

INCORPORATING COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN GRADUATE EDUCATION: A WORKSHOP AND PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Iffat Naeem* & Fabiola E. Aparicio-Ting

University of Calgary

Experiential learning (EL) has become essential for graduate students to meet the demanding nature of professional environments, equipping them with skills in leadership, problem solving, and civic consciousness. Community based learning (CBL), as an identified EL strategy, involves a collaborative learning model emphasizing group membership and community engagement. CBL not only enhances graduate skills, but also places graduate student research within a larger social context and encourages deeper understanding within their discipline. This paper aims to discuss a 90-minute workshop that focused on a graduate student experience with CBL. The paper also presents a discussion on using positionality and mindful inquiry methods to seek EL activities and what barriers are presented for their incorporation into graduate curricula, in the form of a working framework. The workshop allowed participants to not only reflect on their positionalities but facilitated discussion on how positionality can be used to guide mindful inquiry in seeking CBL activities. Further, the participants identified multiple contextual and administrative factors that can act as barriers to integration of CBL into graduate curricula. As EL becomes an important mandate for postsecondary institutions to incorporate into student learning, this paper provides a valuable graduate student perspective that can add insight into the practicality of applying CBL in graduate education.

Key words: Experiential learning, community-based learning, graduate education, positionality, mindful inquiry.

Provincial and national calls-to-action have called for a re-imagining of higher education to align with the evolving economical demands of current society, lead by multi-sector organizations such as the Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada) and the Business/Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) (McRae, Pretti, & Church, n.d). Experiential learning (EL) has become an identified strategy to prepare students to meet these demands with outcomes in student engagement, heightened career development, and enhanced civic consciousness (Braun, Kaipainen, & Usman, 2018). Stemming from Experiential Learning Theory, EL involves active engagement through constant interaction between the learner and environment. EL is often identified as “real world” experience, where learning activities directly engage the learner in the phenomena being studied, followed by a reflective cycle to advance learning (Lewis & Williams, 1994). This hands-on learning approach can take on many forms: service learning, applied learning in the discipline, co-operative educations, internships, study abroad, and experimental activities (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001). Although there has been a

*Corresponding author – iffat.naeem1@ucalgary.ca

strong emphasis on EL at the undergraduate level, graduate (masters and doctorate) programs have been slower to incorporate them into their curricula (Case, 2014).

Community based learning (CBL), as a form of EL, is a process of collective and collaborative learning focusing on the role of group membership or community participation. Ideally, CBL should promote a deeper understanding of one's discipline through connection with public agencies and community organizations that are relevant to learning outcomes (Fischer, Rohde, and Wulf, 2007). CBL emphasizes the need to not only produce graduate students that have sound research and practical skills within their respective fields, but also produce students who are knowledgeable about their research community, and who hold an ethic of service or social responsibility relevant to their particular discipline. In the context of CBL, higher education should prepare graduates to gain firsthand knowledge of people and communities, introducing them to complexities of professional life and nuances of placing their profession into the larger social context (Beckman & Brandenberger, 2009). Through CBL, programs can emphasize citizenship, employability, resilience, problem solving, self- motivation, and gaining self-efficacy as leaders (Mitchell & Poutiatine, 2001). Inherently relevant to the success of CBL curricula is the student perspective. Therefore, it is important to understand the graduate perspective in seeking, incorporating, and learning from meaningful CBL activities within their graduate curricula.

Workshop Aims

The purpose of this 90-minute workshop was to focus on how meaningful CBL activities can be identified, as per the perspective of a current graduate who co-led the session, and to introduce a working framework for thinking about the process of integrating CBL opportunities into graduate studies. This paper will summarize the content of the workshop, which integrated the presenting graduate student's experience with CBL with a proposed framework for integrating CBL opportunities in graduate studies. Workshop attendees were introduced to the student's experience, which was followed by a discussion of each element of the framework with practical examples. We incorporate support from the scholarly literature to further contextualize the workshop discussions.

