Rural Community Engaged Learning? Rethinking Practice in a Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper assesses the challenges of conducting community engaged learning in a small rural town under pandemic conditions. Community engaged learning (CENL) is a transformative, experiential learning activity that sees university students working closely with local non-profits, societies, or schools to address a community-identified need. COVID-19's onset in March 2020 curtailed all interpersonal interaction between our students and partners, compelling them to work remotely—a less than ideal situation. This new mode of engagement called for a swift review of our program goals, operating policies, and instructional practices, and we responded by building greater capacity and resiliency into our courses and reprioritizing the needs of our students and partners. Now, despite two years of strict COVID-19 protocols, our program is stronger, our students are finding deeper meaning in their community engagement, and relationships with our community partners remain strong.

Résumé

Dans cet article, on évalue les défis de mener l'apprentissage en milieu communautaire dans une petite ville rurale tout en faisant face à des conditions de pandémie. Ce qu'on désigne en anglais par l'acronyme CENL est une activité d'apprentissage transformatrice et expérientielle qui permet aux étudiants universitaires de travailler en étroite collaboration avec des organisations à but non lucratif, des sociétés ou des écoles pour répondre à un besoin identifié par la communauté. L'apparition du COVID-19 en mars 2020 a réduit toutes les interactions interpersonnelles entre nos étudiants et nos partenaires, les obligeant à travailler à distance – une situation loin d'être idéale. Ce nouveau mode d'engagement a nécessité un réexamen rapide des objectifs de notre programme, de nos politiques de fonctionnement et de nos pratiques pédagogiques, et nous avons réagi en renforçant la capacité et la résilience de nos cours et en redéfinissant les priorités par rapport aux besoins de nos étudiants et partenaires. Aujourd'hui, malgré deux ans de stricts protocoles COVID-19, notre programme est plus solide, nos étudiants trouvent un sens plus profond à leur engagement dans la communauté et les relations avec nos partenaires communautaires restent solides.

<div align="right">"Never let a good crisis go to waste." (Winston Churchill)</div>

Introduction

In early March 2020, students in our Community as Classroom course were waiting for the resumption of their fieldwork at our local middle school when news broke that the provincial government had mandated the closure of all public schools in response to the spread of the coronavirus. Our students

had been working with groups of middle-schoolers in the weeks preceding spring break to design and implement learning projects as part of a community-supported education initiative (called "Project Engage!"). In the short time they had worked together, the students had developed a warm mutual regard for one another, and it was evident from the din of weekly sessions that they derived immense pleasure from this learning enterprise. To say that all students were deeply disappointed at the project's interruption would be putting it mildly. With the school shuttered and our own courses abruptly moved online, we were left to contemplate the future of Project Engage! and our new program in community engaged learning (CENL) that was slated to begin in the following September.

Within a month of the school closures, discussions were well underway in our university about the possibility of a complete transition to online learning in the new academic year. As these proceeded apace, we began to triage our program's curriculum. The use of the word *triage* here is deliberate. Underlying many university conversations at that time was a comprehensible but extreme sense of urgency. Society was in crisis mode as people everywhere tried to cope with the virus's changeability and to understand how to protect themselves while maintaining some semblance of normalcy. Educational institutions at all levels were doing their best to respond to this bewildering health crisis and to the rapidly implemented provincial imperatives governing it (Ferri et al. 2020; Hodges et al. 2020; Williamson et al. 2020). This urgency, however, gave us pause. What we were being asked to consider was fundamentally not online learning, but emergency remote teaching (ERT), as some colleagues pointed out, and yet there was uncertainty as to what this constituted. The triage of our program showed that ERT was not our chief problem. Between guidance from our educational technology consultant, advice from well-practised colleagues, and the literature on distance learning, we felt we could adequately adjust.[1] Instead, the nature and context of our new program, in which all courses but one are aligned with a community-embedded learning experience, needed to be rethought. We live and work in a small rural town (population 6,099)[2] where resources are scarce and the distance separating us from potential community partners dictates the scope of our work. COVID-19 and the public health protocols enacted to contain it would complicate an already complex engagement with our local community.

