The Student Experience of Community-Based Research: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

This autoethnography provides a description and thematic illustration of the student experience of a community-based research (CBR) course and partnership. Through evaluating personal experiences with CBR, the author identified three qualities of meaningful CBR experiences: trust, indeterminacy, and emotion. These qualities are explored, and comparisons are made between the outcomes experienced and those established in the literature of student learning in CBR. These findings enrich discourse of student experiences in CBR and corroborate literature on student learning in CBR through illuminating the experience by which that learning occurs.

Introduction

It was supposed to be a summer break from my doctoral studies—a well-deserved respite from the grind of graduate school. Instead, I was stumbling through a presentation to a panel of experts in a community I had not known existed just 6 months prior. I fought my way through the presentation of curriculum, doing my best to address questions from the panel of scholars representing various disciplines. This eclectic of expertise left no stone unturned in their questioning, and their collective analysis served as an intellectual flogging of sorts—the kind that keeps doctoral students awake at night.

Upon concluding the presentation and leaving no doubt that this was, in fact, the work of a student, I hastily collected my things and rushed to the parking lot. I sought refuge in the back of our van, hopeful that I might disappear into the seat as an escape from further interrogation. The lump in my throat steadily grew, but showing this pain would only further distinguish me as the novice in the group. I tried to think about anything else, but images of the unintelligible presentation and seemingly endless questioning remained in the forefront of my mind. I was overwhelmed with

feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and incompetence.

My professor, Dr. London [pseudonym], and the principal investigator of the project, Dr. Boston [pseudonym], entered the van a moment later, and our caravan of experts, community partners, and students departed. As we rolled out of the parking lot, Dr. London opened the conversation excitedly: "Man, what a great experience for Ben! Jeez!"

Dr. Boston quickly informed him that "Ben is in the van, [Dr. London]."

"Oh… well, what a great experience, eh, Ben?" he offered, grinning at me through the rearview mirror. I nodded, acknowledging his comment, but I reserved the right to respectfully disagree with my professor about the supposed greatness of this ordeal. Dr. London easily read my emotions despite my attempts to stow them in the back of the van. He continued, "Don't worry, your dissertation defense will be nothing compared to that." He shook his head happily, unable to wipe the smirk from his face as we pulled onto the highway, seemingly reveling in my struggle.

As we sped down the two-lane road past potato fields, abandoned trailers, and wire fences entangled with tumbleweeds, I reflected on how I ended up in this situation: spending the summer with people I had only met in the last year, working to correct social injustices in a rural population as a doctoral student in the field of curriculum and instruction. Though just a few hours from home, I felt an eternity from any conceptual or experiential familiarity.

Six months prior to the episode recounted above, I enrolled in a community-based research (CBR) course as a doctoral student. Now, years later, I regard this course and the ensuing partnership as among the most significant experiences of my education. As a student who saw benefit from CBR, I present this autoethnography to illustrate the qualities of my experience in the hopes that exploring the experiences of one might foster

understanding of the experiences of many (see *Ellis, 2004; Marton, 1981; Starr, 2010; Van Manen, 1990).*

Background

More universities and communities are embracing the mutual benefits of community–university partnerships, particularly in disciplines of public health *(Horowitz, Robinson, & Seifer, 2009)*, education *(Bray, 2001)*, and social work *(Begun, Berger, Otto-Salaj, & Rose, 2010)*. Students can bring productive energy to these partnerships, often "invigorated by their accountability and a heightened sense of purpose" *(Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donahue, 2003, p. 126)*, which has inspired the continued blending of academic work with community partnerships through community service *(Jones & Hill, 2001; Neururer & Rhoads, 1998)* and community-based research courses in higher education. As Stoecker and Tryon *(2009)* noted, "the practice of sending students into communities that are defined as disadvantaged has become a part of the curriculum and even the requirements of an increasing number of higher education institutions" *(p. 1)*.

Community-based research (CBR; see also community-based participatory research, CBPR), as defined by Strand et al. *(2003)*, "is a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change" *(p. 3)*. It is "research that is conducted *with* and *for*, not *on*, members of a community" *(Strand et al., 2003, p. xx)* and, in this regard, may be considered a branch of service-learning *(Stoecker, Loving, Reddy, & Bollig, 2010)*. Service-learning "integrates community service with instruction and reflection" *(Barnett, Silver, & Grundy, 2009, p. 119)* where "service and learning goals [are] of equal weight and each enhances the other for all participants" *(Furco, 1996, p. 3)*. It is an approach to experiential learning (see *Kolb, 1984)* often couched within the social justice tradition *(Hooks, 2003; North, 2008)*, in alignment with Freire's *(1970/2009)* advocacy for correcting inequitable systems: "To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity" *(p. 47)*.

Further, in CBR, "the research process itself becomes a means of change and growth for everyone involved" *(Strand et al., 2003, p. 10)*. Student experiences in CBR have been likened to what Kuh *(2008)* called "high-impact activities"—endeavors marked by a

notable commitment of time and effort in which students address substantive issues in unfamiliar contexts alongside faculty and others and receive feedback on their performance. There is growing acceptance that engaging students in communities beyond the walls of the university has proven effective in enriching the student experience of higher education *(Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014)*.

