The Use of Community Engaged Learning in the Teaching of the Sociology of Deviance

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Introduction

Community-engaged scholarship (CES) engages the researcher and the community together in a process of knowledge generation, allowing for the interchange of expertise and practical outcomes for both parties.\(^1\) It focuses on establishing links between the University and the community in a reciprocal process of making meaning and establishing solutions to community-identified issues.\(^2\) Instead of working for the community, community-engaged scholars work with the community in mutually beneficial partnerships.\(^3\) Increasingly, community-engaged scholarship is becoming central to academic innovation as a method to connect with the broader social landscape in which the academic institution operates.\(^4\)

One role for community-engaged scholarship is its ability to bring students and the community closer together and to progress mutual understanding between different groups in society.\(^5\) The method, often referred to as “community-engaged learning (CEL),” has potential as a tool in instructing courses which treat material that transcends typical student knowledge of social groups from diverse classes, statuses and affiliations. The sociology of deviance, in


particular, can derive benefit from community-engaged learning to enhance student understanding and to foster creativity and innovation. A community-engaged framework can be used to creatively connect students to marginalized groups about which it has traditionally been difficult to establish a deep understanding. In this connective capacity, community-engaged learning has the potential to act as a bridge between theory and practice. Particularly in the teaching of sociological deviance, CEL is a key tool to breach the walls of the Ivory Tower. As a form of public sociology, CEL provides a basis for establishing dialogue between the community and the University, helping to prevent intellectual imperialism, which can emerge from scholarship that is undertaken in isolation from community needs and priorities.

The priorities of community-engaged scholarship more broadly, and community-engaged learning in particular, mirror those long desired by community-focused academics, as articulated in Ernest Boyer’s now-famous call for the reconnection of the campus to the community through teaching, discovery, integration, application and engagement. This paper explores community-engaged learning as a framework to support the learning objectives of a sociological deviance course taught at the University of Guelph. Used as a teaching method, community-engaged learning concretizes and humanizes members of groups socially defined as deviant and allows students to step outside of traditional academic inquiry and to actively engage in scholarship. Community-engaged methods aid in creating mutually beneficial and enduring partnerships,

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which serve to reinforce not only positive student learning experiences, but to respond to community-defined issues.9

Methodology

This paper amalgamates work in the field of community engagement in the classroom and a literature review on the benefits of community-engaged scholarship and community-engaged learning in teaching sociological deviance courses. Throughout a one-semester sociological deviance course, speakers from various community organizations were invited to the classroom to share either lived or professional experiences in fields relating to groups socially defined as deviant. After their presentations, students and speakers were asked to reflect upon the experience. Excerpts from these reflections are presented herein, as a means of demonstrating the utility of using community engaged learning in the teaching of sociological deviance and enriching the knowledge schemas and capacity for action on the part of students, community partners and professors. These reflections are placed in the context of a review of the relevant literature to further illustrate the use and benefits of this technique in academic and community work. Research ethics approval was sought and granted for the use of quotes throughout the paper, which are used to illustrate the first-hand experiences of participants in this community-engaged initiative.

The Sociology of Deviance

The overlap between sociology and criminology has inspired the pursuit of enhanced student understanding of deviant behaviours and acts that transcend the criminal. Knowledge gaps in the sociological schemas of undergraduate students may result in negative labeling for marginalized groups.10 Deviance courses are generally intended to “banish ethnocentric points of

10 Anne P. DePrince, Sarah J. Priebe, and Taylor A. Newton, “Learning about violence against women in research methods: A comparison to traditional pedagogy,” Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy 1,
view regarding deviant categories of individuals and groups through the development of a clearer understanding of how deviance is created and defined". Several different theoretical perspectives can be employed to articulate to students the fundamental aspects of social deviance. For example, the social constructionist approach explores how views of social deviance are viewed and acted upon in different social, political and historical contexts. The social power perspective focuses on the influence that powerful groups in society have in creating and applying laws, and the relativist approach claims that “deviance is in the eye of the beholder” rather than in the act of deviance itself. As Becker notes in his influential text *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*:

… social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender.”