In this paper we share our experience of facilitating CENL in a rural community under restrictive and unpredictable conditions, an experience that was by turns exasperating, elating, and humbling. Yet, it was also highly beneficial. We emerged from the challenges of the past two years with greater clarity around the praxis of our civic engagement and a better understanding of our students' needs and abilities, especially their capacity to find their way through the difficult learning that is a normal part of CENL, and we have begun to think very differently about our relationships with our community partners. These insights have been incredibly motivating for us—something we could not have imagined in the upheaval of March 2020.

The Backstory of Our Program

Our program's foundation began with a collection of conversations. One was an ongoing discussion among faculty in the Religious Studies Department about how to translate the concepts of praxis and social change into a tangible form that students could access and appreciate. This conversation went hand-in-hand with what we were hearing from our students: they had a deep desire to understand the injustices of their communities and to work for positive change—they wanted to find ways to learn the skills needed for that work. The second conversation was among faculty who were watching the university's turn toward experiential learning and its impulse chiefly to implement forms of work-

integrated learning in response to government and public sector initiatives. Our concern was that education should not be chasing industry or government, though we realized of course that the postmodern university was changing and education needed also to respond to pressures that students were feeling about the degrees they were earning and their prospects for the future. This conversation resulted in the creation of the non-profit organization R-PEACE (Research Partnerships for Education and Community Engagement) that now supports the emerging program and its partnerships.

The third conversation serendipitously took place between members of a middle school parents' support committee (PSSC) in a meeting in 2017. At the meeting, the principal expressed her wish to incorporate more forms of project-based learning in the school, and to have students participate in curiosity-driven learning together for at least one afternoon per week. The problem was that she did not have the resources to put such a program in place, nor did she yet have a vision for what form it should take. This conversation—in which one of our faculty happened to be a participant—resulted in the creation of a program that was enfolded in two trial courses called Introduction to Community Engaged Learning and Community as Classroom; the middle school program itself became known as "Project Engage!"

In its ideal state, Project Engage! divides all the students at the middle school into groups of about fifteen, with a teacher supervisor and one or two students from the university. This group and these facilitators are paired with a community volunteer. The program aims to support project-based learning, and so the ideal was to have students self-select according to their interests and curiosities and then be grouped together, irrespective of age, for a deep dive into a particular subject. Taking place one afternoon a week for several hours, the program allows middle school learners, community members, and university students to explore topics of varying size and shape. Over the years, these have included bird studies, cooking, theatre, journalism, climate change, the trades, and so on. The results have been overwhelmingly positive from the perspective of our students as well as that of the learners and parents from the middle school. For our own students, Project Engage! has allowed them to think about how to translate their own learning and interests to a specific audience in the general public. It has allowed them to envision, think through, and execute projects; moreover, it has given them the skills to problem solve and to form partnerships with members of the community, all of which they find empowering. What is more, this type of learning is highly beneficial for students who have been historically under-represented in the university—e.g., newcomers, racialized and gender minoritized students, people with disabilities, and athletes (Bocci 2015; Song et al. 2017; Langhout and Gordon 2021). For the students of the middle school, there has been a lot of enthusiasm and enjoyment in the subjects that they have explored. Parents report a higher level of engagement and excitement about attending school and in fact attendance has been extremely good for these days, in the face of growing problems of absenteeism.

It is not only enjoyment and attendance that the project seeks to address. Data from the last twenty years at least shows a declining level of engagement among students in industrialized countries as they progress through public school education beginning at about Grade 2, and by Grade 8 disenchantment reaches alarming levels.[3] The ultimate manifestation of this apathy occurs went students drop out of high school before graduation (Rumberger 2011). Not only this, but standardized testing and an increasing detachment of our students from the traditional methods and subjects of elementary, middle, and high school education mean that the system is failing to prepare learners adequately for post-secondary education and work opportunities, a fact acknowledged by our provincial government.[4] Project Engage! aims to slow the downward spiral of disconnection by cultivating an "upward spiral of hope" (Emery and Flora 2006; Holton et al. 2017, 3).

