

September 2011

Class Participation in an Aboriginal Theatre Project: An Exemplar of Undergraduate Student Engagement

Ginny R. Ratsoy

Thompson Rivers University, gratsoy@tru.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2011.1.3>

Recommended Citation

Ratsoy, Ginny R. (2011) "Class Participation in an Aboriginal Theatre Project: An Exemplar of Undergraduate Student Engagement," *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2011.1.3>

Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcacea/vol2/iss1/3

Class Participation in an Aboriginal Theatre Project: An Exemplar of Undergraduate Student Engagement

Abstract

In the 21st Century, Canadian universities are increasingly emphasizing the importance of student engagement. This research paper, by analyzing the reflections of undergraduate students on their experiences in a co-curricular service learning assignment – integrated into a course that included more traditional assignments – in the context of situated learning theory, advocates for a community-focused assignment as a component in a “traditional” lecture-and-discussion based course as a tool for enhanced engagement through active, collaborative learning. While the case study explored is a drama course, the anticipated audience is pan-disciplinary, as the article casts more broadly by providing brief, general guidelines on implementing an experiential learning assignment and encouraging all professors to reflect on their classroom theory and praxis to the end of augmenting student engagement.

Au 21^e siècle, les universités canadiennes accordent une place de plus en plus importante à l'engagement des étudiants. Les auteurs de ce rapport de recherche analysent les réflexions des étudiants de premier cycle à propos d'un travail pratique (TP) qu'ils ont effectué dans le cadre de l'apprentissage par le service communautaire – intégré à un cours qui comprenait des TP plus traditionnels – dans le contexte de la théorie de l'apprentissage situé. Les auteurs préconisent des TP axés sur la collectivité en tant que composants d'un cours « traditionnel » comportant des exposés magistraux et des discussions. Ce type de TP est un outil permettant d'améliorer l'engagement grâce à l'apprentissage actif et collaboratif. L'étude de cas porte sur un cours d'art dramatique, mais le public visé par le présent article est multidisciplinaire. En effet, les auteurs de l'article considèrent les choses plus largement en fournissant de brèves directives générales sur la mise en œuvre d'un devoir dans le cadre de l'apprentissage expérientiel et encouragent tous les enseignants à réfléchir sur leurs stratégies d'enseignement théoriques et pratiques afin d'augmenter l'engagement des étudiants.

Keywords

engagement; Aboriginal; holistic; community; experiential learning; co-curricular service learning, social learning, situated learning theory.

Cover Page Footnote

* The author wishes to thank the Western Canada Theatre staff for their continuing cooperation with service learning endeavours, Dr. Will Garrett-Petts for his continuing support as Research Director of CURA, and the students of Canadian Studies 312 for their immeasurable contributions to this paper.

This paper proposes to engage professors in reflection on classroom praxis through discussion of a qualitative study of a course assignment which, through experiential learning, engaged students enrolled in a “traditional” course in a non-traditional community experience. In the early years of the 21st Century, perhaps more than at any other time, professors at Canadian universities and colleges are being encouraged to “engage” students and foster a sense of community. Two primarily undergraduate, teaching-focused universities provide representative illustrations of the holistic, multi-focused approach to engagement. Thompson Rivers University’s (TRU’s) 2007-2012 Strategic Plan includes, among its nine Value statements, “Learner-Centredness” and “Sense of Community,” and the first of its seven Strategic Goals is “Student Engagement” in order to “empower individuals through intellectual, cultural, ethical, emotional, social and physical development” (Value Statements, para. 1) Among Trent University’s Strategic Directions for 2010, in terms of “Student Engagement and Accessibility” are “ Encourag[ing] the development of the whole student as an engaged learner and a contributing member of his/her community(ies)” and “Fostering a collegial, collaborative and healthy student culture that engages learners in their own and others' success” (p. 3). These are noble goals – and tall orders. Moreover, “student engagement” is a very broad, multi-faceted, and somewhat nebulous term which professors can interpret in varying ways.