Coursework alone may not be able to capture the breadth of social deviance, and the traditional lecture-format may serve to reinforce existing stereotypes about individuals socially defined as deviant. This is a particular risk given the socially constructed character of deviance, which can change based on context-specific beliefs about, and shifting norms surrounding, deviant behaviour. Given that active-learning techniques have the potential to improve educational outcomes for undergraduate students, deviance scholars have begun to look to these approaches, which engage students more directly with community organizations both in and out of the classroom, as a means to avoid the further ingraining of deviant stereotypes.
Community Engaged Learning in an Undergraduate Course on the Sociology of Deviance

While there are myriad ways to implement community-engaged techniques, the use of community partners as guest speakers will be explored in this paper. This technique was chosen given the large enrolment in the course; with 300 students the possibility of developing one-on-one style interactions between community partners and students was not feasible. This introduction to the study of social deviance is an elective course and is one of many second year sociology courses offered to students to fulfill course requirements for the Sociology major, minor, or area of concentration. The course is offered one night a week over the course of a twelve-week semester and focuses on the ways in which society responds to, and attempts to control, deviant behaviour. Several sociological theories of deviance are explored in detail in the course, including positivist, functionalist, learning, social control, critical and interpretive theories. Topics covered in the course include: defining, measuring, and explaining social deviance; the social organization of deviance; deviance and stigma; mental health issues; controversial sexual issues; drug use and abuse; harm reduction programs; and popular culture and deviance. Midterms ask thought provoking questions that require students to reflect on the guest speakers’ presentations. Students are asked to describe and analyze one of the presentations by incorporating and applying at least four concepts examined in the course in their analysis. Concepts refer to terminology used in the course, such as stigma, stigma management, primary deviance, secondary deviance, formal organizations, organizational deviance and crime, mental disorders, deinstitutionalization, disease paradigm, and discrimination paradigm. The students

are further required to apply two theoretical frameworks learned in the course to their analysis of the guest presentation. Finally, the students are asked to comment on the effect that this guest presentation had on their learning about the related topic. Did their perspective or attitude about a particular lifestyle, or line of work, change once they heard the guest speaker? Did the guest speaker help to open their eyes to lived realities, break down stigma, or reduce stereotypes in any way? These are the questions we deemed central to determining the value of community-engaged learning.

The Student Experience of Community-Engaged Learning

Community-engaged learning in the classroom context derives much of its usefulness from its capacity to “empower students to bring about positive social change”. Students involved in community-engaged initiatives often report enhanced learning climates and understanding of the material taught in the classroom. Students engaged in the community experience strong and positive influences on overall academic performance, writing, critical thinking skills, motivation, self-evaluation, and reflection. Incorporating activities during course time that “change students from passive note-takers to active participants in their education” is a goal that many undergraduate educators share.

Beyond its ability to enhance student academic success, community-engaged scholarship has implications for students’ development of a sense of social responsibility. By working in

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close co-ordination with community groups, students are able to develop their sociological imagination and sociological eye, and ultimately learn that while they may not be able to fundamentally alter extant social conditions of inequality, sociology has a place in student and community transformation. Students gain access to segments of the population to which they may not otherwise be exposed, and begin to observe the social construction of inequality and the social construction of deviance. In helping students to develop a broader understanding of the social landscape in which they live, work, and study, community-engaged initiatives foster the students’ problem-solving capabilities and encourage lifelong community engagement, both as a part of and beyond academia.

In social deviance courses, student misunderstanding can result in an effect contrary to the goals of the course: the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about a group, or “white knight” syndrome. A “white knight” attitude refers to the student’s perception of self as the solution to societal ills, and the misperception of altruism that can accompany volunteerism and/or community engagement. Accordingly, the professor should consider the potentially sensitive dynamics at play in engaging with the community and strive to understand and overcome potential student biases.

