Pivot Points: Direct Measures of the Content and Process of Community-based Learning

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Abstract

This research is an initial investigation into the ways community-based learning increase the cognitive skills central to the exercise of the sociological imagination. In addition to identifying a means to reveal that learning had occurred, we looked for evidence that the students were mastering sociological content, especially the concepts and habits of the sociological imagination. Using a grounded theory approach, a student/faculty research team conducted a content analysis of 160 field notes from 34 undergraduate participant-observers enrolled in an academically grounded, field-based sociology course. The analysis revealed patterns of "pivot points" where students' understanding is characterized by a noticeable jump rather than as incremental or gradual change in knowledge acquisition. These pivot points are fundamental, categorical shifts in understanding connecting particular observations to generalized theories or constructs.

Keywords

community-based learning, sociological imagination, critical pedagogy, learning outcomes, student learning

It is widely acknowledged that community-based learning yields valuable outcomes for participating students (Eyler et al. 2001; Eyler and Giles 1999; Warren 2012). However, the cognitive or critical thinking gains derived from this pedagogy are much less understood. Our research was guided by a significant question: Using direct measures, can we identify and characterize cognitive gains made by students engaged in academically grounded, community-based learning? In addition, we looked for evidence that the students were mastering sociological content. In particular, we were interested in discovering whether they were making sense of the critical distinction and interplay between personal issues and the social milieu, an epistemological lens that C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000:8) calls "the essential tool of the sociological imagination."

The broadest goal of this research was to understand what students were learning from academically grounded community-based pedagogy and how that might shape their sociological imaginations. We did this by listening closely to how the students themselves articulated this learning. Guided by a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008), we conducted a content analysis of 160 field notes from 34 students, allowing the notes to reveal patterns of learning, rather than relying on surveys, grades, course evaluations, or other indirect measures. In this way, the faculty-student research team was explicitly responding to calls in the literature for direct measures of the cognitive outcomes of community-based learning (Moore 2013; Steinke and Buresh 2002). We systemized these initial findings into a flexible coding scheme that continued to bring the patterns of learning into sharper focus. As we anticipated, the initial patterns we found suggest directions for future investigation.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Nomenclature

Community-based learning literature is filled with continuing calls for more information about what is learned by this pedagogical approach (Bringle and Clayton 2012; Eyler and Giles 1999; Moore 2013; Rockquemore and Schaffer 2000; Warren 2012). One of the dilemmas throughout the literature is the wide variety of nomenclature. Sometimes different terms reference learning that happens in similar ways or circumstances: situated learning and community-based learning may both refer to students engaged in intentional learning outside the classroom. This learning may be a stand-alone summer internship with minimal academic oversight or reflection or may be 10 hours of observational activity embedded within a course. Beginning in the 1980s with the Wingspread Conference and the launch of the *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*, the term of art became *service-learning*, implying that the prime goal, or at least a goal equal to learning, was service to the community. Since then, many have questioned how to measure both or either of these goals. Additional overlapping labels have been used to differentiate learning that takes place outside the classroom from that which takes place within: experiential, engaged, situated, and/or contextual. Rather than try to analyze a complex Venn diagram of terms, we will use the term *community-based learning* in reference to our research. By this, we mean a learning in which significant field work is guided by and grounded in academic reflection, differentiating this pedagogy from field-based learning that is not academically guided; for instance, many work-based internships and volunteer or co-curricular service activities. The distinction between academic and non-academic community-based learning is important when looking at the issue of cognitive gains or critical thinking, both because these gains are an intentional goal of academic learning (Moore 2013) and because academic reflection activities, such as field notes, provide an opportunity to evaluate such gains.

Critical Thinking as a Student Outcome in Community-based Learning

Especially useful in gaining an overview of the scholarship of the student outcomes of community-based pedagogy is the survey commissioned by Learn and Serve America National Service Learning Clearinghouse. This report provides a summary of key research from 1993 to 2000 on the effects of service-learning on students, faculty, institutions, and community (Eyler et al. 2001). While it is important to note that community-based learning provides benefits to all of the aforementioned constituents, our research focuses on student outcomes. Within this focus on student outcomes, numerous studies have measured growth in multiple dimensions, including: self-understanding, professional skills and habits, commitment to civic engagement, and cultural awareness (Eyler and Giles 1999; Myers-Lipton 1998; Osborne, Hammerich, and Hensley 1998; Parker-Gwin and Mabry 1998; Simons and Cleary 2006).