So the goals of CBR in higher education are twofold:

> The most important goal of CBR is to produce usable research for the community.… [Yet] there is always an eye to helping students acquire the knowledge, skills, and values that will make them effective citizens and agents of social change. *(Strand et al., 2003, p. 168)*

These interrelated but distinct aims should receive direct and concerted attention as CBR grows as a means for universities to connect with the communities they are designed to serve *(Furco, 2010)*.

To date, scholars have duly noted the "powerful social and personal change [that] involvement in CBR can stimulate for students" *(Willis, Peresie, Waldref, & Stockman, 2003, p. 43)*, yet few have explored the experiences that facilitate this growth. The majority of research on student learning in CBR focuses instead on the outcomes perceived by students participating in those courses and partnerships *(Lichtenstein, Thorme, Cutforth, & Tombari, 2011; Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008; Willis et al., 2003)*. Though studies of what students learn and what they identify as outcomes are important, also vital to our understanding is the process by which these outcomes are realized through experience. Studies of university–community partnerships often utilize case study methodology *(Polyani & Cockburn, 2003; Willis et al., 2003)*, but still wanting are the cases of how students perceive their experiences in CBR. One way to satisfy this dearth in understanding is to balance the scales of research done on students in CBR with an account *by* a CBR student.

In this study, I aim to facilitate a deeper understanding of the student experience of CBR through examination of my own experiences as a student in a CBR course and partnership. This focus on personal experience is methodologically aligned with autoethnography, which others have noted as particularly suited for inquiries of community-engaged scholarship *(Cutforth, 2013)* and educational research *(Bossle, Molina Neto, & Kreusburg Molina, 2014)*. Through this method, I present and discuss the salient qualities of those experiences I identify as meaningful—or most readily contributing to my

own learning and growth—and in so doing, provide a point of corroboration to the popularly championed student benefits of CBR. These findings contribute to the extant literature of student learning in CBR and may serve as a preliminary guide for CBR teachers and students engaged in university–community partnerships.

To preview, in this article, I review the context of my CBR experience, provide an overview of the literature on student learning in CBR, and outline the methodology utilized in this study. I then present the findings of this study through three qualities of meaningful CBR experiences: trust, indeterminacy, and emotion. I provide vignettes and excerpts from my journal to substantiate these claims as well as to depict the experiences from which these qualities are derived. I also identify the outcomes I experienced as a result of engaging in CBR and offer the significance of this study for teachers and students of CBR.

A Personal Account of CBR

My story with CBR began when I enrolled in a CBR course as a doctoral student in curriculum and instruction. During this course, our professor, Dr. London, coupled the theoretical underpinnings of CBR with practical experience in the field made possible through partnerships with universities, schools, and community groups. Our primary experiences in these partnerships provided material for discourse in class and, in turn, our course discussions informed our contributions to community projects.

From the menu of possible student activities, I chose to engage in a curriculum development project designed to guide middle school students through the process of understanding how their environment influences their health and altering their school environment to make it a healthier place for students. This curriculum was to be constructed by combining a service-learning curriculum with a strategic planning process facilitation guide.

The curriculum would be implemented in rural middle schools of the San Luis Valley of Colorado. The terrain of this valley is reminiscent of the plains of the grain belt. The rough soil taints the groundwater, and the high elevation shortens the growing season. The subtly rolling plains stretch 40 miles across the valley before giving way to rugged mountain ranges and wildlands. Stunning mountain views, cold winters, unrelenting winds, high poverty, and low health outcomes characterize the valley. The people are tough—hardened by the geographic and socioeconomic conditions in which they live. The aim of our project was to empower youth in

this region to address health disparities here by way of the school environment *(Hartley, 2004; Sherman, 1992)*.

After the CBR course drew to a close, I continued my involvement in the partnership through a practicum, was offered a paid position on the project, and remained engaged with this work intermittently for the duration of the 5-year grant. As a result, I have had the privilege of working with professors, curriculum specialists, teachers, principals, students, advisory boards, and other community stakeholders. I documented my experiences with the course and project through a journal and, as a result, have a thorough record of my evolution from student to colleague in a CBR partnership.

Though my involvement in this project ultimately transcended the role of student in a formal sense, I remain an informal student of CBR to this day. While engaged in this partnership, I have benefited from the mentorship of professors, content experts, community partners, and students alike. I have been engaged in difficult, gratifying, and memorable experiences and have managed to cope with the challenges inherent to engaging, for the first time, in a university–community partnership. This account has value that justifies its dissemination because it documents and characterizes the experiences that have led to my growth across several years of CBR. Having outlined the context from which this study draws findings, I transition to a review of the pertinent literature on the topic of student experiences in CBR.

Studies of Student Experiences in CBR

Though few have directly researched the topic, several scholars have initiated the work of exploring what students experience, learn, and identify as outcomes of their CBR experiences. Following is a review of studies that scaffold collective knowledge on student learning and experience in CBR.

