



CASE STUDIES

Facilitating Learning in Context: Refugee Resettlement Case Management Pedagogy in a Human Services Course

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This essay presents a case study of a class design for a course that prepares aspiring human service professionals to practice basic case management skills. The course employed a collaborative learning framework and a community engagement, project-based pedagogy that allowed students to engage in local agencies supporting refugee resettlement. Furthermore, students studied the processes of migration and asylum seeking and designed a project for the university's campus community to raise awareness about migration and refugee resettlement. The project served to disrupt racist and xenophobic discourses about refugees and immigrants. Students' final projects on the migration experiences of refugees highlighted here (from 2017 and 2018) became a multi-year campus event adopted and sponsored by a student club focused on global social justice. The essay concludes with guidelines to design successful collaborative learning, community engagement, project-based human services courses.

Background

An increasing body of literature has highlighted the positive effect of experiential and project-based learning in learning outcomes for students in higher education settings (Beard, 2023). Experiential, community engagement learning has been positively impactful across disciplines (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Students involved in experiential, project-based community-engaged pedagogy have an opportunity to use content knowledge in real-life contexts, explore and address real-life problems, and learn from doing (Nikitina & Apelian, 2019). These pedagogies have been used very effectively in preparing human service practitioners and are a teaching and learning modality which benefits students learning theory-driven skills (Gronski & Pigg, 2000). Moreover, when facilitated appropriately and with a critical lens (Webster & Coffey, 2011; Yep & Mitchell, 2017), these learning experiences have the potential to support the development of a critical systemic framework and intercultural competence (Van Cleave & Cartwright, 2017).

Worcester, the city that is home to our university, is the city in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts that welcomes and resettles the highest number of refugees (Fábos et al., 2015). Worcester's robust refugee population is a multiracial, multiethnic, multilingual and religiously diverse community. The city is home to many organizations that support

unaccompanied refugee minors, immigrants, and adult refugees and their families as they transition to life in the United States. Thus, designing and teaching a course on refugee resettlement case management provides students the opportunity to learn both basic case management skills and skills relevant to the community in which we are situated.

The sociopolitical context in which the course unfolded was deeply impacted by the narratives of the 2016 presidential campaign. Donald Trump (both as the Republican candidate and, later, as President) rallied his base with racist and xenophobic narratives about immigrants and refugees as criminals, terrorists, and rapists to be feared and stopped from entering the U.S. (García Hernández, 2021; Valcore et al., 2021). I observed as students on our campus struggled to understand how to make meaning of issues surrounding migration, asylum seeking, and whether to support refugee resettlement to the U.S. Some students rallied and organized in support of immigrants and refugees while others heckled and yelled during campus programming on the issue.

The course began in January 2017. A few weeks into our course and into the work students were engaged in the community, Executive Order 13769, Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, otherwise known as the Muslim travel ban, came into effect (Equal Justice Initiative, 2018). In addition, the number of refugees the U.S. would accept was cut drastically by 85% and so too was funding to agencies that worked in refugee resettlement and support (Lorenz, 2022). Through their work in community agencies, students immediately felt the impact of the political context and its changing policies and funding streams as their mentors, professional case managers, were terminated. One student who was working in a refugee resettlement case management agency arrived at Boston Logan airport at the end of January to welcome a new family from Iraq, only to find out that they were not able to board the plane and make the journey to the U.S. due to the travel ban. She and her colleagues at the local agency had spent weeks preparing for the family's arrival, setting up their apartment, pouring over medical documents to ensure treatment and transportation to a Boston hospital for their terminally ill child. Students in the class were incredulous about the connection between national policy and local practice and at how what they were seeing on the news was translating in their capacity to engage in this critical work.