Persistent questions remain about one particular dimension of student learning: intellectual or cognitive gains. Scholars have repeatedly called for more research into both the content and process in this arena (Eyler 2000; Steinke and Buresh 2002; Whitley 2014). This includes a desire to legitimate the value of community-based learning in the eyes of college and university faculty by demonstrating how community-based pedagogy enhances cognitive gains specific to course content (Eyler and Giles 1999) as well as the desire to measure critical thinking skills more broadly (Astin et al. 2000; Eyler 2000; Moore 2013).

Compounding the problem are the wide range of definitions and descriptions of what is included under the umbrella of critical thinking, also referred to as either cognitive or intellectual gains (Eyler and Giles 1999; Whitley 2014). This may include: the ability to identify and explore problems, appropriately transfer knowledge from one context to another, and awareness of one's own learning processes (Eyler 2000; Moore 2013; Simons and Cleary 2006). Other scholars further expand on this list by including the elimination of dissonance or connections with critical theory (Moore 2013). In other words, the research examines a wide range of possible intellectual outcomes, according to preconceived categories that often overlap. As Eyler (2000:12) says, "We don't have the detailed information that will help design programs that enhance cognitive outcomes. An important task for the next wave of research is to provide this information by designing research programs that clearly articulate intellectual outcomes of service-learning." Our definition combines these approaches and contends that a cognitive gain is a significant increase in quantity, quality, or sophistication in student understanding.

Measurement Strategies and Best Practices

In addition to the lack of clarity about what constitutes cognitive gains, there is also general dissatisfaction with how gains have been measured. Much

of the research relies on indirect measures—in particular, self-reported measures such as pre-and post-surveys, interviews, or course evaluations, which are notoriously unreliable and may be better indications of student satisfaction than learning (Eyler and Giles 1999; Huisman 2010; Markus, Howard, and King 1993).

Other studies have compared the grades of students who participated in courses with a community-based learning component to a control group that did not; however, the results are mixed and the methodology flawed in that the courses were dissimilar in other respects (Steinke and Buresh 2002; Whitley 2014). Grades are often designed to note very particular changes in relation to predetermined content, testing memory, or application, but grades will generally miss student learning that falls outside of expected parameters. As Eyler (2000: 13) points out, "What is needed are measures that allow students to show us, rather than tell us, that they have attained greater understanding, ability to apply their knowledge, problem solving skills and cognitive development." In other words, there is a need for direct measures that capture what students are learning whether or not they are pleased with the learning and whether or not the learning falls within the goals of a particular course. As a result, we have settled on a definition of direct measures as being equivalent to student-generated output.

It is important to note that some researchers have engaged in attempts to directly observe student learning through case study or ethnographic approaches. In particular, David Thornton Moore (2013) illuminates the process of experiential learning through a handful of case studies. Other researchers have done the same, offering detailed descriptions of particular courses and even assignments as well as extensive quotes from student participants (Bach and Weinzimmer 2011; Delano-Oriaran, Penick-Parks, and Fondrie 2015). The limitation in this approach lies in the small sample size and thus the potentially anecdotal nature of the findings, which limits generalizability. Additionally, a modest number of studies examine what and how students learn directly through a content analysis of student reflections; the cognitive mapping exercise undertaken by Rockquemore and Schaffer (2000) serves as an example. Our research resembles these approaches in several respects insomuch as it relies on grounded theory or on using a content analysis of students' written reflections, where the students' own voices serve as the unit of analysis. In addition, our research relies on a particular course and a sample of 34 students taking the course across 22 semesters. The students wrote four to five field notes over the course of an entire semester, which is much larger and much longer than most case study approaches.

Before sharing our findings, we want to acknowledge that the literature contains extensive discussion about how the structure of the course, assignments, and in particular reflective activities shape student outcomes. For this reason, we want to note that our sample draws from a reflection assignment that hews closely to what is generally considered best practice in these regards. While this is still an ongoing conversation in the literature, the research strongly suggests that there are approaches that yield better results than others across the range of outcomes (Eyler et al. 2001). In general, combining community-based work with academic learning adds value particularly in terms of cognitive gain (Moore 2013). We want to note that the Duffy Community Partnerships course, from which our data sample is drawn, meets the best practice criteria according to the literature. These practices include: long-term relationships, regular oversight in the field and classroom negotiated service-learning agreements, instruction in cultural competency, and most importantly, regular reflection (Eyler et al. 2001; Mabry 1998; Marullo, Moayed, and Cooke 2009; Moore 2013; Stoecker and Tryon 2009; Zlotkowski 1999).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

