working with the youth in JJS, and the successes and challenges of designing lesson plans and putting them into action. Our goal was to understand what impact the project had by creating both vertical and horizontal data to minimise the power structures that typically exist between researchers and participants ([Madriz 2000](#)). As such, the student researcher, who was closest to the lived experiences of the participants, conducted the focus group interviews.

We transcribed the audio and initially coded it line-by-line using a grounded theory approach ([Ryan & Bernard 2000](#)). Each researcher coded all of the dialogues independently using an open coding process to see if categories would emerge ([Lichtman 2010](#); [Saldaña 2008](#)). Together, the researchers shared the initial codes and discussed commonalities between codes, categories and themes that were found. Two sets of initial codes were particularly relevant for understanding if and how the course design could impact social change for students and community participants and inform the current study. The first set centred around forms of mutual learning and was generated by examples of participants recognising, applying and using concepts about inequity at both the individual and structural level. The second set focused on participant perceptions of the curriculum and the pedagogical tools. Taken together, these were examined in connection with the pedagogical decisions made by the professor. They revealed important insight into how instructors might design courses that foster meaningful community through co-teaching, lesson plan development, critical reflection and power redistribution. This methodological approach could allow for

practical connections between the actual course curriculum and the pedagogical tools used by the professor/researcher, and provide evidence of mutual learning and perception of the learning tools from the participant perspective.

Results

The results informed our understanding of the ways instructors can enhance their community-engaged courses through intentional, reciprocal pedagogy. These methods are described and analysed below to provide details on how other instructors might apply theoretical ideas on experiential learning to lived pedagogical practices that would intentionally benefit the community member participants and students in the college class. The study found that the college participants, JJS participants, the instructor, and the coordinator of JJS all recognised that the experience was elevated through relevant curriculum. Such curriculum was rooted in efforts to raise critical consciousness by applying deep oral and written reflection and modelling, encouraging authentic relationships between the participants at the community partner site and the college, and a consistent effort to redistribute power in all interactions ([Cocieru et al. 2021](#); [Mitchell 2008](#)).

While many studies analyse community-engaged learning projects and share findings through themes, few explicitly discuss the practical and specific pedagogical practices that are used and how they are applied. Each of the elements the professor used is explained and analysed so that others can learn about specific pedagogical elements that supported critical learning for all involved in the project.

The pedagogical components included: (1) modelling co-teaching; (2) students developing lesson plans for JJS; (3) critical reflection; and (4) embedding redistribution of power within partnerships. These pedagogical elements are illustrated using data from participants' focus groups, reflections and course material.

(1) MODELLING CO-TEACHING WITH THE JJS COORDINATOR

Too often, college students are sent off to teach in community centres with little to no background in effective pedagogy ([Mitchell et al. 2012](#)). Most critical educators extol the importance of relevant experience, but relevancy is enhanced when the primary portion of the course is connected with a community agency and the professor intentionally creates a meaningful relationship with the community partner.

In this course, the professor and the JJS coordinator worked together to 'minimize the distinction between the students' community learning role and [the] classroom learning role' ([Howard 1993](#)). Often in college classrooms, students are expected to assume a more passive learning role, with a higher level of direction from the instructor, whereas in community settings students are expected to take on a more active learning role. To bring the learning environments into better alignment, the students took on more of an active learning role in the classroom and were also given more direction in their community role by the volunteer coordinator. This blending of learning roles across the classroom and the community was achieved through intentional modelling by the professor and the JJS coordinator. It is worth noting that both were critical of a criminal punishment system that criminalises children for systematically navigating racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, ableist and xenophobic contexts. In effect, the professor and the volunteer coordinator were working to challenge this system, albeit in small ways.

The professor and the JJS coordinator met before the course began to discuss the curriculum and to share current issues the JJS residents were experiencing so they could jointly choose guest speakers and relevant readings, texts and films that addressed these issues through a critical lens. In addition, the professor invited the JJS coordinator to co-teach with the professor in the college classroom over five sessions and also

in the community setting. The professor demonstrated to students that she valued the JJS coordinator's input, knowledge and expertise by creating time and space in the classroom for the coordinator to offer her insights. The students thus experienced a model of co-teaching that required them to share in pairs and small groups, think deeply, question and reflect often.

