Student-led Community Engagement Projects as an Alternative to Traditional Field Placements

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Abstract

This paper presents an experiential learning project designed to replace a traditional field placement experience for students in the Correctional Services program[i] at MacEwan University. Community Engagement Projects (CEP) were self-directed initiatives developed and implemented by students, undertaken in partnership with community organizations. As faculty members, we supported the projects through scaffolded assessments and weekly discussion seminars. Details of the CEP will be presented along with student and faculty reflections on the experience. Finally, we will explore options for future iterations of the project.

Keywords: autonomy, student-led projects, community engagement

Context and Rationale

Students in their final semester[ii] of the Correctional Services program traditionally undertake a second field placement, where they engage twice per week in field-based learning experiences under the supervision of faculty and experienced professional mentors. In January 2022, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, most community partners suspended field placements. Recognizing a need for an alternative that incorporated experiential learning and a real-world context, we designed the Community Engagement Project (CEP).

Field placements and CEPs are both characterized by learning embedded in professional practice. They both involve experiential learning where "the context is real-world, the learning has relevance outside the classroom and the outcome of the learning is no longer just academic" (Carter, 2021, p. 15). Additionally, experiential learning opportunities

increase academic and future career success (Coker & Porter, 2015; Bradberry & De Maio, 2019; Walker, 2019), while providing experiences that are novel and outside the everyday interactions of students. These experiences can also foster learning through reflection. In this case-study, experiential learning theory is applied to frame our explanation and analysis of the CEP.

The experiential learning cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; 2013) describes the way in which students move between action/reflection and experience/abstraction. It characterizes learning as a "recursive cycle" of *concrete experience* (experiencing), *reflective observation* (reflecting), *abstract conceptualization* (thinking), and *active experimentation* (acting). Students and teachers participate in this cycle to engage and interact in the learning process. That is, each stage is experienced multiple times as students progress through a project. Kolb and Kolb (2017) also identify four roles that instructors take to support learners throughout experiential learning: *coach*, *facilitator*, *subject expert*, and *evaluator*.

Kolb and Kolb (2017) have criticized the way that experiential learning activities tend to be implemented in higher education – activities fail to account for the full learning cycle. That is, students engage with only part of the learning cycle; for example, experiencing, reflecting, and thinking, but not acting. In so doing, students encounter and think about an experience, but never "bring change and improvement to the conditions they encounter" (Kolb & Kolb, 2017, p. 14). While it does not seem to be a requirement that students improve society through their experiences, Kolb and Kolb advocate for students to do more than experience something "in-context", and more than thoughtfully reflect on social reality. In order to complete the experiential learning cycle, students must actively experiment in their in-context experience. In this way, the CEP explicitly provided students with an opportunity to integrate academic coursework and attempt to respond to practical gaps or issues they identified with real actions and meaningful interventions.
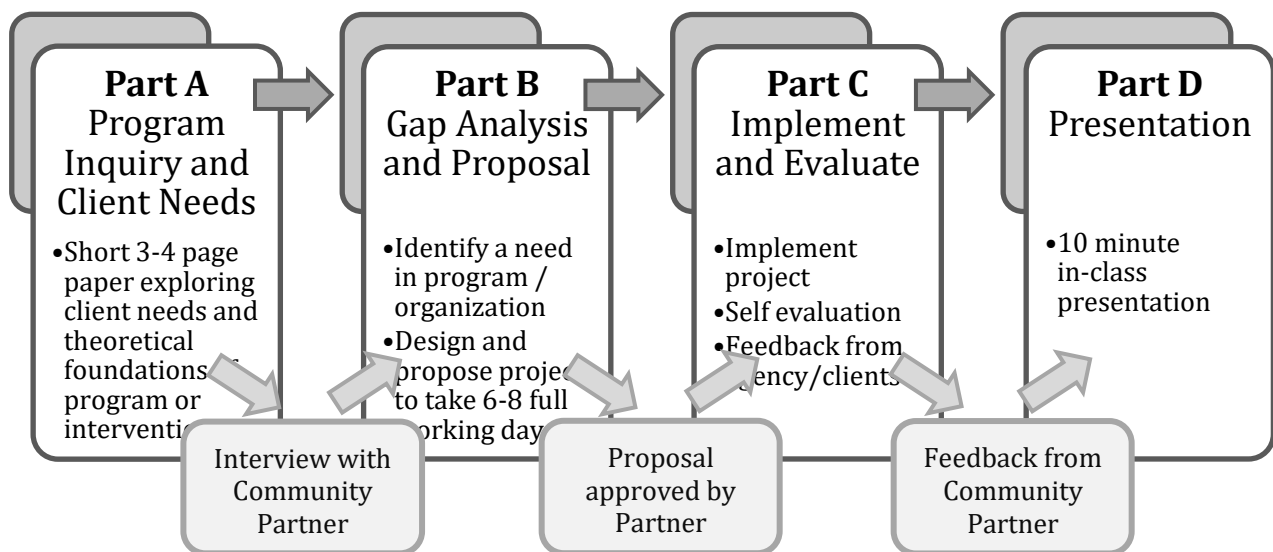
Description of Project

