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Engaging and Preparing Students for Future Roles: Community-Based Learning in DIT

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DIT Access and Civic Engagement Service, Community LInks

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Engaging and Preparing Students for Future Roles: Community-Based Learning in DIT

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Sub-theme 3 – STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Engaging and preparing students for future roles – community-based learning in DIT

Catherine Bates

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Abstract
This paper will introduce the principles of Community-Based Learning (CBL), showing how this pedagogy allows students to use a range of learning methods on real-life projects, preparing them for a changing professional environment and social context, and enhancing their college experience. Lecturers and underserved community partners collaboratively design projects to meet the learning needs of students and to work towards community goals. Through these curriculum-based projects, students develop greater awareness of themselves as learners, and of the role of their discipline in society, as well as building a range of transferable professional skills. This paper will give 2 clear case studies on how

modules have been adapted to include this pedagogy in DIT, drawing on three years' experience of coordinating the Programme for Students Learning With Communities in Dublin Institute of Technology. Participants will gain a clear sense of what is involved in using this approach to learning and teaching, and the benefits for their students, as well as to the participating community partners. They will also have a clear framework for planning their own projects. Community-based learning (or service-learning) is recommended in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030.

Introduction

In 1897 John Dewey wrote about education: 'With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the [learner] for any precise set of conditions'. His solution was to activate and combine the learner's individual talents in experiential education, in relation to their social context and the service they could offer to society, from a social justice perspective (Dewey 1897: no page numbers).

The Programme for Students Learning With Communities in the Dublin Institute of Technology, part of DIT's Community Links Programme, supports lecturers and students engaging in community-based learning and research (also known as service-learning, and science shop), and builds links with communities. 'Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection, to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities. It is used in the US in a wide variety of settings, including schools, universities, and community-based organisations'. (Hunt 2011: 59).

DIT lecturers and/or students work with underserved community partners (local groups, not-for-profits, etc) to collaboratively develop real-life curriculum-based projects to enhance students' learning, as well as working towards community goals. Learning can come alive for students as they take their subject knowledge out of the lecture theatre and apply it to real-life projects in various social contexts. These projects require students to engage in critical reflection and to develop social awareness, and aim to energize them to work for social change. Through these curriculum-based projects, students develop greater awareness of themselves as learners, and of the role of their discipline in society, as well as building a range of transferable professional skills such as communication, social interaction, teamwork, project management, and problem-solving. The community becomes part of the teaching process, and the students' work contributes to the community's work and goals. Community-based learning (CBL) ensures that students are actively experiencing, and not just theorizing on, their discipline in its social context, which also better prepares them for future life and work. This high-impact pedagogy has been shown to increase student engagement, transferable skills, and retention (Hurd 2008).

In 2010/11 approximately 1,200 DIT students worked on curriculum-based collaborative projects with over 100 community partners. One in three undergraduate programmes in DIT last year offered students the opportunity to work collaboratively with communities. This

paper focuses on how lecturers can develop projects with community partners, through two detailed case studies, and guidelines on how to plan CBL projects[4].

Getting started

Most CBL projects in DIT are carried out within the boundaries of pre-existing module descriptors. While these projects run in 57 modules, only a few module descriptors specifically refer to community engagement. Lecturers look for modules with learning outcomes relating to skills such as: group work; communication; presentation; time management; project management; ethics; negotiation; project design; professional development; and workplace adaptability. Modules can also be adapted to include CBL even if the learning outcomes are more technical and discipline-specific in nature.

In our experience, good CBL or CBR projects should incorporate three key elements: regular high-quality contact between students and community partners; student reflection to maximise learning in the realms of the personal, academic and social; and students presenting a usable end-product to community partners for feedback at the end of the module. This is also backed up by international research in this area (Hurd 2008, Strand et al 2003, O'Donnachadha 2009).