In addition, the professor and the JJS coordinator modelled collaborative decision making and made sure they explicitly connected with the teaching groups to work through any interpersonal conflicts. The college students saw the coordinator as an integral and informative partner who was essential to understanding core goals of the course, including the integrated community-engaged learning project. Further, the community-engaged learning project was an essential opportunity to observe, apply, critique and modify theories from the class, utilising insights from the students' own lives, and the community setting. Students learned how the academic fields of Women's and Gender Studies and Sexuality Studies, including feminist psychology, emerged out of the Women's Movement, thus highlighting the potential, contentious and always evolving interplay between experiential activism and academic learning. This enabled the professor and the coordinator to model, in class, that everyone in the room was simultaneously a teacher and a learner, and to challenge the students to position the youth in JJS, not just as students, but also teachers, and knowledge holders and creators.

(2) DEVELOPING LESSON PLANS FOR JJS

One of the primary elements of the course, designed for reciprocity and growth, was having college students share what they were learning in class with the youth in JJS. However, it was essential that the college students be prepared to share this learning. In order to facilitate their preparation, students created lesson plans and facilitated conversations based on their learning about psychology and power, which they more fully explored with the youth at JJS. The college professor and volunteer coordinator required that the eight lesson plans be prepared within the framework of critical consciousness, with a heavy emphasis on dialogue and active learning. These plans detailed the content and activities they would use for each of the sessions they facilitated at the JJS site, but also required that the plans be designed such that the ideas and expertise of the youth in JJS would be integrated within each of the sessions. Students shared their plans with the professor, the JJS coordinator and the lead staff at their respective facility. The professor evaluated the lesson plans using a rubric and required each student member in the group to evaluate themselves and each of their team members based on a rubric of engaged interactive teaching and learning. This ensured that the students were prepared in advance for each of the sessions at JJS, and that they had intentionally created plans that involved all the participants, college students and youth in JJS, as teachers and learners.

The course material (e.g. readings, videos, classroom discussions and activities, guest speakers) the students engaged with before facilitating lessons raised their awareness of and engagement with the relevant topics, and the context in which they would be teaching and extending their learning. Students regularly shared in Women's and Gender Studies that they would have benefited from learning/developing a critical consciousness of these topics earlier in their lives. Thus, the project was framed for students as a way to share what they were learning with younger people who, like them, would not likely have had an opportunity to learn about the topics in their current middle school or high school educational contexts. The current understandings of the topics were presented as continually growing and changing. Students also learned about how our understanding of particular topics is often limited to what we understand from more dominant cultural perspectives, and thus is, by definition, incomplete.

As a result, the young people in JJS themselves would have insights and knowledge that would contribute to a more complete understanding of the topics for everyone involved. It is important to note that these findings were constrained by the context in which the course took place and each participant's prior understanding of critical consciousness. Although we cannot know what level of understanding each student

brought to the classroom initially, the curricular choices and ordering of lessons allowed the professor to introduce this material intentionally to all students and for them to work through their new understandings during the lesson plan creation process. It appeared as though the material was relatively new to most students and that there was variability in student openness to the material. However, focus group data demonstrated that the youth in JJS related to the material being discussed and had personal experience with the topics. They expressed that their views and understanding of the topics were no less valid because they were in JJS than those of the college students. The college students learned that developing relationships was foundational to enhancing learning for everyone involved and fostering the ability to understand inequity, particularly the youths' experiences, through a systemic lens. One 15-year-old Latina youth shared, '[The college students] were nice, they respected us and they didn't think of us as any less because we are in a program or in the system. They just treated us like we were like them.'