Guest speakers in this social deviance course offered an integral contribution to the course subject matter and presented fascinating material to the students. Sociological theory and concepts came to life for the students when experts in the fields of mental health, youth services, 

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22 Chambers, “A Continuum of Approaches.”
23 Barry Checkoway, “Combining Service and Learning on Campus and in the Community,” Phi Delta Kappan 77, no. 9 (1996), 600, 602-606. ; Everett, “Understanding Social Inequality.”
24 Everett, “Understanding Social Inequality,” 301.
sexuality, addictions, and harm reduction spoke to the class. These guests delivered tremendous insight into issues that cannot be captured by any one textbook or any one lecturer. The speakers brought to life topics such as sexual orientation, stigma and HIV, issues in addiction and stories of recovery, HIV prevention, harm reduction programs, needle exchange programs, safe tattooing, street outreach services, street youth and prostitution. Student feedback revealed that the presentations helped to break down stereotypes and reduce stigma.

Guest speakers provide students with opportunities to ask questions about topics such as drug use, safe tattooing, street youth, and harm reduction. Some information presented by guest speakers may also resonate with a student’s own life experiences, encouraging the student to access support or refer a friend for professional help, and bridging the distance some students may feel exists between themselves and the “deviant” groups about which they learn in class. In their midterms, students wrote about how theoretical concepts and guest speaker’s life stories related to their own personal lives and life situations. These opportunities for reflection assist in changing perspectives, attitudes, understandings and practices in ways that deepen student learning. This reflection helps to close the gap between abstract theoretical concepts and discussions of real world issues and situations. The assignments and midterms based on the guest speakers’ material have encouraged students to elaborate on their feelings about a particular speaker’s presentations, while keeping course material in mind. Additionally, unique perspectives from students often help guest speakers to gain an understanding of students’ lives, their interests, and how agencies can support youth more effectively.
Building a Bridge Between Theory and Practice

Community-engaged techniques such as those introduced in this sociology of deviance course can also facilitate and encourage the linking of theory to practice. The use of such techniques may be especially salient in the context of the sociology of deviance, as this course introduces students to many topics that require a firm grasp of sociological theory to understand. Concepts such as social normativity, stigma management, ascribed and achieved status, and moral entrepreneurs are key concepts for this course. Several complex theoretical frameworks are applied in teaching social deviance, and are essential for understanding and explaining the intricacies of the subject. Theory provides us with a basis for comprehending social deviance, as it is through theory we come to understand the world we live in, including the extraordinary and nonconforming behaviours there-within.

One of the key benefits of community-engaged scholarship in terms of student outcomes is its ability to crystallize highly abstract concepts. Forming this link is especially valuable in courses such as social deviance, which require a great deal of theory and abstract thinking. CEL has the potential to fill the gaps left by textbooks, lecture-based learning and students’ personal experiences of deviance, allowing them to critically reflect on these practices, as described above. Engaging with a community of interest can help to broaden student perspectives, which

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may be difficult to extract from the oftentimes-considered “weirdness” or “extraordinariness” of deviant subcultures.26

In the social deviance class taught at the University of Guelph, students remarked upon this bridge-building capacity. “By listening to guests who have experience with issues such as HIV, queer issues, alcohol and drug addictions, the course readings and theories come to life,” explained one student, “by listening and talking with these speakers, we are able to put a face to real-life issues and expand our comfort zone with different cultural experiences.” Another student described the guest speaker experience by referring to the way in which “it makes the concepts jump off the page.” Students gained insight into the perspectives of those who work in the field and/or are clients of community organizations. “A greater depth and understanding comes from this experience that could not be obtained from hearing only one lecturer,” said one student of this increased understanding of diverse points of view. Another commented on how “guest speakers were really able to captivate the class [...] it was so helpful to be exposed to the realities of addiction with guests speaking about their journey to recovery and it is encouraging to hear that there can be a positive outcome for these individuals.”

