

From Revolution to Evolution: Making the Transition from Community Service Learning to Community Based Research

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Since 1989, Cabrini College has integrated Community Service Learning (CSL) into its core curriculum. Like many early adopters of CSL, the non-traditional world of service learning has become an institutional tradition. In the past decade, CSL has widely expanded to the secondary and primary levels. However, as the CSL tradition expands, so does the use of the term "service learning". Community Based Research (CBR), once considered a "separate but equal" branch of CSL, is emerging as a more demanding pedagogy, teaching students to empower community members and alter social structures. Colleges with institutionally established CSL programs are well-prepared to take the next step into Community Based Research (CBR). They have an institutionalized knowledge of how to do CSL and have established strong community partnerships, elements essential to the success of any community-based program. For Cabrini and other early adopters, the revolution is complete. Now, evolution must take place if programming is to remain fresh, rigorous, and relevant to students and communities.

In 1989, Cabrini College designed a community engagement curriculum based upon what is now an accepted approach to service learning. In its current model at the college, Seminar 300 pairs a "high quality placement" (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoeker & Donohue, 2003a, p.122) with appropriate texts, opportunities for reflection, and high-level analysis of social problems. Ultimately, students are required to perform 15 hours of community service in tandem with coursework to provide a hands-on opportunity to interact with community agencies, develop relationships, and make important contacts for future service or career paths.

This course serves to confront a perceived apathy or even ignorance of social problems on the part of the average college student, and it has yielded many successes. Admirably, Cabrini has achieved all of the "five dimensions" of a successful CSL program. CSL is integrated into Cabrini's mission, faculty and students are invested in the programming, strong alliances are built within surrounding communities, and there is strong institutional support and funding for CSL (Furco, 2002b). However, recently there has been a rising sentiment among students that they have "done this before." Like many early service-learning adopters, Cabrini now must realize that, despite hard work and commitment, practices must continue to evolve. There is no point of arrival because communities, students, and societies are constantly changing entities. Since the financial, logistical, and pedagogical barriers have already been removed, the passage into a new era can occur almost seamlessly. Community Based Research may just well be the answer for colleges looking to hold themselves to a higher standard for community engagement.

There are two main reasons CSL is becoming problematic at the collegiate level. First, CSL has been

a loosely defined "catchall phrase" for programming which has extended all the way down to the primary grades. Currently, 75% of students are doing what is called community service learning in high school. However, there is a "mission drift" in many CSL programs, and practitioners often find themselves perilously far from sound practices (Brukandt, Holland, Percy and Zimpher, 2004, p. ii). The quality of experiences varies tremendously from program to program, but the language used to describe these programs remains alarmingly similar. Secondly, CSL programming, if done incorrectly, can reinforce the belief system it seeks to eradicate: reinforcing privilege; relegating service to the "bleeding heart" professions of social work or teaching; and limiting exchanges with the community to works of random charity aimed at temporary relief, not the far-reaching alteration of social structures (p.8). In addition, much of CSL demands community members be passive recipients of services, not active architects of their own futures. If service learning is to remain relevant, there must be "genuine reciprocal deliberation" between community partners and colleges (p. 9).

Today, high schools students are actively engaging in CSL, much more so than they did when collegiate programming such as Cabrini's was being developed. The Community Service Learning Act of 1990 provided financial incentives for the creation and maintenance of CSL programs across the country, expanding focus from college consortiums developed in the mid-80's such as Campus Compact, to secondary schools (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2005). While Cabrini's Community Service Learning course (Seminar 300) addresses issues in a more sophisticated manner than the average high school class, it is a difficult subtlety to convey to the average 20 year-old. Yet another foray into the community is

redundant for a student who has spent much of his or her high school career doing community service. In the most extreme situations, students do not want to do community service at all. In an article in the *Loquitur*, the student newspaper, student Kimberly White expressed a common point of contention regarding her Seminar 300 assignment to tutor in an underfunded school:

I think it's great that education majors want to be involved with these children and they want to assist and teach them. However, if I am an English and communication major, I do not necessarily want to take part in this aspect of community service. I know that there are other options; however they didn't interest me either. ..I felt overwhelmed at some points throughout the semester, therefore I certainly do not think 15 hours of community service benefited my education and I don't think it was necessary or should be mandatory (2005).

