Community-Based Learning: Supporting Grass Roots Leaders as Valued Educational Partners

Practices and lessons from a food systems course and a growing partnership between Ithaca College Environmental Studies and the Tompkins County community.

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Goals of the Food Systems Course and the Evaluation Process

- Identify small interventions from community-engaged learning that help community organizations accomplish their short and long term goals.
- Design the content and structure of the course to bring maximum value to community members and community organizations, as well as to students.
- Identify and provide the preparation and support that is needed by agency staff and community educators who work with students.
- Identify what parts of the student training, learning, and supervision were most effective in providing value to the organization and to the students.
- Identify the kinds of preparation or support is needed by agency staff or other community educators who work with students.
- Identify the personal impact of the course and the project on Project Guides, students, community members, and faculty.

Context: Community-based Coursework in Environmental Studies at IC

Each semester Ithaca College Environmental Studies department offers a 4-credit course guided by Elan Shapiro, focused on issues in social justice and ecological sustainability.   Themes for the course vary from semester to semester. In the Fall of 2012 the theme of the course was "Building a Just and Regenerative Local Food System." The course met twice a week for two and a half hours, once a week at Ithaca College with Elan, and once in the community working on a community project. This course has typically 12 - 18 students enrolled. Community members are invited by Elan to design a project for a team of 2-4 students that will help with the work of their organization, both in providing services to compensate for staff shortages, and in a variety of "capacity building" efforts. Community members involved in grassroots initiatives as well as governmental or nonprofit work, are also invited to be presenters in class and on community-led field trips. Students are expected to put in 5 hours a week each for about 11 weeks of the semester. There is extensive training for the students before and during their work in the community and throughout the course - in racism, classism, systems thinking, and sustainability, as well as in process skills such as team work, communication, cultural competency skills, meeting facilitation, and leadership.

 The courses are designed and implemented as a partnership between Ithaca College's Committed to Change program and Environmental Studies Department and the Tompkins County communities, between the faculty and community organizations, and between students and community members. True partnerships are based on shared goals and values, co-developed goals and plans, with mutual learning and benefits at every level.

From the Project Guide Handbook 2012 used in the course: "It's a challenge to foster closer connections between young people and communities and organizations, when the students are pulled between idealism and disempowerment, and the communities are resource-deprived but understandably cautious or even cynical about university-based efforts. Often, though the university's efforts may be well-meaning, they often have paternalistic, top-down,"charity"-oriented frameworks or components… The quality of faculty guidance and community-based guidance students get is, I think, a crucial factor in the success of this collaboration ..."

 Alicia Swords: "I think it's pretty clear that students benefit a great deal in tangible, measurable ways from these experiences. They learn skills that are very marketable, that build their resumes.

My experience is that community organizations benefit much less because they have to manage and juggle a lot of work ....
This usually means supervising students and doing a lot of training... this imbalance does not have to be the case. We have
work to do to change this."

The intent of this work is to "...move away from the 'service learning' model , that often overwhelms understaffed and underfunded community organizations without adequately addressing their short and long term needs, towards 'community-based learning', that provides the orientation and support to assure that campus involvement advances the goals of the community organizations and values them as educational partners." (**Final Report on Community & Cultural Competency Pilot Modules, 2010)**

Evaluation Process

The evaluation of the Food Systems course that this report summarizes and synthesizes included: face to face interviews by Anne Rhodes with project guides (7) and with other faculty members (1) , on-line feedback from students to the Environmental Studies Department (8) , anonymous evaluations from students to Elan (6) , final project reports from student teams (4) , and student reflections during (5) and at the end of the course.(12)

Course Design and Implementation

Elan implemented a number of course elements to create both a rich and transformative experience for students and a meaningful contribution to community efforts.

- **Provide real and useful work in the community for students to engage in.**
  - Project Guides worked with faculty to design projects that bring real benefit, both short and long term, to their organization or the community, and are doable within the time frame of the semester and within the abilities of students. In spite of mixed outcomes, this is building a different set of norms for what is possible.
  - Students experienced ownership of their work, saw its benefit to the organization, and were acknowledged and appreciated for it.
  - Most students agreed strongly that the experiential learning / doing was the most valuable part of the course, and that it challenged them to think in new ways.
  - *[Student] "...one thing that I always felt as my previous environmental class concluded was hopelessness. [Here] I am] learning to apply myself and realizing that becoming involved in the local community, although it may be small, can cause a ripple effect throughout our society."*