Strand et al. *(2003)* noted four major challenges encountered by instructors of CBR courses: finding a disciplinary connection, building CBR into the curriculum, ensuring student readiness, and structuring the CBR experience. Stocking and Cutforth *(2006)* expanded on this work by clarifying the pedagogical practices they utilize to cope with these challenges through "emerging pedagogy" *(p. 56)* in order to ensure that students find value in the course without marginalizing the needs of the partnering community. Through coping with the challenges inherent to CBR, Stocking and Cutforth argued, professors of CBR courses can facilitate an

environment where students acquire the various positive outcomes of CBR.

Lichtenstein et al. *(2011)* added empirical backing to these ideas through their study of 166 students across 15 colleges and universities. They identified five major student learning outcomes resulting from participation in CBR courses: academic skills, educational experience, civic engagement, professional skills, and personal growth. Though the aim of this study was to develop a survey tool to help quantify the student outcomes of participating in CBR, the authors also found statistically significant correlations across each of these outcome categories, which suggested that "each factor is assessing a different facet of an underlying phenomenon" *(Lichtenstein et al., 2011, p. 22)*.

Whereas Lichtenstein et al. *(2011)* identified the general outcomes of these experiences, Moely et al. *(2008)* found that in the context of service-learning, "the perspectives that students bring with them to the service-learning experience are… important in determining learning outcomes" *(p. 45)* and that matching students' preferences to projects was a predictor of learning in these projects. This presentation of idiosyncrasy in student outcomes somewhat complicates the conversation about what students might identify as experientially valuable in CBR. However, Moely et al. also noted that projects contributing to larger social change were associated with higher student learning outcomes, which is suggestive of the value of CBR as a pathway to student development in higher education. This was supported in the work of Preiser-Houy and Navarrete *(2010)*, who attributed the rich educational outcomes of CBR to the multidimensional nature of the student experience, where academic, personal, and interpersonal dimensions intersect (see also *Kuh, 2008)*.

Finally, and perhaps of most relevance to this study, Willis et al. *(2003)* explored the student perspective of CBR courses through examining their own experiences as undergraduate students. They presented the preparations necessary for instructors of successful CBR projects as follows: set goals, set realistic expectations and time frames, establish clear support systems, ensure prior experience and skills, and facilitate personal investment in the project. They also presented the following set of benefits for students of CBR courses: enrichment of traditional academic coursework, sense of empowerment, greater understanding of social problems, and an integration of academics and service. Through reference to the experiences of the four participant-authors, this study contextualized and clarified the undergraduate student experience of

CBR, as well as complemented the outcomes identified in the literature through providing the student perspective on those outcomes.

Though this literature has clarified the student experience of CBR somewhat, the "need for more extensive study on the student's role in CBR remains" *(Willis et al., 2003, p. 37)*. The present study responds to this call by building on the work of Moely et al. *(2008)*, Lichtenstein et al. *(2011)*, and Willis et al. *(2003)*, effectively supporting the literature on student learning in a CBR project through provision of a concrete account of the graduate student experience of CBR. Further, although others have identified and categorized the outcomes of student learning in a CBR course, in this work, I articulate the process by which those ends may be realized through the method of autoethnography.

Method

This study is an autoethnography; thus my experience stands as the source and filter from which meanings rendered here were generated. Autoethnographic research is a branch of ethnography, which stands in the tradition of cultural anthropology in that immersion in a phenomenon allows researchers to obtain a more complete understanding of the norms and meanings of a given culture or context *(Fetterman, 1998)*. The major distinction between autoethnography and ethnography is the focus on *other* in ethnography and the focus on *self* in autoethnography. Further, autoethnography builds on narrative research in that "the researcher's own experience is the focal point from which a new understanding of the culture in question is revealed" *(Starr, 2010, p. 3)*. In this regard, autoethnography is a study of personal narrative situated in context as a pathway to understanding both. As Ellis *(2004)* explained:

> Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First, they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. *(p. 36)*

In short, because "my own experience [is the] topic of investigation in its own right" *(Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733)*, autoethnography presents itself as an appropriate methodology. This method is suited to address the call for "more stories of success and struggle that have played a part in shaping who community-engaged scholars are and what they do" *(Cutforth, 2013, p. 28)*. Through this method, I explore

the following question: What are the qualities of meaningful community-based research experiences for me?

Data Collection and Analysis

In alignment with ethnography, the primary sources of data in this project were personal notes, reflections, and revelations recorded in my CBR journal *(Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995)*. This journal began as a course assignment and, as my experience with CBR extended over time, transformed into a confessional of sorts, complete with questions, feelings, and vignettes pertaining to my experiences with CBR *(Van Maanen, 1992)*. Through documenting these experiences, I compiled an account of the student experience in a CBR course and ensuing partnership, spanning several years of intermittent participation.

I employed two tactics of analysis in this study. I utilized an iterative process of open-ended analysis and coding to identify preliminary codes and distill these codes to the qualities of meaningful CBR experiences for me *(Rossman & Rallis, 2012)*. I also used "prefigured codes" *(Creswell, 2007, p. 152)* to weigh current theories of student outcomes in CBR against my personal outcomes of CBR. The findings that follow are colored with my personal background, biases, and perceptual abilities *(Clarke, 1975; Eisner, 1998)*.