While literature on the subject of student engagement in Australian and American contexts is readily available, as it is to a lesser extent on pre-university student engagement in Canada, Canadian studies at the university level are few. Concrete definitions of the term “student engagement” are fewer still. The Australian Council for Educational Research (2010) links activity and participation with educational quality in its definition: “Student engagement is defined as students’ involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning, based on the assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities” (para. 2). Similarly, the National Survey of Student Engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009), whose student surveys approximately 1300 four-year universities and colleges in Canada and the United States utilize, measures engagement according to five benchmarks that imply a relationship between interactivity and quality of experience: (a) Level of Academic Challenge; (b) Active and Collaborative Learning; (c) Student-Faculty Interaction; (d) Enriching Educational Experiences; and (e) Supportive Campus Environment. For the purposes of this paper, student engagement will refer to activities that occupy the student in quality experiences – particularly active, social experiences – that generate new knowledge.

My own understanding of student engagement has evolved and deepened as my research on community engagement has progressed. Five years as a researcher on the interdisciplinary Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) Program, “Mapping Quality of Life & the Culture of Small Cities” (which has involved studying the role of three professional theatre companies in British Columbia in engaging their communities), have led to considerable personal reflection on classroom theories and praxis. Specifically, supervision of student research assistants and stand-alone academic service learning courses has led to a reassessment and subsequent extension of the concept of student engagement in the classroom. Community engagement at the university level is, broadly, university work in and with communities — usually off campus and often local. It is generally motivated by a combination of purposes, as outlined by Ostrander (2004), “grounding academic knowledge in real-world conditions, connecting knowledge to practice, bringing academics and practitioners into closer relationships, improving conditions in local communities, and building democracy and civil society” (p. 74).

The literature on university student engagement in community often defines it as virtually synonymous with service learning, described as having reciprocal goals of strengthening student learning and improving the communities they serve, with the intention of positive change in both agents (Power, 2010). I would argue, given the similarity of Ostrander's broader description and Power's more specific one, that, while service learning is a most efficacious vehicle for student engagement in community – and indeed it is the focus of this article – it is not the only form it can take; indeed, for example, students can engage with professors in community-engaged research and accomplish the goals listed by both Ostrander and Power. Cooperation in experiences for mutual benefit is the key here.

Concomitant with CURA research has been my involvement in the stand-alone (curricular) academic service learning courses developed by Thompson Rivers University. As described elsewhere (Ratsoy, 2008), these courses were tailored by Drs. Will Garrett-Petts and Neil Russell to meet the needs of our hybrid, primarily undergraduate university:

Whether individual service learning courses are initiated by faculty, community organizations, or students, they are designed for cohorts of between two and five senior students, each of whom is engaged in a placement for three to five hours per week over the course of a thirteen-week semester, and the TRU calendar description is intentionally broad to accommodate the varying needs and interests of student, faculty, and communities, each of whom may initiate a [hands-on]course (which must always be under faculty supervision). In addition to small class size and extensive involvement, this model is distinguished from classroom-based courses by being graded on a pass-fail basis. (p. 4)

In these service learning courses, my students have assisted theatre companies with publicity and research into historical plays, as well as sharing responsibility for pre-show discussions, archiving material, and preparing fresh data to update a company's website. As they broaden their own skills, the students are also both working alongside theatre professionals as assistants in a number of capacities and completing work that, quite simply, would otherwise not get done. Furthermore, they report that the course has had a lasting influence on their sense of community, increased their likelihood of becoming community volunteers, and, in some cases, even affected their career choices (Ratsoy, 2008). Quantitative studies of service learning efficacy, such as Simons and Cleary (2006) and Eyler and Giles (1999) demonstrate similar enhanced civic engagement as well as affective and cognitive growth. After extended experience supervising research assistants and stand-alone service learning courses, co-curricular service learning seemed the next logical step.