For the past 11 years, Carol Wickersham has served as the coordinator of and instructor for the Duffy Community Partnerships course, an academically rigorous, hands-on, heads-engaged, community-based sociology course. During this time, long-term, stable community partnerships have been established. Each semester, 15 to 19 students are accepted into the program and placed at field sites representing various institutional and demographic sectors in the community (including public sector, business, and not-for-profit organizations). Students engage in 90 hours of work in the field and come together in a weekly seminar that includes significant reading and writing assignments. An essential part of the course is the series of five field notes that students write each semester while reflecting on and analyzing their experiences on site. From the beginning, they responded to an open-ended prompt directing students to reflect on their field experiences through one of three lenses: in a mirror or self-reflection,

through a microscope closely analyzing a particular instance, or through binoculars where they placed their observation in a larger social or political context. Students have complete flexibility over which lens they choose. Wickersham has collected copies of all of these notes, along with permission to use them for research.

The current sample was derived from a subset of field notes collected between fall semester 2004 through spring semester 2014 in the Duffy Community Partnerships course at Beloit College. Over this time, 217 students took the course. Of these students, 153 of them only took one semester of the course, while 64 took two semesters. Given the time and funding available for our project, we decided to start by looking at those students who had taken two semesters. Due to time constraints, we made the decision to exclude their second semester notes from the initial sample. We chose to consider the 34 students who handed in and gave permission to use at least four of their five notes. From this, a data set of 160 notes from 34 students was created.

The names of the students were removed from the sample, and student identification numbers were used to connect demographic information. The intent is to use these data in future research to investigate relationships between demographic characteristics and particular types of outcomes. However, it is helpful to have a demographic outline of the current sample. In it, females make up 88 percent of the total. Sixty-four percent of students in our sample are white. Forty-four percent of the sample receive Beloit College's largest financial aid package based on need, with another 20.5 percent receiving the second largest financial aid package. Students had completed anywhere from zero to five previous sociology courses, with 47 percent having taken either no sociology classes or one sociology class before taking the Duffy.

Procedure

In our analysis of the data, we employed Corbin and Strauss's (2008) grounded theory approach to conduct a content analysis. This approach enabled us to find student learning that we may have not seen had we been asking what students learned based on indirect measures or preconceived ideas of what students learn in community-based settings (Eyler and Giles 1999; Steinke and Buresh 2002; Whitley 2014).

A coding scheme was generated to identify and categorize the content of student learning. We established codes by independently reading notes, with each researcher looking for patterns individually. What we agreed on was to take Richards and Morse's (2007:146) advice about qualitative coding literally and code learning as occurring when a "move" happens. In other words, when a significant shift in understanding occurs, for example, when students change, deepen, broaden, simplify, or complicate what they think, we counted it. The individual readings were then compared and discussed, noting that all three researchers found similar patterns.

While we started having individual readings and discussions, it was decided not to rely solely on intercoder reliability; rather, each of the two student researchers coded one half of the remaining notes, with the faculty researcher reading all of the notes and acting as the final coder, making the final decision about code application. This approach ensures that two researchers read each excerpt and have an opportunity discuss differences when they arise, at the same time acknowledging that it is best to have the faculty member make the final judgment because she will be working with the data set in the future with other students.

Over the course of our research, the codes we identified were focused on particular patterns of movement that we labeled *pivot points*. A pivot point identifies an obvious shift in students' learning. When students articulated that their understanding made a significant move—*deeper, higher, clearer, more nuanced*—then we coded those excerpts as pivot points, further grouping them according to common characteristics. In addition, we analyzed the notes for evidence of sociological learning, and what we found was less referencing of particular facts or theories but more the habit of the sociological imagination, which connects the particular to the more universal or the individual to historical, social, and theoretical constructs. Definitions and examples of pivot points and the sociological imagination will be discussed in greater detail in our findings section.

FINDINGS

The most significant finding was that student learning took place in bursts rather than gradual growth in insight. Borrowing from literary studies, this shift is akin to *anagnorsis* in which a character makes a discovery that produces a change from ignorance to knowledge. We labeled these jumps as *pivot points*. We found 74 pivot points in the 160 notes examined.

