Community-Based Learning: A Primer

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Community-based learning: opportunities and challenges

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Introduction
Driven by the need to produce graduates with the skills that are valued by employers (e.g. communication, decision-making, problem-solving, leadership, emotional intelligence and social ethics), academics are constantly planning, designing and refining pedagogical activities that would facilitate the attainment of these skills by students. Community based learning (CBL) is a pedagogical approach that is renowned for its benefits to students’ skills, personal growth and confidence, and citizenship (see Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Essen, Steven-Truss & Thomas, 2005; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001 for a comprehensive list of benefits). A CBL project typically entails students offering a community service (e.g. educational, environmental) while being of benefit to the students’ learning (see McDonnell, Ennis, P. & Shoemaker, 2011; Goggins, 2012; Al-Khasawneh & Hammad, 2015 for examples). More examples of CBL projects in DIT may be found on the Students Learning with Communities webpage (http://www.dit.ie/ace/studentslearningwithcommunities/).

CBL has been highlighted in the Irish National Strategy for Higher Education (Hunt, 2011, p.76) as 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”. Community engagement also forms one of the four missions within our institute, DIT.

Community based learning (CBL) also known in the United States, Australia, Africa and Asia as “Service Learning” (SL) is defined as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs as part of structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (cf. Flecky, 2011, p.2). CBL is deeply rooted in cognitive and developmental psychology,
pragmatic philosophy, and democratic theory (Petkus, 2000). The theory begins with the assumption that experience is the foundation for learning; and various forms of community service are employed as the experiential basis for learning. Here we will highlight the contribution of Kolb (1984) Experiential Learning Model (Petkus, 2000). In his model, Kolb outlines the learning experience as a constantly revisited four-step cycle, where different learning roles are assumed through the cycle. The learning is attained by the student through; concrete experience, followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Figure 1).

The primary objective of this research is to define a roadmap/guideline that would assist academics in successfully incorporating CBL into the modules they teach. To do so we aim to explore successful implementation of CBL in higher education. This will involve examining the components of successful CBL modules, the organisation and logistics entailed, and adequate assessment techniques. We also endeavour to identify some of the barriers (and possible solutions) that hinder the successful implementation of CBL in Irish institutes and elsewhere.

![Figure 1: Kolb’s experiential learning theory (adapted from Petkus (2000))](image-url)
Planning a CBL project
A CBL project requires careful and thorough planning. The conceptualisation and planning stage of a CBL project involves a variety of activities; identifying a community need, establishing the learning objectives of the CBL project, establishing the knowledge and skills necessary for the project and determining resources and activities necessary for the project. Planning also includes developing connections with community resources for the project, establishing the type of project, the number of hours required and the expected outcomes or forms of assessment for evaluating project outcomes and student learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Planning a CBL module is often the most challenging stage, however, civic engagement/community involvement offices within academic institutes (e.g. DIT Students learning with communities) offer great support to staff in finding community partners, development of the project, management and dissemination of its findings. In the Appendices, we have compiled a checklist from various resources to aid academic staff with the planning of a project.

Once a project concept and community partner are chosen, it is essential to decide how the CBL activities will be incorporated in the module, and to modify the module descriptor to reflect these changes. Samples of CBL activity planners and module descriptors may be found in the Appendices of this report.

Implementing and managing a CBL project
We draw on the literature to provide recommendations on how to implement and manage a CBL project. Bringle and Hatcher's (1996) identify four components which must be considered for CBL to be successful: institution, staff, students, and community. We have added industry involvement to this list, given the increased focus on industry-ready graduates following recommendations of the Irish national strategy for higher education (Hunt, 2011, p.75). CBL is an ideal mechanism for attracting industry interest to institute programmes. It also helps to embed industry in the community in which it operates.

Successful implementation of a CBL project relies on the successful management of four aspects (Figure 2). We draw on the literature to provide recommendations on best practice under each of the above-mentioned management aspects:
Student-supervisor interactions

One crucial recommendation for managing student-supervisor interactions is to provide a self-assessment sheet to participating students. The theory underpinning this is Kolb's (1984) model for experiential learning whose fourth component is based on thoughtful interpretation and comparison of experiences. Secondly, Goggins (2012) recommends that the marking sheet which is used by the supervisors should be provided to the participants. The final critical component of this management aspect is the timely marking of the project at its completion.

Monitoring student progress

With regard to monitoring student progress, Helms (2015, p.13) suggests the use of reflection in order to ensure that deep learning results from the experience. Not only that, reflection can also determine if the students have mis-learnt or reinforced an existing prejudice. He points to journals, essays, class presentations, analytic papers, artwork, or any expressive act as a means of capturing reflection. He states that the key to effectiveness is structure and direction (Helms, 2015, p.13). More specifically, positive academic outcomes will result from structuring exercises with specific course related questions. However, an unstructured personal journal or group discussion will also elicit effective disclosure. Goggins (2012) suggests that a grouped
student evaluation survey provides a useful lens on how students are progressing. Student logs either online or through a log book is also a useful form of monitoring.