- **Expose students to communities and realities that they had never experienced before.**
  - Students experienced the realities of food injustice and food insecurity; poverty; volunteer community activism; anti-racism work in a number of agencies and initiatives; the demands of production farming; work to get healthy food in schools; activists of color working on food systems; and white people as anti-racism allies.
  - *[Student] "It constantly amazed me ... so much emphasis on building relationships over time in order find the balance needed for a self-creating, evolving, and regenerative local system."*
  - *[Project Guide] "They had their eyes opened about the lack of healthy food in many homes, and the lack of information about food choices and what is harmful, about the ignorance about fruits and vegetables, and that people can't afford healthy food, that it's not accessible. [They didn't realize] the inequality of the food system."*

- *[Student] " Before taking this class I never thought about where my food came from, I just knew it came from a store ... it's not worth the carbon emissions for me to eat out-of-season foods!"*

- **Provide meaningful, frequent interactions between students and a variety of community members.**
  - Probably the greatest impact on the students was the contact with twenty-plus community members who shared their experiences and interacted with them both in the classroom and in the community.
  - Students worked with both white people and people of color, with low-income people, both urban and rural people, and people of different ages.
  - Students interacted with bankers, academics, community organizers, food pantry workers, farmers, and others.
  - Collaborating community members provide students with an immediate application of the academic content from the coursework.
  - *[Project Guide] "Working with the students helps me remember the value in the work. It helps me be more persistent."*
  - *[Student] "I think that the interactions with community members taught us much more about why it is important to engage yourself with your community. ...gave a face to the lessons we had been learning all semester, "*

- **Provide diverse ways for students to experience the community, and integrate community members into the course in multiple ways.**
  - Community members were engaged as presenters in the classroom, as designers and leaders of field trips, as presenters at field sites, and as semester-long Project Guides.
  - Presentations or field trips took place nearly every week, plus students had at least an hour a week with the Project Guides
  - Connections were made in the classroom and in the community, in various locations, at work sites, agencies and organizations, farms and food pantries, as well as in readings, reflections and journaling, class discussions, homework – all integrated.
  - Community members presented content-based information about the food system, their work experiences, personal stories, analyses of community problems and solutions, as well as leading skill trainings.
  - There was a cumulative impact on students from seeing the community in a variety of ways. Students reported that the diversity of learning experiences was the most valuable aspect of the course.

- **Create a learning community format that is egalitarian, fostering meaningful and honest interactions.**
  - Non-lecture format, experiential learning in the classroom
  - Students co-lead discussions based on the assignments, with little or no lecturing
  - Set up seats in a circle, with faculty and presenters as part of the circle
  - Record feedback from students at end of each class and incorporate into following sessions
  - Create an informal culture that is safe enough for personal discussion, expressions of doubt and fear, airing of differences of opinion, and honest questioning – for both students and presenters.
  - Importance of time in the classroom to process their experiences in the community, on an emotional and cultural level
  - *[Student] "This class would not have been the same if it was in a traditional classroom. I enjoyed sitting in a circle and being able to have open discussions instead of being lectured at."*

- *[Student] "This lesson (value of developing relationships of trust with people who are different from me), along with many others that I have received this semester, will stay with me throughout my life."*

- **Prepare students for authentic interactions with community members through a classroom focus on in-depth information about the food system, racism and classism, and skill training.**
  - Focus on Communication skills (including listening and giving feedback), interviewing skills, cultural competency skills, leadership, facilitating meetings, and collaboration skills.
  - *[Project Guide] "I could see their growth in working in the community - their conscious effort. They were choosing their words more carefully, becoming more aware."*
  - *[Project Guide] "They had to look at their privilege, look inwardly. Their curiosity drove them, but they didn't realize that how you frame a question can put people off."*
  - *[Student] "This entire experience has heightened my understanding and appreciation for race and class awareness, cultural identity, and justice advocacy."*
  - *[Student] "Before taking this class I was not aware of what white privilege is...[it] made me realize how racism is really about an unwillingness to share power. "*

- **Engage students with Systems Thinking and its practical applications**
  - A systems thinking approach allows students to reach understandings and connections beyond specific facts.
  - Apply systems thinking to addressing racism, classism, the food system, and to farming practices (e.g., permaculture).
  - Systems thinking allowed them to make connections they had not thought of before, confront things that they had taken for granted, and recognize hidden patterns, such as power imbalances and systemic racism.
  - Students learned to see the necessary conjunction of sustainability and equity.
  - *[Student] "I understood how issues of community, food and race are so tightly interconnected..[I became able]... to look at other issues I am presented with in a systematic way."*