A 16-year-old Latina youth talked about the relevancy of the curriculum and, in turn, students in the course shared with the youth what they had learned about gender-based violence and community organisations that support survivors of such violence. The Latina youth said, 'I liked that they talked to us about being raped and what we should do about it instead of talking about rainbows and unicorns ... because most girls my age do get raped and they don't have anywhere to turn to, no one to talk to ... And I found it really useful that they gave us numbers that we can call and talk to anonymously about that because I think that would help a lot of girls my age ...' This youth's comment represented the responses of many of the youth participants. She voiced that 'being raped' was real in their context and needed to be discussed openly. To her, talking about relevant but hard issues was more important than discussing topics she considered trivial, such as 'rainbows and unicorns'. The youth participants valued these lessons because they were research-based and current issues they faced, and connected them to the goals of the course on women and power.

As the college students actively listened to the youth's lived experiences and then incorporated them into the lessons, they saw more engagement with the topics. One college student explained, 'Risky topics that most people aren't willing to talk about was what our girls really responded to because it is applicable to them and nobody ever asked them to share what they had to say about these topics'. [Fejes and Miller \(2002\)](#) discuss how girls in JJS want to be heard and also want gender-specific programming that incorporates sexuality. Similarly, our data demonstrates that the relevant topics are the ones that girls in detention never get to discuss. The students explained that 'risky' and 'taboo' topics engage youth because they are close to their lived experience. Many of the youth expressed surprise that the college students provided them with the opportunity to discuss them. Topics like rape, sexuality and sexism were those that most interested the youth and gave them the opportunity to feel heard.

[Mitchell \(2008\)](#) emphasises that the art of critical service-learning lies in developing authentic relationships through long-term connections. Our results indicate that the college students and the youth formed bonds with one another. Though the youth were incarcerated, they had the choice to attend the sessions facilitated by the college students. In turn, the college students could choose to teach at the JJS or participate in alternative assignments that did not include community-engaged learning. This suggests that it may not just be time, but that other components may facilitate connection during these short-term relationships, such as the lesson topics and their relevance, similarity in age, and the structure of the learning environment. One way the youth felt they were able to bond with the students was through activities. This finding points to interactive and hands-on activities being effective pedagogical tools that can help facilitate the building of relationships.

During the focus group with the youth in JJS, a Latina participant explained that 'They didn't just talk, they actually got us to interact with them. We just got to know each other in a way that we could actually get along and do activities together.' It was not by accident that the college students moved away from a banking model (Freire 1972) of teaching that is so prevalent on college campuses. They designed interactive

lessons because the college professor included and emphasised intentionally student-centred, action-based teaching. The rubric designed for the assignment included elements of critical pedagogy, interactive teaching, and connection. Because the college students facilitated engagement with the youth during each of the lessons, the youth repeatedly shared that they could see how the concepts played out in their lives and those close to them. The college students often noted that, when the youth participants were unaware of more academic terminology, the meaning became clear when they shared their experiences as examples. The youth articulated this learning during the focus groups even when they didn't remember the academic terminology. For example, one youth participant explained benevolent sexism when she said, 'I learned like guys may ... I forgot the words, the guys would say something that was sexist, like he would say it in a nice way too, like he would say, "Oh honey, I don't want to be with the kids because you are so much better at it" like he would make it in a good way, but it is still sexist ...'. This quote illustrated the youth participant's heightened critical consciousness when she shared that a 'guy' says words that seem respectful, but in reality make assumptions about gender.

The youths' lived experiences with oppression in relation to power helped them connect to the concepts with depth and clarity. One 16-year-old Latina girl said, 'I actually kept my papers so I could take them home to my little sisters and I could explain to them all about that stuff ... and the gender thing would be really helpful for them to know.' In this quote, the youth also referred to handouts that the college students brought to one of their lessons. Another youth explained that they appreciated learning about the difference between sex and gender: 'I thought it was interesting because, for me, that's how I was, like, I was supposed to be a chick when I was born but I'm a dude clearly. And I think it was cool to learn about it.' This also provided a space for the cisgender identified youth to question gender binaries, and to express support for their peer. For example, in the same focus group another participant responded to the trans youth [Note trans is our label, not the label that the youth themselves used. This youth was still making sense of their gender identity and so we use 'trans' as an umbrella term to describe that this youth's gender did not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Also, while this youth communicated that they were supposed to be a 'chick', at the time of the focus group, the youth was using he/him pronouns/], 'I am completely proud of him and ya know, other people here are like what? that's sick, what kind of guy would want to do that, but ya know, I think it's brave of him ...'. For the youth involved in the project, the content of the sessions was relevant to their lives.