Given its initial success, however, and the wonderful response from students, the department decided to go ahead with the creation of the first phase of a disciplinary program in community engaged learning. CENL is part of a much larger category of experiential education generally referred to as service learning and has been a well-established part of the post-secondary landscape for well over three decades. Its genesis is found in the work of philosopher and education reformer John Dewey (1859–1952), whose pedagogical ideas, along with those of psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) and educational theorist David Kolb (1939–present), were enormously influential in the reshaping of twentieth-century education. A proponent of experiential education, Dewey called for students to play an active rather than passive role in their learning, an idea that stands at the core of CENL and other forms of service learning.[5] We understand CENL as a high-impact experiential learning opportunity that seeks to empower students as they endeavour to create positive social change (Kuh et al., 2017). This is achieved by having students collaborate with community partners (ordinarily a non-profit or social service group) to tackle a community-identified need such as elder care, food security, educational enrichment, or housing. While working with their partners, students receive academic instruction in the theory and practice of CENL and engage in structured critical reflection.

The inclusion of CENL in a traditional liberal arts setting has been enriching and impactful. It has also been a challenge. Many faculty colleagues appreciate the applied nature of the courses and respond to student enthusiasm by offering their own support of the program. Nonetheless, it remains that the number of faculty who want to collaborate with the program is small. There are a variety of reasons for this. One is that faculty and other departments have little wiggle room in terms of their teaching assignments, and indeed programs have limited maneuverability in terms of resources. Consequently, when an opportunity is proffered to collaborate in a community engaged learning course or project, it is often expressed that the corresponding program cannot spare the resources. Indeed, similar undertakings such as experiential learning courses or internship supervisions must be done off the side of faculty's desks. In addition, there appears to be a suspicion among some colleagues that, despite the fact that community engaged learning has its own disciplinary tools and experts, what is happening in these classes is not "real learning." This is perhaps due to the fact that the courses in question involve a practical component that is undertaken out in the community where learning outcomes are not easily or traditionally measurable. In addition, the presence of such pedagogical strategies as self-reflection and the use of assignments like learning portfolios renders what goes on in community engaged learning suspect or unserious. Finally, some faculty colleagues look on the success of students—i.e., their higher grades—as a sign of lack of rigour, the supposition being that so many high Bs and As can only mean lightweight learning. The response from students of course is exactly the opposite: indeed, feedback has consistently been that the nature of these kinds of courses is, for them, life-altering.

Rurality and Community Engaged Learning

The knowledge that students find community-embedded learning transformative is enormously satisfying, but creating these engagement opportunities is sometimes hard-won.[6] Idyllic rural towns frequently conceal realities of daily life of which students and practitioners must be aware before immersing themselves in community work. Smaller tax bases, for example, mean that resources and infrastructure are more limited than in urban centres. Ready access to transportation and technology (equipment and Internet), two things that are vital for working and communicating with partners, cannot be taken for granted, nor can the assistance of non-profits and other service organizations that often support communities with financial exigencies (Harris 2004, 43). Social issues, such as housing

insecurity and poor health, can be pervasive in rural areas, but appear to be more difficult to detect than in metropolitan centres. Unsheltered individuals, for instance, sometimes create temporary living arrangements by moving constantly between family and friends ("couch-surfing") until adequate shelter is found (Waegemakers Schiff et al. 2015, 90; Ganzert et al. 2017, 197). Diagnosing and treating poor mental health, loneliness, and isolation can be complicated by the distances that separate residents from a town's health care providers, and exacerbated by a culture that values self-sufficiency and privacy (Harris 2004, 44).

Despite these challenges, it is also true that rural communities generally possess social capital in abundance, and this is one of their greatest assets. Whereas social capital and its impact on service learning can be broadly defined (Bourdieu 1985; Lin 2001; Paxton 1999), we follow Putnam in seeing it as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995, 67). Deep-rooted networks have a tremendous capacity to galvanize people in times of need, as communities around the world demonstrated at the start of the pandemic. Nonetheless, even prior to COVID-19's appearance, we had ample opportunity to observe the social capital of our community in action as we sought partners to assist with the many Engage! projects underway. One person in the town always knew of someone else who willingly offered expertise, or contacted another individual who could assist: a catering company owner who mentored our students in teaching food chemistry to the younger students; an educator and ornithologist from a local non-profit who ran a bird studies group; and a former vocational instructor turned community college administrator who made it possible for a boisterous group of Grade 8s to use heavy-equipment simulators as part of their introduction to trades. Generous, accomplished, and caring, these people and many others who supported Project Engage! served as models of civic-mindedness and demonstrated to our students—many of whom are from large urban centres—that the stereotype of rural people as uneducated, parochial, and inward-looking needed unpacking and dispelling (Holton et al. 2017, 7–8; Walters 2007).