Findings

The findings of this study fall into two categories. First, I present the qualities of CBR experiences that I perceive as meaningful. Second, I clarify the ways in which I have grown through CBR by reviewing the outcomes of these experiences. Though no discrete boundary distinguishes the two sets of findings, I present them separately in the interest of clarity.

Qualities of the CBR Student Experience

I identified three qualities of the meaningful CBR experience for me: trust, indeterminacy, and emotion. Each quality is described and supported with reference to the experiences themselves. This is not to contend that qualities are associated with particular experiences in exclusive terms, but to illustrate how these interrelated qualities arose through my collective experiences with CBR.

Trust

> We sit on the hard plastic seats of the cafeteria table. Two middle school girls bounce in to join us for lunch. I am struck by how young they look. Our table of adults gives them our undivided attention as the girls are asked to share their thoughts on health issues facing students at their school. I am desperate to hear their perspective. At first, they are guarded in their responses, and we engage in casual banter about less charged issues— activities they participate in, bus routes, favorite school subjects, and so on. But after a few minutes, the girls seem comfortable discussing their critiques of sexual education in their rural region, where abstinence-only curriculum remains popular *(Santelli et al., 2006)*. These girls, for whatever reason, have grown to trust our discretion over the course of lunch, and we, in turn, trust their perceptions to guide work in the school.

Trust was the initial point of contention to arise in my CBR experience, and it served as the gatekeeper to engaging in meaningful experiences in both the course and the partnership. I use the term *trust* here in its relational sense, signifying "confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing" *(Trust, n.d.)*. In my experience, trust was a prerequisite to meaningful involvement in the partnership; only when my future colleagues and I achieved a degree of mutual trust did the experience begin to take on educational significance. This assertion is supported through the following vignette, which describes the events surrounding my request to borrow the lone copy of an unpublished curriculum manual:

> Given my initial task on the project, to blend two curricula, I felt it necessary to review each curriculum manual prior to initiating any work on merging the two. I requested to borrow one of the manuals from Dr. Boston. Her email response, "I have one copy of the… facilitation manual but I don't loan it out!" suggested I should find another means to merge the two curricula. However, in the following weeks I continued to show interest in the project and found other ways to contribute. I scheduled time to review the manual when Dr. Boston was in meetings on campus, offered

> my perspectives on curriculum development proce-
> dures, and maintained prompt correspondence related
> to the project. She responded quickly to my enthusiasm
> by amending her previous stipulation, loaning me the
> manual for days, and later, weeks.

This excerpt not only showcases how trust plays an integral role in the relationships between CBR collaborators, but also how this trust must be earned. Before this partnership, I did not know Dr. Boston, and she had little reason to trust me with her curriculum. It was a professional risk for her to involve students in this work, and in order for her to take that risk, she needed to know that I could be trusted. Dr. Boston later reflected on how we built trust with one another early in our partnership:

> It feels a bit like speed dating! You have to match up
> quickly and hope for the best. But external factors
> make it difficult for a smooth courtship! We only have
> a quarter to bond, it takes me a while to build trust and
> for the student to earn my stamp of credibility, if you
> will. This is especially true for a very large scale project
> such as [our project]—it's hard for a student to jump in
> sometimes.

This notion of trust validates Strand et al.'s *(2003)* recommenda-tion that CBR partners develop mutual trust to ensure a successful partnership: "Each partner trusts that the other can be counted on to 'do the right thing'… [and] work to develop a faith in the col-laborative process itself " *(p. 31)*. It was only after I had earned trust with partners, academic and community-based, that I was able to engage in experiences that I considered productively contributing to my own growth. Seen in this light, trust stands as a gatekeeper to student learning in CBR projects.

But this trust was not unrequited; it was also necessary that I, in turn, trust my community partners and professor. Had I not trusted that they would be there to guide me when challenges arose, I likely would have been reluctant to invest time and energy in the project. But through trusting in others, I was able to engage in work that I would have otherwise considered beyond my capacity. This presentation of trust as an aspect of meaningful experience in CBR is supported tangentially in Noddings' *(2005)* argument that the caring, trusting relationship between teachers and students is

a necessary condition of educational experience (see also *Bryk & Schneider, 2003)*.

In summary, through trusting my partners and professor, and in earning their trust, we were able to lean on one another to reap the benefits of collaboration. It was only after building these trusting relationships that I was able to engage in those experiences that I believe most directly contributed to my growth. Therefore, I present trust as an integral quality of the meaningful CBR student experience.

Indeterminacy

> I watch from the back of the classroom as seventh grade students stroll in the door. They waste no time in interrogating me: "Who are you?" "Why are you here?" "Are you our new assistant?" "Why is your hair so long?" I should have expected this. I explain that I helped write the lessons for their class, and I am here to learn how we could improve the course. "OK, let's get started," the teacher's voice rises above the chatter, and students file into their seats. I open my laptop and start taking notes.

> We have relied heavily on teachers to expose the vices and virtues of the lessons, and their feedback has been instrumental in improving each version of the curriculum. This was never the plan. Though curriculum development is often presented in texts as a concrete linear procedure resulting in a polished final product, in practice we have found it to be anything but. Rather, it is an iterative, uncertain, seemingly unending process of trial and error.

