



Community-Engaged Learning: Building Well-being One Relationship at a Time

By Dania Bogle

Abstract

This paper explores the potential of community-engaged learning to improve well-being by helping those engaged to develop good relationships. It was written when I was conducting research on the impact of community-engaged learning on student well-being and participating in community engagement, thus experiencing its positive impacts.

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My name is Dania Bogle, and I had spent 20 years as a sports journalist when I decided that I wanted to change careers. I enjoyed doing general research, and I thought it might be nice to make a full-time career out of that, but I also eventually wanted to do a job that would directly and positively impact the lives of others. As an undergraduate, I engaged in a community service project working at a primary school for children with special needs.

This engagement gave me a deep sense of satisfaction as it helped me to fulfill a lifelong dream of giving back and also working with children, in which I had developed an interest as an adult. I didn't know then that the concept of that module was community-engaged learning. It was merely a compulsory course for students at my university. It was only after I chose to pursue a graduate degree and started reading on the proposed research project that I understood the true meaning of community engagement. I was drawn to postgraduate research investigating the impact of student engagement in community-engaged learning (CEL) because it focused on CEL's impact on student well-being. Throughout the course of my study abroad, I undertook community-engaged work to gain deeper understanding of student perspectives. Engagement served to improve my own international student experience, and helped me to practically apply to my own experience Seligman's (2011) positive emotion, engagement, relationships meaning, and accomplishment model. I used this model to assess the well-being of students in my study and I used it to examine if I was also experiencing well-being.

The Value of Community-Engaged Learning in Building Good Relationships

Although there is substantial research that

having good relationships is essential to good health and well-being, I saw through my research that not a lot of focus is placed on this element of community-engaged learning. Much of my background reading pointed to CEL's influence on civic values, and indeed, throughout my interaction with students in community-engaged learning, giving back was a recurrent theme. As I have, students often expressed a sense of satisfaction from fulfilling their own vision of returning something to the community.

When Robert Putnam published his treatise on the decline in civic engagement, *Bowling Alone*, in 1995, he singled out technology as the primary source of disengagement, but I now understand that while technology indeed leads to isolation, so can migration. It was at this point that I also came to understand that good relationships can be a form of vaccination against poor mental and physical health. I witnessed firsthand the importance of good relationships through engagement, not only as a student trying to adjust to life in a new country, but also as a researcher. For instance, I learned that community engagement engenders well-being when students have continued contact with others. In my first few months of life abroad, I knew very few people. This was a very isolated time as I struggled to gain my footing. I joined a church community in my new town. Later on, one of our community-engagement activities was to go caroling at a day care center for senior citizens. One of the students in my study had conducted her CEL project at a day care center, and expressed that she felt deep acceptance during her time with the seniors. Although personally I believe the singing group's performance was not all that good, our attendance was well received, and I understood the sense of meaning and subsequent well-being that someone could gain from engaging in this activity. In addition, I met new people at the center and seeing me show up at a time when I could have been working

on my thesis helped me to gain new respect in the eyes of my fellow carolers. This helped us to form a greater bond and these individuals would express deep willingness to support me later on. My activities were social in nature, but other students undertook sport-based community-engaged programs and these were particularly good at helping them develop relationships because of the interaction, especially in groups that it provided. My supervisors also encouraged me to witness students in CEL modules in active participation, which was best facilitated in their sport-based initiatives. I decided that I could apply the knowledge I gained and combine it with my training in sport science by encouraging sport-based community engagement. When I returned home, I again volunteered at a school, this time proposing to teach parents of children with special needs to practice self-care by engaging in regular physical activity.

I was also encouraged to be civically engaged by my supervisors, and as I continually sought such opportunities, I became a student mentor. One of the saddest moments during my time as a student was seeing one of my mentees decide to drop out of college. I had spent time with her outside of school, even visiting her at work. I knew she was torn, but the responsibility of doing her part in taking care of family had led her to decide to put off her studies. Students I encountered in my study also had difficulty balancing family responsibilities, undertaking part-time or full-time jobs, and finding time to undertake the practical component of CEL. I recognized the importance of having a good support system when my mentee called me late one evening to ask my advice on whether she should drop out or not. Although my influence was not enough to keep her in college, I think it was instructive that she had someone other than family to call on for advice, and I believe that this is one of the roles that supervisors in community-engaged learning can play. CEL programs present an opportunity for students to develop relationships with individuals in the community who may influence their future education or career choices.

I also learned about different types of cultures and subcultures, due to the range of individuals I encountered in research and my own engagement. I met individuals, most of whom I have not seen since, because we are traveling different paths, but whom I remember, and from whom I learned about food, language, and how people engage in other countries.

My participation in an undergraduate CEL project sparked my interest in conducting research into community engagement at the postgraduate level

when the opportunity to do so arose. Further, having completed master's degree study in community engagement, I was motivated, even determined, to continue research in engagement at the doctoral level. My interest was piqued by the reaction of students in the element of relationships, which appeared to me to be the area in which the greatest impact was felt. I believe that at its core, this is what CEL is truly about. People want to help others and forming connections can be the start of good relationships. I became more convinced, for instance, that once adults take the time to form better relationships with children, they would have fewer issues with misbehavior. If there is one thing that my research into engagement taught me, it is that every child needs at least one good adult in order to thrive. I remembered a time when I too needed one good adult and I made a vow to try to be the one good adult in the life of every child that I encounter henceforth. I started putting this into practice once I had completed my studies and returned home, and saw instant results. Even children once described as difficult, once I connected with them, I found were no longer misbehaving at all. I had given serious consideration to a degree in social work before I opted to undertake a bachelor's degree in sport science, and graduate training in community-engaged learning gave me an opportunity to interact with others, taught me patience, and gave me insight into what life in a professional social sphere might be like. I decided that I wanted to pursue a career in health promotion, with focus on improving health through connection and relationships. I believe strongly that seeing the effect of CEL on the lives of others and feeling its effect in my own life has changed me forever.

References

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About the Author

Dania Bogle is a public health advocate. A Jamaican by birth, Bogle completed an MSc in Health & Leisure Studies from the Institute of Technology in Tralee, Ireland.