Community-Embedded Learning and COVID-19

Some of the challenges of rural and remote CENL from the past twenty-four months are evident in three introductory-level courses taught during the pandemic. These present the theory, practice, and tools of community engagement from different perspectives. Education, Mentorship and Athletics is aimed at students who are looking for meaningful ways to take their athletic and leisure practices and use them in community work, while also exploring possibilities for careers in recreation, sports management, coaching, or helping professions. These students explore the values and skills that are beneficial for community engagement, consider what they themselves bring to community work beyond their athletic ability and strong work ethic, and learn project management skills. Our Introduction to Community Engaged Learning introduces students to the basic philosophies, practices, and dispositions of CENL, and is intended for students who are considering future careers in education, whether as K–12 educators, outreach workers for non-profits, or advocates for grassroots organizations interested in education reform. As noted in the backstory of our program, students work in our local middle school as part of Project Engage! and design project-based learning activities with community partners and junior students. Finally, Community Narratives is a methods course that introduces students to the purpose and function of community storytelling (e.g., identity formation, raising awareness of community concerns, and collaborative problem solving in communities). Students investigate and gain experience applying the tools of narrative-making by working in our university archives, at our local heritage museum, and visiting natural and historical landmarks. Through their focus on the local, students become familiar with the

community in which they will live and study for four years, interact with its members, and build a relationship for delivery of a short-term project that benefits an individual or organization.

Community Narratives

Community Narratives was in fact the first course offered after the COVID-19 outbreak. It ran online in the summer of 2020, by virtue of university regulations, as no decision had been reached at this point concerning a full or partial shift to online learning for the upcoming academic year. Our preference had been for delivery on campus and in person, and we might have cancelled the course if not for the fact that the majority of participants were marginalized students who needed the opportunity to earn credits at this point in their programs. By and large, these students do not carry full course loads because of their involvement in varsity sports (many are on scholarship), or their need to work part-time—or both. They spend the summer working and taking courses to ensure that their degree programs stay on track. Most of these students also remain in town for the summer, but like others in 2020 they had returned to their home communities in mid-March, at our administration's urging, and were now living in different time zones. Those who had been fortunate to find employment in a severely contracted job market were also working full-time, which meant that there were few opportunities for real-time meetings.

To build the kind of community in that classroom that we believe is integral for peer learning and collaboration, we implemented practices that are mainstays of distance learning: asking students to introduce themselves to one another by composing and posting a brief autobiography and commenting on those of their classmates; creating threaded discussions and wikis for sharing potential project ideas, reflections on course readings, and expertise; posting a greater range of "how to" and "help" documents to assist students with assignments; and having a flexible consultation schedule (Nordyke 2015; Robertson and Riggs 2018). To alleviate the logistical problem of finding and working remotely with a community partner here in Sackville, students had the option of seeking partners closer to home who were willing to help them with the embedded learning component.[7] None of these measures seemed to work, however, because of the distraction engendered by the coronavirus outbreak and the logistical challenges of life in the summer of 2020. Normally keen to work with students, our usual partners were focused on their own challenges; chief among them was their ability to operate under the health protocols that had been enacted for the public's protection. Student anxiety seemed to move between helping in struggling family businesses, wondering whether they could earn sufficient money for tuition, and the changeability of life under the pandemic, not to mention that everyone worried about contracting COVID-19.

In the midst of adapting our course to these challenges we were presented with a moment of clarity. Sadly, it was precipitated by the murder of George Floyd on 25 May 2020. Students in the class, generally speaking and unsurprisingly, found the event disturbing, as comments from their assignments revealed. Racialized students, who formed the majority of class participants, responded to George Floyd's death in one of two ways: some expressed their devastation or attempted to separate their responses from their schoolwork—hoping for a distraction of some sort—by focusing solely on their project work. In an effort to be compassionate and respectful of everyone's distress at a time when COVID was already making life difficult, we gave students greater flexibility in the form, scope, and execution of all assignments, including their projects. The results were instructive. The second way of responding to George Floyd's death was that some students began reaching out to each another on social media to talk about potential projects. After partnering with a teacher at one of our regional schools, some threw themselves into creating a mentorship program for at-risk middle school athletes, which involved weekly fitness workouts