- **Compensate community members as professional educators.**
  - Project Guides –were paid by the hour, usually $20/hr, depending on the time they have available, including their prep, approx. $500-900 per semester. Guides who are paid by their agency to work with volunteers as part of their job were usually not compensated. Some presenters chose to volunteer their time.
  - Presenters in the classroom – were paid by the hour, depending on how much prep they have to do, approx. $80-150
  - Field trip organizers were paid in the range of $80-150
  - Presenters at field trip sites were usually paid $60-75
  - Some people who contributed as part of their paid job can had their fee donated to a project of the agency, for example, for scholarships.
  - The funds to pay presenters and Project Guides came from the Ithaca College Committed to Change program and the Environmental Studies Department.
  - Program guides who saw the project as part of their work and did not ask for compensation sometimes found the project took more hours than they had expected, which affected their motivation and level of commitment. Other guides who contracted from the beginning to be paid exhibited a higher level of motivation and responsibility

Challenges

Identified issues that make the balance of benefits to the community more difficult to achieve. (See attached page of comments from students and Project Guides.)

- The Projects didn't make the substantial capacity-building contribution that was planned and hoped for.
- One semester was not long enough to complete some projects. Jamilas S.: We need to spend some time thinking through what is realistic in terms of expectations of students and how we can create balance as a project guide
  - Project Guides find it difficult to scale a project to the time available,
  - Elan subsequently made it clear that projects could be multi-semester, though not with the same students, in the current system
- Considerable planning time required to design a Project that is useful and manageable by the agency, doable in the time frame, and appropriate to the students' skills and awareness.
  - Elan has since started the planning process months, rather than weeks, in advance.
- Students did not have the necessary skills to carry out and complete some projects effectively. Excessive and unforeseen demands on Project Guides' limited time, energy, and attention.
- Students' need for on-going coaching, supervision and accountability
- Significant need for timely and clear communication among all participants. Jamila S. : Provide lots of different formats for communication – social media, email, texting etc. based on the comfort levels of group members
  - With this much new, this much going on, this many people involved, and the complexity of the course, there is a great need for clarity, careful organization, thinking and planning way ahead, clear expectations, and keeping to a schedule that is manageable.
      Jamila S.: Substantial work required from faculty beyond the academic course work - to identify community participants, create relationships with them, and help to design and implement projects and presentations. Build in a system whereby agencies and non-profits and individual community members can get connected. Also sharing the value of the process and format of this experience with colleagues so that they can duplicate parts of this effort.
- The students' experiences are new and challenging and bring an emotional response, requiring substantial reflection and processing.
  - Course readings and homework were reduced later in the semester and in the next semester's course, allowing more time for reflection and journaling.
  - Project hours per week were also reduced in the subsequent semester, which students greatly appreciated.
- Substantial work required from faculty beyond the academic course work - to identify community participants, create relationships with them, and help to design and implement projects and presentations.
- Difficulty funding transportation costs for students to community locations, especially rural sites, and especially in the tight time frame of class schedules. This limits most projects to urban rather than rural areas.
- Difficulty of finding funds to appropriately pay community educators.

Successes

- Compensating Project Guides and community presenters recognized them as valued educators, supported their needs for well-paid employment, and established a model that may influence other faculty and institutions.
- Project Guides and presenters felt validated having their wisdom and expertise recognized,

appreciated, and compensated.
- Students receive a more in-depth, relevant, and integrated learning experience than can be provided by relying exclusively on the lecture-essay-exam model, as well as a stronger, more personal connection with the community.
- Students were inspired the Focus on justice and sustainability which permeated the course
- For students, the chance to move off the hill and be directly engaged in real work, and to experience ownership of and success/achievement in that work was a singular experience in their academic life.
- Students in one team were so enthusiastic about their community experience, that they wrote an eloquent Guest Column about it, which was published in the weekly newspaper, the Ithaca Times. The column also encouraged other students to get involved in the community www.ithaca.com/opinion/article_53ea6aec-43f2-11e2-b5ac-001a4bcf887a.html
- Students came to see themselves differently as a result of the immersion into experiences with community members. Their lives expanded beyond the campus life to a bigger set of concerns.
- Many students continued to contribute after the semester was over, volunteering and staying engaged.
- The work of understaffed community organizations got a boost from extra hands, even though the capacity-building aspect of the projects fell short of the hoped-for outcomes.
- Critical work that was not urgent was accomplished by students in some projects. Waiting for staff to have time to do this work might have taken years.
- Doing a comprehensive evaluation of all the aspects of the course has led to important reflection and changes in practice.