The CEP replaced the previous traditional field placement course, equivalent to 250 hours of field-based learning over the course of one academic term. We were challenged to provide a revised field-based learning opportunity for students that simultaneously respected the community partners' pandemic restrictions and maintained the integrity of the learning outcomes. The CEP met both goals while being an innovative project that required initiative and commitment from students.

The CEP consisted of four parts: (A) program inquiry and client needs; (B) gap analysis and proposal; (C) implementation and evaluation; and (D) presentation (Figure 1). This design provided the pedagogic framework for student learning, while community partners provided context and faculty provided mentoring and accountability.

The CEP incorporated a variety of high impact practices in higher education, namely: active and collaborative learning, service learning, and capstone experience (Kuh, 2008). High impact practices have been demonstrated to have positive impacts on student learning and development (Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015), and engagement (Kuh, 2008).

Figure 1: Overview of Community Engagement Project

Part A Program Inquiry and Client Needs	Part B Gap Analysis and Proposal	Part C Implement and Evaluate	Part D Presentation
•Short 3-4 page paper exploring client needs and theoretical foundations program or intervention	•Identify a need in program / organization •Design and propose project to take 6-8 full working days	•Implement project •Self evaluation •Feedback from agency/clients	•10 minute in-class presentation

Interview with Community Partner

Proposal approved by Partner

Feedback from Community Partner

(adapted from Patrie, 2022)

Part A was a hybrid research paper involving both academic research and community-level information, and, on occasion, interviews involving community organizations (depending on the timing of the interview). Each student explored a program or intervention from their community that interested them, identifying the dominant client populations served, the needs of the clients, and including theoretical foundations of the program or intervention. Interviews with community partners occurred between Part A and B, leading to students who conducted the interviews earlier to include some interview information in Part A. In Part B, these interviews informed students' gap analysis of the program or intervention, culminating with a basic logic model to propose how they could address the identified gap. The proposal, including the implementation timeline, was approved by the community partner and faculty member. In Part C, students implemented and evaluated their proposed project. Implementation occurred over a one-month period, for the equivalent of six full days or 48 hours, and students evaluated their project through self-evaluation and feedback from agency contacts. Finally, in Part D, each student presented to their class as a way to disseminate their learning.

With regards to classroom assessment, we assessed all four parts of the CEP. Ongoing assessment supported the scaffolding of the project, and provided opportunity for formal and informal feedback, support and intervention throughout. Final grades were comprised as follows: Part A (20%), Part B (20%), Part C (40%), and Part D (20%).

Successful completion of the CEP relied on student interest, autonomy, and initiative, all characteristics contributing to the development of an engaged learner. Each student identified and researched a client group and area of need about which they were passionate. Faculty provided a mix of direct introductions and mentoring for students to contact organizations independently. Approximately three-quarters of students were successful at connecting with the agency they selected. We arranged three group interviews with alternate community partners for the remaining one-quarter of students to attend. Both student- and faculty-initiated interviews subsequently informed the rest of their projects. Students used these professional contacts to complete their gap analysis,

and in many cases, the contacts became project supervisors. Overall, students partnered with a range of community and institutional agencies that aligned with their varied interests (see examples below).

