

Community-Academic Equity in Service Learning: The TCCBE/U-Links Approach

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Abstract

Typical North American approaches to service learning are student-centered, institutionally based and emphasize a charitable approach - reinforcing stereotypes about who holds the power. The TCCBE and U-Links independent broker approach balances student and community needs to ensure all stakeholders benefit.

Competing Self-Interests in Service Learning

What makes higher education civic engagement challenging? The ideal civic engagement model would provide students with life-altering experiential education, faculty with inspiring new pedagogical models, higher education institutions with new educational programs, and communities with enhanced capacity and power. Crafting a practice that serves those diverse interests can be truly daunting.

Ever since Ernest Boyer called for greater student civic engagement in 1987, the dominant North American service learning model has emphasized student education, often at the expense of host communities. Consequently, students do not receive training that could support their service assignments. The majority of student service learning placements are also short-term, producing little benefit for community members (Stoecker and Tryon, 2007; Tryon et al., forthcoming).

Higher education administrators have noticed that service learning is good public relations, showing the institution attempting to provide direct public benefit. It also shows the institution attending to the educational needs of the students in a public way, again reflecting the emphasis on student education in mainstream service learning. It is no accident, then, that the dominant model of service learning is the 'charity', as opposed to the more controversial 'social change' model (Campus Compact, 2007; Marullo and Edwards; 2000; Robinson, 2000).

Faculty in higher education institutions usually become involved in service learning through two paths. Some build careers from promoting the practice, becoming celebrated educators or service learning researchers (for example, Zlotkowski, 2001). Others respond grudgingly to service learning mandates from higher education administrators to keep their jobs in a context where lifetime tenure is no longer assured.

Community organizations hope service learning will enhance their capacity, yet many experience it as a net loss for productivity. Despite these odds, organizations continue to host student service learners in part because they see educating the public as part of their mission. Many community organizations see service learning as their staff providing services to students, rather than the other way around (Stoecker and Tryon, 2007; Sandy and Holland, 2006). While there are students, administrators, and faculty who truly care about the communities they attempt to serve; student, institutional, and faculty self-interest in service learning has primarily been focused inward, producing an imbalance of power and benefits.

New Models for Service Learning

One of the most popular models for trying to provide community benefit while also serving the self-interest of faculty, students, and higher education administrators is community-based research (CBR). First, the research questions that propel CBR are supposed to come from the community, rather than from faculty or student interests. Second, CBR emphasizes the application of research to real community issues, requiring that students enter a CBR project with research skills already in place. Third, the research should support action around those community-identified issues (Strand et al., 2003).

Project-based service learning (PSL) is similar. First, the service learning project needs to come from a community-defined need. Second, in contrast to the service learning model where a student shows up at a community organization and staff has to figure out what to have them do, PSL is based on the creation of a project that the community or organization designs (Bradford, 2005; Chamberlain, 2003; Draper, 2004, Joint Educational Project, n.d.). And because there is a defined project, there can also be defined skills that service learners must bring with them. Building websites, creating databases, and organizing community events are typical PSL projects.

CBR and PSL shift the balance of competing self-interests by putting community-defined needs first, and building higher education institution programming to support those needs. This is often easier in CBR, since research methods training is already part of higher education curriculum. Both CBR and PSL emphasize accomplishing positive community change. Particularly in the case of advocacy groups, this can often lead to controversy. Despite this, community organization and member self-interests are still given priority.

Supporting New Service Learning Models: Three Approaches

It is unclear whether institution-based approaches can support these new models. The main forms of infrastructure currently supporting service learning, with one exception, seem to put higher education self-interest ahead of community self-interest.

The *institution-based service learning office* is very common in Canada and the United States. Such offices are typically charged with getting more students and faculty to do service learning - providing support for faculty to develop service learning courses and trying to connect students with local organizations. It is unclear whether institution-based offices can support these new models of service learning because they do not appear to emphasize intensive cultural competency training or even professional etiquette training for students before they enter the field. These offices also typically do not provide training for community organizations to define service learning projects and community outcomes are rarely tracked.

Other higher education institutions rely on either a *single coordinator or committee* to guide service learning. In this approach, service learning most often occurs directly between faculty and host organization staff (something that local organization staff deeply desire). Like institutionally based offices, there is often a lack of mechanisms for a) ensuring benefit to local communities; b) supporting community organizations to host service learners; and c) providing cultural or professional competency training to students.