Table 1. Distribution of Pivot Points by Code across 160 Field Notes.

Pivot Points	Number of Pivot Points	Percentage of Pivot Points
Metacognition	31	42
Small-to-big/big-to-small	29	39
Good society	14	19
Total	74	100

Table 2. Number of Pivot Points per Student.

Number of Pivot Points	Number of Students
0	5
1	7
2	8
3	6
4	7
5	1

These pivot points fell into three main categories: (1) *metacognition*, (2) *small to big/big to small*, and (3) *insight into the question, "What makes a good society?"* We labeled 31 pivot points as metacognition when the students' insights deepened as they came to sudden awareness about the learning process itself and/or about how their learning is influenced by their role or social identity. The second pivot point, small to big/big to small, occurred when a student made a connection between a particular instance, individual, or organization and a larger theoretical, historical, or social construct. Twenty-nine students had insights of this nature. In the third pivot point, 14 students exhibited movement on the value-laden question, What makes a good society?

Not surprisingly, insights varied significantly from student to student and over the course of the semester. We assume that variations in student background and field sites yield variations in student learning. However, these correlations remain the work of future research. At this point, we looked for patterns that are generalizable across the distribution. Pivot points reoccurred throughout the 160 notes (Table 1), though not uniformly among the 34 students. How pivot points were distributed among students is summarized in Table 2. Surprisingly, 15 percent of students had no pivot points throughout the semester. One direction for future research is to investigate what may influence this distribution.

Metacognition about Learning or Role

Metacognition is defined as awareness and regulation of one's thought process (Fitch, Steinke, and Hudson 2013). We noted that students' metacognition tended to focus on two areas: the learning process itself and/or how their role or status shaped experiences and interpretations of these experiences. These were often interrelated, so we coded them as one category. For instance, Student FF

illustrates how students can become aware of their role and how it affects their understanding of experiences by stating,

> Up until this past week, I had been behind the scenes, constantly organizing, sorting and reorganizing information in order to make my present role an effective one. But now, I am in the forefront, exposed and vulnerable to the pressures of being a manager of thirty volunteers and fifty elementary students. This role is completely new and equally overwhelming to me, but I can already sense that I have learned more about myself and the way people interact with each other than from any other experience I have ever taken part in.

Community-based learning places students in situations where they may become aware of their unconscious assumptions that classrooms are *the* location where learning happens and that professors are *the* source of learning. The field notes reflect students' growing awareness of the possibilities for learning everywhere and from everyone and their own role in shaping that learning. For some, this was a gradual process, but for most, it manifests as an unexpected insight. For instance, we noted that a student might move from naiveté to a more sophisticated understanding or from using simplistic to more complicated paradigms. However, we noted a common pattern in all of these moves was to situate the particular and specific within a more general or abstract framework. Student H demonstrates this point by putting it this way:

> Stoecker and Tryon (and their student researchers) have made an acute discovery regarding short-term service learning students and the challenges they face. In laying them out one by one I feel as if I am more aware of

the situation I've immersed myself in. Understanding the drawbacks both to me and to my supervisors will be helpful when addressing new challenges that will occur. In recognizing the drawbacks it only further illuminates the way my supervisors and I have avoided roadblocks, speeding steadily toward additional education and efficient and more unbiased service learning (Stoecker and Trynon 2009).

In addition to becoming aware of the learning process itself, students also became increasingly conscious about how their role impacted the social dynamics of their site and influenced their own understanding. Many had little or no previous experience in assuming a professional role, so the shift from student to de facto staff caught them off guard. The disequilibrium caused by their new role within the organization helped students become aware of assumptions and habits they had become accustomed to or unconscious of in the familiar role as student. For example, Student F notices the differences in her interactions with parents of the students at her site when she presents her role there differently:

After the discussion, one of the parents said, "Well it was actually nice to talk with you and get to know you." At that moment I realized that it may have been necessary to drop my role as a leader a little bit, because otherwise we might not have been able to share connection for that short while. The parents, having only met me once or twice, did not have the same kind of respect for me as they did for Nicole and so by just having a conversation, I was not imposing myself as the "intern" on them. I felt that it was a more mutual conversation and so we were able to connect I realized that leading this discussion was the safest way to break out of my comfort zone and begin to take on a leadership role.

