

Student Experiences and Learning in CBL Courses

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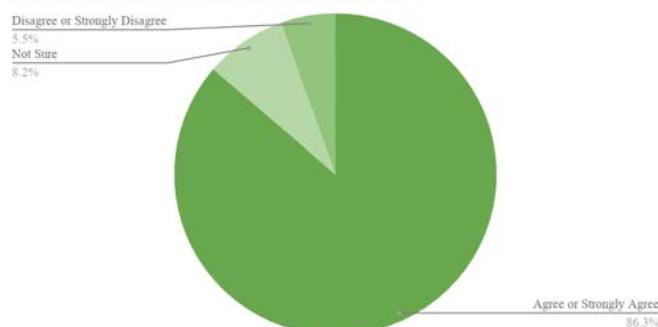
Research conducted at a range of institutions of higher education across the United States suggests that community-based learning (CBL) can provide powerful learning opportunities for students at all stages of their academic career. Specifically, CBL can help students develop empathy, better understand the relationship between theory and practice, and contribute to their surrounding community. To better understand how CBL affects Centre students specifically, the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has been conducting student learning self-assessments in CBL classes, including classes in Politics, Sociology, Math, Spanish, and Education, for the past two years. Altogether, a total of 146 student learning assessments are represented in the analysis that follows. Additionally, in fall 2017, the CTL conducted a survey given to all Bonner students to which there were 22 respondents, and in winter 2017, conducted a focus group with four students who had CBL experiences. These supplemental elements to the ongoing in-class assessments were designed to yield rich qualitative data that could help us contextualize the quantitative data collected through the student learning assessment, as well as gather information about what CBL opportunities Centre College students would like to see in their classes.

This report provides an overview of the important conclusions from these data and analyzes the extent to which the CBL experiences of Centre students resonate with the aforementioned research on the effects of CBL on student learning. Specifically, this report presents five commonly held findings from the research literature and explores what our data suggest about the extent to which these findings, broadly interpreted, are also true at Centre College. Our hope is that faculty members will find this information useful as they develop CBL projects and courses, and that these findings might spur conversation about the nature of CBL at Centre College.

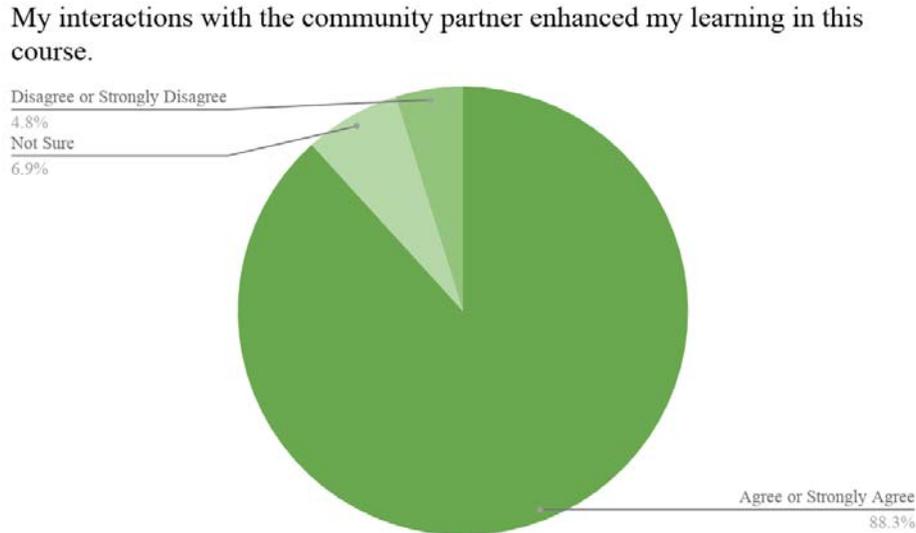
Finding #1: CBL encourages deep engagement with course materials and concepts (Astin & Sax, 1998; Knackmuhs et al., 2017; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000).

Our survey and focus group data strongly align with this finding. Of the combined total of 2016 and 2017 fall post-survey respondents, 86.3% agreed or strongly agreed that CBL helped them to better understand the lectures and readings in the course.

The community-based learning I did through this course helped me to better understand the lectures and readings in this course



Additionally, 88.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their interactions with the community partner enhanced their learning in the course.