Case study one

The Professional Practice Studies module in year 2 of the BSc (hons) in Human Nutrition and Dietetics shows the suitability of a professional development module to CBL projects. This module is designed to develop competence among students in those skills required for their practice placements in community and clinical settings later in the year. Learning outcomes include: students demonstrating their ability to describe a person's dietary intake; doing a basic nutritional assessment of a person; developing educational resources/presentations appropriate to specific client groups; and demonstrating an understanding of ethics in the context of professional practice (Moloney et al, no date).

In previous years these skills were developed using role-play and case studies. In 2010/11, Clare Corish and Mary Moloney, the lecturers on this module, wanted to adapt it to include CBL. Together with Cathrina Murphy of Dublin City Council North Central Area, whose role includes liaison with older people, they designed a CBL project to benefit students and older people. Cathrina recruited around a dozen interested older people from the North Central Area of Dublin to visit DIT to engage with the students and to have their diet evaluated by them.

At the first visit, two students worked with each older person, one student taking their diet history, and the other student acting as observer. Observers gave feedback afterwards to students taking diet histories. After taking the diet histories, students gave short presentations to the older people on day-to-day dietary issues that they and the lecturers felt would be of interest, and facilitated a discussion to find out what nutrition-related topics interested the older people, in preparation for their return visit the following week.

[4] An extended version of this paper, containing more detail on each area we cover, can be found in the publications section of our website: www.communitylinks.ie/slwc

Between the two visits, the DIT students analysed the diet histories taken, and set dietary goals for the older person. These were submitted to the lecturers for constructive criticism before the return visit. Students also researched and prepared presentations on the topics of interest identified by the older people.

When the older people returned to DIT, the student who had previously acted as observer now took them through the proposed dietary goals, while the other student now acted as observer. Students had prepared useful handouts, presentations on their topics of interest, and a tour of the library and science facilities in the Kevin Street campus for the visitors.

Feedback on this project was overwhelmingly positive from all involved. Not only did students learn the practicalities of taking a diet history, analyzing it and making recommendations, but they expanded their learning into other dimensions too, e.g. developing their social skills. Students learned to overcome their shyness about initiating conversation with new people – an essential part of the work of a dietitian. Two students specifically identified 'talking to people we didn't know' as an aspect of the module that was difficult (Moloney and Corish 2011: 2). Students also had the opportunity to learn about the very practical issues which concern people about nutrition and health. As one student said: 'I highly enjoyed the experience. I found it extremely relevant and helpful to my college work and really helped put theory to practice'. (Murphy 2011)

Staff were very pleased with students' engagement. 'Students quickly demonstrated their total commitment to making their project as successful as possible in a short space of time' (Moloney and Corish 2011: 1) While the project required extra work from the lecturers, they felt students had reaped the rewards. Academically the students did well as a group on this module, and also noticeably outperformed the previous year's cohort in the subsequent practical professional competence examination, for which this module was intended to prepare them (Moloney 2011).

The project also had many benefits for the community partners, who enjoyed the interaction with the students, received personalized dietary recommendations, and formed new networks within their own community through the social aspect of the visits to DIT (Murphy 2011). They commented: 'The programme was very efficient and covered so much that we can put most of it into practice daily. The personal attention was very rewarding.' 'Good to have nutrition labelling explained as this is a mystery to most of us. Never understood saturated fat or folic acid. The young people I met on this programme were very friendly and knowledgeable' (Murphy 2011). After the second visit, the older people were keen to return to DIT in the autumn to talk to the same group of students' (Moloney and Corish 2011). Murphy and the DIT lecturers recently organised this follow on visit, where the same older people and students (the latter now in third year) met to reassess the older people's dietary goals after six months.

All of these positive outcomes, from a project which comprised two morning visits to DIT by a group of older people, highlight the enormous benefits that can accrue to students from even a small-scale simple CBL project. These future dietitians are now better equipped for their future careers, and have amassed a range of professional skills to help them to deal with a potentially uncertain future.