(3) CRITICAL REFLECTION

Reflection is central to all high-impact critical community-engaged courses ([Latta et al. 2018](#); [Warren 2019](#); [Wellesley 2021](#)). Prompt creation is critical if students are to see the clear connection between the goal of the course and the experiential learning. The college professor assigned reflection papers that specifically focused on issues of power and structural inequity. Each student wrote eight reflection papers responding to critical prompts, one after each of the lessons they facilitated, with the students, professor and JJS youth engaging in deep reflection throughout the experience. Students commented on how much they learned through writing on and discussing what they had experienced.

The verbal and written reflections were facilitated via carefully constructed questions that investigated personal relationships as well as root causes and structural inequities. Further, many of the reflections could be directly tied to the course content and the experiences that all the participants had with the content. The professor recognised that students' lived experiences would shape how they engaged in this project and interacted with youth in JJS. The nature of the reflections allowed students to consider not only the topics discussed at their JJS site, but also how their own identity and experiences might shape their understanding of existing inequities. Further, the course materials encouraged them to recognise that structural inequities need to be challenged in order to create change, not that the youth in JJS need to be changed. For example, one college student said:

It was super frustrating for me because again I had the typical stereotype about going in and then seeing my opinions switch...so I guess it was frustrating for me knowing that with lack of, I don't know, opportunity that a lot of these girls will end up back there. Knowing that, having conversations with them and knowing how smart they were...one of the girls that, I can't remember her name, she came in twice or three times and we saw her and I was like, 'stop coming back,' and it's so easy for me because of my opportunities to just be like it's easy, stop coming back you don't need to be in here but understanding that they don't have the opportunity...so I think that was the sad thing, the most frustrating part cause I couldn't fix their problems.

Another student responded:

But I think that, like I agree that was a big frustration knowing you can't do anything about the outside variables but it helped connect it to the material that we are learning because these are the things we are learning in class is why they keep coming so you're like it can give you all the more reason to try to change it...you're like okay things need to change because these smart girls do not deserve to be in here.

These quotes point to the college students grappling with the idea of *blaming the victim*, which was part of their initial assumptions. In his foundational text, [Ryan \(1972, p. 6\)](#) coins the term to name the ways that those with privilege focus on individual victims rather than on social contexts that create social problems, and that 'Victim-blaming is cloaked in kindness and concern, and bears all the trappings of statistical furbelows [ornamentation] of scientism ...'. In short, he explains that 'social problems are a function of the social arrangements of the community or society, and that, since these social arrangements are quite imperfect and inequitable, such problems are both predictable and more important, preventable through public action [rather than "fixing" individuals]' ([Ryan 1972, p. 17](#)). Through course discussions and assignments students are able to recognise that there is no easy individualistic 'fix' that they can offer or that the girls themselves can implement, a realisation that is needed in order to move away from ideologies of White saviourism and paternalism, and towards questioning social systems. One of the reflection papers intentionally created an opportunity for the students to grapple with these ideologies.

Use Ryan's chapter, 'Blaming the Victim', to help you write this reflection. Your reflection should demonstrate your understanding of the chapter. How might well-intentioned programming for girls in JJS serve to blame the victim? How has this come up in this service project thus far? If it hasn't, why do you think it hasn't? Are there instances where you might have fallen into the trap of blaming the victim, even if you were well intentioned? How do we structure programming (in general) to avoid blaming the victim? How can this project be structured to avoid blaming the victim? How can you personally work to avoid blaming the victim while working with the girls in JJS?

The guided critical reflection in groups and their personal writing illuminated what they observed and the theories they studied. Another practice involved using the Critical Incident Reflection to asked questions such as: 'Based on this event, what conclusions can you draw, or not draw, about people, groups, organizations, society?' (adapted from [Eyler, Giles & Schmiede 1996](#)). This prompt pushed students directly towards the contextual elements of the organisation and the concepts they were studying. In [Anderson et al.'s \(2019\)](#) study, they ask why the reflections their students wrote were so rich. They determined that the participants found the service-learning experience to be professionally enriching when instructors 'learned to implement problem-solving and encourage them to think critically' ([Anderson et al. 2019, p. 242](#)).

