Opening the Web of Learning: Students, Professors, and Community Partners Co-Creating Real-Life Learning Experiences

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Abstract

This article documents an example of a successful learning partnership for an activity called the Leadership Challenge (LC), an experiential learning design used by Royal Roads University (RRU) in its Master of Arts in Leadership Program. The LC is based on a co-learning model in which professors create the conditions for students' learning; community-based organizations bring an authentic challenge as a scenario for learning to the students; and organizations, professors, and students all learn from one another throughout the process. We believe this experience is an example of how genuine partnerships between universities and community organizations can be created in which community partners are squarely placed in the center of the academic experience, rather than being treated as peripheral. Written from the perspective of representatives from both the university and the community service organization, this article also documents the limitations of this activity based on the short time frame allowed.

How can community organizations and universities partner for mutual benefit? What does authentic collaboration and community engagement entail? As the notion of engaged scholarship has gained momentum over the past few decades, questions such as these have challenged members of community interested in partnering with universities and engaged scholars alike. As a contribution to the scholarship of community engagement, this article documents an example of a successful learning partnership for an activity called the Leadership Challenge (LC), an experiential learning design used by Royal Roads University (RRU) in its Master of Arts in Leadership (MAL) Program. The LC is based on a co-learning model in which professors create the conditions for students' learning; community-based organizations bring an authentic challenge as a scenario for learning to the students; and organizations, professors, and students all learn from one another throughout the process. We believe this experience is an example of how genuine partnerships between universities and community organizations can be created in which community partners are squarely placed in the centre of the academic experience, rather than being treated as peripheral.

Written from the perspective of representatives from both the community organization and the University, this case builds on the theme of impact in community-university relationships by exploring the nuances of a particular LC that occurred in 2013. From a pedagogical perspective, this case illuminates a problem-based, experiential, real-time/real-life open-ended learning challenge. That is, it did not aim to provide fixes to problems; rather, it intended to open up possibilities for mindful reflection and improvement. This case exemplifies the importance of entering into community-university relationships with the goal of ongoing mutual learning, thus moving forward from a transactional approach which frequently focuses on unrealistic expectations of fixing problems. The success of this LC is examined in the context of creating a relationship of trust, the backgrounds of those involved, and the development of realistic expectations on all sides in regard to the scope and limitations of the LC. It begins by introducing the context of engaged scholarship as well as the pedagogical design of the LC activity. It then details the specific community-university relationship outlined in this case and concludes with reflections on values, limitations, and lessons learned.

The Context of Engaged Scholarship

Over the past three decades, universities have demonstrated an increasing interest in community engaged scholarship (Gibson, 2006; Hall, 2009). Vogelgesang, Denson, and Jayakumar (2010), for instance, described a significant turning point when the 1999 U.S.-based Kellogg Commission "challenged institutions to renew their commitment to address the pressing issues of the day" (p. 438). Sandmann, Thornton, and Jaeger (2009) likewise suggested that universities' current turn toward community engagement is "a natural evolution of their traditional missions of service … along with their commitments to the social contract between society and higher education" (p. 1). In Canada, this kind of scholarship also has deep roots (Etmanski, Dawson, & Hall, 2014). Hall (2009) has documented how the Extension Unit of the University of Alberta was established in 1912 with a mandate for outreach and engagement. Likewise, the Antigonish Movement during the 1930s and 40's linked research, adult education, community economic development, and social action to support economically depressed communities living in Atlantic Canada's fishing communities (Welton, 2001). The scholarship of engagement (Boyer, 1990; 1996) and the notion of engaged scholarship (Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010) have informed much of the current momentum around partnerships between community-based organizations and universities.