INTEGRATING CBL INTO GRADUATE EDUCATION: A WORKING FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 shows a working framework proposed by the authors that synthesizes the process for graduate student engagement in CBL as an iterative cycle focused on academic and personal growth. This framework was developed based on the presenting student's experience with integrating CBL into her graduate training, as described below. We propose that this framework applies to the integration of any EL activity into a graduate program. This cycle begins with reflection on positionality.

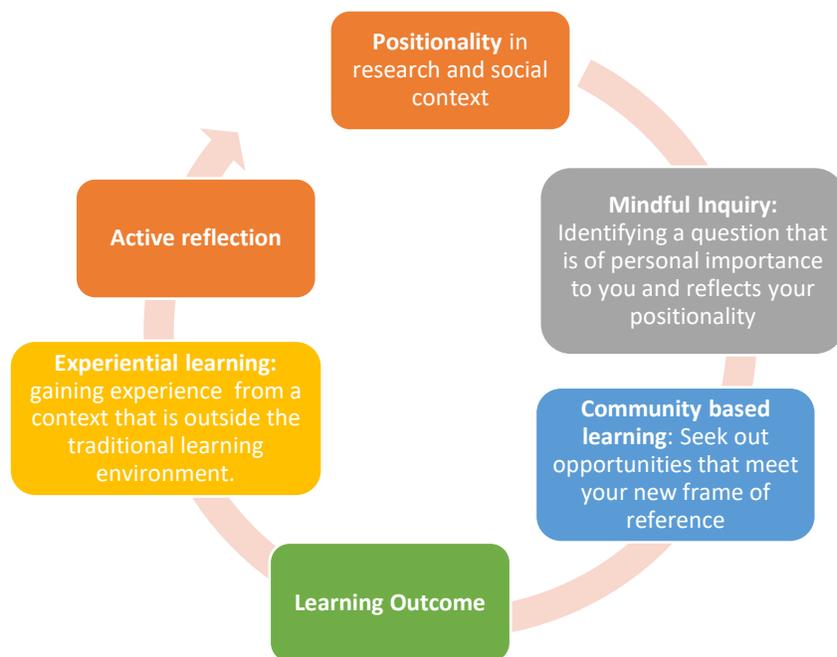


Figure 1. Proposed framework for guiding community-based Learning for graduate students.

Reflection on Positionality

To define what experiences would be most valuable to one’s training and to make explicit one’s long term career goals, it is important for graduate students to reflect on their positionality and how it can shape their future aspirations. The workshop was led by a graduate student in the department of Community Health Sciences pursuing a specialization in population and public health, with the support from a faculty member from the same department. The graduate student outlined her experience with two self-identified CBL experiences: 1) an internship at Alberta Health Services (AHS) focusing on the social determinants of disease (e.g. income, education); and 2) volunteering with Calgary Immigrant Women’s Association (CIWA) facilitating a class for newcomers in practicing conversational English. These experiences were sought out at a time when the graduate student was reflecting on the attributes and skills that she hoped to gain through her graduate training, including the application of health science knowledge, practical research skills, and working within interdisciplinary and community environments. To begin the search for CBL opportunities that would best align with the student’s learning needs, the student purposefully reflected on her positionality. Positionality originates from feminist theory and social psychology and attempts to critique the essential assumption of subjectivity and a more deterministic view of social participation (Ahern, 1999). Positionality posits that individuals occupy multiple identities, fluid and dialogical in nature, contextually situated, and continuously amended and reproduced. The positions that we make meaning of and engage with the world are informed by our identities and lived experiences (Acevedo et al., 2015). A student’s positionalities and identity can also vary across context and inform, as well as be informed, by the individual’s positions in the learning environment. Through this reflection, the student connected her self-identity to the type of researcher that she aspired to be – one focused on health inequities and immigrant populations.