In addition to written reflection, the professor facilitated six whole-class reflection discussions. Data showed that she would often redirect questions students asked so that they were more actively involved in solving them. Because these students were not involved in teacher education, the professor took time to teach them explicit lessons on group dynamics and lesson planning that involved active learning from the

students. Through writing and small group discussion, students learned from their successes and weaknesses. The professor also asked them, for example, to choose something in a lesson they had conducted that they thought went well or poorly. They also had to unlearn teaching practices that were based on a transmission or banking model.

Because the college students had experienced deep reflection, they were able to create deep discussions in the field. The youth valued that the college students did not simply talk to them, but also became involved with the youth in a way that fostered their getting to know one another. This reiterates the importance of interactive pedagogical tools and demonstrates how community-engaged learning projects can use this type of pedagogy to address two of the goals of critical service-learning, building authentic relationships and working to redistribute power (Mitchell 2008; Maxwell & Chesler 2019). Previous research found that student transformation through community engagement can be influenced by building personal connections with the community they are working with (Simon & Cleary 2006). Our data supports this finding, indicating that student–youth connection makes students feel even stronger about wanting to do something about the systemic inequities the girls in JJS experience.

Simons and Cleary (2006, p. 316) discuss how community-engaged learning can reduce stereotyping and help students learn to alter their ‘preconceived notions about community through social bonding and interpersonal interactions with community recipients’. Our data depicts a similar finding. Through deep reflection, students demonstrated how initial misconceptions about the youth in JJS were mitigated, and how through reflection, students were encouraged to adapt their lesson plans to create an environment of equity that led to valuable experiences.

Creating a brave space (Arao & Clemens 2013) allowed one White woman-identifying college student to share her biases, ‘I thought they would be more hard and dangerous, so I was kind of expecting that going into detention, but when I got there, they are not that way at all, they are not the people that I thought they would be.’ With the biases exposed, the college students could discuss and analyse them, and work to mitigate them through the experience. Without the reflection and connection to conceptual understandings of stereotypes of those incarcerated, those biases could have been reified.

(4) EMBEDDING REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER IN PARTNERSHIP

Redistribution of power was embedded in the pedagogical development of the course and the partnership in the following ways. First, the professor and the JJS coordinator shared the planning and teaching of the course to ensure that both the student learning goals and the goals of the JJS coordinator were met. The JJS coordinator’s goals were threefold. First, the JJS coordinator sought to better educate college students on the challenges faced by girls who interfaced with the JJS system as girls in JJS were often portrayed in popular media as sensationalised stereotypes of violent ‘bad girls’. However, while the number of girls in JJS had increased, violent crime among girls had not. What was new was the way that both police and society punished girls who did not conform to the stereotype of ‘good girls’ (Chesney-Lind & Irwin 2008). Second, the JJS coordinator wanted to provide better access for girls in JJS to gender responsive programming that addressed their specific needs. Girls often enter the JJS system because of the ways that we culturally criminalise girls’ responses to gendered violence that they experience (e.g. running away, substance use). Thus, the JJS coordinator wanted the girls to have access to programs that were strengths based, trauma informed, and relational (Sharpe & Simon 2004). Third, the JJS coordinator wanted some of the topics to address challenges that the girls sometimes encountered with staff, given that staff and girls were both present during the sessions with the college students. For example, the JJS coordinator asked if the students could provide information on sexuality, as the staff were often dismissive of girls who identified as LGBTQIA+.

In order to meet these varied goals, the coordinator was invited to co-teach on campus to explain the background, rules and expectations of JJS. Together they worked to challenge the inequitable systems that they both saw present on the college campus and at the JJS. Secondly, the students were invited into the classroom space as co-creators of knowledge. Third, the college students were encouraged to teach the course content to the youth in JJS in a co-constructed way, whereby the JJS participants' voices could be heard as valid sources of knowledge.