A second quality of the meaningful CBR student experience is *indeterminacy*—noting that which is "not exactly known, established, or defined" *(Indeterminacy, n.d.)*. I use this term with intention, as I identify direct ties to Dewey's *(1938)* argument that engagement in an indeterminate situation is an antecedent condition to genuine inquiry. As he stated,

> A variety of names serves to characterize indeterminate situations. They are disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc. It is the *situation* that has these traits. *We* are doubtful

> because the situation is inherently doubtful.… [S]itu-
> ations that are disturbed and troubled, confused or
> obscure, cannot be straightened out, cleared up and
> put in order, by manipulation of our personal states of
> mind. Restoration of integration can be effected… only
> by operations which actually modify existing condi-
> tions, not by merely "mental" processes. *(Dewey, 1938,
> pp. 105–106)*

Dewey's *(1938)* indeterminate situation is one that troubles or confuses us and cannot be easily reconciled. Further, in his words, "the indeterminate situation becomes problematic in the very process of being subjected to inquiry" *(p. 107)*; the activity of inquiry, then, is one of resolving indeterminate situations through engagement with the conditions of that problem.

Situations with conflicting interests that required creative problem solving were commonplace throughout my CBR experience, and reconciling these issues often required a diverse skill set, realized only through channeling the collective expertise of the members of our partnership. Engagement in this indeterminacy also required a willingness to adapt my role in the partnership to the needs of the situation at hand, with particular attention to my own capacities as they complemented our collaborative inquiry. In other words, in the context of CBR, indeterminacy breeds ambiguity, and ambiguity requires the collaboration, flexibility, and adaptation of those involved (see also Strand et al.'s *[2003]* assertion that remaining flexible is a "crucial element" *[p. 37]* to successful CBR partnerships).

For instance, upon joining the project, my task was to merge two independently successful curricula, logically enough, into one successful curriculum. Though this task was presented in simple terms, my journal describes points of confusion and apprehension regarding my responsibilities:

> I still lack the "big picture" information I need in order
> to actually begin any of the prospective merging, or
> even understanding, of the two curricula—I need more.
> There is some confusion about how [another student]
> and I are meant to work (together or separately).

Weeks later, I noted that this variance in roles was not exclusive to my experience but was, rather, inherent to CBR:

> CBR never ceases to amaze. I went into this meeting thinking that I would have some very good points to put forward regarding the continued merge of the curriculum. However, for virtually the entirety of the 2-hour meeting, we focused on logistical issues of approaching the school, what to say, what we want to disclose, and what we don't.… In this discussion, we were closer to a group of salespersons than we were curricularists, which speaks [to] the diverse array of roles played in a partnership.

Months later, I continued to reflect on these issues of ambiguity and uncertainty, again acknowledging these struggles as a natural tendency of engaging in this work.

> This [work] retreat reiterated the "you really never know with CBR/CBPR"—the constantly changing contacts and input keep changing the project as we are writing it. It's such an ever-changing process. Even writing—something traditionally done in solitude—involves meeting with tons of people, getting tons of input (both from the community and experts) and writing and rewriting based on that input. I think we are going to end up with a better curriculum as a result [of] the huge number of voices and perspectives we are getting on this curriculum—it's just a ton of work to receive and import that input.

It seems that to maintain partnership across these dynamic systems—including schools, universities, community stakeholders, and external experts—we had to constantly adapt and amend our plans, roles, and tasks to fit the needs of the situation. Challenges calling for adaptation included the discontinuation of community partnerships, changes in staff and faculty at partnering public schools, forging new partnerships, soliciting input from consultants, hiring new research partners and students, and other unforeseen issues arising along the way. As a result of accepting a role in this dynamic system, my responsibilities throughout the project evolved to reflect the best match of my abilities and the fluctuating needs of the project (see *Moely et al., 2008; Strand et al., 2003)*. Embracing this indeterminacy often led me into unfamiliar situations which, as Dewey *(1938)* noted, are environments full of potential for inquiry and educational significance. The uncertainty

innate to CBR yields a nonlinear, iterative, messy path forward *(Strand et al., 2003)*, but such is the path of educational progression *(Dewey, 1916/1944)*.

Emotion

> K-12 teachers, parents, a principal, a school nurse, and a few students look to me to adjourn our meeting. My shirt does not fit, and my steel-toed boots do not pair well with the khakis I am wearing, though I am too inexperienced to know the difference. My heart thumps higher in my chest as I talk with my hands, trying to convey professionalism, experience, and competence, though in the moment I am convinced I lack all three. It does not help that I am sitting in a chair designed for an elementary student. I do my best to suppress my emotions and conceal the shakiness of my voice as I express gratitude to the group: "You know, what's so cool is we are all here for these kids. I feel like this doesn't happen very often. And together, we can really do something here."

The third quality of the meaningful CBR experience is *emotion*. I do not introduce this quality to simply note that I experienced emotions in CBR—indeed, every experience carries with it some emotion. As Dewey *(1934/2005)* explained, "emotions are qualities… of a complex experience that moves and changes.… All emotions are qualifications of a drama and they change as the drama develops" *(p. 43)*. I introduce emotion here to indicate the emotional fluctuation I experienced as a mark of the drama in my CBR experience.