Community-engaged learning may also help students to overcome difficulties in understanding social deviance as more than “a mere voyeuristic examination of those on the fringes of behaviour”.27 Part of the preparation for community engaged work should be information-based teaching about the population of interest, which may help to clarify, in advance, some of the social dynamics at play in the labeling and expression of deviance.28

Following this theoretical introduction to the course with first hand knowledge and experiences

27 Bader, Becker and Desmond, “Reclaiming Deviance,” 320.
28 Checkoway, “Combining Service.”
in the words of guest speakers who either work in the field or are clients of community
organizations, may help students to more fully understand the reasons behind social definitions
of deviance.29 “I am able to think differently about deviance issues and be more open minded,”
explained one student in this social deviance course. “Hearing about people’s personal
experiences with stigma and deviance gives us examples of how these concepts actually do affect
people in real-life.” Engaging with marginalized groups can provide substantive examples and
illustrations of the larger sociological processes involved in the study of social deviance.30

As a result of participating in active learning about social deviance through engaging
with speakers from groups considered deviant, students often report feeling better connected to
the community as a whole, further enhancing the social and civic responsibility and partnership
aspects of CEL. Community engaged work also helps students gain a fuller understanding of
themselves and the context in which they live and study, regardless of their baseline biases and
spaces of belonging. This aspect is of particular salience to the study of social deviance, as
student misunderstanding has traditionally acted as a roadblock on the path to a more objective
understanding of the subject matter.31

Guest speakers from marginalized groups can inspire community-consciousness and
perhaps even incite students to seek engagement with these groups outside of the classroom.32
This is particularly true when students are given the opportunity to interact with speakers and
reflect on their experiences. As the Director of a women’s addiction treatment centre
commented,

Sharing information and personal stories from the “front-line” appears to impact the students by increasing
their awareness and reducing stereotypes. This creates a better social understanding of addiction in general
and may even influence a student more directly. On most occasions, students wait to speak to me after the

29 Hollis, “Capturing the Experience.”
31 Uggen and Inderbitzing, “Public Criminologies.”
32 Jakubowski and Burman, “Teaching Community Development.”
presentation. Invariably, students share their own personal stories of addiction — with themselves, family members or friends. In this way, the integration between community organizations and education can lead to significant personal changes.

Giving students adequate time to reflect on their experiences, biases and understandings of deviance can also be instrumental in preventing paternalism.\(^{33}\) It may be that, particularly in the case of deviance scholarship, speakers allow students to access perspectives from varied segments of society, and may even incite continued work in the subfield of sociology of deviance and/or further study with these particular groups.\(^{34}\) Community engagement overall has been linked to greater career certainty and direction among sociology undergraduates.\(^{35}\) Future research could attempt to ascertain to what degree this certainty can be linked to the experiences of undergraduates, through community-engaged learning, where students engage with segments of society to which they would not normally have developed ties.

The Professor’s Role in Community-Engaged Learning

Professors may face certain barriers to implementing community-engaged scholarship and community-engaged learning techniques, including the time required to establish community partnerships and lacking reward structures for the work required to create a positive community-engaged experience for all parties involved.\(^{36}\) However, there are also many benefits for professors who undertake community-engaged methods.\(^{37}\) Community-engaged scholarship and learning can provide professors with a valuable opportunity to engage more

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\(^{36}\) Hawkins, Brown and Bergen, “Summary of Results.” ; McKinney, Medvedeva, Vacca and Malak, “Beyond the Classroom.”

directly with the community and with students.\textsuperscript{38} With a willingness to adapt methods of teaching, professors can create new relationships with students where both parties play an active role in defining the course experience.\textsuperscript{39} The student-teacher relationship can be fundamentally altered by employing these techniques, recalling what Friere referred to as critical pedagogy, where education acts as “articulation of experience, critical thinking and reflection, and social action.”\textsuperscript{40}

Evidently, different community-engaged initiatives require different timelines.\textsuperscript{41} Shorter-term techniques, such as bringing in guest speakers, can help to surmount the traditional difficulty experienced by professors in terms of working within a semester-based system and working with large groups of students.\textsuperscript{42} Even in a shorter-term CEL initiative such as the course explored in this article, students were provided with the opportunity to reflect on the material the guests had presented in relation to the course by participating in class discussion, by reflection in written assignments and by posting in online discussion groups.