**HEI-Industry-Community interactions**
The support of industry and the community is the lifeblood of sustainable CBL. Sustainability is underpinned by successful management of the interactions with external CBL stakeholders. It is vital to make industry/community partners aware that the objective of the CBL activity does not just focus on the student’s professional skills but on “the importance of service within the community and lessons of civic responsibility” (cf. Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Developing a detailed structure guidance document for students and community partners (Appendices) is crucial from the outset (Goggins, 2012). Part of this process may involve developing a structured Service Learning Agreement between students and community at the start of a project (Appendices) in order to assist the student and community partner in understanding the learning objectives of the project, clarify the CBL activities in which the students will be involved, and ensure that the student, community partner, and faculty member are aware of their responsibilities in the CBL component of the course.

**Documentation management**
The distributed nature of CBL project gives rise to the need for documentation management, a process that integrates information from different stakeholders. For example, students’ reports should be sent to the community partner soliciting their feedback. In the approach outlined by Shinnammon, Gelmon, and Holland (1999), this feedback could focus on partner’s view on the impact they perceive CBL has had on students; their motivation for participating in CBL programs; their satisfaction with their roles and responsibilities and the levels of community involvement (Appendices). A second source of feedback is the CBL participants. Students’ opinions (and consensus) may be sought to identify weaknesses and strengths of the delivery of the module. If these inputs are properly documented they may be used to feed-forward, and further develop the structure of the community-based project set-up, as well as establishing its value within the university and community.
Assessment

Quality assessment of CBL is important to higher education as it provides a way of interjecting CBL into the national dialogue about the quality of undergraduate education (Steinke & Fitch, 2007). For the purpose of assessment, Ash and Clayton (2004) organised the primary learning objectives into three categories: academic, personal, and civic. Alternatively, Steinke and Fitch (2007) used two categories of learning outcomes; cognitive outcomes (e.g. critical thinking, and intellectual development) and graduate skills (e.g. civic engagement and ethical development). Some of the available assessment tools for these learning outcomes are discussed under the three headings below:

Written assessment

Reflection has always been central to CBL and its benefits in enhancing the quality of learning are well-documented (Eyler et al 2001; Blouin & Perry, 2009). It is essential to use reflection prior to, during, and following CBL experiences. To ensure that students perform critical and meaningful reflections, Ash and Clayton (2004) advocate the use of guided reflection models e.g. DEAL (Ash & Clayton, 2009) which encourages students to deepen their reflections and to examine their experience in light of specified learning objectives for academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic engagement. The successful implementation of guided reflection models in higher education (Lay & McGuire, 2010; Brooks, Harris, & Clayton, 2010) and their reported benefits in engaging students and deepening their learning has contributed to their growing popularity. The use of rubrics for the assessment of reflective writing facilitate an objective assessment scheme (Appendices).

Essay-type tools, using open-ended problems, are used for the assessment of both cognitive and personal skills (Steinke & Fitch, 2007). Examples of these are the Cognitive Level and Quality Writing Assessment tool which includes rubrics for scoring that includes a cognitive level skills scale based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, and the framework developed by Coetzee (2012) which assesses graduate transferable meta-skills and personal attributes and also uses a rigorous assessment rubric for the evaluation of academic and personal skills.

Oral assessment:

Oral presentation (see Goggins, 2012; Chan, 2012; De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2009 for examples), allows assessors to observe students presenting their in-depth knowledge of a topic or learning experience. CBL projects often use individual or group presentation assessment to
judge students’ understanding and presentation skills (Chan, 2012). Further, instant feedback is given to the students on misconceptions or gaps in the knowledge that were evident (Goggins, 2012). The use of assessment rubrics for students’ presentations enhances the evaluation process (see Fennessy, Saunders, & Fenton, 2011; Hayne & McDaniel, 2013). Peer assessment may be used as part of the grading process. It can empower students by allowing them to become more involved in the assessment process and gives them a level of responsibility. Peer-assessment is claimed to enhance learning (Deely, 2015, p.145).

Interviews, is a direct means of assessing students’ learning outcomes allowing assessors to receive immediate reactions and responses (Chan 2012) while allowing students to fully live in the learning experience (Regev, Gause, & Wegmann, 2009).

**Research scales:**
The literature demonstrates a wealth of instruments for the assessment of the cognitive learning outcomes of CBL (e.g. Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004). Examples of these instruments is the Cognitive Learning Scale (Steinke & Fitch, 2003), an ipsative assessment that compares pre-participation and post-participation performance, and the and the Scale of Intellectual Development (cf Steinke & Fitch, 2007). On the other hand, there is a dearth of research scales for the assessment of personal and civic engagement. Examples of these are the Graduate Skills Assessment Test using multiple choice questions (https://www.acer.org/gsa), and the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire (CASQ) tool (Moely, McFarland, Miron, Mercer, & Ilustre (2002)).