As a student in a CBR course and partnership, I struggled with the difficulties inherent to CBR while also celebrating the gratifying nature of working toward social justice. As with trust, this emotional investment was both a signifier of and a prerequisite to meaningful experiences in CBR. My emotional response to the work reflects a degree of care and ownership for the purpose behind it; I cared about what happened with this project because of my belief in the greater mission to which it contributed (see *Freire, 1970/2009; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008)*.

Evidence of these emotional swings is pervasive throughout my journal. One example arose through our partnership with an educational consulting firm. The consultants self-identified as "stan-

dards people" and recommended that we revise the curriculum so that each activity be associated with an instructional objective composed as a measurable outcome (see *Bloom, 1956; Mager, 1962; Popham, 1972)*. This philosophy of curriculum development reflects that of the scientific curriculum-maker *(Bobbitt, 1924; Charters, 1923; Kliebard, 1975)*, an approach to curriculum design for which I held philosophical reservations.

If I had not been emotionally committed to this project, I might have felt more apathetic about the input of our new partners, but this was far from the case. When these differences in curricular philosophy began to materialize through recommended alterations to the curriculum, I felt intense frustration and irritation at having the work we had produced to that point put through the filter of an alternative philosophy. As my journal reads:

> I am worried about [our curriculum] being analyzed by "curriculum specialists" I hugely disagree with. They were very "outcomes-based" repeatedly saying "each activity needs to state what each student will 'know and be able to do' at the end of each lesson." I was silently in shock during the meeting, but fuming under the surface.…I did not want to have to put our good work through this bad filter.

> [Dr. Boston] appears to have fully adopted the [consultant] position. I am VERY concerned about the future of the curriculum [in light of our new consultants' philosophy] and even my potential future in the project. I cannot see myself writing a curriculum that includes "students will know and be able to do" for EVERY [expletive] activity!

I raised these concerns with Dr. Boston through a lengthy e-mail, clarifying the difference in educational philosophy between our curriculum and that proposed by our curriculum consultants. My emotional plight was met with an affirming and appreciative response:

> I think your concerns are valid and I'm so glad you raised them. Thanks very much for taking the time to put them in writing. I feel SO GRATEFUL that you are part of this team.

To be sure, this incident was not the exception. Other moments of frustration and emotional toil litter my journal, such as this entry titled "Frustrated in September":

> I'm frustrated with the constant "iterativeness" of this project.… I'm also frustrated that we are incorporating everything [our curriculum consultant] says.… Right now… I am sitting in front of my computer deleting what I wrote months ago. I'm super, uper, duper, frustrated.

But these low moments were balanced with emotional highs, such as these:

> Fruition! I was finally able to provide a meaningful contribution to the curricula merge—and man did it feel good. I was prioritized for our meeting… so I could share some of my findings. Most of my ideas were well received by the group, and inspired rich conversation in regard to design.

> All the hard work is worth it on nights like tonight when I can connect with people and work to bring people together in these communities. Remembering all their faces in that room still brings me joy; I love this project!

As Freire *(1970/2009)* noted, the desire and ability to work for social change come from a place of love: "If I do not love the world—if I do not love life—if I do not love people—I cannot enter into dialogue" *(p. 90)*. It should come as little surprise, then, that the prospect of actualizing change in a marginalized community took on emotional significance for me. It became something I wanted for myself, as well as for others (see *Lichtenstein et al., 2011; Rosner-Salazar, 2003)*. This inspired deeper engagement with the project which, in turn, magnified the educational benefits of the experience (see *Willis et al., 2003)*. Seen in this light, we may consider emotional engagement as impetus, signifier, and catalyst to the meaningful CBR experience. With the qualities of the meaningful CBR experience clarified, I shift the focus to the outcomes of these experiences.

Outcomes of the Experience

> I sit at a long table with parents, teachers, principals, and other members of the local community—our

steering committee. Small groups flit through the curriculum, jotting down reflections and recommendations to improve lessons. I stare blankly at the pages, feigning review of what I know well to be in these lesson plans, while eavesdropping on hushed critiques of the curriculum.

One lesson under review is designed to prepare students to examine health problems in their school. We sought to do this creatively by explaining how investigating a health problem "is a lot like solving a case. To solve a case, detectives use evidence or clues to try to figure out what happened…." Students would practice using their detective skills by solving a fabricated crime: "The Salazar family returned home… from their two-week vacation to Patagonia to find they had been robbed!" This was followed by a list of evidence, notably including: "1) The Salazar family locked all doors and windows, and turned on the alarm when they left for Patagonia. 2) Missing items include all electronics (iPods, speakers, televisions, computers) and expensive jewelry. 3) There was a carnival 3 miles from the Salazar's home 7 days after the Salazar family left for Patagonia."

Before the meeting, I was proud of this lesson. I had associated economic success with a traditionally Hispanic surname, which aligned with what I learned recently in a course on culturally responsive pedagogy (see *Gay, 2000)*. However, the steering committee quickly instructs me that an understanding of whom we are responding to is a prerequisite to genuine responsiveness. They explain how this lesson plan showed a lack of cultural understanding on as many as four counts: First, Salazar is the name of a local family, and this would inspire a charged response from students. Second, most families cannot afford the valuables in the example, let alone travel abroad. These examples could be alienating. As one community member offers, "Maybe they could take a vacation to Denver. I think that would connect better with students." Third, even the wealthiest families do not have an alarm system or lock their doors; most

leave the keys to their car in the ignition. Fourth, and finally, "We don't have carnivals, we have county fairs."