Students feel the time could be “better invested” doing things that directly correlate to their majors. Why should future computer engineers or business leaders have to teach kids to read? Didn't they already “do” community service in high school? This student's view addresses a common problem facing college social justice programming. Widespread, loosely defined CSL at the secondary level makes collegiate CSL programming seem redundant. Students falsely believe (because their past experiences have taught them) that CSL and social service should be relegated to the fields of social work and teaching (Brukandt et al., 2004, p.4). Clearly, the programming they are receiving is well-intentioned but incomplete. CSL amounts to little more than “charity” in the absence of a well-structured, interrogative curriculum.

Community Based Research (CBR), often viewed as a “separate but equal” branch of CSL, avoids the common pitfalls of CSL programming. However, there is a clear distinction in the construction of these two methods. CSL has become a blanket phrase, describing any activity which engages the community for the mutual benefit of community and student. It is, at times, a “boutique initiative,” brought out for the benefit of funders or public relations departments (Brukandt, et. al., 2004, p.4). CBR, however, is better defined as a “collaborative enterprise” between professors, students, and members of the community that “validates multiple sources of knowledge and promotes the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination” with an eye toward “achieving social justice” (Strand, et. al., 2003, p.8). In CBR, students need to directly access information that the community and ONLY the community holds. As a direct result, partnership is innate in the structure of the program.

Students are forced to commit to a model of partnership rather than charity, because they must work with community members and agencies to get the necessary information. Intrinsic to this model, students must learn other complex skills: coordinating complicated schedules, valuing a variety of people and personalities, problem-solving complicated situations, and dealing efficiently with frustration (Strand et. al., 2003a). As a by-product, students are also able to see that social change IS a shared value many people hold. It is the logistics of social change that are problematic.

The success of the CBR model is evidenced by its widespread adoption in colleges across the US. Among colleges with CSL programs, in 2000, 33% conducted Community Based Research. By 2003, 65% of these same schools were engaged in CBR (Campus Compact, 2003). Similarly, students are happier. Studies indicate that the more complex the service “task” a student performs, the more positive the student is about the service experience (Furco, 2002a). CBR allows students to use a wider range of skills, putting theoretical knowledge to the test in real-time situations. In addition to the community consciousness offered in service learning, CBR raises the ante by demanding a direct application of knowledge gained in other classes in all disciplines, management of an actual project, and most importantly, the moral evolution from “charity” or “service” models of community involvement to a fully engaged partnership model with enhanced reciprocity.

At Cabrini, the merits of CBR have been widely discussed, and offering CBR as a part of a new “signature” course sequence is currently on the table. Much like the national trend noted in the previous paragraph, CBR programming has gained momentum at Cabrini College. Where only one section of Community Based Research was offered in 2004 (the study discussed in this article), there are now five Community Based Research projects running this semester (Spring 2006). The course design figures heavily into discussions about signature programming happening at administrative levels. While CSL is widely supported by the college and the Wolfington Center (a million-dollar program that acts as a communications hub for CSL), CBR is emerging as a more popular model because of the enhanced outcomes it offers.

Marullo and his colleagues identify four primary outcomes agents of social change seek when doing work within communities. Two of them, “enhanced capacity” and “increased efficiency,” are met in the traditional service-learning coursework. Student volunteers make a marked difference in the amount of people agencies are able to assist, and they make agencies more efficient when done well. However, even when done well, CSL can strain agency resources. Justin Lee, Director of Fund Development for Big

Brothers Big Sisters of Montgomery County, states that it often takes more time to train and monitor in-house volunteers than it does for staff members to do the same thing themselves. For that reason, his staff has learned to be very selective when asked to take on in-house student volunteer projects (2005).

In addition, the loftier goals of community empowerment and the alteration of power structures are often unmet (Marullo, 2004, pp. 62, 63). Often, in service learning, the learning follows a traditional model, in which one side is the “service provider” and the other is the “service receiver.” While many things can be learned in community service learning and should not be discounted, much of the information a student gains is a by-product of service. For example, a student is placed to tutor in an underfunded school. Through this experience, the student learns exceptionally valuable things, like what an underfunded school looks like, what a student’s life is like, and what challenges present on a daily basis in this environment. Personal experience indicates experiences act as a text, but are more powerful and immediate than a textbook, and therefore very useful. In traditional service learning, “service” is innate, and with it, the idea that we are providing something necessary, and getting, in return, a front row seat to learn about the ways of the world.