The workshop emphasised that positionality can be self-directed, and strategically applied to pedagogical practice to result in transformative learning. Attendees were given an opportunity to reflect and on their own positionalities as researchers, working and interacting outside of the academic environment. To guide this reflection, a series of question were asked: 1) Who are you; 2) How are your personal characteristics sources of power and privilege; 3) What is your connection to those you will interact with; 4) Do you share any commonalities identities, or experiences? Attendees took 10 minutes to reflect and share their positionalities as graduate students, administrators, and instructors.

As an example, the presenting graduate student shared her positionality as a South Asian, first-generation immigrant who believes in social justice and health equity. She was drawn to seek volunteer opportunities in CIWA because she also came from an immigrant family and her research in within ethnic populations of Alberta. She felt that working within this community was essential to her understanding of conducting ethnicity research. Further, as a trainee, she felt she needed to gain the research skills necessary for her to be a leader in her field, motivating her to seek an internship with AHS. Identifying the multiple roles that she inhabits (i.e. a trainee, a woman, a minority, and an immigrant) and how they overlap and influence what she wants from her degree, was instrumental in her seeking specific CBL opportunities. In this case, positionality was a powerful tool to drive the learning in a graduate degree.

Interestingly, a program coordinator noted that acknowledging positionality can also help supervisors, instructors, and coordinators to guide graduate students seeking CBL opportunities outside of the formal curricula. Indeed, Mitchell and Poutiatine (2001) have noted that universities as a whole need to reposition themselves to acknowledge the importance of student CBL into graduate training that has been criticized in being too heavily research oriented, and lacking opportunities to connect students with real-world examples and experiences, which adds to the achievement of important graduate attributes.

Moving Towards Mindful Inquiry

Once students have reflected on their positionality, they are ready to engage in mindful inquiry (MI) to help identify experiences that align with aspects of personal interests, career aspirations, and skills the student wishes to develop during their graduate training. Specifically, MI is learner-centered approach that emphasizes reflective practices including brainstorming and conducting challenging conversation with the self to develop fresh insights and creative sparks (Webster-Wright, 2012). MI is a flexible approach to asking personally important questions that can be complex, multilayered, and dynamic (Nagata, 2003). MI can be an effective approach for graduate students to mindfully reflect on how their social positioning shapes their interests and can be integrated to enhance their learning within their context (Nagata, 2006).

The presenting graduate student used MI to help align her career aspirations and learning needs with the types of CBL activities to pursue. For example, working with CIWA offered experience in cultural competency and leadership, and her position at AHS provided guidance on how to handle short term applied projects and enhanced her competency as a field researcher.

Workshop participants participated in a *Dotmocracy* exercise at the beginning of the workshop, where they placed a colored dot on a scale of agree, neutral, disagree in response to a statement that indicated that MI cannot be learned (Figure 2). The results align with the presenters' emphasis that MI is a consciously applied strategy that can be initiated with reflective positioning, as posited in the working framework (Tobin, 2018).