This project also afforded students the opportunity to give back to the community amidst stresses created by a world pandemic. Students designed their own projects, enabling them to select the methods of engagement with which they were comfortable given the changing state of the pandemic. Over half of the students completed their projects with some component of face-to-face engagement fully virtually, while the rest worked in a fully virtual format. A co-requisite for the CEP was a weekly seminar in which students shared their struggles, triumphs, fears, and accomplishments as they progressed. As pandemic restrictions changed throughout the term, the seminar started online and transitioned to face-to-face. Seminar provided students with a place to problem-solve, seek emotional support, and celebrate successes. It also provided an opportunity to discuss progress, encourage accountability around timelines, and include debrief observations they had made. Over time students took ownership of the seminar, providing peer support and community to each other while they completed their projects. The weekly seminar was crucial to creating a sense of community and belonging for the group, contributing to overall student engagement (Linton et al., 2020).

Throughout each part of the CEP, students engaged in all phases of Kolb's learning cycle. *Concrete experiences* included conducting research and gathering information from their communities regarding current programs and organizations (Part A), interviewing representatives from community partners (Part B), designing and implementing their proposal (Part C), and seeking outside feedback on their project (Part D). *Reflective observation* was encouraged, and made explicit during seminar sessions, as well as through written assignments and ongoing faculty-student communication. The project required students to integrate theoretical and skill-based learnings with their projects: in each part students drew on academic and practical knowledge, and explicitly articulated this in the research paper, proposal and final reflection. This thinking about, or *abstract conceptualization* of, what the projects accomplished ensured that projects remained grounded in a clear purpose with a supporting theory. Finally, students engaged in *active*

experimentation: modifying their projects in response to feedback from faculty or community partners, responding to personal insights regarding their own work habits and styles, and adjusting their approach to clients, work, or project goals as needed. Certain elements of Kolb's learning cycle were easier and others more difficult for students, based on their experiences and abilities. Our roles as faculty members were critical in supporting students, recognizing and building upon their strengths.

Examples of Student Projects

The range of organizations with which students engaged was consistent with traditional field placement opportunities: a variety of nonprofit organizations and correctional institutions and community-based programs. While most of the community partners had previously hosted field placement students, five community partners were new to the correctional services program. Depending on student interest and comfort level during the pandemic, project proposals fell into two broad categories: direct client engagement and resource development.

Many of the projects that incorporated direct client engagement included planning and facilitating workshops or programs. Students designed targeted programs and workshops such as journaling for incarcerated women, physical fitness for male residents struggling with addictions, and goal planning for incarcerated youth. Additionally, some students participated in street outreach for the homeless population, fundraising and distributing items, or creating promotional videos.

Resource development projects were equally diverse and focused on meeting the needs of the partners, without direct contact. Students developed resources that would support clients, staff, or any population experiencing the identified need. For example, students created lists of Indigenous supports for youth, low-income cookbooks, redesigned intake forms, client surveys, and mental health brochures for staff or clients.

Reflections

Student Reflections

In this section, student reflections were taken from seminar discussions, one-on-one conversations, written project evaluations, and a university-published media story highlighting the students' accomplishments (Campus Life, 2022). We provided all students an opportunity to opt-out of having their reflections or projects referred to in this case-study. We have also generalized comments so individual students and community agencies remain confidential. Where we included specific quotes, direct permission was obtained. Overall, it was reported that the CEP fostered student agency, empowering them to identify subject-specific issues and client populations that held particular interest to them. Students were also challenged to initiate professional contacts, analyze established agencies for gaps in service, and design new initiatives to engage with clients in the field of corrections. In one student's words, "I put a lot of hard work into this project which ended up paying off as it was the highlight of my university stay."