As these and other engaged scholars have suggested, we are living in an historical moment where there is increased value placed on scholars who see engagement as scholarship with not on community. Etmanski, Dawson, and Hall (2014) have stated,

> There are two defining characteristics of this body of research: it is action-oriented and it is participatory. An orientation to action means that the researchers, whether as members of the community or outsiders, commit to supporting the community in improving conditions in some way. What, exactly, constitutes meaningful action is an ongoing debate and will vary under different circumstances. … [Likewise], the word participatory means that the intended beneficiaries of the research (i.e., community members) have significant control over some if not all parts of the research process: from problem-definition, to research design, data collection, representation, and dissemination of findings (p. 8).

Despite good intentions and a growing body of scholarship outlining helpful responses to frequently encountered challenges, community-university relations continue to be riddled with complexities and hurdles. In the pages that follow, we acknowledge these through documenting how two organizations came together for the purpose of this activity.

Leadership Challenge Background

Royal Roads, formerly a military college, was reborn as a public university in 1995. It is a small university just a short drive from Victoria, BC on Canada's west coast. Much smaller than the University of Victoria, RRU focuses on applied and professional programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. The MA in Leadership is among the university's longest-running programs. The LC is used in several of RRU's graduate level programs as an opportunity to extend our students' understanding of theory and how theory can apply directly to practice. In the case explored in this paper, the LC was used in the first term of the MA in Leadership program. The first term includes a two-week residency period in which students come together face to face, attend small seminars, larger plenary sessions, and participate in a variety of learning activities. The residency period forms an intense learning environment, and it is within this context that students connect theory to practice using the LC as a vehicle for enhancing their learning.

The LC is similar to a business case study in that it involves a complex narrative and is intended as a vehicle for the application of theory to practice. At the same time, it is not like a case study in that it is a real, unresolved issue currently being experienced by a client organization, which we call a sponsor. Students at RRU addressing a LC are applying theory to practice through analyzing a relevant and current issue with a sponsor organization, and making creative recommendations to assist the sponsor move forward with a complex and often ill-defined challenge.

The notion of grounding and extending learning through the application of theory to practice in this manner is itself grounded in constructivist learning. The theory of constructivist learning, with early roots in the work of Piaget (Rohmann, 1999) holds that learning is a process of meaning-making and that we tend to make meaning and construct knowledge socially. Of equal importance, especially when considering the LC as a vehicle for learning leadership, constructivist learning also holds that learning can be most effective when undertaken in the context of social groups with diverse membership.

Significantly, in the constructivist paradigm, "learning proceeds from previously assimilated learning acquired through interaction with the environment" (Rohmann, 1999, p. 304). In a group setting such as the LC process, the diversity of the group adds significantly to the richness of both the learning and the experience. In such a setting, reality is not objective, but rather a construction; different people will construct different meaning as a result of experiential and cultural backgrounds. Constructions are built socially through interactions between people with diverse backgrounds (Rohmann, pp. 363–364).

The LC serves two purposes for the students. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, is to provide a forum in which they can apply the various theories and models we present in seminars and through course reading. The second purpose of the leadership challenge is to provide an opportunity for students to live and practice their own developing theories and frameworks of leadership and teamwork, both critical elements of the MA in Leadership. This lived experience may have more value for both learner and sponsor than may seem initially obvious.

Since the LC occurs during the two-week on-campus residential period of the first term of the program, the experience of working in teams to complete the LC activity provides an in vivo experience of generating an effective organization based on the concepts and theories they are learning. Although the lived experience of teamwork may seem clear, it has been our experience through many years of using this approach that because the students are working in teams that reflect the functioning of organizations, they are more capable of empathizing with any potential struggles facing the sponsor organization. Even though their own classroom-based organization is temporary, and perhaps somewhat artificial, they still come together in community much as our community sponsors organize to accomplish their own purpose.

When LC teams become microcosms of real-world organizations in this way, they are reflecting Senge's (1990) notion of microworlds. In much of his early writing, Senge's conceptualization of microworlds suggested that the role of members focuses much more on research than it might in their workaday roles in the so-called real world outside of the classroom setting. Because the vast majority of our students are themselves leaders in their own organizations, the ideals of the microworld can and often do become reality. In these cases it becomes the students' job to reimagine reality. The learning in such cases can be profound.