> These community partners are gentle in informing me that, despite my efforts to be responsive, I lack the background knowledge of the community to successfully do so. My generic, academic conception of responsiveness is no match for the experiential community knowledge. I still have much to learn, and in this case, I learn the value of a steering committee to help outsiders navigate the cultural and practical terrain of a community. As a student of the community partnership, I am able to learn these lessons.

Stepping out from the comfortable nest of the academy to flap my wings with the community was a meaningful experience that produced numerous educational outcomes for me. Namely, through experiences marked by trust, indeterminacy, and emotion, I was able to mature as a professional, build academic and collaborative skills, develop as a researcher, awaken my social consciousness, and grow as a leader and community liaison.

Evidence of this growth permeates my CBR journal. Reflections early in the project posit my contributions as minimal. As I stated in the first month of the project,

> I desire to give meaningful input, but don't believe I can give very much until I know both curricula very well. I'd like for my comments to carry the knowledge of both curricula, rather than guessing where we are headed.

And in the second month of the project:

> I feel that my contribution will not accurately reflect the effort I have put forth in understanding the entire project.

But as time went on, my role in the project began to take shape, and my opinions began to carry more weight. Again, testimony of this perceived growth is evidenced through several journal entries:

> My opinion and voice continue to grow as I become both more comfortable with the group, more confident

with the material and process, and more skilled at strategically expressing my opinions.

Another important thing that happened during this meeting, and has been happening through the process, is the amount of weight my recommendations carry, and my comfort in making them. At first, I had a lot of listening to do before I could give any recommendations, which may have come across as a lack of engagement. As of late, I feel more confident about my understanding of our objectives, and how they can best be accomplished—I am more of a player in the game now. I also feel I am taking more ownership of the project, not from a power-hungry perspective, but just in that I have invested a fair amount of energy in this process, and therefore have an interest in how this project turns out.

I have grown into a position of being an irreplaceable asset to the development of this curriculum. I now feel I understand the parameters of our project as well as anyone—and continue to grow as more of a leader in the project. I now feel comfortable to delegate to people who have been in this project longer than I have. This is perhaps overly ambitious to my knowledge or skills, but seems to feel natural.

As the months of engagement in this project turned into years, I grew into a position of leadership on the project, which I would have perceived as beyond my capacity at the inception of the work. As Dr. Boston once professed: "Can you imagine the position we would've been in without you here today?" Similarly, in a different meeting, Dr. London observed, "Ben, you're really leading the project now, aren't you?" To evolve from having limited expertise and confidence and making minimal contributions to the project, to taking a position of leadership within the project, was a gradual but steady transition that mirrored my growth over time.

This CBR experience provided me with grounds fertile for development as a professional in several ways. By embracing the challenge of collaborating across communities, disciplines, professions, institutions, and backgrounds, I have gained skills as a collaborator and translator of ideas. Further, and perhaps more important, engaging in work for and with marginalized commu-

nities facilitated the awakening of my social consciousness *(Freire, 1970/2009)*. CBR showed me not only that academic work could make an immediate difference in the lives of others, but also that I have the capacity to engage in this work. In this regard, the project and partnership took on new meaning: It was not merely a means to my own education but a meaningful endeavor in and of itself (see *Dewey, 1916/1944, 1938/1997)*.

This is not to say that I now possess the necessary package of knowledge and skills for professional enterprises of this nature, nor is it to congratulate myself for my efforts. Rather, my aim is to give experiential credit where credit is due. Through these experiences, I have transitioned from a naïve, unsure, and guarded student to a position of leadership, confident in my capacity to provide meaningful contributions to the partnership. Although I have much to learn, I have come a long way.

Ultimately, by following the wandering and difficult path of CBR, I was rewarded through learning skills I did not know I needed, gaining knowledge I did not anticipate attaining, and identifying values I did not know I had. These personal outcomes both support and expand existing conceptions of student outcomes in CBR (e.g., *Lichtenstein et al., 2011; Moely et al., 2008; Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Willis et al., 2003)* through provision of a personal account of the process by which these outcomes may be achieved. Meaningful CBR experiences—characterized by trust, indeterminacy, and emotion—apart from facilitating the various results identified above, have been intrinsically gratifying and rank among the most significant experiences of my education. The unpredictable and sometimes circuitous path of CBR stands in stark contrast to the steadfast direction of my personal growth as a result of these experiences.

A Note on Limitations

The notion of a researcher's personal narrative as the source from which findings are identified may appear egocentric or even lacking rigor *(Holt, 2003)*. To be sure, utilizing the method of autoethnography results in findings that are reflective of my experience alone and come laden and enriched with my personal bias and background *(Eisner, 1998)*.