Case Study: Background Theory and Praxis

An understanding of the process of assimilating awareness gleaned from these supervisory experiences into the classroom requires some historical background on the theory and praxis in Aboriginal university courses, including the specific course, Canadian Studies 312: Aboriginal Dramas in Canada (CNST 312) at Thompson Rivers University. I find it especially important to encourage students to contribute any knowledge and experience from their cultural backgrounds and formal education *and* to supplement my learned knowledge of Aboriginal writing and culture with multiple perspectives of Aboriginal writers and educators. I draw extensively on the

holistic approach espoused by many Aboriginal educators and effectively summarized by Doige (2003): “The Aboriginal approaches to learning are spiritual, holistic, experiential/subjective, and transformative” (p.147). Doige further outlines three principles she and other Aboriginal educators and researchers view as necessary to influence curriculum and pedagogy: “a) to accept and thus validate Aboriginal epistemology as a basis for learning; b) to create a relational, safe learning environment that values students; and c) to promote authentic dialogue” (p.149). The course is learner-centred, focusing on group discussion, oral readings, films, plays with a local or regional connection, and a field trip to the local Secwepemc Museum. Furthermore, every effort is made to harmonize syllabi with the offerings of the professional theatres in Kamloops, and a visit from the director or actors often augments the study of text and production. These approaches proved equally effective with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian students as well as international students.

The combination of learning experiences has likely enhanced the students’ understanding of a particular play, and, I hope, had a similar effect on their understanding of professional theatre and drama in general. However, their engagement was, essentially, as *spectators*. As my interest in experiential learning has deepened concomitant to my research, I have realized that the progression from audience member to *participant* is the next logical step for my Aboriginal drama students. This article, through a case study and qualitative analysis of the results of the implementation of a co-curricular service learning assignment into a “traditional” course, advocates for both a move *beyond* the guest speaker and “field trip” approaches to drama studies and a more generalized reflection on student engagement in “traditional” classroom courses for professors in all disciplines.

Case Study: Context

The spring 2009 Western Canada Theatre and National Arts Centre co-production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George Ryga (which premiered in Kamloops) provided an unprecedented opportunity for variety for the CNST 312 students. The experience went beyond studying and viewing a landmark play starring several nationally and internationally known Aboriginal actors in its first professional production with an Aboriginal director. Students were able to exhibit their responses to that play in the TRU Art Gallery and the Sagebrush Theatre lobby, meet CURA and Ryga scholars, get acquainted with local theatre practitioners and actors from across the country, and introduce, hear, and contribute to talks and panels featuring some of the playwrights whose work they were studying. The production and related activities also provided the students with a springboard into participation; although students could not be literally part of the cast of a professional production, they could have a role in the larger process of production, and in that way be “in the show”.

Basing their conclusions on a study of the compatibility of third-year students learning styles and professors’ instructional techniques at the University of Lethbridge, Mather and Champagne (2008) recommend “several different types of assignments for evaluation so that those whose strategies are poorly matched to one assignment type nevertheless do better on another” and group work so that participants “can tap the different abilities of several individuals to come up with solutions to problems” (Discussion section, para. 4). A co-curricular service learning assignment – with accompanying report – in conjunction with traditional assignments such as research papers, tests, and final examinations, as well as bridging the gap from observer to participant, accommodates different learning styles. In groups, the students participated in one

of three areas: (a) the Canadian Studies programme's three-day series of events around the history of the play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, which featured speakers, films, and panels on the play, the playwright, and related issues; (b) a CURA conference, which grew out and immediately followed the Ryga Week events, and was themed around performance in the small city; and (c) WCT pre-production work on the play itself. As this was one of several assignments in the course and the students were in most cases novices in the service area in which they were involved, the students' roles were focused. Some examples of student responsibilities included: (a) assisting with conference and events organizing; (b) presenting a reading from selected scenes of the play to open the gallery exhibition held in conjunction with the Ryga events; (c) publicizing the production on the university campus; and (d) assisting WCT in publicizing the play to Aboriginal communities in the British Columbia Interior.

Each of the eighteen students in the CNST 312 course, representing a variety of disciplinary interests, cultural backgrounds, and previous experience with theatre, had the opportunity for interaction with segments of all of the overlapping communities (e.g., fellow students, the larger TRU community, the conference community, the Aboriginal community, and the WCT community). Although the nature of individual student's contact varied (some, for example had minimal contact with the conference community but considerable contact with WCT personnel and vice versa), all had close contact with at least some of their fellow students and all were definitely engaged. Students were participants in processes, rather than observers of processes and products.