We are often told that the experience of a residency, consisting of seminars, workshops, and especially addressing the LC, is transformative.[1] Such feedback is consistent with MacKeracher's[2] (1996) view of such learning experiences: "Learning is transformative because it has the potential for developing change. Personal meanings and the personal model of reality can be changed during interactive and constitutive processes" (p. 9). This is significant in that, in our view, learning leadership is a complex process. Unlike some other disciplines, the construct of leadership is elusive; it defies right answers and encourages a constructivist approach to learning. The constructivist approach encourages a necessarily learner-centered mindset: "The learner centered approach focuses primarily on the learner and the learning process, and secondarily on those who help the learner learn" (MacKeracher, p. 2). The subtle shift this brings to our teaching practice is both daunting and rewarding.

As faculty members, we see ourselves as facilitators rather than teachers in the more traditional sense. Of course this does not mean that we avoid theory; rather, we present it and then step back, allowing our students to make their own meaning, and apply it as they choose. Research shows that knowledge is much more likely to be remembered or recalled in the context in which it was originally learned (Bridges, 1992, p. 9).

The leadership challenge approach can be considered as a form of "problem based learning" as conceptualized and explicated by Bridges[3] (1992). "Problem based learning is an instructional strategy that uses a problem as the starting point for learning. The problem is one that students are apt to face as future professionals" (p. 17). With roots

[1]See Agger-Gupta and Etmanski (2014) for further details on the transformative elements of the first residency term.

[2]Dorothy MacKeracher's work informed the design of early iterations of this program when it was the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training.

[3]Edwin Bridges's work informed the design of early iterations of this program during which residencies were five weeks in duration and included at least four separate leadership challenges.

in both constructivism and problem based learning, the LC encourages not only the ideals of the microworld, but also greater motivation and orientation toward success (Bridges, 1992).

The LC has become a core element of first-year studies in the MA in Leadership at RRU. Serving as both an opportunity to apply theory to practice, as well as a platform for practicing leadership in a microworld, it adds richness to the learning and lived experience of graduate education. As a mechanism for working in partnership with community sponsors, the LC has paved the way for students and faculty to apply relevant theory toward advancing community initiatives.

Overview of the Process of Developing a Leadership Challenge

The process we undertake to complete the LC, even though complex and often somewhat emergent, does involve some predictable elements. As a starting point, we partner with representatives from a sponsor organization who identify an organizational challenge with which they are currently grappling. These representatives are invited into the classroom to make a presentation during the first week of our first term residency. As one of their assignments for the first term courses, the students work in teams to come up with proposals to address the challenge and then make presentations back to the organizational representatives in the latter part of the residency.

Student engagement with the sponsor organization comprises a 60- to 90-minute briefing involving the Executive Director (ED) and perhaps other senior organizational leaders who come to RRU to present their challenge. During this session students have a chance to ask questions of the sponsor. A telephone conference call later in the week with the key sponsor individual (ED or other senior leader) allows students to ask more questions and check assumptions once they have immersed themselves in the challenge. Finally, the sponsor returns a last time to RRU in the second week of the residency to attend the student team presentations.

Sometimes sponsor organizations hear about the LC through word of mouth and approach us independently. At other times, we reach out within our School's broad network of contacts to find a suitable organization that wishes to participate in this mutual learning experience. Normally a contracted faculty member (what RRU calls Associate Faculty members) is hired to write an 8–20 page overview of the LC, including the context of the challenge, information about the organization and its current successes, a description of the key issue the senior leaders are interested in addressing through the challenge, and parameters for the assignment.

The overarching question asked of the sponsor is, "What organizational challenge or opportunity are you currently facing that you would be comfortable sharing with the MAL students, and that you think would benefit from the insights of our mid-career student teams applying leadership principles?" The process of working with the sponsoring organization is highly collaborative to develop an appropriate challenge open enough to allow students to apply both their individualized knowledge as leaders in their own organizations as well as the knowledge they are learning in the residency and through their readings.