One limitation of this study is that my experience is not neatly associated with time spent as a formal student in a CBR course. As I have noted, I remained engaged in the partnership through a practicum, then as a student employee. Consequently, the findings

presented here are reflective of engaging in CBR for a significant period of time, longer than most students who enroll in a CBR course *(Strand et al., 2003)*.

Finally, to reiterate, I do not present these qualities and outcomes as reflective of all student experience in CBR courses and projects, but as aspects of my experience alone. This is not to excuse the methods utilized but to clarify that, in this study, "referential adequacy is tested not in abstractions removed from qualities, but in the perception and interpretation of the qualities themselves" *(Eisner, 1998, p. 114)*. It is my hope that this recounting will stand as one case in the collective exploration of "the promise of auto-ethnography" *(Cutforth, 2013, p. 28)* to enrich our understandings of CBR. These limitations aside, this study does present several important implications for CBR teachers and students.

Significance for CBR Teachers and Students

Although I strike an appreciative tone with respect to community-based research, I do not mean to present this article as a blind endorsement of CBR in all contexts with all populations. Surely, although engagement in a CBR partnership was beneficial for me, it may present other students with undue hardship. The hours do not readily align with a regular work schedule; the tasks are indeterminate, fluid, and collaborative; and the learning is often more idiosyncratic than prefigured *(Moely et al., 2008; Strand et al., 2003)*. Whether we perceive these aspects of the experience as an opportunity or an inconvenience is likely a strong predictor of achieving the purported educational benefits.

Despite the limitations of this study and of CBR, it is my contention that this work may be of interest to teachers of CBR courses, students who participate in community engagement projects, and university affiliates who strive to blend student coursework with community partnerships. To me, trust, indeterminacy, and emotion are important qualities of meaningful student experiences in CBR, and I hope that illustrating these qualities may help students and teachers of CBR anticipate and validate these qualities as they arise. In other words, through enriching our understanding of the student experience of CBR, those involved may be better able to facilitate and engage in meaningful experiences, and as a result, produce the positive outcomes noted by Lichtenstein et al. *(2011)* and Willis et al. *(2003)*.

Further, teachers of CBR courses may consider intentionally facilitating experiences that actualize the qualities presented in

this article through cognizance of how trust, indeterminacy, and emotion may cultivate educational outcomes for students. This is not to usurp other prevalent guidance for teaching CBR *(Preiser-Houy & Navarrete, 2010; Stocking & Cutforth, 2006)*, but it is to recommend concerted attention to the conditions of student experiences in CBR. Teachers of CBR may benefit their students by fostering trusting relationships with their students and community partners, encouraging students to invest emotionally in the work, and challenging students to embrace the indeterminacy inherent to CBR partnerships. It may well be that the provision of these conditions positions the experience as one primed for positive student outcomes.

The findings of this study also suggest that CBR students should seek and earn the trust of faculty and community partners, be willing to adopt an emotional stake in their work, and lean into the indeterminacy inherent to meaningful experiences in CBR. CBR is iterative, ambiguous, emotional, nonlinear, messy, challenging, and complicated. But students willing to engage with the difficulties presented by CBR may be rewarded with meaningful experiences and various educational outcomes (see *Lichtenstein et al., 2011; Moely et al., 2008; Willis et al., 2003)*.

Ultimately, the decision of significance and directions of future study will be shaped by readership. I present these qualities of experience in the hopes that those engaged in CBR may apply them to their contexts as appropriate. This study opens the empirical door, so to speak, to understanding the qualities of the meaningful CBR experience, and the findings herein may be applied to practice in innumerable ways. Future studies may explore the qualities outlined in this study or apply other frameworks of educational experience to the study of students engaged in CBR. These experiences may also serve as examples of how critical consciousness and socially just orientations can be awakened in students, and therefore provide a perspective on bringing these theories to practice *(Freire, 1970/2009; hooks, 2003)*. Continuing down these lines of inquiry could inform CBR teachers as facilitators of experience and may help students identify and assimilate the educational value therein.

Epilogue

To close this study, I return to the opening vignette:

> After the van ride back to the hotel, I have a few moments alone—just enough time for a cliché pep

talk in the bathroom mirror. I attempt to dull the emotional discomfort I feel by taking the long view; trying to identify whatever it was Dr. London was smiling about. I have to get over it somehow, as I am due for dinner with the same scholars who had just so politely scrutinized the curriculum I had worked so hard on.

Thankfully, my CBR professor and community partners have created an environment where insecurity and emotional investment are to be cultivated as contributing to student development. I reside in a space where it is safe to show how this work elicits an emotional response, and my feelings of inadequacy may be considered a reflection of my commitment. I feel hurt only because I care.

The lump in my throat subsides, and I begin to see this experience in a more positive light. I realize that it does not matter that the curriculum I wrote requires revision, and it does not matter that I trip over my words when I am nervous. It does not matter that I still have much to learn about participating in university–community partnerships. My shortcomings do not matter because I am a student, and this is my chance to learn.

I remind myself that it takes courage to work on something you believe in, and our efforts could make a genuine difference in the lives of people in this community. I also remind myself that it is precisely because these experiences are difficult that I am able to grow through them. For these reasons, I am able to see this interaction as but one in a series of experiences that will further prepare me as one who engages in some of the best, most difficult work.

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