The instructor’s perspective on teaching and learning has been affected as a result of adopting community-engaged scholarship into the classroom. This approach helps us, as professors, to achieve the connection between theory and practice we strive for in teaching. Sharing information and personal stories from the “front-line” appears to impact students tremendously by increasing their awareness and reducing stereotypes, an impact that has been incredibly rewarding to the professor. Students have shared with the instructor, in person,

\textsuperscript{38} Everett, “Understanding Social Inequality.” ; Sam Marullo, Roxanna Moayedi, and Deanna Cooke, “C. Wright Mills’s Friendly Critique of Service Learning and an Innovative Response: Cross-Institutional Collaborations for Community-Based Research,” \textit{Teaching Sociology} 37, no.1 (2009), 61-75. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Jakubowski and Burman, “Teaching Community Development.” \\
\textsuperscript{40} DePrince, Priebe, and Newton. “Learning about violence,” 162. \\
\textsuperscript{41} Marullo, Moayedi and Cooke, “C. Wright Mill’s.” \\
\textsuperscript{42} Mary Beckman and David Hay, “Community-Based Research in a Course on City Revitalization,” \textit{Transformations} 2, (2003), 77. ; Jakubowski and Burman, “Teaching Community Development.” ; Wright, “Getting More.”
through midterms, and through course evaluations, how deeply touched they were by the speakers’ presentations. Some have shared how their own families have experienced similar circumstances and situations described by the guests. One student commented about her exposure to addiction at family gatherings:

   My perspective on this lifestyle changed as the guest opened my eyes on how it can affect individuals throughout so many aspects of their lives. When reflecting on the lifestyle of one suffering from alcohol addiction, we often turn a cold shoulder and express a negative reaction. The guest speaker helped me to break down stigma. I have gained a more positive attitude towards those suffering and truly believe that although times may be rough, and one may slip through the cracks, there is hope for recovery.

Another student was overcome with emotion when after class she approached our guest who was speaking on drug addiction. She wanted to let him know that she had helped him on the street when she worked for a homeless shelter in another city; the man recognized her. For the student, to see that her small contribution may have had an impact on helping this individual “return to society,” and was in fact now contributing to her education was very compelling. That homeless, addicted man she had helped was now presenting his story of recovery to her and the class. Student reflections such as these reinforce, for professors, the value in employing community-engaged learning in their courses as a means to deepen student learning and connection of lived experiences to theoretical concepts.

   Benefits to Community Partners

   In addition to altering the student and professor experience of learning, one of the most significant benefits of community-engaged work is its ability to give voice to community
partners, a voice which may be largely ignored in traditional academic endeavors. In creating partnerships that involve direct participation from community partners, community-engaged initiatives can help to make a community-engaged initiative successful for professors, students, and community partners alike. Thus, entering into community partnerships with an eye to work with, rather than for, these partners, is a fundamental consideration in community-engaged initiatives.

Focusing on the benefits to community partners requires commitment on the part of all stakeholders. In order to develop a “mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity,” focus should be placed on applying the learning initiatives to needs identified by the community. In speaking to a class of sociologically engaged students, guest speakers articulated what they determined to be the priorities of the group or agency they represent. Community partners may benefit from even short-term engagement with the University when they work within these truly mutually beneficial relationships, as noted by a speaker from the local HIV/AIDS committee.

Class presentations have allowed us to educate, learn from, and work with the University community to address the issue of HIV and AIDS both locally, and more broadly. These interactions have provided many benefits to our agency including many energetic volunteers, and an increased awareness of our agency and our programs and services. Different perspectives from the students assist our agency as we gain a better understanding of the needs of the students and can better provide them with prevention and treatment services.