To improve the balance of power in higher education-community partnerships, the *independent broker* approach is an exception to these more common types of infrastructure supporting service learning. The remainder of the paper focuses on this approach, describing how competing self-interests of students, faculty, higher education administration, local organizations, and community members are managed.

The Independent Broker: Defining Characteristics of the TCCBE and U-Links Approach

The Trent Centre for Community-Based Education (TCCBE) was created in 1996 out of a partnership between the Frost Centre for Canadian Studies and Native Studies at Trent University, the Community Opportunity and Innovation Network (COIN), and the Peterborough Social Planning Council. From the beginning, TCCBE has been an independent organization, originally as a project of COIN and now as a not-for-profit corporation on its own. The Haliburton County Community Co-operative (HCCC), engaged in discussions with the TCCBE in 1998 and a year later U-Links Centre for Community-Based Research (U-Links) was initiated as a project of the HCCC.

In their service learning work, the TCCBE and U-Links deliver the Community-Based Education (CBE) Program in the South-Central Ontario Counties of Peterborough and Haliburton. Through the CBE Program, the TCCBE and U-Links utilize both the CBR and PSL models of service learning by welcoming project proposals from local organizations throughout the year and providing support during the development phase. These models of service learning set the stage for community hosts to define the scope and focus of projects while creating realistic expectations for Trent University student-involved work. Project proposals are reviewed by (University and non-University) members of a Local Community Advisory Committee (one in Peterborough and one in Haliburton) to ensure community and student benefit and look for links to other research and resources in the community.

Over a decade of activity allows the TCCBE and U-Links to work with a wide range of University departments and serve the multidisciplinary needs of the community (Berger and Bowe, 2003; Berger, 2002). For local organizations, the TCCBE and U-Links operate as a 'clearinghouse' for accessing particular expertise at the University. Likewise, as more faculty become involved with TCCBE and U-Links-brokered projects, the staff become familiar with faculty interests and can contact them as research topics are identified (Berger and Bowe, 2003; Berger, 2002). Student involvement ranges from first year undergraduate to PhD-level students on projects that are not always confined to research activity. This diversity of student involvement broadens the possibilities for meeting the short, medium, and long-term needs of local organizations; achieving diverse student learning requirements; and encouraging longer-term community-based involvement from all participants.

In multi-stakeholder projects, it is often important to have a mediation or brokerage mechanism between competing interests and pressures. The TCCBE and U-Links perform this function in five distinct ways:

1. *Independence from the University.* Since inception, the TCCBE and U-Links have existed as non-profit organizations outside the administrative structures of the University (Berger and Bowe, 2003; Berger, 2002). This independence allows for increased control over governance and resource development and improves opportunities for higher education institutions to achieve student recruitment and retention rates and community-involved research goals.
2. *Independence between program delivery agents.* The TCCBE and U-Links operate independently (i.e. retaining autonomy over region-specific projects) while delivering a common program.
3. *Mediator between project participants.* As community-based organizations, the TCCBE and U-Links are intimately connected to the interests of their communities, allowing program staff to often act as 'cultural translators' between higher education institutions and host organizations. This cross-cultural work facilitates trusting relationships in CBE projects -

from proposal development to project implementation, completion and next steps (Berger and Bowe, 2003).

4. *Equitable governance.* The TCCBE and U-Links maintain governance structures that ensure equitable University/non-University representation and broad-based community perspective at all levels of governance - from Local Community Advisory Committee to the Board of Directors (Berger and Bowe, 2003; Berger, 2002).
5. *Neutral turf.* In Peterborough County, the TCCBE has always been located in the downtown area of the City of Peterborough - often renting space on the downtown campus of Trent University. A physically neutral presence and meeting place can be powerful antidotes when competing stakeholder pressures intensify. In contrast to TCCBE's close proximity to the University, and many institutionally based programs that attempt to serve rural areas through a central office, U-Links operates its own office in Haliburton County, 150km from the University - employing local resources for assuring rural CBR and PSL are controlled by the local community. At the same time, its close partnership with TCCBE and affiliation with the CBE Program provides access to University resources.

How Well Does it Work?