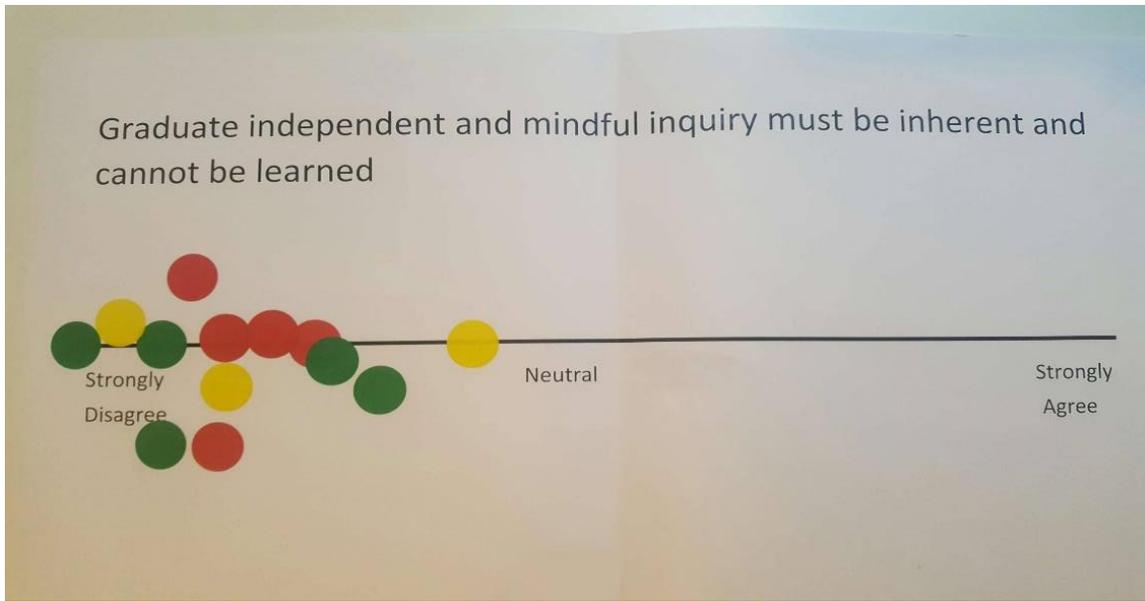


Figure 1. Dotmocracy exercise to understand view on mindful inquiry, conducted before beginning of workshop.

Experiential Learning through CBL

MI should then lead to identifying relevant CBL and EL experiences and defining learning outcomes that fit within the students needs, goals, and skills. These learning outcomes serve as an important point of reflection for students both during and after a CBL or EL experience. As graduate students experience CBL activities, reflection should also facilitate an opportunity to connect theory and practice, and to deepen the student's understanding of their discipline as applied to real world contexts and problems. Reflection is an important aspect of any EL activity and should not be minimized or overlooked as a key component of our working framework. Once the student has completed the CBL and has reflected on the experience, the student can then again reflect on their positionality, with a focus on any personal changes or new understandings, which in turn can shape the seeking of further EL activities (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Barriers to Integrating CBL into Graduate Education

While integrating CBL or other EL activities in graduate training is ideal, there are multiple personal, academic and administrative barriers to doing so. To understand workshop participants' view of including CBL in graduate education, attendees were asked to indicate their agreement with a statement that too many barriers exist for graduate students to incorporate CBL into graduate curriculum and training in a second *Dotmocracy* exercise at the beginning of the workshop (Figure 3). The results showed a varied response. To facilitate further discussion on this, workshop attendees were given 15 minutes to discuss perceived barriers all along the process outlined in the framework, first in a pair-share format, then followed by a whole group discussion.