Case study two

Larger multifaceted community-based learning projects can be suited to incorporation into work placement modules. Academic staff have been exploring CBL as an alternative to industrial work placements[5]. This is recommended in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt 2011: 59): 'One solution to the challenge of finding suitable work placement for students is service learning. This has the advantage of also providing students with the opportunity to engage in civic endeavours.'

Computer Science lecturer Ciarán O'Leary and his students, in partnership with Wells for Zoe, Camara Education, and DIT's Computer Learning in Communities (CLiC) Programme, collaborated on a more complex CBL project, involving a stay in Africa, and a 30-credit work-placement module. O'Leary has been involved in CBL and CBR projects with his students for almost ten years, and articulates the benefits for students (O'Leary 2011a):

> We see this as an equivalent to work placement, rather than a substitute […] the service-learning module provides students with an opportunity not available to them through work placement, for example, to take on more responsibility and have more control of the direction of their work than they would get in work placement. The ability to work autonomously, for example, is a learning outcome that can be better achieved, we suspect, in our module than work placement. The ability to understand organisational and management structures would be better served by work placement. The distinction is in the emphasis, though both modules treat more or less the same high-level learning outcomes.

Combining Ciarán's views with our own reflection on the relationship between CBL/CBR and work placement, the following table shows the similarities and differences (in italics) between them.

Industrial work placement	CBL/CBR placement
Develop professional skills and CV experience	Develop professional skills and CV experience
Develop *knowledge of organisational and management structures*	Develop *project management and organisational skills*
Learn about *industry* as potential employer	Learn about *community/not-for-profit sector* as potential employer
Develop communication skills with *colleagues*	Develop communication skills with *clients*
Develop understanding of role of discipline *in industry*	Develop understanding of role of discipline *in society*
Develop ability to work *responsibly in a clear line-management structure*.	Develop ability to work *autonomously in a flexible management structure*.

Table 1: Differences between learning outcomes on industrial work placement and CBL placement

[5] A fuller discussion of the use of CBL/CBR in DIT across a range of disciplines as an alternative to work placement, including an early assessment of Ciarán O'Leary's module, can be found in the following paper: Bates, C. and Gamble, E. (2011) 'Alternatives to industrial work placement at Dublin Institute of Technology', *Higher Education Management and Policy Journal*, 23 (2).

O'Leary devised a module, called service-learning and civic engagement, to match the existing 30ECTS work placement module, with revised learning outcomes. This module drew on his previous experiences in CBL, in conjunction with his discussions with community partners John and Mary Coyne from Wells for Zoe. Wells for Zoe is 'a sustainable development organization helping communities in Malawi access clean drinking water', which promotes organic agriculture through a test farm, and is involved in early years education programmes (http://www.wellsforzoe.org/). Students from DIT had previously volunteered with Wells for Zoe.

This new module had four specific phases. The first phase, pre-commencement, involved an application form, interview process, and fundraising. Students who were accepted onto the module had to raise €2,500 each to cover flights, accommodation and vaccinations (O'Leary 2011b). With the ongoing recession in Ireland, successful fundraising experience is a professional skill that would probably interest potential employers.

The formal start of the module involved two months of preparation work. Several smaller CBL projects were built into this preparation stage, including students working with Camara, a computer recycling charity, to learn PC maintenance and repair skills, and students working with DIT's Computer Learning in Communities programme to teach older people to use computers. Students also devised a mission statement with goals for their technical and organisational learning, and development of social insight, during the project (O'Leary 2011b).

During the third, immersion phase, students spent six weeks in Malawi, involved in all aspects of Wells for Zoe's work, supervised by John and Mary Coyne as well as by contacts in the local University and Technical College. Students were required to conduct a needs assessment with the organisation. The assessment of this module focused on students identifying a need, and researching, designing and implementing a solution to that need. This very open brief allowed students to take responsibility for their own learning experience, and to take ownership of those projects for which they identified a need, in collaboration with Wells for Zoe (O'Leary 2011b). Back in Dublin, students spent the remainder of the module in the final project phase, using their skills and research to meet the community's need.