To begin our selection process, the faculty team gathers names of possible sponsor organizations, often informally reaching out in our networks to see whether there might be interest amongst our contacts. We bring the names of all potential sponsor organizations forward to the faculty team planning meeting to determine which would be the best fit. Once the faculty team has agreed, the contracted Associate Faculty member makes a formal meeting request to the potential sponsor organization to provide an overview of the LC format and explain what can be expected. Sometimes this meeting includes several representatives from the identified sponsor organization. If the organization agrees to participate, they are asked to sign a consent form as part of the RRU ethics review process for student learning involving real-life scenarios.

The contracted Associate Faculty member then drafts a document (assignment description) that includes a brief literature review to help frame the challenge, typically involving both publicly available sources as well as pertinent information on the organizational context offered by the sponsor (e.g., internal documents the organization is willing to share). This document also includes student deliverables for their final team assignment (a presentation and paper).

Where possible, we also ask the sponsor to return the following year in the cohort's second residency to give a brief (approx. 30 minutes) update on what has actually changed within their organization in the interim. This lets the cohort know what kind of impact the team presentations had for the organization and provides an opportunity for dialogue between students and sponsor.

Although we have a preference for working with non-profit organizations, any organization willing to travel to RRU for the purpose of this activity is a possible sponsor organization for a LC. We seek to partner with a new organization four times per year according to our first term residency schedule.

Although the approach is in some ways linear as described, in practice it tends to unfold as an emergent process. Student teams may choose to collaborate, or may see the LC as a competitive process. Conflict may emerge within or between teams. Diverse levels of relevant expertise on teams may result in wonderfully creative recommendations or, alternatively, may stifle creativity. Faculty interventions may enhance or discourage excellent teamwork. For teams to achieve a level of success, "control is replaced by a toleration of ambiguity and the 'can-do' mentality of 'making things happen' is modified by an attitude that is simultaneously visionary and responsive to the unpredictable unfolding of events" (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006, p. 20). As such, it would appear that recognizing and working with a complex and emergent process where ambiguity and responsiveness are essential becomes critical in achieving levels of success.

The July 2013 Leadership Challenge

In the spring of 2013, the community service organization (CSO)[4] that chose to partner with RRU was undergoing a significant change process. Under a transfer agreement that the province of British Columbia (BC) had with the federal government, this CSO was moving from a BC-funded environment to direct contracting with the Government of Canada. The new funding model came into effect as of April 2014. Because the federal government places significant emphasis on a specific kind of reporting accountability, the new contracting and funding model was set to bring changes for many staff in the agency, including capturing vital client service data in a federally designed database, quarterly cash flow forecasts, and performance assessment/outcome reporting. For many of the CSO staff members, especially the frontline workers who for the most part had little administrative background, this change entailed dealing with administrative procedures to a much larger degree than under the BC funding model. All staff members were required to undergo administrative training to cope with the requirements of the new system.

For the purpose of the LC activity, the ED, Mary Smith, and one of the managers and co-author of this article, Sabine Lehr, requested support in coming up with some innovative ideas on how this organizational change process could be led and managed. They hoped the students' ideas might support them in creating an engaging and rewarding learning experience for the staff, rather than a burdensome and (for some staff members) frightening change process.

One of the challenges that Mary and her leadership team faced at that time was that those who had chosen to work for this particular CSO had been attracted to the organization for reasons other than quantitative reporting. Furthermore, their skills were more conducive to the work at hand and perhaps less to their soon-to-be expanded administrative function. At the time this CSO joined with RRU to set the parameters of the LC, the executive team observed that this organizational refocusing was becoming confusing and demoralizing to their staff members. Even the manner in which the administrative training was set to take place (i.e., mostly through webinars) was perceived as at odds with the spirit of face-to-face, interpersonal client-based work, especially considering that most frontline staff had mother tongues other than English and varying degrees of competence with computers and electronic media. Yet, had staff members not adopted this new reporting structure, and had not learned to do it well, the CSO would have been at risk of losing funding and staff members would have been at risk of losing their jobs. As the ED articulated at that time, "we want to prepare them, not scare them" (personal communication, 8 July 2013). In the face of these challenges, how could the CSO, the ED, and the senior leadership team create and reinforce a positive, respectful message that this change was necessary? How could that message be shared most effectively?