There is, however, also reinforcement in the belief that we are there to “fix” a problem or alleviate a social burden, unconsciously reinforcing privilege. Clearly, if we are to strive toward our third goal, community empowerment, it is necessary to empower students and community members equally (Marullo, et al., 2004). By tutoring, teaching ESL, and mentoring community children, colleges are inadvertently teaching a sophisticated model of charity, and “nobody wants to be a charity case” (Davila, 2004). Early programs such as the aforementioned Community Service Act of 1990 are lauded for their attempts to make service a way of life in every community, but criticized for a failure to achieve long-range institutional change. In short, “[s]ervice divorced from politics will never live up to its promise. Service harnessed to...social reform could transform a nation” (Drogosz, 2003, p. 18). If CSL is to evolve, a more reciprocal definition of empowerment must be demanded so that community members are not passive recipients of services but active participants in designing the blueprint for a more equitable system.

Students are taught to serve in high school, but CSL does little to equip students to achieve the fourth goal: an alteration of social structures (Marullo, et al., 2004). CBR challenges students to learn to use their skills to problem-solve. Innately the program forces them to look at raw, real data, assess it, and even make real recommendations to potentially alter existing barriers. In well-executed CBR, the hierarchy that

exists traditionally between student, professor, service providers, and service recipients is deconstructed, and authority is redistributed more equally among participants (Strand et al., 2003b). In the absence of an authority with a “right answer” students have more freedom to innovate. They also feel an increased responsibility to do so.

Norristown Partnership: A Shift in Paradigm

At Cabrini, centralization of services proved successful in the development of the Wolfington Center on campus. Created in 2002 after years of planning and careful research, the center provides a distribution hub for all community service learning and activities. Cabrini then decided to also centralize service partners with the hopes of buoying the efforts of Norristown, a nearby community, and Montgomery County. Initially a factory town, Norristown is an industrial community trying to survive in the postindustrial world of the Philadelphia suburbs. In addition, Norristown is the site of a very recent large influx of Mexican immigrants. Proximity to social services also draws some of the county’s neediest citizens. Area agencies, while effective, are overworked and dramatically underfunded. Cabrini, in working exclusively with one community, is hoping for a longstanding commitment that changes structural inequities in the community.

Initial attempts at CBR maintained the legacy of CSL despite intentions to boost community empowerment. The project was not initiated by the community but was more a case of Cabrini using Norristown as a “text.” Students in the class were asked to do a basic demographic study and asset mapping of the Norristown Area. In support of this study, students were assigned 15-week service placements in the Norristown area. The initial goals of service learning were articulated. However, students were given an additional “layer” of purpose: they were to establish relationships with community leaders in the hopes of recognizing assets, not deficiencies, in the community. What was working in the community? Who were the key players? What had already been tried? What do agencies need to continue providing services? Students became engaged in service, but also were more likely to build relationships that extended beyond their service environments.

This was a particularly interesting endeavor, mainly because it exposed a variety of pedagogical and philosophical problems with fledgling CBR. First, since the community did not initiate the discussion, there were varied responses to our “probing.” In short, it felt like probing. Some agencies were reluctant to share information. Others stated that this type of center had been proposed before and was ineffective. An agency with close ties to Cabrini confided that

Norristown's assets had been mapped extensively, something which agencies tolerated in the hopes of getting funding. In retrospect, the only reason Cabrini was able to make and survive this "error" was its reputation. Studies indicate that the most solid indicator of the strength of a college-community partnership is time (Dorado & Giles, 2004), one of the reasons early adopters with established relationships are better poised to make the shift to CBR. For the past sixteen years, Norristown has reaped the benefits of Cabrini volunteers. The relationship is solid. They knew we could be trusted to move quickly in response to community needs.

In the classroom, students still relied largely on objective demographic information to determine the site of the center. The "aha!" moment came when Big Brothers Big Sisters, a community partner, was asked to come to class as a guest lecturer. Jeannie Gustafson, Director of the Big Sisters Program, brought the sixth through eighth graders in her programs to assist. When students showed Gustafson's students the location they had selected based upon demographic information, the middle schoolers quickly vetoed the idea. The site placement was smack in the middle of two warring gang territories. Two months' worth of work was undone by six thirteen-year-olds.

This information was useful, but even more compelling was the by-product of this knowledge. Students in Seminar 300 began to see community members as not only useful, but essential. Suddenly, these were not a group of "at-risk" youth oppressed by an unfair system, but a panel of experts with a body of knowledge that was otherwise completely inaccessible. Not only did this change Cabrini students' views of the community, but Gustafson later reported her students were also empowered because their knowledge was useful and productive. Something had shifted, almost imperceptibly, and so we followed it down the rabbit hole.