In considering the TCCBE and U-Links independent broker approach, a joint CBE Program staff meeting was held focusing on the following questions: 1) what are the pressures or factors affecting main stakeholder groups? (i.e. hosts, faculty, students, staff, and the institution) and 2) what do CBE Program staff do to manage different interests? Summary results follow:

Students often lack the time to fully implement a project, lack confidence with research and working in the community, and are unsure how to balance project accomplishments with academic goals. University-identified pressures are less associated with concerns about public image and more associated with the sense of risk associated with trusting an outside agency to run an academic-related program (e.g. concerns about quality). Faculty pressures include lack of recognition for community-based work within the institution. Lack of recognition usually leads to lack of time because CBR and PSL may take away from more highly rewarded work. Faculty also express concerns about the quality of student-involved work and worry that community needs are not being met. Such concerns are amplified by the fact that, in some projects, evaluation can also be a challenge. Host pressures include lack of understanding about CBR, research in general, PSL and academic expectations and schedules - with time constraints and lack of resources making it difficult to overcome these information deficits.

As independent brokers delivering the CBE Program, the TCCBE and U-Links have developed several practices for mediating these factors and pressures inherent in the process:

- *Creating clear, realistic expectations* in the project development stage and when projects are matched. This prepares project hosts to be flexible with students. By communicating regularly with faculty we also better understand acceptable academic expectations.
- *Incorporating projects into established courses* more often than into independent/reading courses. This provides more support for students and time allocation for faculty.
- *Being proactive in communication* is a simple, important and time-consuming strategy that takes many forms. For students it means regularly checking in via email, on-campus office hours and visiting classes. For faculty and hosts it means keeping in touch throughout the year, whether involved with a current project or not. In addition, the TCCBE and U-Links organize events for bringing stakeholders together to talk about CBR and PSL.

- *Providing background information* to students to help get them started on a project. This may come directly from our libraries or from the host.
- *Using project agreement forms* to serve as a contract between hosts, students, faculty, and the independent broker. Crafted by the student(s), it outlines the deliverables of the project and each stakeholder's responsibility in making the project a success.
- *Being in the community* is a key piece of the independent broker model. To the TCCBE and U-Links, attending host meetings and events and having office hours in convenient locations keeps CBE staff in touch with host issues.

The TCCBE and U-Links are also continuously refining common program staffing structures for a supportive environment that promotes communication and the ability to step-in for one another. For example, CBE Program staff (Projects Coordinators) link with project participants by project, not by stakeholder group. This positioning balances community and student needs and can facilitate quick turn around - often a key to success in project management. Another useful tool is an online database where staff can check on project status and be prepared and able to respond to situations they are not directly responsible for.

While the above practices are helpful in making CBR and PSL projects successful, there are many remaining challenges to equitable stakeholder participation. Future strategies to address these challenges include:

- *Supporting larger research projects* where student-involved work becomes part of a longer-term process involving many stakeholders. Linking student projects to something bigger provides students with more cultural and professional contexts; provides local organizations with more significant pieces of work, and provides faculty with more opportunities to link teaching and research.
- *Creating networking and learning* opportunities for stakeholders to come together and develop better mutual understanding of the competing interests at work.
- *Focusing on skills development, quality and rigour* for building confidence of all stakeholders. Suggested strategies include: popular education research techniques that incorporate quantitative and qualitative methodologies, peer-reviewed processes such as publication and awards, community-based course design, CBR ethics review, and communication of a 'skills/quality/rigour strategy.'
- *Supporting stakeholder engagement* to increase the ability to participate. Suggested strategies include: community-based scholars-in-residence, enabling grants for faculty, hosts and students, mentoring programs, appraisal of faculty promotion and review policies, and review of government research funding practices.
- *Building community-based relationships and diverse resource supports* that allow us to stay true to purpose and ensure sustainability. Suggested strategies include: community-based business planning and marketing, social finance, and multiple partnerships that are issue-driven (e.g. poverty reduction) and knowledge-driven (e.g. innovation, education and research).

Conclusion

Is this a better approach? U-Links and TCCBE have now brokered more than 450 community-inspired projects with an overall 80% success rate focusing on equitable stakeholder benefit. It is doubtful that an institutionally based office or a single coordinator approach could have done as well implementing CBR and PSL models of service learning in North America, encumbered as

they are by the student-centered and ‘charitable’ models of service learning. That said, the Science Shop model in Europe does seem to support community-defined projects despite offices being located in higher education institutions. Until we are able to fully implement the European model in North America, however, the independent broker model may be our best bet.

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