Students commented on the fields and client populations with whom they engaged. They were surprised to see they could make a real impact in their community. Those who had direct engagement with client populations found the experience more rewarding as their assumptions and preconceived notions were challenged. At times, students made personal connections to these realizations:

> *Knowing what it's like to be a member of a minority group and not have a voice, I understand what it's like to be overlooked. I've learned to get out of my comfort zone and challenge myself to make a difference in the lives of people who are marginalized. Furthermore, I learned that I am capable of initiating something that would have a great impact on the community as well as making a significant difference in the lives of young offenders.*

Students encountered common issues in the nonprofit sector: underfunding, lack of training, and lack of staff. Having studied current practices in their fields, students saw how practical limitations, intensified by the pandemic, impacted the extent to which organizations were able to implement best practices. Initially these limitations led to some

students feeling paralyzed by choice and scope. They saw how much work there was to do, how much there was to address, and how complex the issues were. In the words of one student: "I will admit that at first it all sounded quite overwhelming and I was not sure about what the outcome would be. Although… it turned out to be a valuable experience."

Students realized their capacity as young professionals on the cusp of graduation. The project empowered students to shape their own educational experiences, which increased students' overall engagement in their project. This was evidenced in student reflections, for example: "I liked that this project was self-directed and we were able to pick the [organization] we wanted to work with and also have a lot of say in what was done during the implementation portion. It [gave us] the opportunity to explore [our] own emerging professional interests." They showed initiative, perseverance, courage, and determination as they navigated obstacles and sought to design and implement innovative solutions for established organizations. Ultimately, they accomplished their projects.

Many students spoke positively about how the CEP pushed them outside of their comfort zone. While initially students seemed reticent and overwhelmed with starting their projects, all students identified an immense sense of accomplishment upon project completion. Students characterized the experience as a success, even when their projects were not fully realized in the way they imagined. Students noted that they learned to overcome barriers, adjusting their approach, plans, or even entire proposals in response to setbacks. Many students shared that they developed confidence in their abilities, tailored time management skills to work for them, and felt pride in what they accomplished.

These learnings, about themselves as well as their chosen field and future careers, were amplified and encouraged through seminar discussions and other opportunities for reflection, which is a crucial part of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. In each part of the CEP, students were given formative feedback to encourage them to think deeply about their project, and their role in it, in new ways. Final reflective exercises helped to concretize their personal and professional learnings. Overall, a number of students

identified the CEP as the highlight of their university experience. In the final words of one student: "You made my last semester a meaningful and important one."

Instructor Reflections

The CEP created a unique window for students to explore field-based learning contexts with a client population of interest, where students had the autonomy to define and develop their own projects. The format provided a real-world opportunity for them to bridge course learning with an impactful community project. As described above, students talked about feeling empowered to shape their own educational experiences. The CEP provided an opportunity for learning similar to a capstone project, since students drew on skills, knowledge, and experiences from previous courses to complete a self-directed project. Through the different parts of the CEP, students were able to apply academic knowledge, employ critical thinking, and make use of field-specific skills to explore and creatively address real-world problems. Many students identified areas in which they were passionate to practice, and built professional connections that ultimately led to offers of employment.

We worked with the students to ensure that they had the resources and support necessary to complete their projects. The weekly seminar provided initial space for this support to occur; however, we continued to meet with students and discuss the CEP outside the classroom. Our role was critical in supporting students through their learning processes, and through the experiential learning cycle, to recognize their strengths and support their growth.

Upon reflection, we found ourselves taking up each instructor role related to the experiential learning cycle at different times throughout the term as identified earlier. Initially, we were *coaches:* talking students through the steps of making contact, identifying a gap, and proposing a response plan. We were also *facilitators*: expediating connection to community, encouraging discussion and problem solving between students during seminar, and helping students adjust their initial proposals as they encountered roadblocks. As *subject experts*, we leveraged our own community connections to help

students find agencies and supported students with our academic and practical expertise. Finally, we were *evaluators*, ultimately assigning grades to each part of the project, but also assessing project viability, identifying issues to anticipate, and encouraging students to think about potential future expansions.

One significant shift from traditional field placements was the role that we played in the CEP. While traditional field placement faculty supervisors are focused on arms-length monitoring and assessment, in the CEP we took on a mentoring role. In field placements, students are mentored by their agency supervisor, and typically work directly with that person in a position with a defined role. In the CEP, students were more self-directed and defined their role as they created and implemented a project. Having both taught traditional field placement courses in the past, we noticed an increased workload in terms of supporting and mentoring students. In a traditional field placement this work is lessened by the constant presence of a field placement agency supervisor under whom the student works constantly, and there is less emphasis on student choice and autonomy. In contrast, in the CEP, it was crucial to maintain numerous lines of contact with students, check-in regularly, and offer guidance or advice to support them to overcome challenges and achieve their goals.