and positive discussions that reinforced the need for commitment to schoolwork, personal development, and leadership. Others partnered with Mount Allison University's Black Student Advisor and Diversity Educator to produce podcasts on what it means to be black in Canadian society and what the Black Lives Matter movement represents for them. By relaxing the usually tight grip we maintain on the development of community partnerships, and expanding our perceptions of engagement in our community—all the while continuing to offer the usual care and facilitation—we enabled our students to locate the peer supports they needed and come into their own. Ultimately, the in-person design of the mentorship project prevented it from launching in September 2020, as the students had intended, but there would be other opportunities in the future for our students to mentor those who were similarly situated. What is more, the vagaries of engagement in this course provided direction for future iterations and encouraged us to think very differently about our students' learning outcomes.

Education, Mentorship, and Athletics

This course grew out of a conversation with school principals in our region in the spring of 2021, during which a principal who worked in a distressed community school thirty-five kilometres from our university asked if we would assist him in creating problem-based learning activities for his students. He was familiar with the format of Project Engage! and wondered about the possibility of his students and ours working together in a similar arrangement. The project he envisaged would not be a transplantation of Project Engage! since his school had different requirements in terms of its size, mixed ages, student interests, and socioeconomic barriers. Nevertheless, we agreed that our students would work with Grade 3 to 8 students, for ninety minutes per week, on problem-based learning activities. This arrangement would free school staff from their usual teaching duties and give them time to plan for the integration of other forms of non-traditional pedagogies that they had identified as essential in the future success of their students. We felt that the knowledge and experience we had gained from Project Engage! would enable the formulation of such a program and allow us to pivot successfully to meet the needs of these students as well as our own. In addition, we had learned from Community Narratives in the preceding spring that there were some groups of students who would be drawn to the theme of the course—and who often struggle with traditional learning styles. In fact, they were already expressing an interest in focusing on the context of a distressed community. Not only could this new course help our partner, but it could also help us reflect on the student demographic for which we create CENL courses and what we hope to achieve in them.

In the previous academic year, the university had determined that faculty could choose their own mode of course delivery, so we decided to offer this course in person and designed a curriculum accordingly. We also managed to find transportation for the thirty-eight students (mainly varsity athletes) who would travel to the school each Friday.[8] In the week prior to start-up, however, a coronavirus outbreak at the junior school threatened to derail the project. Rather than wait for it to subside, we shifted to remote engagement, believing that after a year of online learning, our students and the school staff were fairly proficient with TEAMS (the only platform available to our partner). From the outset, however, delivery was plagued by network performance issues at both ends, a problem attributable in part to the use of aging hardware (a common problem in local schools). Nevertheless, our students slowly adjusted to online delivery and were beginning to feel more comfortable with remote teaching when a strike by CUPE workers, who performed a variety of jobs within the school, shut down our project entirely.

Students were not only disappointed by the absence of a community-embedded experience, even one that was conducted remotely, but also began to struggle with the messiness that characterizes experiential education and CENL especially. By design, learning in CENL classrooms is student-driven. We ask and expect students to be responsible for their own learning, although we provide the guidance they need to identify, parse, and track what they learn. The real difficulty is that this form of learning is nonlinear and can involve a high degree of risk because students are encouraged to work outside their comfort zones. They also engage in critical self-reflection and analysis—tasks that many find too confronting or confusing. But this messiness becomes intelligible when students have opportunities to apply and test newly acquired knowledge and skills. In this course, once this applied learning context was removed, students began to feel disoriented and understandably complained that their learning lacked meaning. To their delight and our relief, this situation resolved itself somewhat on the last day of the course when it became possible for all students to meet for a dynamic afternoon of activities. Later, as students reflected on this afternoon, they repeatedly characterized the experience as exhilarating. Not only did they find meaning in working with the younger students, but the learning that had seemed so impenetrable to them a few weeks earlier suddenly began to take shape.

This new course has allowed us to think through ways to "pandemic-proof" (or crisis-proof) our programming. It is one thing to warn students that things may not work out exactly as they plan; it is quite another to witness a series of events that almost crushes every opportunity they attempt to create. Future iterations of courses, especially as the pandemic continues and hits rural communities in unique ways (e.g., infrastructural issues, health care access, and loss of employment), will need to have various modes of delivery built in from the beginning, with the expectation that variety will provide enough scope in the face of unforeseen circumstances. The course has also allowed us to think more carefully about our own student demographic, whom we want to attract to CENL, and how to support them in this new way of learning.