Another community partner voiced the following:

Presenting in universities has the equal benefit of opening up the opportunity to gain important insights and knowledge from students on how to improve our work and support youth more effectively. Young people are the centre of our work and all our presentations aspire to directly and indirectly improve the lives of young people at risk or involved in the sex trade, by inspiring people to access support, get involved in social services, and utilize their personal and academic knowledge to enhance the resiliency of their own community.

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44 Jones and Hill, “Crossing high street,” 213.
45 Wenger, Hawkins and Seifer, “Community Engaged Scholarship.”
46 The Carnegie Foundation, “Classification Description.”
Often, though the presentation may occur at only one occasion in a semester, the partnerships created between community organizations and the University may be upheld over a much longer time period. This allows the partnership to transcend the traditionally limiting semester system and build lasting relationships between community and University.

Benefits and Limitations

The use of community-engaged learning in the sociology of deviance course has been of great benefit to students, professors, and community partners alike. Feedback both from students and community partners has supported this innovative teaching methodology. Student testimonials and student responses on midterms have demonstrated both a high level of understanding of many theoretical concepts and an ability to link these concepts with real life experiences. The instructor of the course has developed working relationships with these community partners over the years and shares with them how enormously beneficial their presentations are to the class environment. Similarly, the community partners have expressed how delivering presentations to students has helped to ground their work targeting youth and adults alike.

Despite the benefits of incorporating community-engaged scholarship into the classroom, undertaking CEL projects may not always be high on the professor’s list of academic priorities.47 One limitation with community engaged techniques such as service-learning, community-engaged learning and public scholarship is the time required by professors to forge partnerships with community agencies.48 To establish a solid relationship with a community organization of interest, professors must invest time in forming bonds of trust and understanding with these partners, and draft appropriate proposals for community-engaged work.

47 “From Scholarship Reconsidered.”; Checkoway, “Combining Service.”; Hawkins, Brown, and Bergen, “Summary of Results.”
48 Everett, “Understanding Social Inequality,” 306.
Shorter-term community-engaged techniques have tended to mostly benefit students, rather than providing substantial benefits to community members. At times, shorter-term techniques risk replicating the “for community” mentality rather than a truly mutually-beneficial collaboration, but steps are being taken to develop effective community-engaged learning initiatives on a short-term, intensive and mutually beneficial basis.\textsuperscript{49} The dynamic nature of community-engaged methodologies, it appears, may at times act as a barrier to establishing lasting partnerships in the field. However, it is also this nature that makes the technique so attractive to many and so illustrative of the broader optic through which students can learn to understand society. Professors willing to engage with a degree of uncertainty and to work with community partners based on community-identified goals and desiring to learn more about the interface between academia and community are encouraged to look into various forms of community engagement as potential methods of innovative and effective teaching. Bringing in guest speakers from the community, as described above, represents one such method with the potential to change the way students and community engage in the classroom.

Conclusion

Community-engaged scholarship, despite its seeming infancy, has much to offer the field of sociology in general and sociological deviance in particular. In fact, the teaching of the sociology of deviance is an ideal place for the use of community-engaged techniques to help undergraduate students understand the often difficult to grasp concepts introduced in such courses. With careful consideration of all involved stakeholders, quality community-engaged scholarship may also provide benefits to community partners, who are directly involved in the dynamics at study in sociological deviance courses. This exciting approach to teaching and learning has the potential to improve student-learning outcomes, to build the sociological

\textsuperscript{49} Wright, “Getting More.”
imagination among students and professors alike, and to mobilize knowledge beyond the walls of the Ivory Tower. Focusing on benefits to community partners could enhance the effectiveness of future community-engaged learning initiatives in sociological deviance courses, while still firing the imaginations of students and broadening student understanding of social deviance in its myriad forms.
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