Structuring a Successful Community Engagement Project-Based Course Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning “redefines the role of teacher from expert to facilitator” (Panitz & Panitz, 1998, p. 164) and encourages students to make their own meaning and construct their own understanding of the content engaged. Collaborative learning allows for students to engage in learning as collaborators and participants versus as receivers of knowledge. Panitz (1999) delineates the five principles of collaborative learning: working together versus

independently enhances understanding; increased understanding is a result of thinking through material together (orally and in written work); through engagement in the classroom, students become aware of the relationship between learning collaboratively and increased understanding; learning unfolds more unpredictably than in classes structured didactically; students engage voluntarily (p. 12). For me, it was important to foreground and discuss this framework of learning with students, acknowledge that it may be different than the philosophies and pedagogies informing their other classes, discuss how the learning might be experienced differently, and predict some moments of frustration with the process and with me as an instructor that would not be strictly controlling the content, pace or “product” meant to demonstrate the learning.

Establishing Prior Knowledge

Understanding what learners know and using this knowledge as a foundation for new learning is an important and ubiquitous learning strategy in higher education (Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). It is necessary for an instructor to begin a course by ascertaining prior knowledge to understand the learners in the classroom space, to teach new material building on a prior foundation, and—of course—not to teach content that students already know (Ambrose et al., 2010). I employed anonymous silent writing exercises that asked students questions such as: Who is a refugee? How does a person become a refugee? What is meant by climate change refugee? Who is an internally displaced person? Who is an immigrant? What is meant by undocumented worker? Who are unaccompanied refugee minors? Who is an asylum seeker? Why would someone seek asylum? Based on students’ answers, I knew students had very little prior knowledge about the process of migration, asylum seeking, and refugee resettlement. Hence, I knew where to begin to build a foundation on the topic of refugee resettlement case management.

Simultaneously to establishing prior content knowledge, I wanted to know what prior knowledge and narratives were informed by assumptions, misinformation and deficit narratives based on media coverage of immigration and asylum seeking in the historical and highly politicized moment. Providing students an opportunity to practice analysis as well as reflection and self-awareness is an important aspect of community engaged pedagogy (Webster & Coffey, 2011; Yep & Mitchell, 2017). I asked students to participate in anonymous silent writing. We analyzed these writings, wrestled with them, engaged in content learning, and then reflected on our prior and new understandings of the issues. Opportunities for self-awareness were provided throughout the semester as well as at the end of the semester as students examined their thinking before and after the course. Some sample questions posed at the beginning of the course and discussed throughout include:

1. What are the stories (and political perspectives) you have heard in your family, friendship circles, and community about immigration, undocumented workers, refugees, and asylum seekers?
2. Have you met/know a person who is a refugee, immigrant, undocumented worker (in your own family or in your social circles)? If so, what do you know about the experiences of these persons? If not, please describe what you think are some of the issues these persons may encounter as they acclimate to life in the U.S.
3. What, if any, are your questions and/or concerns about working with this population?
4. Some people in the United States believe that we should not allow refugees to enter the country. What are your thoughts on this issue?
5. Some people in the United States believe we should limit the number of immigrants and refugees who may enter the country. What are your thoughts on this issue?

Answers were discussed and deconstructed throughout the semester. For example, one student wrote: “I have never met a refugee, but my dad says that it’s not right that they have more rights and privileges than Americans . . . my dad worked hard to get me and my brothers to college, and he said that refugees get to come for free.” After a refugee resettlement case manager who works with unaccompanied refugee minors came to speak in our class, students learned that, often, these young people struggle to participate fully in academic and social life. They often aspire to attend college but do not have the asylee or refugee status and documentation necessary to apply for federal financial aid, a driver’s license, a social security number that would allow them to seek and obtain employment, etc. We revisited the anonymous comment cited above and students engaged in a discussion about the challenges of relying on media coverage to understand the process of migration and issues of refugee resettlement. Moments of “unlearning” and “re-learning” happened often throughout the course.

Providing Historically and Socio-Politically Critically Informed Content Knowledge

Both critical analysis and space for reflections on learning are important components of critically and systems-informed community engagement pedagogy (Webster & Coffey, 2011; Yep & Mitchell, 2017). Directly deconstructing deficit narratives of marginalized persons is an important first step to critical understanding.