A brief discussion of the process of implementing a co-curricular service learning assignment into a "traditional" course is in order. Because this process is sufficiently complex and situationally variable to warrant the attention of a separate article, and, indeed, there is considerable literature on the processes, I will limit discussion to suggestions on a few matters of a practical nature. A service learning assignment is likely to be most efficacious if the culture of the course as a whole is interactive. Course activities could include frequent discussion of course material, individual or group presentations, and other opportunities for both formal and informal interaction to facilitate engaged learning in general and to foster an appropriate milieu in which to incorporate a co-curricular service learning assignment. Introducing an assignment very early in the semester fosters evolving familiarity, providing students with a choice of duties makes optimum use of their individual skill sets, and devoting some class time to group formation and consultation integrates the assignment into the course; that is, integration of this sort makes it part of the course culture, rather than a tacked-on feature. In addition, frequent, and where possible, face-to-face communication among the group members, their community partners and their professor not only increases the likelihood of the assignment running smoothly, but also, of course, facilitates the social learning that is primary. Many of the students are likely to be unfamiliar with this type of assignment; therefore, it is especially important to present it as an opportunity for applying classroom theory to real world practice and for extending the students' community networks, and to provide a detailed assignment sheet that outlines service learning philosophy, as well as the rationale and objectives for the projects and as many of the anticipated duties of each element of the project as possible. In addition, flexibility on the part of the professor, the students, and the community organization is requisite as the lives of students, as well as the operations of classrooms and organizations, are fluid rather than static. Evaluation may involve consultation with the community organization, and may be based on a combination of the completion of the project and the completion of a reflective report (the reflective element

being a constant in service learning theory and practice). Process is both intricate and delicate; in social learning, it is at least on equal footing with product.

Situated Learning Theory

Given the highly interactive structure of the course, as well as the importance of developing students' social intelligence to experiential learning theory in general, this article focuses on specific aspects of students' social development. Kolb and Kolb (2005) describe situated learning theory as drawing on "Vygotsky's (1978) activity theory of social cognition for a conception ... of learning as a transaction between the person and the social environment" that conceives of knowledge as "resid[ing] not in the individual's head but in communities of practice. Learning is thus a process of becoming a member of a community of practice through legitimate peripheral participation" (pp. 199-200). Kolb and Kolb see situated learning as extending learning spaces "beyond the teacher and the classroom," and providing "socialization into a wider community of practice that involves membership, identity formation, transitioning from novice to expert through mentorship, and experience in the activities of the practice" (p. 200). Although the experiences of one semester could hardly suffice to facilitate expert status, other important aspects of situated learning theory apply. I suggest that situated learning theory has much in common with traditional methods of education of many Aboriginal cultures; in fact, David A. Kolb's earlier words in *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (1984), which emphasize education as holistic, are quite similar to those of Doige (2003). Kolb (1984) asserts that "To learn is not the special province of a single specialized realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception. It involves the integrated functioning of the total organism – thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving" (p.31). Both approaches emphasize holistic development, hands-on learning, and social interaction.

Qualitative Data: Sources and Analysis

The qualitative data received from students came primarily from their service learning report, an accompanying mandatory survey, and to a considerably lesser extent from their responses to final examination questions on indirectly related subjects. The report instructions were deliberately general in order to afford students freedom to present individualized responses:

Your report, in an essay of at least 750 words, will describe your particular project, detail the methods you used to complete the project, and summarize what you learned about Western Canada Theatre, university events planning, or academic conference facilitation through your service. This report is meant to both summarize your service activities and provide a forum for you to reflect on those activities.

The five survey questions were designed to elicit information on the extent of their previous experience with service learning, their previous experience with their individual service learning assignments in the course, a list of the skills they learned or honed in the experience, their senses of the effects of the assignment on their social interactions with their fellow students and the theatre and/or university personnel with whom they worked on the assignment, and what they

believed they learned from the assignment that they would not have learned from a traditional research essay.

In coding the data, it became apparent that most of the students had no previous experience with service learning and very little or no previous experience with their activity. Furthermore, their responses to the survey questions, as well as their individual comments in their reports, indicated a clear sense of social and cognitive development. The former, admittedly, had been my avowed and often stated purpose, so perhaps the students were primed to respond in that vein. However, the responses were detailed and well supported, which suggests considerable reflection.