Our initial foray into research "inflicted" on the community unearthed an important aspect of CBR: the articulated common goal (Strand, et al., 2003b). The first foray into Community Based Research more successfully addressed the third and fourth principles: community empowerment and the alteration of power structures within a community (Marullo et al., 2004). The project partnered with St. Patrick's, a Catholic Church in Norristown, PA. As mentioned before, Norristown is the site of a recent influx of Mexican immigrants, and the church found itself in the unique position of having a dedicated established congregation and a large bilingual mass. The Parish Council was interested in knowing how each congregation felt about the other.

The instructions in the St. Patrick's study were very straightforward. St. Patrick's Parish Council had

designed a survey asking congregants to rate their perceptions about the immigrant community in the Bilingual Mass. The study consisted of several Likert scales and a basic demographic section. Each student was to administer the survey to at least six congregants over a series of four designated Sundays. Both students and congregants were asked to commit to this a month in advance, and this planning made for a very smooth collection of data. In the interim, during class time students learned about recent migrant communities, practiced interviewing skills, and discussed their own views about immigration, skills already widely established as an expectation of Seminar 300. Interestingly, the established tradition of CSL made this process very comfortable for both the students and the instructor and helped to build an easy rapport and trust between the two.

Students returned to class with 125 completed surveys. Next, they were asked to take the information they gathered and answer questions posed by St. Patrick's Parish Council. How do parishioners in the English-speaking mass feel about parishioners in the bilingual mass? What demographic factors affect attitudes? Finally, based on this information, what can the Parish Council do to further integrate their congregation? The students responded with an overarching question: "How do we even begin to know how to do this?" With over 600 pages of raw data in a stack in front of them and no "right answer" in sight, the panic was palpable.

The responses to students in a CBR classroom are as simple as they are complicated. We will work together. We will use our strengths. We will compensate for each other's weaknesses. We will work like a corporation. Quickly, an IT department was established to set up a data base. Committees were formed. Deadlines were established and grading rubrics created. Presenters, editors, and analysts were selected. Each student used his or her major and talents to get to the end product: a 30 minute presentation of findings to the Parish Council. It was rational authority at its best. We were all working toward a common goal; therefore, authority was natural and in harmony with that goal.

Many instructors discover (the hard way) that group work can be the death of academic ideals. However, in this instance, students were engaging in the highest form of learning: teaching. They taught one another how to use and create data bases. One student lectured me (at length, I might add) about statistical integrity, and she brought me to her statistics professor to have him look at our study and check ways of enhancing its validity. In the absence of an overwhelming "authority" in the classroom, students were forced to manage one another, coordinate schedules to meet deadlines, and equally distribute

work according to talents and abilities. CBR, however, is not a magic bullet. The classroom did adopt a corporate model where the more dedicated and capable students emerged as leaders, oftentimes compensating for or even carrying less motivated students. However, students later commented that even this was a valuable lesson in real-time management.

Community Based Research, in effect, works as a testing ground for all of the theoretical knowledge students have gained in their respective fields. The emphasis in the classroom is not about “service,” but instead focuses on the creation of a professional product for a very important client. This removes the stigma that service learning is only for the “bleeding heart,” the social work major, or the future teacher. The study showed students there is activism in IT, power in marketing, and compassion in graphic design. Students were empowered by the experience, forced to move out of the passive role of learner and into the more active roles found in workforce environments.

Think of the Taoist idea that knowledge and wisdom are, at times, opposite entities. In its traditional service-learning format, Seminar 300 allows students broad and interesting experiences, but those experiences are still heavily mitigated. Students return to the classroom to understand their experiences through the lens of the instructor and selected course material. The “knowledge” exists in the form of sociological trends, statistics, and historical facts, which, as our earlier experience with Big Brothers Big Sisters proved, can be misleading. CBR places value on “lived experiences,” empowering community members as essential informational sources (Strand et. al., 2003b). In CBR, the answer is completely unknown by both the instructor and the student; there is no “knowledge” to interfere with “wisdom.” The meleé that follows is nothing short of exhilarating. We leap, and hope the net appears.

Enhanced Empowerment

Every Community Service Learning program strives for empowerment. However, as the non-traditional becomes traditional, a new, more demanding definition of the word begins to emerge. In the Community Service Learning model, empowerment is derived from a “shared benefit.” The students are empowered by their ability to help, and community members are empowered by the new skills they learn from students. As the non-traditional becomes traditional, empowerment also extends into areas involving funding, human resources, and even assessment of student volunteers (Strand et. al., 2003b). A trust is developed, and each party relies on the other to provide services integral to the successes of respective programming.