Introduction to Community Engaged Learning

The third example of pandemic teaching and learning involves our Introduction to Community Engaged Learning course. Project Engage!, the education partnership we established with Sackville's middle school in 2018, stands at the heart of this course. It provides the all-important immersive learning experience, but it has also become the standard by which we formulate new CENL opportunities. Before the start of a new school year, we consult with the principal and staff of the middle school to decide on the learning activities that Project Engage! will comprise. They are the most familiar with the curiosities and interests of their own pupils and make recommendations based on this knowledge. Once the topics are established, our students meet with the middle-schoolers to draft a tentative plan for a project's execution. One of the project's goals is to create an opportunity for the younger students to explore material that genuinely excites them; another is to foster a sense of civic responsibility by helping them turn their interests toward work that is beneficial for their school or possibly the town. In the very first iteration of Project Engage!, a group of students with a passion for the environment designed a recycling program for their school that became a model for schools across this province and led to a national innovation award (Tower 2019). Another group walked to the local nursing home each week where they visited with residents and engaged them in light activities and games. By and large, however, project work provided educational enrichment.

All this changed under COVID-19 and the public health imperatives that accompanied it. From September 2020 to February 2022, we were not permitted inside the school. We might have switched to remote project work if not for the fact that health regulations dictated that individual classes (or bubbles) could not mix freely inside or outside the school. With low course enrolments during this same period (because our students were wary of community work in a pandemic) and a school population of over three hundred students, remote Project Engage! was not a viable alternative. We attempted to maintain a measure of engagement by having our students create a database of activity plans that teachers could utilize in the absence of Project Engage!, but there seemed to be little appetite for this at a time when staff were unsure how to plan for rapidly changing conditions and had additional responsibilities besides teaching (e.g., classroom cleaning protocols).

Despite the uncertainty, it was gratifying to see that the fruits of conversations and prior years of planning developed as teachers and students pivoted to devise their own Project Engage!–like projects that could be carried out within their own bubbles. Unsurprisingly, teachers and students wanted to get outside; they also wanted to continue to be active in their communities, whatever the restrictions. One class created an outdoor art gallery by hanging pictures on a fence along a well-used walking path for the enjoyment of those who passed by. A senior in the community who was feeling lonely and isolated because of the pandemic made it known to the school just how much these pictures lifted her spirits and how grateful she was to the students who created them. Another class volunteered to pick up litter from the streets of the community but turned this service into a research project by asking why certain streets seemed to have more garbage than others.

It is not an understatement that Project Engage! has changed the culture of the school, which is not presented here as a testament to *our* intervention, but to the opportunity we have *co*-created in the school for staff to try new things, to have conversations about change, and to let students lead the way (all goals the principal expressed in that very early conversation about the possibilities for a program). One thing that "Pandemic Engage!" could not reproduce, however, was the connection that the middle-schoolers formed with university students. We are not concerned that these new learning projects will spell the end of Project Engage! On the contrary, the principal and staff are eager for our students to return because it is the mentorship and enjoyment of students working together irrespective of age that made learning so pleasurable and effective. With so many benefits beyond the traditional curriculum, the principal's original hopes for the program have borne fruit in ways that are profound, despite the challenges that COVID-19 threw in the way.

Conclusion

This essay began with a quotation from Winston Churchill that might seem flippant at first blush, but which captures well our strategy for facilitating CENL under the pandemic. Its vicissitudes are still with us, but had we not taken Churchill's comment as advice to think differently about our program's design, its context, our students' learning needs and outcomes, and our perhaps more rigid perceptions of community engagement, we might still be grappling with the fretful questions that first confronted us in March 2020. Instead, though these have of course been challenging times, we have encountered a number of issues that have important implications for CENL program development and teaching. These now inform our current deliberations and designs.