The Students' Task

Each LC team was asked to make recommendations to the sponsoring organization regarding actions and perspectives they might adopt in order to help them achieve their goal of maintaining excellent communication and preparing their

[4]Name and identifying information have been removed to protect confidentiality.

staff for the upcoming change without generating fear or losing their ongoing commitment. Each team's task was to:

- Provide a clear definition of what the team considered the essential issues or challenges that needed to be addressed in order to inspire the shift;
- Outline a clear picture or vision of what the ideal future could look like, as well as a set of indicators by which progress could be monitored and that spoke to the achievement of success;
- Propose a clear leadership strategy, or a set of integrated strategies, that the CSO leadership team and other stakeholders could utilize and apply to their current challenge and that would remain relevant as they moved forward with a mindful approach to preparing and moving through imminent change. Students were asked to draw upon the knowledge and learning from seminar and plenary sessions; however, they were not to be limited to residency topics only. Rather, they were encouraged to be open to thinking outside the box and consider all frameworks and models that might be relevant to this challenge;
- Provide a clear overview of the opportunities, barriers, and risks to implementing their recommended strategies, along with tangible ideas about how these opportunities might be leveraged and how barriers might be overcome; and
- Provide short and long term concrete plans or recommendations for action around an effective approach to shift the organizational culture in response to this externally mandated change.

Each team was expected to produce a concise, written action plan of approximately eight pages addressing the above requirements; make a 12-minute presentation to the panel highlighting the key elements of their plan; and anticipate and respond to questions from a panel of representatives from the CSO.

It was clearly noted to the students that the CSO had graciously volunteered to share this LC with the RRU class. They had done so partly in search of possible solutions to their ongoing challenge and partly in the spirit of community to assist the MA Leadership students achieve success. The instructors asked that the students join in this spirit of mutual learning and mutual respect by maintaining confidentiality and doing their best to find viable possible responses to the challenge. When questioning the CSO, presenting possible solutions, and responding to questions from the panel, students were asked to remember this commitment to community and respectful communication. Finally, students were reminded that addressing this challenge was, above all, a learning opportunity. While addressing the significant organizational concerns presented to them, they also were encouraged to learn from the team experience and the application of the effective and authentic leadership practices promoted in this program. As students participated in each seminar or plenary activity during residency, instructors asked that students consider how they might immediately apply lessons learned in the LC team process or product.

Impact of Leadership Challenge on the Sponsor Organization

This LC, which we collaboratively entitled "Leadership, Communication, and Mindful Change," addressed a major shift in the CSO's primary funding relationship with government that came into effect as of April 2014. As was expected from the outset, the new contracting and funding model brought changes for many staff in the agency, including new database requirements, quarterly cash flow forecasts and other accounting procedures, and enhanced evaluation outcomes reporting. When the CSO was approached by RRU with regard to becoming a sponsor for the Leadership Challenge, the agency embraced the opportunity to explore with RRU leadership students how this change process could be led and managed innovatively. Specifically, as described previously, the CSO was interested in turning the process that was perceived as burdensome and potentially frightening by many, into an engaging and rewarding learning experience. Throughout the process, starting with the first meeting during which RRU LC leaders and the CSO's ED discussed the basic parameters of the challenge, it was apparent to Sabine that RRU regarded and treated the challenge as a true partnership with the community organization. It was clear that the community partner's needs were squarely placed in the centre of the learning experience, rather than being treated as peripheral, as is so often the case when community organizations are merely used as sources of data for research or as recruitment grounds for research participants.