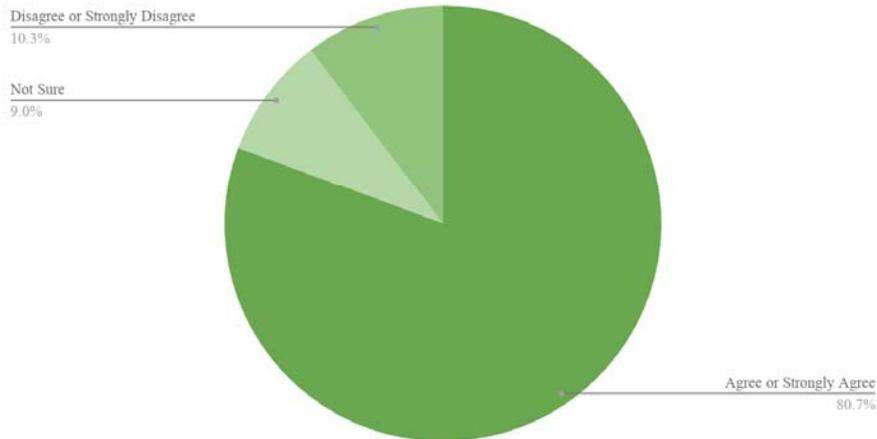
In the focus group, one student observed that CBL “takes the classroom outside of the classroom” and allows students to see “abstract” concepts in a community setting. Moreover, students asserted that seeing theoretical disciplinary concepts outside of the classroom enables students to “pursue action with [their] knowledge.”

When paired together, the survey and focus group data suggest that by providing opportunities for students to learn about concepts from the community, CBL encourages students to deeply engage with course material and enables Centre students to develop a better understanding of course concepts. Ideally, CBL also provides students with an opportunity to then act upon these concepts in a way that produces something of value to the community. Of course, connections between course content and community work are not automatic, but must be structured and supported through carefully constructed assignments and ongoing reflection opportunities. (See Finding #5 for additional information related to this finding.)

Finding #2: Studies (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler, 2002) conclude that CBL increases student awareness of community needs.

This widely held national finding is supported by both our survey and focus group data. Of the combined total of 2016 and 2017 fall post-survey respondents, 80.7% agreed or strongly agreed that CBL helped them to become more aware of community needs.

The community-based learning involved in this course helped me to become more aware of the needs in my community.

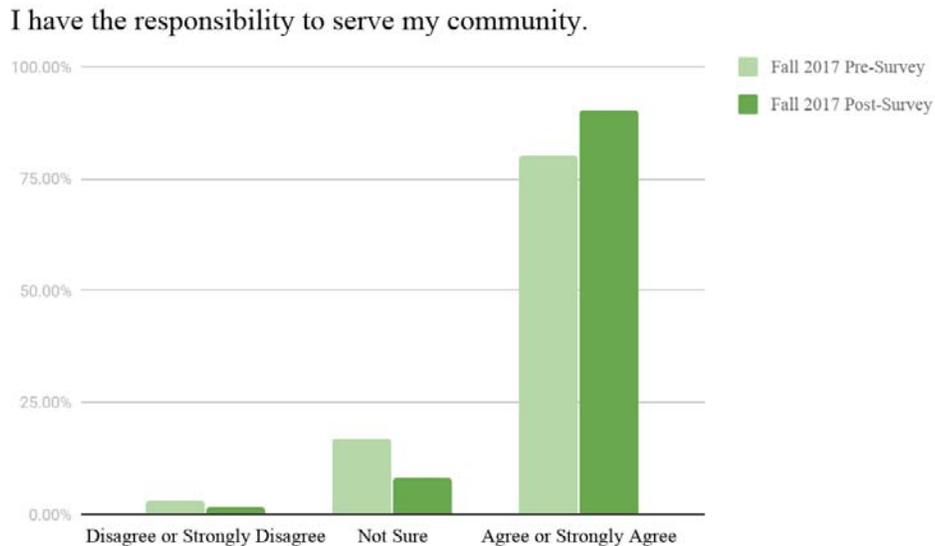


In the focus group, one student said that many students hold a fixed “idealistic view of the world”, especially related to community issues, but that CBL can help students to understand structural realities and “barriers” facing communities. Students also added that this understanding “opens the door for directed community action,” whether in or out of a classroom setting. Another student noted that rather than “assum[ing] they need something...it’s important to ask the community what they need.” A student who echoed these sentiments claimed that the “most important part” of CBL is “asking the people that you’re helping what they actually need instead of just assuming what you think that they do.” With this finding in mind, faculty members designing CBL projects and courses may want to consider giving students detailed information about the process by which they developed the project, with particular attention to the ways the community partner contributed to – or even directed – the development of the project.

While the survey data directly reflect a self-reported increase by students in awareness of community needs, the focus group data provide an idea of how this awareness is developed. CBL challenges students to consider the multi-dimensionality of community needs, which can often be more complex or completely different than students’ prior conceptualizations. Based upon these experiences, students approach community involvements such that communities retain the power to decide what they need. As the next finding indicates, understanding this process also allows students to be more prepared to carry their commitment to community service and action into their various communities after their undergraduate experience.