Students' sense of their relationship to, engagement with, and understanding of theatre – which will be the focus of this analysis – was a prominent theme. Students' comments frequently: (a) reflected an increased understanding of what goes on “behind the scenes”; (b) showed how students placed themselves, their group, or the class as a whole in relation to the company itself; and, (c) indicated that students perceived themselves as a part of a process (i.e., in an “us”, rather than a “them and us” relationship).

Four central sub-themes relevant to student engagement through social learning emerged from student responses to the theatre company: (a) an awareness of the challenges professional theatre companies in small cities face, particularly with respect to the material conditions; (b) a consciousness of community and the individual student's role in that community; (c) an appreciation for the social value of theatre; and (d) a sense of individual connection to the production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, and, thus, a deeper appreciation for and understanding of the play itself (indicating cognitive effects of their social learning). Clearly, Kolb and Kolb's (2005) theories on situated learning theory are applicable to the students' responses.

Working in some cases on-site and side-by-side with theatre professionals, students had the opportunity to participate in day-to-day operations, an experience that provided them with a sense of the dedication of theatre workers and the depth and breadth of theatre work. One student expressed surprise at finding the company's archives “a closet full of file folders in plastic containers” and a generally unglamorous atmosphere about the office space, leading to the conclusion that the company is “about heart and soul, not glitz and glamour...[where] a few people [do] a significant amount of work to ensure that the theatre culture in Kamloops survive[s]” (Survey One). The CURA conference provided students with insight into the details of the production process. Several students expressed surprise at the complexities of the process and one student wrote, “I had never considered the myriad aspects of producing a play before... I have come to realize that it is an epic undertaking with more elements than I would have guessed... I have gained an appreciation for not only the play itself but the behind-the-scenes work that is not always evident in its final form on stage.”(Survey Two). The words of this student were echoed in several other responses:

What impressed me most were the difficulties that faced supervisors of WCT. I value the staff at WCT and realize it is a complicated and rewarding business to run a theatre company: to make sure you get your audience to partake in important community- building projects as well as covering your costs ... My respect for theatre companies has been greatly enhanced through this process. (Survey Three)

The dynamics of theatre-community engagement were understood by one student as “a struggle to try and reach a balance between what one wants to accomplish as an organization and what

will be embraced by the community.” Yet another student, who was privy to some of the technical processes, emphasized the increasing anticipation for the production itself this experience engendered, writing, “I am glad to witness the setting up of the play, in progress. It made me... appreciate live theatre even more than I already do!” (Survey Four). Several respondents indicated a new-found awareness of the financial constraints on theatre companies, as well as the hectic pace of theatre work. These insights, directly from survey responses, could only result from *in situ* circumstances. The students were writing from their engagement in process; thus, their knowledge was being cemented in a way that could not happen from a more conventional assignment, nor from simply being told about professional theatre work by guest lecturers from the field. Their “experience in the activities of the practice” was the first crucial step toward “socialization into a wider community of practice.” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 200).

A course on Aboriginal dramas, of necessity, delves into both social issues and the social efficacy of theatre, and our class discussions of that aspect of various contemporary plays were immeasurably enhanced by the service assignment. One student placed the service assignment directly into a social context:

The social learning aspect ... encouraged thinking from different perspectives. For example, I am not a First Nations person, but I feel somewhat more knowledgeable about the sensibilities of that culture because I have interacted with students with that heritage as well as [Aboriginal artists and other professionals] in conjunction with the plays and other assignments in the syllabus (Report One)

Others took a more direct socio-cultural approach. One report began,

I volunteered to take this position because I was interested in networking with Aboriginal peoples in hopes of dialoguing and helping to increase Aboriginal participation in the renewal of George Ryga’s play as envisioned through Aboriginal direction, creativity, and participation. (Report Two)

The student concluded “The research we did was important to the theatre, because it puts *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* into historical context and provides background information that Kamloops citizens need to fully understand the oppression of Aboriginal people.” (Report Two) These students are able to extrapolate from their concrete work to more abstract cultural issues – an impressive synthesis. Interestingly, as they moved beyond the classroom, into what Kolb and Kolb (2005) call “communities of practice,” their awareness of the social issues illustrated in the course curriculum – Aboriginal plays – became more grounded.