Informed in critical multicultural education frameworks (O’Grady, 2000) that problematize service learning that is not grounded in criticality (Stewart & Webster, 2011), I taught directly about systems of power, oppression, and transformational social justice work. I provided historically, culturally, and socio-politically contextualized content knowledge. We studied the migration processes, asylum seeking and refugee resettlement using a global systems lens that was informative and directly challenged myths and stereotypes about immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, etc. We deconstructed statements made by students in introductory anonymous writing exercises such as “people believe immigrants and refugees are a drain on our economy because they don’t pay taxes;” and “a lot of refugees could be dangerous criminals or even terrorists trying to get into the U.S.” Students were challenged to understand pervasive deficit narratives about refugees and surprised by the realities they face. One student wrote:

I had absolutely no idea that refugees have to pay back the cost of their airline tickets that brought them here. The families I work with came here with no money and they have to find a job immediately and start to pay back the government for the travel costs that got them here. This seems unfair because they came here due to persecution and losing everything they had in the first place.

Providing Opportunities for Reflection on Learning

Providing space for analysis and reflection of community engagement experience to examine prior knowledge, biases, and skills development is a necessary component of this pedagogical approach (Beard, 2023; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). It allows students to reflect on their thinking and the development of that thinking (Beard, 2023; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). As an example, in a reflective journal one student wrote:

I thought I would be working with poor people who didn’t have much and that I would be helping them out. I worked with a family where both the mom and dad were working in food industry and factory jobs, but I found out that they both went to college and were professionals before they came to the U.S. They both speak English as well as other languages. They really pushed their kids to study hard and they were working towards being able to get the degrees they needed to move up in American society. I actually learned that they work a lot harder than me and most of the people I know, which is not what people think about when they think about immigrants. I’m ashamed to say that it’s not what I thought, either.

Writing prompts that facilitate self-awareness and awareness of learning support student's skills development (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Students wrote about their skills acquisition in the context of the community engagement work:

I think I learned much more about case management than my peers in the regular class without the community project. It's one thing to read things in a book and another thing to be out practicing the things we learned. I really understand how to 'build rapport', interview, and support families to find and 'utilize community resources,' because I did this with them.

Finally, students remarked they understood the content presented in a deeper and more meaningful way: "Everyone talks about trauma informed care, but I understand loss, grief and trauma in a better way because I connect it with migration and leaving behind everything you have ever known."

Supporting Student-led Creative Project Design

Finally, in this course students were asked to engage in a group project that would manifest action (Webster & Coffey, 2011; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Creating a project that is non-disposable that can be shared publicly for the common good is a hallmark of project-based pedagogy (Webster & Coffey, 2011). In the first year of the course, 2017, students chose to split up into several working groups. Each group germinated ideas for different projects. Projects included: 1) writing letters to the editors of local papers, a Catholic publication, and our university's student paper on the issues of migration, 2) writing to legislators to urge them to work to end policies that supported travel bans and numeric restrictions of refugees to resettle in the U.S. 3) an awareness-raising event for our own institution titled "Walk in the Shoes of a Refugee," in which a group of students conducted research to write a story of migration that would be represented on campus.

Students who designed "Walk in the Shoes of a Refugee" created 12 stages of a family's migration story from fleeing their home due to violent conflict to arriving to a UNHCR refugee camp at the border of their home country to resettling in the United States. Students set up these 12 stops/stages in a loop around our campus. Then, students guided all participants in this event walking from one station to the next explaining the complicated journey. The event demonstrated the long and arduous journey that families undertake to seek and obtain refuge in host countries. Walking from one station to the next clearly illustrated the long process. Two students involved in a project collaborated with the instructor to present their work publicly at the JUHAN Conference (Jesuit Universities Humanitarian Action Network) in 2017 with a presentation titled: Interrupting Xenophobic Discourses and the "Othering" of Migrants: Using Community Service-Learning Pedagogy to teach about Refugee Resettlement.