From Sabine's perspective, the instructors very skillfully led the process of creating a problem-based, experiential, real-time/real-life open-ended learning opportunity that did not aim to provide simplified fixes to the challenge, but opened up possibilities for mindful reflection and improvement among all participants. The final meeting with the students where the CSO representatives were presented with eight sets of recommendations was characterized by a sense that the CSO was in the driver's seat to facilitate the discussion, with the instructors deliberately assuming a background role. Following the final presentation, the CSO received the students' written papers, together with a DVD with recordings of their oral presentations. This practice is further proof of the instructors' commitment to working with community partners in an authentic manner based on the principle of equality of partnership.

Following participation in the LC, the CSO implemented several concrete ideas that emanated from this process. In the fall of 2013, Sabine Lehr, co-author of this paper, was appointed as transition manager at the CSO to set a clear signal for staff that there was going to be intentional leadership over the coming months. In this way, the change process shifted from being a looming thing to having a familiar face and a person attached to it whom staff could contact with any questions.

One student team had structured its presentation around William Bridges's (1980) transition model that distinguishes between the external change process and the internal transition process. The team designed an interactive experience of moving through the three zones of "ending, losing, letting go", "the neutral zone", and "the new beginning" (Bridges, 1980). Inspired by this presentation, the CSO decided to recreate this experience during an all-staff meeting less than four weeks away from the final switchover to the new funding model. There was an incredible sense of solidarity and camaraderie in the air as everyone present participated in this symbolic act of transition.

Several student teams had stressed the importance of organizing an open space or learning day where staff would have the opportunity to reflect on the change and transition process outside of their regular work environment. Finding funding for such a day can be difficult for a non-profit society; however, luck was on the CSO's side. For several times in a row, they had put in an application for the "Once-a-Quarter Strategic Think Space Day", offered free of charge to a non-profit organization by four local innovators who believe in empowering non-profit change-makers. In spring 2014, just after the change had been implemented, the CSO was successful in their bid, and on June 11, 2014, 38 staff members participated in a workshop focused on team building and managing change. Participants left the day feeling re-energized and inspired by their past work. One exercise in which the staff members participated involved a self-assessment of where they saw themselves in the transition process. The results were then plotted on a graphic.

The CSO also took the students' advice to provide thoughtful and adequate support to staff very seriously. When the time came to train staff on the new client database, the CSO arranged for a trainer to fly in from another part of the country so that training could be provided face-to-face in a computer lab group setting, rather than relying solely on Web-based training (the mode in which most agency staff received their training). This format helped staff navigate their fears of the new technology by providing a friendly collegial environment in which staff members were able to help one another.

In terms of the bigger picture, the RRU instructors' outstanding leadership and practice around community-based approaches helped the CSO to reconceptualize the lens through which they viewed the upcoming change from a negative challenge to a positive challenge. As a result, not only was this partnership helpful in terms of supporting the CSO's organizational transition, it also highlighted useful practices (as well as some limitations) for engaged scholarship more generally. We will discuss these in the final section below.

Discussion

There are several benefits to having a community organization and university forge a partnership for the purpose of this activity. As representatives from RRU, we hope that this LC experience enables all participants, including the organizational sponsor, the students, and the faculty team to benefit by deepening their understanding of how leadership concepts and theories can be applied in the context of a real-life, real-time organizational challenge. Students in particular, emerge from their first term with more refined leadership skills and return home to have a greater impact in their own organizations and communities. Such learning reflects the ideal of what Botkin, Elmandjra, and Malitza (1979) originally referred to as "anticipatory learning" when exploring different conceptualizations of organizational learning. Significantly these authors emphasized that anticipatory learning is a participatory approach to learning focusing on innovation and building capacity to address emergent challenges in an increasingly complex world. Current and former students regularly report the benefits of anticipatory learning which is often the result of utilizing the notion of microworlds in teaching and learning (Senge & Fulmer, 1993). Moreover, we hope that the sponsoring organization benefits from having a cohort of 40 or more mid-career professionals make a concentrated effort to apply their skills, knowledge, and passion to an organizational challenge. When the LC is particularly successful, the sponsor organization is better able to serve the members of its community with improved leadership ideas and processes.

