

Community Service Learning and Community-Based Research: How are they Different?

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Introduction

The field of community-university engagement comprises a myriad of activities that are variously labeled and defined (Checkoway 2001). At UBC, an increasing number of students and faculty members are engaging in both Community Service Learning (CSL) and Community-Based Research (CBR). Both CSL and CBR have the following key intentions:

1. To ground the work in the priorities, needs, and context of a particular community setting as defined by people from the community rather than someone from the university
2. To include people from the community in meaningful ways in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the undertaking
3. To produce something of value to the community as well as the university.

Some authors in the community-university engagement field view CSL and CBR as having so much in common that there is no need to make distinctions between them. For example, in his description of his work in East St. Louis, Reardon (1997 and 1998) refers to his students' work variously as participatory action research, service learning, and community outreach. Similarly, Stoecker (2008) considers CBR where students collect research data to be a form of CSL that solves the problem of there sometimes being only a weak connection between course content and students' service activities. Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue assert that CBR represents one of the more advanced forms of service learning (2003, p. 123). Harkavy, Puckett, & Romer (2000) take a slightly different approach, describing action research, including research about CSL, as the bridge between service and research.

I disagree with what seems to be the predominant view in the literature on service learning that originates in the US. I believe there *are* important differences between CSL and CBR. I think it is important to recognize that CSL and CBR are different activities and to use the two terms accurately. The key reasons to strive for this clarity are:

1. In order to avoid confusion among students about what their role in the community setting is, what they can expect to learn, and what is expected of them
2. So that community organizations have clear expectations about the kinds of results they can expect from students' engagement with their organization
3. So that community organizations and university representatives can make good decisions about whether CSL or CBR would be the most appropriate activity for students to undertake in a particular context.

Students' Experiences

From the student perspective, service activities tend to be different from research activities. Working with community members to build a composting system for an urban garden, tutoring children in math, or chopping vegetables alongside street-involved

women in a community kitchen are all different from common research activities such as interviewing people about a community issue, analyzing statistical data and making recommendations about social policy, or collating information that community organizations can use to plan future programs. These different kinds of activities require different types of orientation and training. For example, university students doing service in poor and marginalized communities need to be sensitized to their assumptions, stereotypes, and privilege while students doing research in such settings need similar sensitization as well as training in research methods and protocols.

CSL and CBR can result in some similar learning outcomes (e.g., increased understanding of a community issue or increased ability to work effectively as part of a team) but will also likely lead to different outcomes. For example, students doing CBR will learn about research methods in their discipline and how to practice these methods in community contexts. Ideally, students will learn about the role of the researcher, the importance of profound curiosity as the impetus behind research projects, and the need for careful scrutiny of one's own biases and assumptions as a prerequisite to the production of valid and useful knowledge. The challenges faced by students doing CBR include:

- Ensuring that the research questions are truly generated by the community
- Ensuring that their activities are in compliance with academic ethical guidelines and congruent with the particular community context
- Obtaining sufficient data and understanding the issues sufficiently to allow meaningful conclusions to be drawn
- Providing useful information to the community in forms that are accessible (e.g., reports, videos, or verbal presentations).

In contrast, students doing CSL will learn about how academic knowledge is relevant to community issues, will be challenged to reflect critically on their roles as citizens and will come to understand the need for scrutiny of the variety of motivations that can underlie “service” in the community and how different approaches to service can influence community dynamics (e.g., how does a charity approach vs. a community development approach affect the way a community member responds to a student's efforts to engage). The challenges faced by students doing CSL include:

- Making direct personal connections with individuals who may be different from anyone they have known before
- Ensuring that their activities are congruent with the culture of the community context in which they are working and that these actions are useful in the immediate moment
- Understanding at least some of the complexities of the community context as an insider might
- Exploring the connections between what they are studying and their own personal experiences (including their emotional reactions).

One way to simplistically summarize the differences in students' experiences is to say that CBR primarily engages students' heads, while CSL engages their heads, hands, and hearts. CBR challenges a student to ask, “How can I use research methods to help this

community group get answers to questions that it sees as important? and, “What do I know and understand about this issue or community context and how can I work with others to make sense of it?” CSL presents a somewhat more immediate challenge and requires a student to ask, “Why and how much do I care about this issue or setting or individual and what am I going to do about it, right here and now?” Another way to generalize about the differences in students’ experiences is to say that CBR teaches students to be researchers, while CSL teaches students to be active citizens or activists.

Communities’ Experiences

CBR and CSL also look different from the perspective of people in community settings. In some instances, particularly in communities where there has been a history of perceived exploitation by university researchers (e.g., Aboriginal communities or poor and marginalized communities like the Downtown Eastside), activities with a service focus are more likely to be welcomed than activities where the focus is research, even when the university aims to engage community members as co-researchers in a participatory approach.

In addition, what the community receives as outputs from the two types of activity tends to be different: CBR produces reports or other records of students’ analyses of information and, often, recommendations for action; CSL projects done by teams of students produce a wide variety of tangible products (from garden sheds to murals on school walls) while ongoing, individual CSL placements typically bring additional human resources to specific programs so more tasks can be done or more people can be served.

The third major difference relates to the questions of, “Who feels most comfortable in the two domains of activity?” and, “What are the resulting implications for the nature of the collaboration between the university and the community?” Although many communities are becoming active partners in CBR, the practice of research is traditionally the university’s area of expertise. Consequently, students doing CBR are typically supervised more by faculty members than community organizations, and so it can sometimes be difficult for community members to see that their knowledge, experience, and power are being incorporated into a research project. On the other hand, the realm of service or community development is where the community has more knowledge and experience, and community organizations typically act as students’ supervisors or mentors. In these situations, community members can more readily see how they have an important role to play as co-educators of students.

Being Clear About the Differences between CSL and CBR

I am aware that it is easy to find examples of specific instances where the distinctions I have made between CSL and CBR do not apply. For example, students doing CBR may care deeply about a particular issue or community setting and may be actively engaged in hands-on work as part of their research. I am willing to risk being accused of oversimplification because I believe that, when students are engaging with communities for the first time or when community organizations and university faculty and staff are in the early stages of a collaborative project, clarity about means and ends is crucial. Being

clear about what is being done, and why, and what roles everyone is playing will help to avoid confusion or conflict that could jeopardize the initiative.

Making a distinction between CSL and CBR does not mean that these two forms of student engagement in communities are incompatible. In fact, they can be highly complementary. CSL can increase students' first-hand knowledge of a community issue and inform their subsequent participation in a CBR project. CBR can provide needed background or contextual information to help shape CSL activities that are likely to have a significant impact.

Being clear about how CSL and CBR are different and what their respective outcomes can be should facilitate the formation of collaborative relationships between communities and universities where roles, responsibilities, risks, and benefits are mutually understood and agreed upon. Being clear about whether it is CSL or CBR or a combination of the two that will offer most benefit to the various stakeholders will mean that relationships are based in shared understandings and shared purposes. It is these kinds of relationships that are more likely to have important strategic benefits and be sustained over the long term. It is in the context of these kinds of relationships, where there is a strong experiential understanding of the various ways that community-university engagement can be embodied, that the boundaries between CSL and CBR can be blurred with less risk of misunderstanding and consequent harm to the relationship.

References

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