In the second iteration of this course in 2018, I invited the students who created the “Walk in the Shoes of a Refugee” project to come speak to the class. Immediately, the students in year 2, were drawn to this project and wanted to work on a second iteration to make the campus event bigger and to institutionalize it at our university. Thus, the “Migration Walk” was created. Year 1 and Year 2 students worked together enlisting the collaboration of a social justice student club on campus to revise the migration story and create more permanent stations for the walk. They also institutionalized the walk by making it part of a week-long yearly event on campus that focuses on the institution’s values and community service goals. Students agreed the event was a success, which drew over ninety participants including students, faculty, alumni, and administrators.

Lessons Learned and Continued Work

To structure a successful collaborative learning course using community engagement and project-based pedagogy, an instructor must first be willing to step away from the “expert role,” move away from traditional didactic pedagogy, and accept less control over content and process of the course with the belief that this framework will enhance authentic learning and meaning making. This can be difficult for instructors who would like to feel like they are directing the learning process. In this context of collaborative learning, instructors must also establish students’ prior knowledge, provide content knowledge that is historically, socio-politically and critically contextualized, provide students the opportunities to wrestle-with and deconstruct prior knowledge informed in bias and misinformation as well as provide ample space to reflect on learning. Finally, students’ final projects should be student-led, collaborative, and creative projects that are informed by their interests and learning, are non-disposable, and are opportunities to share student learning beyond the classroom walls.

A faculty must create opportunities and activities that allow students to understand the collaborative learning framework, establish students’ prior knowledge, provide content knowledge that is historically, socio-politically and critically informed, provide students the opportunities to discuss, analyze, and deconstruct prior knowledge informed in bias and misinformation as well as provide opportunities to reflect on learning. Finally, students’ final projects should be student-led and informed by their interests and learning. These projects should be non-disposable, and provide opportunities to share learning beyond the classroom.

If these criteria are designed into the course format, students have an opportunity to understand content in real time and in real context of policies. They are able to learn content, theory-driven skills, practice self-reflection and self-awareness, and create projects that generate action and share knowledge publicly.

Students are able to practice theory-driven helping skills in a way that students in a traditional, didactic course cannot. Student assignments and final projects are non-disposable and meaningful. They can be facilitated

as multi-year projects and as collaborations with campus and community stakeholders. The transferable skills involved in designing and carrying out such collaborative assignments, translate into the competencies and skills students will need as human service professionals, when they will be communicating and collaborating with clients, their families, other professionals, and myriad stakeholders.

Challenges of adopting these approaches are felt by both students and the instructor. There are certainly the logistical difficulties of engaging multiple stakeholders, agencies, students, etc. Most importantly, however, while a preponderance of research points to the fact that college students learn more in classrooms designed using active engagement pedagogies than in passive lecture contexts (Crouch & Mazur, 2001; Deslauriers & Wieman, 2011; Hake, 1998), these frameworks are challenging for students who expect an instructor to lecture, direct the learning, provide expertise and certainty, and structure the course a priori (Henderson & Dancy, 2007). Some students find it uncomfortable to negotiate with others, work collaboratively, work more slowly, and have a structure that is not completely predictable. But these felt challenges, too, are opportunities for learning as these can generate discussions and learning about the importance of flexibility in the context of working with multiple collaborators and stakeholders—especially in human service work.

Educators teaching human services students should consider adopting collaborative learning, community engagement, project-based pedagogies in both theory and theory-driven skills courses. For us (the instructor and the learners) involved in this course, it was clear that the framework generated authentic, analytical, and reflective learning that was co-constructed. Students demonstrated content knowledge on migration, asylum seeking and resettlement case management that was historically and politically informed. Students challenged problematic xenophobic discourses on immigrants and refugees. Students learned valuable theory-driven skills and created projects that generated action and awareness-raising as well as provided opportunities to practice transferable skills. Simply put, the learning opportunities were many and meaningful.

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