Based on the case outlined, here we describe two key supporting factors of this particular community-university partnership, which include the value of relationship and prior knowledge as well as putting the community organization's needs first. In the spirit of reflexive practice, we also outline key limitations as the potential for superficiality in student analysis in a classroom-based activity bounded by set timeframes. We offer these reflections and lessons learned here for the purpose of furthering the dialogue on engaged scholarship.

The value of relationship and prior understanding. A nuance of this particular community-university partnership is that Sabine (as a representative from the CSO) and Catherine (as a representative from RRU) had known one another and worked together on various projects for approximately nine years prior to this LC experience. This means that when Catherine initially reached out to Sabine to find out whether her organization might be interested in joining this LC activity, a foundation of trust was already established for both parties. Although Guy was later hired as the lead to connect with Sabine, the ED, and other individuals in the organization with whom he did not have a prior relationship, each was introduced to the other through a trusted colleague, thus smoothing the way from the start. This value placed on relationship building is reflected in literature pertaining to engaged scholarship in general and community-based research more specifically (Etmanski, Dawson, & Hall, 2014).

Related to this point were other nuances around the specifics of the individuals involved in this case. As it turned out, the ED was a graduate of RRU and had experienced a similar LC activity in the context of her own graduate studies. She was therefore familiar with the learning intention behind this activity, which meant that it did not require as much background explanation on behalf of Guy and Catherine. Similarly, Sabine wears both an academic hat and a CSO hat. As a key member of this CSO's leadership team, Sabine was the lead member of the panel invited to attend the students' presentations in the second week of their on-campus work. She also took the time to come back to RRU when the students returned to campus the following year for their second on-campus residency, at which time she provided them with an update of how their recommendations had been taken up by the CSO, and which changes had been implemented. On both occasions, faculty members observed how effectively Sabine communicated with the students. It was evident that she was a skilled educator in her own right in that she understood how to validate their contributions while also offering authentic feedback. Her commitment to the students' learning experiences was exemplary. It is unusual for RRU to partner with organizational sponsors who also have experience teaching at a graduate level and can therefore appreciate the students' learning goals as well as rightly holding high expectations around the benefits of this activity to their organization.

While in this particular case, the foundation of trust already existed between the school and the CSO, this is not always the case. Very often there is no existing relationship between an LC sponsor and the individual writing the LC. In such cases building a foundation of trust is among the first priorities. Early meetings and phone calls often involve very open and emergent conversations exploring potential topics, but also simply raising to a level of consciousness one another's realities; building relationships. As we teach our students, "Relationships are the very heart and soul of an organization's ability to get any job done" (Short, 1998, p. 16). Building comfortable relationships with LC sponsors and potential sponsors is a critical factor in ensuring the success of the initiative, and success with the LC means a real benefit for the sponsor as well as a potentially transformational learning experience for the students.

Putting the organization's needs first.

From the perspective of the CSO, the experience of partnering with RRU on this activity differed in a number of important ways from more traditional university-community interactions they had experienced. First and foremost, according to Sabine, the relationship was characterized by mutual respect, trust, and equality. In particular, this meant that the focus of the relationship was an issue identified by the community organization, not by the university. As such, the intervention resulted in direct and concrete support of the organization. This organization is approached regularly with requests to gain access to the client base they serve, sometimes from desperate students or faculty members who are crunched for time and have exhausted other possibilities. Although this CSO values its relationships with universities and has a desire to support students as one aspect of their community service, they have noted that often there appears to be little understanding around the need to exercise sensitivity in facilitating relationships with their clients. In contrast, rather than seeking access to their (potentially vulnerable) clients, this project was focused on supporting employees of this CSO as well as changes in the organizational structure, which reflects the project's location in a program focused largely on organizational leadership.