The word “community” and associated concepts recur in the students’ responses, frequently in the context of their classroom or the TRU community, but as often in a larger context. Some students put forth abstract generalizations as concluding statements to their reports, noting, for example, the importance of community to research in general and the applicability of skills acquired in the assignment to community and society as a whole. In addition, several students made more direct, concrete connections by placing themselves directly into the context of the production; while perceiving their role in making the production of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* come to fruition as relatively minor, they fitted that role into a larger whole. One wrote, “As I took part in the advertising process I feel I have contributed to the publicity of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* and therefore feel a sense of ownership regarding the play’s successful

production” (Report Three). Another extended the parameters of community, writing, “This project allowed me the gratification of being involved in the production of an important piece of Canadian theatre history.” (Report Four). The Kolb and Kolb (2005) concept of socialization into “ a wider community of practice that involves membership and identity formation” is evident here.

Further evidence of an enriched educational experience through social learning is provided by student perceptions of an enhanced understanding of *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* specifically and the process of play creation in general. One student’s Ryga Week public reading involved her in earlier versions of the play’s script, an activity that gave her insights into collaborative aspects of the play and appreciation for the intricacies of play creation. Another student, who was engaged in conference activities, wrote, “I learned how plays are written and how they are produced. I learned that the plays we read are not the first version; instead, they are the second or third or even the fourth, as is the case for *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*.” (Report Five). Perhaps most affecting is the response of this student:

Reading *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* in front of a bunch of people made me think that I was contributing to the awareness of the marginalization in the world – in history , and now....And if a person showed up, not knowing that this still occurs today, then I have made a difference in society – even if it seems insignificant. (Report Six)

This student evinces an awareness of the historical nature of the play but as well sees the issues it presents as ongoing and reveals an understanding of the socially efficacious role of theatre. The participatory nature of the assignment afforded the students a sense of immediacy not otherwise possible, thus enriching their educational experience. Furthermore, the assignment and its accompanying reflective report made the students cognizant that learning can be “a transaction between the person and the social environment” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 199).

Conclusion

Clearly, participation does not eliminate the need for incorporating spectating and witnessing elements in the drama classroom. Rather, participation enhances spectating. It employs more of an individual’s senses, and it broadens and deepens the context of viewing the play, augmenting such activities as listening to guest lectures by theatre personnel and participating in field trips, thus making studies more deeply apprehended and valued. As a component of a learner-centred curriculum, a service learning assignment is an effective tool to enhance student engagement.

Although only time will tell if the co-curricular service learning assignment will have a lasting effect on the Canadian Studies 312 students, their written reflections suggest a positive leaning experience. More than one student carried the co-curricular service assignment beyond the assignment itself – by what theatre scholar Susan Bennett (2005) has acknowledged as one of the two most common and often very effective means of advertising in theatre – word of mouth. As well, student-theatre company experiences prompted one student to vow to resume previous volunteer work with the company, another to express a determination to engage in volunteering in some form, and more than one “non-theatre” student to express interest in the discovery that there are ongoing volunteer roles for non-actors at Western Canada Theatre. In addition, by the spring of 2010 a student from the Canadian Studies 312 course had successfully completed two

stand-alone service learning courses – initiated by the artistic producer and the administrative director – with Western Canada Theatre.

The fortunate coincidence of an Aboriginal-themed research conference and a theatre production with the scheduling of a course that related to both made for an exceptionally rich opportunity for students with a variety of disciplinary perspectives to engage with both on- and off-campus communities. However, opportunities for such collaboration are not uncommon, and they are certainly pan-disciplinary. As they respond to institutional mandates that increasingly focus on engagement, professors in all disciplines are cognizant of the mutual benefits of involving individual or small groups of students in their research. Perhaps this recognition could be a stepping stone to a broadening of their vision of student engagement to encompass such social learning opportunities as on- and off-campus conferences, meetings, festivals, and other projects for entire classes of students. Such collaborations can not only contribute meaningfully to the quality of events; they can also foster faculty research and deepen student engagement.