Often this awareness of a shift in social status was coupled with the students' attempt to discern whether this new role was a good fit for them, especially as they envisioned their future selves. In addition to self-reflection, they often closely observed those with whom they worked, reflecting on status, authority, and power dynamics but also on the nitty-gritty reality of their day-to-day work lives. In many ways, they were using their field experience to try a possible future on for size. For example, noticing that social workers spend a lot of time negotiating with parents in order to get children back in their parental custody, Student H reflects,

Before doing work with [community organization], I was under the impression that being a social worker was the correct path for me. . . . I'm still very interested in working with at-risk youth, especially those in the foster and abuse and neglect systems, but am going to look for different manners in which to approach the same social issue.

Small to Big/Big to Small

Small to big/big to small pivot points reflect student awareness of the connections between particular instances and concepts that are more general. Sociologists will recognize this as one of the fundamental moves of the sociological imagination. According to C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000:8), "Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between 'the personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure.' This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all social science." While the students' articulation in their field notes of the difference between the particular and the general was not confined to the relationships of individuals to structure, it was probably not entirely coincidental that this discovery occurred in a sociology course that explicated this intersection.

The practice students gain in making these connections help them move toward mastery of several of the key learning goals and outcomes articulated by the American Sociological Association in *Liberal Learning and the Sociology Major* (McKinney et al. 2004). Most important for our study was demonstrating understanding of "reciprocal relationships between individuals and society" and "how social interaction and the self influences society and social structure" (McKinney et al. 2004:52). For example, Student K, a student working at a community garden in a housing project, had a pivot point illustrating the connections between individual circumstances and structure while reflecting on the challenges of an event she is helping organize. The student reflects:

The [program] tries to step in, but I question how effective it can be if it is the only

support offered to the kids. I do not think the work I am doing is in vain, but I am certain that it will not completely succeed unless other social change can be realized that represents the cycle of poverty and lack of education.

Similarly, Student M changes her perspective on classical liberalism by connecting the ideas it espouses to the experiences she sees at her site, stating:

Despite the confusion and experiences that have reinforced this notion of helplessness, Lucy seemed optimistic about continuing to apply for jobs. I wonder how people break out of these cycles that seem largely beyond their control, and what role [the social service agency] plays in that locally. Recently in my Sex and Power class . . . we talked about the tenets of liberalism, its downfalls, and how it pertains to feminism. The discussion made me think of my conversation with Lucy. Liberalism values the idea of the individual as an autonomous entity, independent of a social context. While I agree with some of the tenets of liberalism, I don't believe that the kind of autonomous equality it strives for is realistic.

Both instances exemplify student learning that involves the student connecting experiences at their respective sites to theories explored in their coursework, an example of the small to big shift. These two examples are notable in that they occur at two very different sites and that while Student K reflects on sociological theory learned in the Duffy Community Partnerships course, Student M reflects on theory from a different course outside of the discipline of sociology.

Small to big pivots often involve students writing about how a particular interaction they had at their site illustrated a concept that the student had read about in a text. However, common insights also include the student's unmediated perception of individual elements cohering into a pattern. An example of this latter paradigm is that of Student K, who while working with children at a community garden considers what she first thought to be children acting out due to bad behavior. Upon further reflection, the student realizes that the children's behavior is related to difficulty expressing themselves. She suggests that the structure of the class

can either exacerbate this problem or solve it through implementing a structured time for children to communicate their state of mind. Similarly, Student H has an insight into her understanding of organizations that serve children in situations of abuse and neglect, stating that the organization's role is more complex than "providing a child with a bed and three meals a day"; rather, the purpose of her organization is "demonstrating that there are actually people in the world that are truly interested in being involved in a child's life without expecting anything in return, [community organization] volunteers are able to restore some social trust in children."

In addition to the directionality of linking particulars to more universal concepts, many instances in this coding category could also be characterized as making a move from simple to complex understandings or vice versa. In other words, what seemed simple may become more complicated as the student reflects on the dynamics at the field site. For example, Student D, in her work at a food bank, complicates the idea of serving families in need of food assistance as she analyzes the organizational strains put on food banks that share clients:

As beneficial and well-meaning as hunger relief programs are, it becomes easy for toes to be stepped on in the bigger picture. Once a month, the [community organization] hosts a mobile pantry where individuals and families can receive an emergency food supply. . . . It functions like [community organization], just in a more temporary fashion. The conflict this program causes is that people will double-dip on food those days.