Promising Practices to try

- Create and implement a agreement form for students, faculty, and Project Guides to sign, outlining their commitments to each other.
  Find ways to fund and set up college shuttle transportation for students to be able to get to community sites, especially in rural communities. Jamila: Set up a peaks over poverty challenge to raise funds with CCE's energy and transportation units
- Design projects that challenge students to stretch and learn, but do not require skills that will take so long to learn that there will not be time to use them, or where the project is completed with a limited skill level and the results are not useful, or not as useful, to the organization.
  - *[Project Guide] "I can't give them something that's critical or immediate for the organization, because, then, the quality of the work and getting it right the first time is essential. And the supervision and number of hours would go way up. So I have to think of something not critical but useful. I probably need to have been thinking about this months ahead."*
  - *[Project Guide] "Having a dedicated staff person who was able to work closely with the students was essential. We could not have accomplished what we did without this position. She coached the students, worked with them on interviewing skills, gave them feedback, helped them find resources."*
        Jamila: Help project guides to plan realistically if they have not worked with students previously, perhaps, have a small training for project guides.

- Institute an intermediary coordinating function which would help with supporting Project Guides, students, and faculty.
  - Intermediary could be through a campus-supported community engagement center embedded in the community or a dedicated nonprofit serving area colleges and organizations.
  - Could help create and support the relationships that lead to the projects, match projects and

courses, support community educators and Project Guides, help with project design and development, coach and supervise students, facilitate on-going communication, etc.

- ○ *[Project Guide] "We need a point person – for communication, to hold students accountable – in a way that the Project Guides can't (don't have time for). And Elan can't do this for each of the projects. An intermediary."*
- ○ *"The coordinating function was more complex than we planned and budgeted for, because of the start-up nature of the experiment and the collaboration between two quite different cultures. This highlighted for many of us the need for committed staff—ultimately in a community engagement center—that can build long-term partnerships. Community engagement can play a crucial and labor-intensive role in linking faculty from different courses and disciplines with appropriate community partners. Part of the work of staff in existing community engagement centers is to support and encourage community partners to clearly define what organizational needs and projects are most appropriate or most adaptable for student work. " (Community Cultural Competency Module Evaluation, 2010)*

- • Make a long-term commitment to work with the same Project Guides or organizations over a number of years in order to accomplish something more substantial for them.
  - ○ In recent semesters, some projects have taken three semesters to complete, with each group of students passing the work on to the next. This has resulted in outcomes that are substantially more useful to the organization.
  - ○ *[Project Guide] "This was my third time around. I knew what had gone wrong before, and spent a lot of time with Elan ahead of time (in the summer) to get prepared. How to make it effective and easy, how to get set up, not so many problems like last time."*
- • Consider the possibility of a student making a year-long commitment to an organization, working on community-based learning in more than one class.
- • Make the benefits to the college, faculty, and students of community-based learning more visible to the institution, in order to get more support. Make sure the college can see the rich source of education that community members are providing to their students.
- • Create a separate endowment at the college for community engagement.
- • Increase the pay for faculty who are taking on community-based learning.

Conclusion

Although there are many difficulties and surprises in steering community-based learning, with many small irritations, sometimes a sense of "wasting" time, some wrong turns and dead ends, the goals and values embodied in this way of teaching and learning are taking our institutions of higher learning and our society toward where they need to go. We are beginning to change the relationship between our colleges and universities and the communities in which they are located. Students and faculty are learning citizen activism, and a new way of thinking about what it means to be in community. And the community members and organizations are guiding and directing this learning. This work can help address the historic power imbalance between higher education institutions and the communities they're embedded in. It does this by empowering community groups to stand up for their priorities and see themselves as valuable resources in the venture of educating young people as leaders in creating a positive future.

With so many resources, and such a variety of resources existing on campuses, colleges can afford to appropriately honor the contributions of community members. There are probably many other ways in which the institutions could respectfully partner with community organizations and initiatives. It is theoretically possible to augment both tangible and intangible benefits – for the individual and for the community organization – so that the money is not the only way the college recognizes community contributions. It

would be a useful activity to reflect on what kinds of non-economic benefits students, faculty, and the institution of higher education could deliver. Maybe it would include a long-term commitment to ending systemic racism and classism in the community, delivering the time, attention, and energy of faculty, administration, students, staff, alumni and trustees to that task.

"My worldview has been changed, because I used to think that volunteering was boring and not worth my time ...It is easy to sit back and think that someone else will do what needs to be done, but too many people have this attitude and I no longer want to be one of them! Now I have community skills that I plan to use to become engaged in helping build a strong and supportive community that will encourage others to do the same."

"We really have to have our eyes on the prize – all of us, and not just be trying to make a dent or change something just a little. We really need to keep in mind that we're going for the whole picture, the whole reality of food justice."