Faculty should be aware that service learning assignments can also increase the level of academic challenge for both students and professors. Several Canadian Studies 312 students acknowledged that their co-curricular service learning assignment took them “out of their comfort zones.” Faculty implementing such assignments may find themselves feeling similar discomfort at times. Butin (2005) calls experiential-based learning practice “an existentially dangerous endeavour...” because faculty must “rethink the belief that academic knowledge comes directly from us, in a classroom, based on a written text, and assessed objectively” (p. ix). However, at times we must, as my students and I learned, stretch ourselves. As Butin advocates, “We must acknowledge our students as active, reflective, and resistant agents in their own educational processes” (p. x). Situated learning, with its emphasis on intricate socialization processes, can induce scrutiny and interrogation of traditional academic roles. Such examination is often a necessary step toward significant change, which can have profound effects on the classroom, the professor, and the community.

Given the connection between research and teaching on which this article began, it seems fitting to include the reflection of a student who was both a research assistant on our CURA work and a student in the Canadian Studies 312 course. The student’s conclusion neatly encapsulates the Kolb & Kolb’s (2005) “situated learning theory” from a student perspective:

Through Service Learning, the student[s] not only learn more about their potential to effect change and enrich their place of residence, but those outside of the university setting learn that students are eager to be involved in the community-building process. This was an extremely satisfying and rewarding endeavour. Every class should have some component that requires a student to apply their knowledge to the community social sphere (Erin Hoyt, personal interview, April 10, 2009).

This response evinces both membership in and a strong sense of identification with the both the university and the city community. It also implicitly acknowledges the importance of varied pedagogical approaches.

Students’ engagement in university courses in all disciplines can be extended into participatory engagement in local communities to the end of enriching their university experience through active and collaborative situated learning. In this case study, the experiential, holistic approaches of traditional Aboriginal education were a natural fit with the course content and the community focus. However, it is important to note that the approach appeared to work

equally well with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and, as previously suggested, there is a nexus between those traditions and some Western learning theories. With increasing emphasis in post-secondary institutions on student and community engagement, it is incumbent on educators to reflect on their practices, to consider the attitudes, preferences, and orientations of their students, and to approach those students as both dynamic entities and elements of larger communities. Incorporating co-curricular service learning assignments or other assignments designed to enhance the whole student and expand the university's influence into the surrounding community by implementing elements of traditional Aboriginal education and situated learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) can be an empowering and productive method – for all parties – of achieving such engagement. With flexibility and imagination, in one way or another, we can all be “in the show.”

References

- Australian Council for Educational Research (2010). Survey seeks to measure student engagement. *ACER eNews*. Retrieved from <http://www.acer.edu.au/enews/2007/06/survey-seeks-to-measure-student-engagement>
- Bennett, S. (2005). *Theatre audiences: A theory of production and reception*. (2nd ed.). London and New York: Routledge MacMillan.
- Butin, D. W. (Ed.). (2005). *Service-learning in higher education: Critical issues and directions*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Doige, L. A. C. (2003). A missing link: Between traditional Aboriginal education and the western system of education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 27(2), 144-157.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Higher Education*, 4(2), 193-212.
- Mather, J. A., & Champagne, A. (2008). Student learning styles/strategies and professors' expectations: Do they match? *College Quarterly*, 11(2). Retrieved from <http://www.clark.edu/tlc/documents/Learningstylesandeducatorsexpectations.pdf>
- National Survey of Student Engagement. (2009). *National Survey of Student Engagement: 2009 Invitation to participate*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. Retrieved from <http://nsse.iub.edu/>
- Ostrander, S. A. (2004). Democracy, civic participation, and the university: A comparative study of civic engagement on five campuses. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 33(1), 74-93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0899764003260588>
- Power, A. (2010). Community engagement as authentic learning with reflection. *Issues in Educational Research*, 20(1), 57-63.
- Ratsoy, G. (2008). The small city as classroom: Academic service learning participants reflect. *Transformative dialogues*, 2(2).
- Simons, L., & Cleary, B. (2006). The influence of service learning on students' personal and social development. *College Teaching*, 54(4), 307-319. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.54.4.307-319>

- Thompson Rivers University. *Strategic plan: 2007-2012*. Retrieved from http://www.tru.ca/shared/assets/2007-2012_strategic_plan832_6.pdf
- Trent University. *Mission for Trent University*. Retrieved from <http://www.trentu.ca/administration/documents/100624mission.pdf>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman, (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.