Overall, the wide range of student projects created an exciting dynamic, with many opportunities for learning and development. The focus of learning in traditional field placements is often on fitting in with the established systems; the CEP provided students with the opportunity to go beyond conformity and engage in critical thinking, program development, and innovative engagement. They were able to take real, measurable actions in response to the challenges they learn in coursework and observed in the community. While students did acquire field-based skills, they were not limited to pre-existing roles and responsibilities normally defined by organizations and institutions. The CEPs required students to show initiative, overcome challenges, develop new competencies, and engage ethically in pre-professional practice. They also experienced profound personal growth and learning. Therefore, while we would make minor adjustments to the project to support the development of students' agency and self-direction from the start, we see the project as a success.

Concluding Remarks and Future Plans

Specific to our context, we would make some adjustments to the CEP in future iterations. First, we would expand the timeframe to two terms, which would alleviate time pressures for students to identify and contact community partners. The need to identify partners led to near immediate faculty intervention as we sought contacts for students. Conducting the project over two terms would permit students more opportunity to develop agency, take on larger projects, and learn through trial and error. This would also decrease stress on community partners to meet tight timelines, creating more opportunity for community development of the proposal. Second, we would adjust Part A: Program Inquiry and Client Needs aspect paper (see Figure 1), to focus primarily on researching a client population and their presenting needs, and then having students identify potential community partners who work with these populations. Students would then proceed to Part B: Gap Analysis and Proposal, where they would initiate communication with agencies in search of a partnership. The initial intent was for students to begin exploring programs and services in their communities; however, the overlap with Part B (gap analysis and proposal) led to confusion for many students. Finally, the CEP could also be implemented with distance learning students in the program, as an effective option to explore field-based learning opportunities in their community, as it provides them with more opportunities for real-world experiences and aligns more closely to field-related learning outcomes.

Student agency and autonomy

The CEP relied heavily on student agency and autonomy, especially in earlier parts of the project when students were attempting to identify community partners. This worked well for students who already had some experience and connections in the community; however, others initially struggled. Student autonomy represents a marked shift in their student experience, from following instructions to creating self-directed experiences. Since many students reported being overwhelmed, additional scaffolding throughout this shift would have been helpful. Additional support to develop student agency might also

have lessened instructor workload with respect to finding community partner matches. In the future, a resource list of potential CEP partners could be useful. More broadly, the project is easily adaptable to other practice-based and professional fields of study, especially those in human services. The project could be integrated into existing coursework as community service learning, independent study options, or capstone projects. Since traditional field placements are often more restrictive with regards to student agency, some students noted that completing the CEP immediately after their traditional placement provided them with the opportunity to address issues they had observed in field placement. In this way, they saw the CEP as the culmination of their program and an extension of their emerging professional identities.

The CEP enabled the maintenance and development of relationships with community partners through the pandemic, encouraged students to give back to their communities, and facilitated professional networking. While these are worthwhile outcomes in themselves, they were made more salient since most post-secondary students in Canada were restricted to online learning during this time. The design of the CEP afforded an empowering and collaborative approach to increasing student engagement in field-based learning. Its open-ended format could easily be adapted to student interests, community resources, and societal constraints. While the impetus of the CEP was a lack of field placement opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic, we believe that it was a successful project that holds promise for future experiential learning opportunities more broadly.

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[i] The Correctional Services program prepares people for careers in the criminal justice system, such as probation, parole, rehabilitation and reintegration support, restorative justice, security, and risk assessment

[ii] The Correctional Services program is a 2-year diploma program. Students completed this project in the second term of their second year. In the term immediately preceding, they completed either a traditional field placement or an extensive research paper. The program equips graduates to contribute to community safety and promote positive growth in the individuals they support and supervise. The criminal justice field is diverse, with many opportunities to work in prevention and intervention with youth and adults in all areas of the Canadian criminal justice system, both in the community and in institutions.