**Challenges**
Student perceptions and community engagement plays a valuable part in CBL but presents obstacles. Kruger, Nel, and van Zyl (2015) outline how students’ ability to learn is to a great extent affected by their perception of the specific learning environment in CBL and refers to the way students view, understand and interpret CBL. If students have a negative perception of the learning environment, they will have a negative attitude towards the learning. Therefore it is vital to understand students’ perceptions and take these into consideration in the design of CBL projects. Marzano (1992) outlined that positive attitudes and perceptions may be encouraged by creating a better learning climate, ensuring the quality and quantity of the resources available and gaining individual acceptance of the students.
Another key challenge is the level of community participation in CBL (see Ponder-Brookins et al., 2014). To address this, all community representatives involved and others affected by the study need to be involved from the beginning of a project to ensure correct equitable decision making and power sharing among partners. Another challenge was the management of outputs so as to collaboratively disseminate the results among all partners that supported all participants involved.

In a study by Kue, Thorburn, and Keon (2015), challenges were presented when implementing CBL in a community with little experience of research. The significant challenges included the need for intensive training, supervision of field staff and difficulty in translation of research materials. To overcome these challenges, Kue et al. (2015) adopted the following approaches: engagement of cultural insiders as investigators, building of community partnerships, including members of the community on the research team and development of culturally appropriate and sensitive methods and materials.

Finally it is extremely important to address the challenges that CBL presents to students. Some of these challenges were identified in a study by Kruger et al. (2015) and include:

- Poor learning opportunities, CBL experience wasteful of students’ time
- Poor monitoring of student attendance at host organisation
- Insufficient training before CBL experience
- Student’s not knowing what will be expected of them at host organisation
- Poor communication between host organisation and student and third level institution.

Despite these challenges there is tremendous potential of CBL to enhance professional education as it allow students to apply their background knowledge in real-world settings and provide an important avenue for self-reflection. Addressing these challenges will improve the students’ experiences and in turn improve the success and result in more socially reactive graduates able and willing to work in community settings. Some challenges, however, will require creative thinking to address continually.

**Evaluation**

Through effective evaluation it can be demonstrated that CBL as a valuable approach to achieving learning outcomes thereby providing a way of interjecting CBL into the national dialogue about the quality of undergraduate education (Steinke & Fitch, 2007).
Evaluation tools can be designed for formative and summative purposes. Formative tools can be used to shape the process and improve the outcomes and address challenges as they arise while summative evaluation occurs at the end of the CBL experience to measure the impact of experience on students, faculty, the curriculum, the community, their institutions, and themselves and provide feed-forward for the next cycle of the CBL programme. We have compiled some useful evaluation tools from the literature to assist academics with the evaluation procedure (Appendices).

**Conclusions**

CBL is a powerful pedagogy with great potential for benefiting students’ academic and personal skills. In this study we have provided a brief overview of how to plan, manage, assess, and evaluate a CBL project. We also discussed some of the challenges and how they were addressed in the literature. The success of a CBL experience relies on a number of factors; thorough planning, guided reflection, effective project management and effective evaluation. We would here highlight the importance of “induction” to CBL students to make them aware of potential difficulties in time management and conflicts.

The material in this document may serve as a “primer” for academics who are interested in implementing a CBL project. However, academics should consult and liaise with own institute’s civic engagement office for more support on implementing CBL within their disciplines.
CBL primer for new academics

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What is CBL?
- "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" (Hunt, 2011).

Getting Started
1. Structured guidance document for partners
2. Structured Learning Agreement with student
3. Student self-assessment
   - Partner readiness and awareness
4. Assess impact of CBL
   - Student evaluation
   - Impact on student

Assessment
- Critical Reflection
- Oral Assessment
- Research Scale

- Improves presentation skills
-Develop understanding
- Fosters assessment
- Needs assessment

Management
- Industry-Community Interactions
- Student-Supervisor Interactions
- Document Management Process
- Monitoring Progress

Challenges
- Appropriate learning opportunities
- Assessment
- Communication support
- Professional skills
- Program orientation

Conclusions
CBL is a powerful pedagogical technique.
- It improves academic & personal skills
- Provides an avenue for self-reflection
- Adds to student experience
- Produces socially reactive graduates
- Willing & able to work with communities

Further Reading
# Appendices

## Appendix A: Planning a CBL module

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<th>Resource</th>
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## Appendix B: Implementing and managing a CBL project

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<td>Student time log sheet, supervisor evaluation</td>
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## Appendix C: Assessment Resources

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Appendix D: Evaluation Resources

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References