Finding #3: CBL can help promote life-long service and community involvement (Moely et al., 2002; Astin et al., 1999) .

Our survey and focus group data bear out the idea that this is also true at Centre. In fall 2017, comparing pre- and post- test results reveals a 10% increase in the number of students who agree or strongly agree that they have a responsibility to serve their community. Considering that 80% of students already agreed or strongly agreed in the pre-survey, this is a substantial increase.



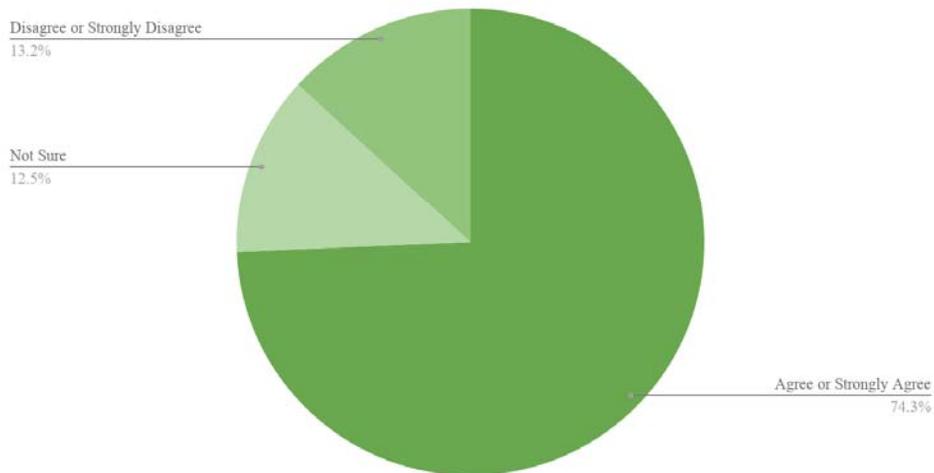
In the focus group, a student observed that by giving students an “eye-opening experience,” a CBL class can “change how they see the world and how they vote in the future, which could potentially have systemic changes.”

Combining the focus group and survey data shows that CBL compels students to feel invested in their community and allows students to see how their actions in the present can impact future decisions. Although we do not have the capacity currently to conduct a longitudinal study to see if students who participated in CBL at Centre are still involved in community service after graduation, our data indicates that students intend to continue their involvement and relate this continued involvement with their CBL experiences.

Finding #4: CBL improves students’ writing, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills (Simons & Cleary, 2006; Richard et al., 2017).

Of the combined total of 2016 and 2017 fall post-survey respondents, 74.3% agreed or strongly agreed that CBL helped them to develop their problem-solving skills.

The community-based learning aspect of this course helped me to develop my problem-solving skills.

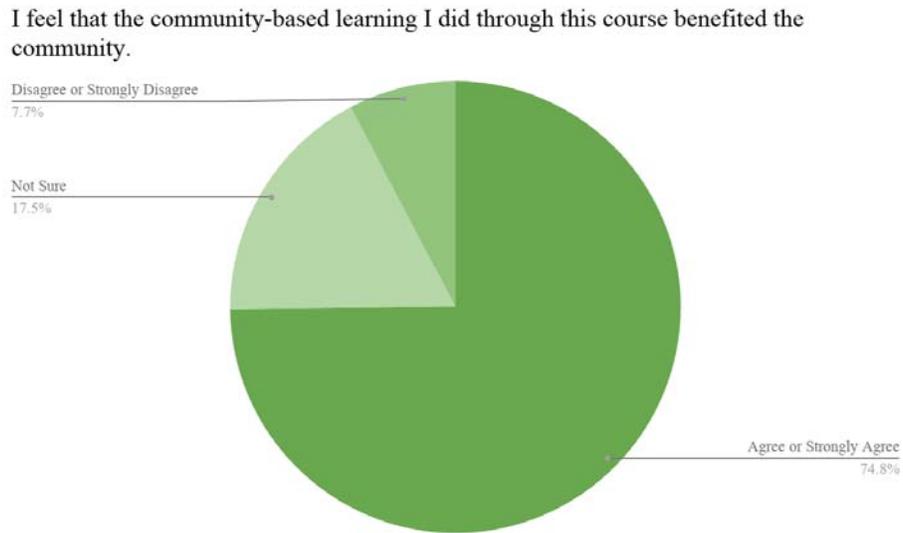


In the focus group, many students indicated how CBL both afforded them situations to practice problem-solving and affected the way they approach problem-solving theoretically and logistically. One student stated that by applying classroom material in “a more real-world situation,” CBL enabled them to practice “thinking on [their] feet.” Another student asserted that “in order to address the systemic problem, you have to still work with the immediate problem.” Notably, in this statement the student distinguished between immediate and systemic problems, while also making it clear that problems with different time horizons must be addressed concurrently. Emphasizing the logistical side of problem-solving, one student stated that “planning a project that suits an immediate need” must also be a “sustainable” way of meeting that immediate need. In this statement, the student acknowledged that even immediate needs are recurring, meaning that addressing them once does not necessarily alleviate the need for a long-term solution. Another student identified a logistical aspect of problem-solving in highlighting that there must be “enough volunteers” to practice “continual action.”