Community Based Research holds the potential for enhanced empowerment, since it demands not only the shared benefit of CSL but a “shared vision.” At the center of effective community based research is the idea that research is designed and executed by both the school and the community. There is an equal sharing of the power, knowledge, information, and execution of the project. The only difference lies in the “currency” used and exchanged.

For example, in the St. Patrick’s project, students benefited from the learning process of creating a final presentation from raw data. They gained insight into the problems facing communities with new immigrants, and they saw firsthand that often immigrants are not unwanted in communities, merely misunderstood. Had this been CSL, students may have come to this conclusion by speaking with the immigrants they were tutoring or through casual conversation with congregants. The results would have been purely anecdotal and therefore easy to dismiss as non-representative. By doing surveys, however, students directly solicited opinions parishioners have about their bilingual counterparts. Next, they formatted this data into an Access spreadsheet, compiled data from the Likert scales, looked at averages, and cross-referenced subsections of the survey results to see what demographic factors influenced opinions expressed on the Likert scales. Students concluded, based upon this process, that the only thing that affects parishioners’ attitudes toward immigrants is the amount of time spent together. While this seems to be a small observation, it is a lesson earned through hard work rather than given to students in lecture format or even through interaction with congregants. But what did St. Patrick’s gain?

Primarily, the Parish Council gained insight into the views of their community. However, they also had documented proof that there were a wide range of positive things happening between the Mexican immigrants and the established community. The council suggested that the findings be published in the local paper, which often ran articles about the negative impact of immigrants on the community. They also had tangible reason to increase activities in the Parish that drew both local and immigrant congregants. Because students had surveyed congregants about which events were heavily attended by both communities, they were able to focus on the development of similar events to further increase interaction between the two communities. The council was encouraged by the results of the survey and eager to conduct a second survey and analysis of immigrants’ perceptions. In addition, the council suggested other area churches might be open to similar studies. In the future, a regional assessment of Catholic churches could be done to alleviate misunderstandings between parishioners and immigrants, making the Church a gateway through

which immigrants could comfortably and safely enter communities.

This empowerment is more significant than in traditional CSL. In service learning, the benefit is substantial to both the student and community agency, but there is the unfortunate by-product of reinforced privilege. Students learn, essentially, that they can give to others “less fortunate”, and the language they use about their experiences reflects this. In a CSL model, students may have taught ESL (English as a Second Language) classes or assisted with outreach programs at the church but would see no long range institutional change, even though the service provided is invaluable in our world of under resourced social services. CBR “keep[s] a collective eye on long-term goals” and works toward the “larger goal of changing social arrangements” (Strand, et. al., 2003a, p. 41). In addition, the information in this study comes from the community, reaches the student, and is then returned to the community, creating a more even and well-distributed arrangement of empowerment.

Confronting the “Myth of Arrival”

Early adopters of CSL have all of the elements in place to launch a successful CBR program. Ultimately, CBR offers the opportunity to enjoy free passage between the community and the college or university, eliminating the “ivory tower” and working toward a more fully empowered community. Effective adoption of CBR requires many of the same things needed for effective CSL programs: institutional investment, faculty incentives and training, continued scholarship about and reflection on the practice, and curricular incentives for students (Furco, 2002b). As mentioned before, these practices are not only in place in institutions with successful CSL programs, but they are an identifying trait of colleges with service missions.

CBR will also place increased demands on current programming, keeping it one step ahead of programs at the secondary level, reaching farther into the realms of community empowerment and improved social structures (Marullo et. al., 2004). In its most advanced form, “decisions about resource distribution, programmatic emphases, and future expansion will be informed as much by the powers of faculty-community partnerships as by the board of trustees” (Strand, et al. 2003a, p.233). However, this need not be a radical overhaul of the existing system. At Cabrini, when the partnership with Norristown was created, a steering committee was formed to guide the program. Recently, influential community members have been invited to join the committee, reinforcing the central idea of CBR: shared vision. While this certainly falls short of the aforementioned democratic existence between college

and community, it is a step, a part of the evolution. Colleges such as Cabrini, with a tradition of the non-traditional, are most gracefully poised to make the transition from CSL to CBR. The hard work is done; we need only to reignite the desire to remain one step ahead of the norm.

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