On the other hand, the concepts introduced during class may cohere or simplify what seemed like random or disconnected experiences, moving from complexity to a simpler or more unified understanding. For instance, Student D finds that a quote from Robert Coles helps her to make sense of the difficult situation of rationing resources at the food pantry:

The most difficult thing I've been dealing with recently is turning people away. It's something none of we workers are good at or want to do, but it has to be done once we reach the maximum number of people we can

serve in a day. . . . Last week three women walked in at the same time when there was only one number left. . . . The way Esperanza looked at me and said, "So who do you give it to?" really resonated with me. It was a very real moment. A quote from Coles that really embodied how I feel about my work at [the food pantry] is, "To some extent, all those called to social and political activism struggle with that tension between the obvious desire to change a situation and the necessary respect for those who have had to endure hardship and have learned to survive as best they can—and who have a hard-earned skepticism of outsiders, whatever their good intentions" (Coles1993:42).

What Makes a Good Society?

The third category of pivot points echoes the organizing question for the Duffy Community Partnerships course. *What makes a good society?* is a recurring theme in class discussions, so it is not surprising that this topic shows up in many students' field notes. However, this does not mean that students expected their experience on site to answer the question. In fact, students often found themselves caught off guard by issues of social ethics at their site, which caused them to revisit what their assumptions were. For instance, Student V who was interning at a social service nonprofit writes,

> I wonder how community organizers handle the first disappointments in people. I wonder if someone they really counted on let them down, and how they keep going to get more volunteers, to generate more interest, or how much they think of giving up on their cause. . . . After these negative thoughts, I began to wonder where the world would be if everyone just gave in and accepted a planet with a "broken" system.

Similarly, Student Z, who shadowed a social worker, not only connects experiences at her site to the larger question but also her personal experience.

> Some of the questions for me when I left Debbie's home are can these home visits really solve the underlying problem that were linked to being in poverty? How do these different federal and state agencies affect

Debbie's life? What motivates or why is she in this field of work? . . . My feelings when I left Debbie's house were mixed I was not shocked at how she lived because when I was younger my parents struggled to pay the bills and did everything that they could do to make sure me and my sister where fed, clothed, and healthy. . . . So I know that Debbie might seem to outsiders who come from a different world as extreme, but she is only trying to survive. At the same time, I was sad, I was sad that Debbie and others like her had to struggle so hard to be ok and how can our society allow this huge gap between rich and poor that is not freedom to me.

Pivot Points in Summary

It is important to note that sometimes the shifts in learning encompass more than one pivot point. For instance, in the quote by Student Z, she is aware of how her social identity informs her insights at the same time she is linking experience to the question of "What makes a good society?" The insights were often multivalent and richly textured, as one insight shaped and reinforced the other.

In addition to categories of pivot points reinforcing one another, a second pattern began to emerge across sets of notes from the same student. Some students drew repeatedly on one type of pivot point rather than all three. Using the aphorism by Robert M. Pirsig, we characterized this tendency as, "The only Zen you'll find on the mountain tops is the Zen you bring up there with you." In other words, it seemed that students entered the Duffy Community Partnerships course with certain questions or dispositions that they tested and developed through the entire course. This might be a student struggling with a vocational direction or it might be a student newly exposed to sociological ways of thinking who is testing them out. Student KK is a prime example of this, exhibiting four separate but related pivot points that concern the role of education as an institution. She begins her community-based learning with simply making sense of how classrooms function:

> Since actually beginning the reading with the second graders though, I have begun to notice behaviors and attitudes that seem to indicate more than just overwhelming circumstances. I feel I am beginning to recognize a mode of operation in the staff

that allows for daily functioning on the brink of chaos.

Next, she moves on from her realization about how one classroom functions in one school to broadening her observations to consider how schools and education fit into the greater functioning of society:

> Throughout the entire visit I pondered the topic of my literature review, character education, as well as moral education at large. The process of socializing and growing up in this country are overwhelmingly nuanced, and so much about the specific contexts of families and schools dictate the worldviews that individuals develop.

On her visit to a fellow classmate's community-based learning site, a requirement of the Duffy course, Student KK next builds on her understanding of the role of education by considering other means of obtaining an education. The site visit was to an organization that provides tutoring to illiterate adults. Student KK found:

> Speaking to Jessica about the age demographic that visits the Council was valuable as someone who works with children. While Jessica and I do very similar things at our sites, we do them with very different groups. Learning to read as a child is an extremely different process to learning as an adult, and the same is true, of teaching students to read. While I struggle with engaging young minds in a task that is difficult and sometimes without clear rewards, Jessica works with capable adults who are often providing for families and working.