One DIT student worked with students in the local University, and saw that they were not using computer networks and hardware which had been donated to them. During the project phase in Dublin, he developed audio and video tutorials on how to set up and use the hardware and networks they would need, and sent these tutorials to the University in Malawi. O'Leary expects next year's students to follow up on these projects, upgrade any software or systems that need it, and check that these meet the users' needs (O'Leary 2011b).

The students' responses to the project were overwhelmingly positive, including learning about the resourcefulness of the Malawians in the face of lack of equipment and financial constraints: 'If we had to go into our own classes at DIT and bring all our own tables and chairs, or fix all our own broken computers, we wouldn't know what to do' said Marc

Murray (Lillington 2011). Jean Finlay's learning focused on tackling new challenges and 'finding you could solve problems' (ibid).

Clearly these students developed a range and depth of skills to deal with an uncertain present in Malawi, which enhance their ability to deal with an uncertain employment future at home after they graduate. With CVs bursting with experience and initiative, and confidence in their own problem-solving, social and technical abilities, they epitomise Dewey's vision of an experiential education situated in its social context, with a vision of social justice.

Key considerations in starting a CBL project

To start such a project, we advise lecturers to consider the modules that they already teach. Ideally the module should have learning outcomes including professional skills development, and a continuous assessment component, but these are not essential.

The following six key considerations can assist lecturers in getting started:

- What are the module learning outcomes – do they need to be adapted (e.g. at the next programme review), or can CBL be used in keeping with the existing learning outcomes?
- What kind of community partner could they work with, and on what kind of work? What outcomes might they want from the project which students could reasonably deliver?
- How might students actually do the community-based learning? The process of thinking about structuring the module helps to ensure that the project idea is realistic and achievable.
- What additional skills will students need – e.g. group work, reflective writing, wiki training? How can lecturers and/or other staff members facilitate students in developing these skills?
- How will the module be assessed? The learning outcomes of the module are paramount.
- How will the module be evaluated?[6].

The project planning stage begins a process of relationship-building and mutual learning between lecturers and community partners. Both should introduce each other to their work and their goals, followed by a collaborative brainstorm of ideas for projects that might sit in the overlaps between both their goals. These broad ideas can be narrowed to a realistic small-scale start-up project, which can be built on over the coming years if necessary. Both sides should manage expectations at this stage –what students are likely to deliver, including the likely standard of work, and the time and resources the community partner can commit to the project.

[6] A range of tools and questionnaires for evaluation can be found on our website (www.communitylinks.ie/slwc)

Once the project starts, the relationship between lecturer and community partner is crucial in ensuring its success. Regular open communication is essential, along with collaborative review and evaluation of the project as it progresses, including whether goals need to be revised. Following the handover of results to the community partner, and feedback to students, together they can assess the strengths and weaknesses of the project, and of their collaboration, and jointly plan for the year ahead.

Conclusion

Relatively small-scale CBL projects can reap considerable rewards for students and community partners. Students learn about themselves as learners, as future professionals, and as citizens, through reflection on course-based, real-life projects where they actively engage with underserved community groups. They can develop a wide range of professional skills, from problem-solving to group work and communication skills, as well as becoming autonomous learners and building their confidence in their ability to cope with new and challenging situations. Larger, more complex CBL projects, involving a number of community partners and possibly international cooperation, can be rich alternatives to industrial work placement, and add intercultural experience to students' learning. In light of the changing economic and social landscape, this experiential approach to learning and teaching offers students an invaluable preparation for life beyond college.

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About the Author

Dr Catherine Bates has been the co-ordinator for Students Learning with Communities since September 2008. She studied design for her degree and master's, and did her PhD in sociology. She lectured in design theory and history for ten years. In 2006 she moved to the community sector, where she ran a second-chance education programme for women drug users in rehabilitation for two years, before taking up her current post in DIT.