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Community Engaged Learning and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Illuminating the “Crisis of Meaning” in University Communities

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Community-Engaged Learning (CEL), also known as Serving Learning (SL) or Community Service Learning (CSL) in other institutions, is important for addressing the well-being of university communities. Traditionally, CEL is a hands-on form of community-focused pedagogy that facilitates meaningful student engagement with myriad communities and university partners. However, the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for CEL, as emergency remote teaching and learning constrained creative freedom, geographical mobility, and community connection. Drawing on extensive primary research conducted in Winter and Spring 2022 within the London, Canada university community, we examined perspectives towards creativity and meaning-making in participants’ personal and professional lives. Results indicated that many students, faculty, and staff experienced a “crisis of meaning” in their academic and work lives – especially post-pandemic – and actively seek engagement in meaningful, and non-instrumental/utilitarian activities for their well-being. This presentation narrows in on this “crisis of meaning” vis-a-vis CEL and mobility within and beyond the university.

Full paper

At our institution, CEL is described as a form of experiential learning (EL) for which “students engage in a project, developed collaboratively with a community partner, that has mutually beneficial outcomes.” (Western University, 2019). Non-profit and community-based organizations are co-educators and co-mentors in the process, bringing to the table their invaluable experience and expertise, as well as facilitating the exploration of meaningful engagement in activities (Smeltzer et al., 2022).

Literature examining CEL in the academy highlights the role that this form of community-focused pedagogy can play in addressing some core areas of impact within “meaning making”, namely 1) gaining insight into one’s, positionalities and subjectivities, as well as short- and long-term goals ; 2) the essential role of building relationships with a range of communities; 3) nurturing one’s commitment to social justice objectives; and 4)) engaging in a deeper meaning of service (Fogle et al., 2017). Similar research by Sperduti and Smeltzer (2022) emphasizes how CEL participants are energized by the prospect of making a positive difference in the lives of others, of reducing their own anxiety about future job preparedness, and of gaining a greater sense of agency and professional confidence. However, while CEL can offer tremendous personal, academic, and professional benefits to students, it can also prove challenging in numerous ways. For instance, CEL may offer some students exposure to painful instances of systemic injustices or experience distressing parallels to their own life experiences (Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022), which have often been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Veyvoda & Cleave, 2020). Overall, some students may feel empowered by CEL opportunities; while others may be disheartened by the process (Sperduti & Smeltzer, 2022). Using mixed-methods tools that included online surveys and focus groups, some of our key findings include: an overwhelming number of respondents expressed creativity as being “essential” to their well-being; most did not believe that their academic institution supported/valued creativity sufficiently; and students viewed their lives off-campus to be more creative than their academic and desired opportunities to engage in creative activities on campus. These findings are relevant to a wide range of disciplines as meaning-making pursuits through CEL, are critical to the well-being of our multifaceted personal, professional, and academic lives.

In this presentation, we explore an important sub-theme of these findings, which specifically highlights qualitative responses that discuss the “crisis of meaning” that has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. For instructors (and some staff members), being able to engage in pedagogical activities in the form of CEL endeavours are valuable to helping address the lacunae (or “crisis in meaning”) they have felt as they emerge out of the pandemic and move through a world marked by geopolitical angst. For many participants, the pandemic has driven them to want to connect more with others for their own well-being. Others, especially students, expressed a desire to be of service to their respective communities, especially given that the pandemic has negatively impacted large swathes of the population. Overall, concerns were raised that the pandemic has resulted in a loss of space for imagination, the boundless, unrestrained imagination of what might be possible in the future was restricted by the need to live day by day in a sense of survival. These findings support creativity is a valuable tool for building resilience in response to adversity (Metzl, 2009), as the process of meaning-making through creative expression and connection with others has been purported as an adaptive response to the pandemic (Kooper & Kaufman, 2020).

Although there was optimism about the power of CEL to support engagement in meaningful activities; there are some barriers that need to be acknowledged. Some participants shared how the pandemic presented substantial limitations to CEL by restricting mobility – hence compromising subsequent opportunities for meaningful engagement within communities and exacerbating social isolation (Smeltzer et al., 2022). This was further highlighted by issues with attempting to normalize emergency remote CEL, which presented unprecedented pressures on faculty, as well as uncertainty to students and staff (Meija, 2020; Smeltzer & Sperduti, 2022). Overall, attitudes toward the value of CEL were positive for nurturing the well-being of the university community through the facilitation of creativity, connection, and meaningful activities; thus lending to the importance of ensuring students' mobility.

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