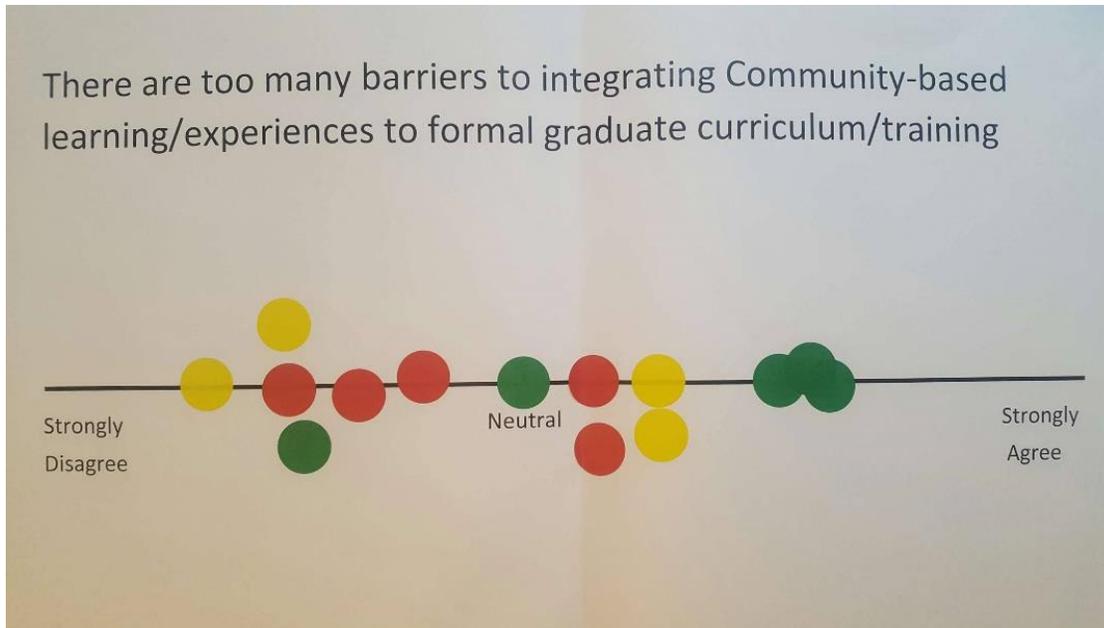


Figure 2. Dotmocracy exercise to understand view on integrating CBL into training, conducted before beginning of workshop.

Mindful inquiry was identified as an existing graduate student activity – participants noted that most graduate students have goals related to competencies that they hoped to develop through their graduate training. Unfortunately, multiple contextual barriers can limit community-based learning opportunities, including academic schedules, institutional procedural barriers, the number of opportunities available, and a lack of a clear entryway into community-based learning. Further, attendees noted barriers to integration of self-defined learning outcomes, including disciplinary canons that exclude certain learning outcomes as “legitimate knowledge”, lack of opportunities to include self-directed learning in the formal graduate curriculum, and administrative barriers (e.g. approval from supervisory committees and program directors, designing courses around CBL experiences).

The workshop discussion highlighted that stages of positioning and mindful inquiry within graduate students was less of a concern than contextual and administrative barriers to incorporating community-based learning into graduate education. This is not surprising as experiential pedagogical approaches have been peripheral to traditional graduate curriculum focused on academic research, that limit what can be considered as legitimate knowledge (Stoecker, 2008)

CONCLUSION

This workshop aimed to bring awareness and discussion about EL in graduate education and proposed positionality and mindful inquiry as the foundation for valuable community-based learning opportunities to enhance graduate training beyond the traditional curriculum. It is becoming essential that graduate students not only acquire skills in effective research and teaching, but also learn to apply disciplinary knowledge in real world settings. This can promote a deeper and complex understanding of curricula and facilitate connections to public agencies and other community groups that may enhance employability after graduation. Further,

as students move away from tradition academic careers, it is becoming important that graduate training be enhanced to develop skills that stakeholders seek (e.g. communication skills, the ability to work in teams, and workplace literacy). An increasing demand for skill flexibility, and capacity to leverage previous knowledge and experiences in new ways, forces graduate students to shift to experienced based learning. This equips students to deal with new, unspecified challenges as they enter their professional careers. Experiential learning, in this case, is no longer in the periphery of graduate training, but a fundamental component of the graduate learning experience (Levkoe, Brail, & Daniere, 2014).

UCalgary is one of 16 institutions in Canada to develop a framework for community engagement (a component of EL) (Braun et al., 2018). Indeed, UCalgary in working towards encouraging all students (graduate and undergraduate) participate in at least one meaningful EL opportunity before they graduate. Therefore, research and scholarship into EL is an important mandate for the universities teaching and learning future. This workshop adds to this inquiry in providing a graduate students perspective and discussion around the practicality of applying CBL in graduate education. Future studies should aim to understand and resolve barriers to successful incorporation of CBL activities to graduate education.

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