Taken together, our data sources reveal that CBL builds problem-solving skills, with the quantitative data indicating a self-reported increase and the qualitative data demonstrating the nuance with which CBL students approach problem-solving. With regard to the theoretical side of problem-solving, students make distinctions between the multiple dimensions of a problem and how they should be addressed. Logistically speaking, students understand that one-time fixes are often unrealistic and that issues of capacity must be considered.

Finding #5: Studies (Bringle & Kremer, 1993; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996) suggest that CBL can contribute to community development (meet a real community need).

Of the combined total of 2016 and 2017 fall post-survey respondents, 74.8% agreed or strongly agreed that the CBL they performed benefited the community.



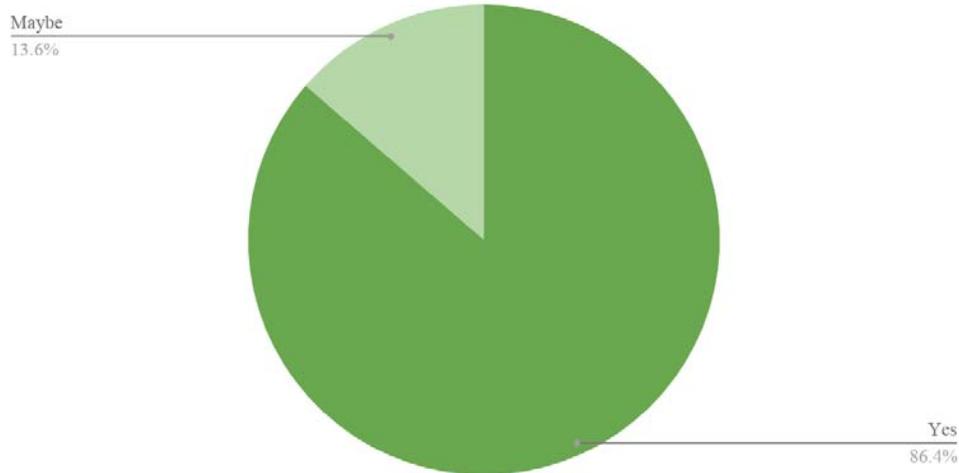
A student from the focus group recounted that their CBL experience allowed students to “produce something” that the community was able to “take and apply.” In this specific situation, the class developed a report that demonstrated the positive impact the partner had on the community. The community partner was then able to use this report to secure the additional funding necessary for them to fulfill their organization’s mission.

At the same time, although the majority of students who participated in the assessment self-reported that CBL benefited the community, and although students in the focus group could point to specific times when the community benefited, it is important to acknowledge that 17.5% of survey respondents answered that they were ‘unsure’ about whether the community had benefitted. In the focus group, students shed additional light onto this finding. As one student expressed, “it’s hard... to decide what is benefiting the community effectively and who to talk to in that community.” Given that it is a desire to benefit the community that often drives students to participate in CBL, faculty engaged in CBL may want to focus particular attention on helping students determine the outcomes of their community work.

Conclusion

While CBL is clearly not an appropriate pedagogical approach for all classes in all academic disciplines, faculty members in disciplines ranging from mathematics to art history can – in the right circumstances – create CBL courses that help enhance student learning, increase student engagement, and contribute to community development. Certainly, our research suggests that many Centre students – particularly those with existing community relationships and interest in service – would be interested in seeing additional CBL courses offered. For example, when surveyed, 19 out of 22 Bonner students agreed that they would like to see more classes offered at Centre that involve community-based learning, and those that did not agree chose ‘maybe’. None of the respondents chose ‘no’.

Would you like to see more classes offered at Centre that involve community-based learning?



In conjunction with the findings previously discussed, this survey data indicate that not only do students themselves recognize personal growth and an effective academic experience as being linked to CBL, but that they are also calling for more opportunities to be involved in CBL at Centre College. As always, we are more than happy to share additional CBL resources or meet to talk about any aspect of CBL, including contacting community partners, designing effective assignments, and connecting community and classroom work.

References

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