In addition, it was generally felt that costs and benefits of participation were carefully balanced in order not to create a strain on the nonprofit's limited resources. Although there was no direct reimbursement for the time spent by members of the CSO, all materials produced by students (reports and a video recording of presentations) were handed over in their entirety to the organization, thus maximizing learning and impact. Moreover, RRU dedicates contract funds to the lead faculty representatives for the LC rather than expecting them to do this work off the side of their plates, thus resourcing the relationship-building time required up front. Guy's particular approach to developing a LC is to make it as easy as possible for organizations to partner with RRU and this includes holding meetings/conversations at a location that is most convenient for representatives from the organization. With the exception of the two visits to campus when the students are in residence, representatives from the university go to the CSO instead of the other way around.

Limitations in this model.

Etmanski, Dawson, and Hall (2014) have suggested that the type of engaged scholarship projects that find fertile ground in the academy are typically "ones that do not destabilize the status quo too drastically, or that integrate better into pre-existing institutional structures, e.g., timeframes for courses or project funding" (p. 9). In this sense, the LC is indeed required to fit directly into the timeframe of when the students are on campus for their residency. Given the two-week timeframe of their on-campus experience, students have just a little over a week to analyze the organizational challenge and report back. As a result, despite students' and faculty members' best intentions and the collective number of hours they dedicate to this project, their analysis can only ever reflect ten days' work. Although student teams' presentations are normally thoughtful, well-polished, and well-intended, some are, of course, more helpful to the organization than others. This means that following the morning of presentations, representatives from the organization need to wade through a large amount of data (their own notes, the students' reports and presentation slides, along with the video recording if requested) to find the recommendations or possibilities that are best suited to their context.

In addition, the design of the assignment has students working in eight independent teams. Although communication between teams is encouraged to help to avoid unnecessary repetition, thus providing the greatest value for panel members, inevitably some repetition occurs when teams present to the panel one after the other. A little repetition might be considered useful in reinforcing key points, but often the repetition is based on concepts students are learning from their first term textbooks and is therefore somewhat predictable.

Over the years, faculty members have considered various options for mitigating this design challenge. One option has been to coordinate teams in such a way that each team takes on one aspect of the challenge; however, the risk of this design is that this student group might be perceived as the experts in this one area, instead of one of several teams offering suggestions in the spirit of mutual learning. Moreover, there is the possibility that this divided as opposed to holistic approach could reproduce challenges resulting from silos already present in the organization. Experience has shown that this kind of coordinated design works best when it emerges from the students themselves, rather than as a top-down mandate from the instructors. Nevertheless, this discussion still raises questions about how much repetition is truly in the organizational sponsor's best interest.

Finally, there is a minimal risk that students who do not have a full understanding of both the sponsor organization and the leadership concepts and theories taught in the first term may provoke a sense of discomfort in the sponsor. This possibility is particularly present during the initial question period on the second day of class where they may inadvertently ask insensitive questions or during final presentations where they may make unsound recommendations. Every caution is taken to ensure students ask questions and present their proposals in a respectful, humble, and appreciative manner reflective of the values promoted in the MA Leadership program. Nevertheless, faculty members cannot control all spontaneous comments offered in conversation, nor is this their intention. As mentioned, all parties must be prepared to enter into this agreement with the highest of respectful intentions, acknowledging that this is an opportunity to exercise leadership and learning all around.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has shared lessons learned about engaged scholarship by documenting a particular iteration of a particular learning activity at RRU. The key contribution of this case to the scholarship of community engagement is its focus on mutual learning as opposed to setting unrealistic expectations around fixing problems. In the case of this and other LCs, mutual learning includes benefits to the sponsor as well as the students. Anecdotally, over the years both have reported significant learning and positive change. Indeed years and even decades after graduation, students recount stories of transformational learning through the leadership challenge process. We have also highlighted the value of relationships and putting the organization's needs first as essential components of a successful community-university partnership. In offering these reflections, our hope is that others may take what has been useful from our experiences and apply it to their own practice.

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