Her final pivot point shifts from broader, society-wide considerations back to localized specific aspects of her site, wrapping it up with a connection to an assigned text by Robert Coles in which he explores motivations for community service:

> I wanted to learn what it takes to be a competent, encouraging, and respected teacher. What I've found though, is that there isn't just a magical formula. The elementary school setting is different to other educational institutions: the standards to which teachers and staff are held to flexes

quite a bit in real life, because so many variables shift in everyday life. Anything but flexibility is crippling to the institution. Not even just that though, the teachers themselves give so much of themselves, in very different ways, and I was surprised as I truly examined that. . . . There are relational dynamics at work here, I feel, and watching my supervisor in particular—I have seen a kind of metal [*sic*] and a kind of dedication to the work that I know I have not yet experienced in my life. These things are heavily directed and impacted by the satisfactions and hazards that Coles discusses (Coles 1993).

It is apparent through Student KK's field notes that she began the class with an interest in education and she took that through her entire experience.

Other students go in with the goal of determining if they want to follow a specific career path. Student H (quoted earlier) works at a site where social workers are present and is considering becoming a social worker himself. It is apparent that these considerations are influencing his pivot points with his first being an insight into what social workers really do in their day-to-day lives and whether or not he would be happy with that reality. In subsequent notes, he begins to discuss the specific impact social workers can have on individual people and the importance of that. In his last set of notes, he has a pivot point regarding the role of social workers and how that role fits into the greater community. Throughout, he focuses on what social workers do and their role in society while simultaneously considering if this is the career path for him.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This study begins to address the call identified in the literature for direct measures of intellectual gains. Encouraged by what we found, we hope to join others in developing a body of knowledge based on such direct measures to inform best practice in community-based pedagogy.

The first and obvious next step would be to code and analyze more of the available data. There are 217 students to date who have taken the Duffy course and a total of 980 available field notes. As more data are transcribed and coded, we will be able to explore the connections between student

demographics and experiences. Another fruitful investigation will be to interrogate how characteristics of field sites and/or particular field supervisors shape the process and content of learning. For instance, why are the pivot points distributed across students and time in the way they are? Not all students have pivot points, neither were they uniformly distributed within a particular student's set of notes. Additional research is also needed to examine the relative or weighted quality of insights. We recognized that not all the insights are equally profound, rich, or detailed; however, this round of research did not attempt to probe the variations in depth. In addition, this sample did not attempt to explore the developmental arc of community-based learning, which a larger set of data will allow us to do.

There are questions about whether these insights are generalizable for academically grounded, community-based learning in general or whether they are particular to this course or to community-based sociology courses. However, while these notes came from a sociology course, only 15 of the 34 students were sociology majors, and many had no previous sociology courses. Another question of generalizability emerges because the students all responded to the same assignment prompt and were encouraged to reflect on their experiences in light of the same core readings. Thus, it would be intriguing to know how strongly this particular assignment description and these texts and the classroom lectures and discussion influence the content of the learning.

DISCUSSION

What we discovered over the course of our exploratory project is that students make meaningful cognitive gains especially in the areas of metacognition and the ability to transfer knowledge between classroom and field contexts. Students' experiences on site, coupled with academic guidance, push them to become aware of how they learn and how their roles influence what they understand. Furthermore, these foundational skills assist students in the acquisition of a sociological imagination as they contend with the question, "What makes a good society?," by exploring the interplay between the particular and structural factors. The pivot points in the students' field notes revealed the moments when their sociological imaginations were kindled.

To us, it is clear that both the uncertainty of the field experience and the tether of classroom guidance encourage student learning. What we observed in students' field notes is the "aha!" of discovery. These findings make a strong case that academically grounded, community-based learning guided by reflection puts students into a position to make significant intellectual gains of a fundamental nature. It is clear that community-based learning provides an opportunity for students to practice critical thinking at the same time as they practice transferring knowledge between the classroom and the field site while becoming conscious of the fact they are drawing on both contexts to create meaning.

When we began the project, we sought to use students' own work to provide some direct measures of how students learn in community-based settings. We believe that we have provided a starting point that demonstrates it is possible to make this kind of connection. We also think we have contributed to the literature by challenging the idea that students learn in a linear progression by showing how irregular pivot points are in student work.

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