First, a particular demographic in our courses is emerging and has been made more visible in the last two years; there is a higher proportion of students from minoritized populations who enrol in our courses. Some are attracted chiefly by opportunities to work with similarly situated students in the Tantramar family of schools and nearby communities. Or they are enticed by disparate learning styles and opportunities to use the considerable skills they have already developed in their lives toward their degree program. It is also possible that they are motivated by both. Their learning needs might differ substantially from those who are accustomed to navigating the educational system, who benefit from its structures and styles, and who have already figured out how to succeed in it. University can be an uncomfortable place for marginalized students unless they are fully engaged in ways that value their knowledge, life experiences, and worldviews, however traditional or non-traditional they may be.[9] Not only are we now thinking more carefully about our targeted student demographic and the design of our program, but we are also reflecting thoroughly about how to (re)imagine our ideas of student success. The crisis of the pandemic revealed that, from a programmatic point of view, we must recognize what marginalized students bring to community engagement and consider how we can accommodate their needs.

We have also learned from experiences at two different schools that it will be important to create the conditions where the partnerships and their projects can thrive, despite pandemics, strikes, or any other unforeseen circumstance. This means, specifically, that it is important to set up not one, or even two, modes of engagement, but perhaps multiple avenues for students and teachers. This is, after all, one of the important features of universal design for learning, in this case adapted specifically to unexpected community contextual shifts. But these unexpected shifts also indicate that programs must be designed with the less than ideal option that we may not be able to be involved with them at all, given unforeseen events. So, the pressing question for us now is to consider how we ensure that we co-create the conditions necessary for well-calibrated projects that can run—or be adapted—in the hands of our community partners with or without us. This may be a counterintuitive step for students (thinking about a project they are designing without themselves in it), but retelling the stories of 2020 and 2021 will assist them in seeing why *contemporaneous* planning for a transferring of the project's design and running is an essential step in creating and executing it within a given term.

Finally, one of the things the pandemic has made clear to us is that the normalcy that people tried so hard to maintain in the early days of COVID-19 is no longer the normalcy we need or want. It has been regularly observed that the pandemic brought structural inequalities, both local and global, into high relief. A return to so-called normalcy thus is a regressive step, not a progressive one, and we hope that this is what many of our students have taken away from their CENL coursework over the past two years. The pandemic has been a time of astonishing creativity and innovation that has helped students to see how to make positive change in the world around them.

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Notes

[1] The literature on electronic service-learning (eSL) and remote CENL was not overly helpful. In spite of more than twelve years of practice, research on this form of learning has not kept pace with the scholarship on direct engagement (Stefaniak 2020; Faulconer 2021). Furthermore, researchers and practitioners of direct and remote service learning are employed at urban universities or colleges where the nature of engagement and the resources available differ significantly.

[2] Census Profile, 2021; Census: Sackville, New Brunswick; Statistics Canada. Retrieved 21 June 2022.

[3] Riley et al. (2002) offer thoughtful and nuanced discussions of student disaffection. Dei (2003), Murray et al. (2004), Rogers (2016), as well as Lawson and Lawson (2020), speak to disengagement in industrialized countries. To my mind, the best expression of student estrangement comes from a student, not a researcher. See Harriet Sweatman's unflinching (and heart-rending) indictment of the Scottish education system in "The Grim Life of a Scottish Pupil." She penned this essay prior to graduating and was awarded the Scottish Schools Young Writer of the Year 2019. Sweatman continues this conversation in a companion piece published after her first year at university and entitled "The Action Generation."

[4] See Government of the Province of New Brunswick, Ministry of Education and Early Childhood Development, "Succeeding at Home: A Green Paper on Education in New Brunswick," October 2019.

[5] CENL differs from volunteerism and community service in that these experiences do not typically involve critical reflection and reciprocal learning.

[6] The distinctiveness of rural engagement is well researched. For a small sample, see Harris (2004); Holton (2009); Stoecker et al. (2017); Zastoupil (2021); Preradović et al. (2022).

[7] We also consulted a range of publications on best practices for remote CENL throughout the first two years of pandemic engagement including Becnel and Moeller (2017), Purcell (2017), Byrd and LaPan (2021), and Nordyke (2015).

[8] It should be noted here that social capital helped us to secure the transportation necessary for this project as well as a generous grant from New Brunswick's Future Ready program.

[9] Research on the effects of service learning or CENL for marginalized students is increasing. For a small sample, see: Bocci (2015); Cross and Fouke (2019); Dunlap et al. (2007); Langout and Gordon (2017); Rahill et al. (2017); and Song et al. (2017).

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