The response of the youth helped validate that redistributing power as a pedagogical tool could be beneficial in similar critical community-engaged learning projects because it was refreshing for this particular population to be treated equally and not seen as less because of their 'record'. Another way students were able to help redistribute power through the lessons was to demonstrate that they could relate to the youth's experiences primarily as femmes. A White college student shared a story during one of the workshops about how she responded when a girl was questioning why girls are called whores and boys are praised for having sex with multiple people. The staff member present told the girl to stop acting 'that way' if she did not want to be called things like that. In response, the college student was able to demonstrate how a response like that blames the victim and fails to recognise the big picture. 'I told her, "I have had experiences like that" and I tried to relate to her and explain that it was a systemic problem and that it wasn't just her.' This quote provides one illustration of a common theme: regardless of being a student or a girl in JJS, sexism was experienced by all of them; however, recognising how the experience of sexism played out may be different because of the intersection of various group memberships. Instead of simply saying that it was a systemic flaw, the student first related to the girl's experience, which furthered the goal of redistributing power from being held exclusively by those in positions of authority in the room (the college student and the JJS staff person) to the girl by aligning herself with the girl and naming how sexism permeates the lives of all women in some way or another. This was another example of that student's raised consciousness.

Conclusion

This community-engaged project addressed the gap in the literature on critical community-engaged learning praxis in higher education. The specific tools this professor and coordinator used enhanced collective critical consciousness within the college students and the participants in JJS. These conclusions can inform instructors in higher education, civic and community engagement centres and administrators in higher education on tools they might use to create meaningful connection and deep learning in their classes.

Critical community engagement emphasises the importance of maintaining long-term relationships with participants; however, our results demonstrate that even short-term community-engaged learning projects can build authentic relationships (Mitchell 2008). This result may be due to the topics discussed in the lessons and their relevance in the lives of both women college students and girls in JJS. Because they were all close in age to one another may have facilitated the quick relationship building, and also aided the deconstruction of power structures that exist in typical student-teacher relationships. Additionally, while the relationships between the college students and youth in JJS were relatively short-term (semester long or shorter, depending on the length of time that the youth were in the JJS programs), the relationship between the professor and the JJS volunteer coordinator lasted for multiple years, with collaboration over ten semesters.

In summary, this critical community-engagement project benefited both the college students and the youth in JJS involved in the project. Specifically, students were given the opportunity to build connections with youth who had lived experiences that exemplified the course material and reflected on how abstract/theoretical concepts operate in reality. The youth also benefited from connection building through learning

about/naming the structural inequities that operated in their own lives and by being part of a space that provided an opportunity to share their perspectives on topics they viewed as relevant.

Limitations and Future Implications

Although this research informed us on the efficacy of specific pedagogical practices designed to promote critical community-engaged learning and gender-specific programming (Garcia & Lane 2013), there were limitations that needed to be considered. One limitation was our sample size. Due to the transitional nature of JJS, many of the youth who participated in the project were released or moved to other facilities during the semester and were therefore unable to participate in the focus group sessions; however, this led us to unexpected valuable information. Even those youth who took part in only a single lesson learned something, yet, as to be expected, those who took part in three or six lessons demonstrated more learning on both an individual and structural level.

The results from this study are applicable only to this critical community-engaged project; however, similar findings of other service-learning projects demonstrate some similarity in the benefits that students experience. This study offers an aspect of community-engaged research that is often forgotten – the community participants' reactions. In addition, our results demonstrate that lessons addressing social inequities are beneficial for youth in JJS and offer a way to alleviate the gap in gender-specific programming. As seen in previous research, critical community-engaged learning has the potential to transform students by critically reflecting on how the theoretical concepts discussed in class are applied (Simon & Cleary 2006). By incorporating the three main components of critical service-learning – social change, redistribution of power and development of authentic relationships – in all levels of the project, we found that both students and youth in JJS could understand and use the information they had learned (Mitchell 2008). The methodology chosen for the project and how to study and analyse it kept these three aspects top of mind. The results demonstrate that pedagogy and curriculum that fit with these aspects are beneficial to learning about systemic inequities and wanting to do something to change them.

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