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A Promising Practice to Move from Charity to Solidarity: Community-Engaged Experiential Learning in International Development Studies

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Abstract

Community-engaged experiential learning (CEEL) has emerged as a model of teaching and learning that provides postsecondary institutions with a framework for meaningfully connecting with their wider communities in ways that ensure mutual benefits. This study explores CEEL, including the challenges and value of CEEL, in the context of international development studies (IDS), using evidence from multiyear research with a 3rd-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Guelph. Using a multistakeholder approach, we examine experiences and perspectives of students, community partners, and university stakeholders to provide a comprehensive understanding of the course impacts and CEEL more broadly. Each stakeholder group identified numerous shared benefits of CEEL. This work indicates that actualizing community-engaged experiential learning that is grounded in justice and committed to critical reflection and reciprocity has the potential to dismantle knowledge hierarchies, promote solidarity, expand worldviews and project reach, and act as a catalyst for transformative change.

Keywords: global community engagement, community-engaged teaching and learning, community–university partnerships, international experiential learning

Community-engaged experiential learning (CEEL) has emerged as a model of teaching and learning that provides postsecondary institutions with a framework for meaningfully connecting with their wider community in a way that ensures accountability and mutual benefits. In this article, we will explore CEEL in the context of international development studies (IDS) and discuss the critique and value of CEEL using evidence from a multiyear evaluation of a 3rd-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Guelph.

CEEL is a branch of experiential learning (EL) that incorporates the principles of community-engaged learning (CEL), calling for universities to meaningfully integrate community engagement within the academic curriculum in a way that aligns learning outcomes with community-identified priorities (Morton et al., 2020). CEEL emphasizes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities that is mutually beneficial, whereby the exchange and production of knowledge and resources is reciprocal and equally valued (Morton, 2013; Morton et al., 2020).

CEEL is a way to amplify the social, cultural, and human capital of universities and their larger communities, while also enhancing student learning and skill development (Levac et al., 2018; Peterson, 2009). Studies show that participation in CEEL courses and programs is positively associated with student academic performance, including improved GPA, critical thinking, and communication skills. There is also evidence that these programs enhance career success and employability of students due to the development of transferable skillsets and exposure to "real-world" work environments (Tiessen et al., 2018).

Much scholarship focuses on impacts for students; however, research indicates that community partners find the process of working with students enriching and value the relationships established with the universities (Cronley et al., 2015; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Worrall, 2007).

Although CEEL can lead to many positive outcomes, it is important to also recognize that these programs can have negative consequences. Critiques of CEEL generally focus on the power dynamics and oversimplification of campus–community partnerships, which can perpetuate or exacerbate social inequalities, marginalization, and disempowerment if not acknowledged and addressed (Dempsey, 2010; Levkoe & Stack-Cutler, 2018). There is a tendency within the literature to overlook the complexities of community identities and downplay the ethical implications of these relationships. Unequal access to resources, such as knowledge, time, and funding, can skew the priorities and decision making away from communities, undermining the very goals of establishing such a partnership in the first place (Dempsey, 2010). Such inequality is complicated further in the context of international development studies' contemporary practices, rooted in Eurocentrism and colonialism, that can reinforce the status quo and the charity-based development model under the appearance of "good" global citizenship (Tiessen & Huish, 2014).

Scholarship surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of CEEL has grown, but the research has been notably descriptive and/or focused on only a single perspective (i.e., students, faculty, or community; Beaulieu et al., 2018; Hammersley, 2013; Levac et al., 2018). To gain a holistic understanding of the impacts and implications of CEEL, we seek to explore the outcomes for all stakeholders simultaneously.

Understanding the Impact of CEEL

EL activities are considered an essential component of the international development (ID) curriculum in Canada. Employers and postgraduate programs seek candidates with practical "field" experience, while students are eager for exposure to potential career paths and professional skills development (Tiessen & Huish, 2014). From our perspective, CEEL has the potential to transform development studies by taking a global/local approach to social issues and reframing the focus of community engagement to one that is explicitly justice-oriented.

One way of integrating a justice orientation to CEEL is to commit to practicing critical community-engaged scholarship (CCES). CCES is described by Cynthia Gordon da Cruz (2017) as incorporating insights from critical race theory that can "support university and community partnerships in producing knowledge that more effectively dismantles systemic sources of racial and social injustice" (p. 363). Gordon da Cruz explained that shifting the goal of community-engaged learning toward an explicit focus on justice, as opposed to "public good," leads to more effective responses to social issues and strengthens partnerships between communities and universities. This can be a transformative approach, particularly in the field of ID, as we move away from the conceptualization of development as charity work toward an understanding that it is a process rooted in justice and solidarity.

Another approach to understanding the impact of CEEL in IDS is through a global/local perspective originally applied to community engaged teaching in global health (Rowthorn, 2015) and geography (Houston & Lang, 2018). Global/local, or *glocal*, is a means of "teaching or applying a global perspective and understanding of transnational . . . issues, determinants, and solutions to address the . . . needs of communities everywhere" (Rowthorn et al., 2016, p. 952). Glocal understandings of development help remove the othering that can occur when working in cross-cultural settings and can help foster "thick" forms of global citizenship. John Cameron (2014) argued that experiential learning in the context of IDS is often approached with a "thin" understanding of global citizenship, meaning motivations for implementing or participating in these programs center around superficial notions of "doing good" or "helping" or "making a difference." However, they do nothing to deconstruct or address the structural and economic inequities that perpetuate this need for "help." Thick global citizenship, on the other hand, attempts to shift these structural conditions through building solidarity with equity-deserving groups and confronting our complicity in reinforcing and benefiting from unjust systems.

Value of CEEL in IDS

Central to the value of CEEL is the focus on critical reflection and reciprocity (Levac et al., 2018; Tiessen & Huish, 2014). Critical reflection acts as a pedagogical scaffolding that positions learning, specifically

experiential learning, as a continuous process of action–reflection (Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014). This approach prompts students to push past a focus on personal change and examine power relations, cultural norms, and existing institutional arrangements and policies that marginalize and oppress specific groups of people. Equally important in the practice of CEEL is the notion of reciprocity. Reciprocity is defined as the "ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties" (Maiter et al., 2008, p. 305) and underscores the nature of community-engaged projects as being more than a teaching tool—they should meet community-identified research priorities. Establishing reciprocal relationships requires explicitly confronting power disparities and maintaining a commitment to open communication.

Actualizing community-engaged experiential learning that is grounded in justice and committed to critical reflection and reciprocity has the potential to dismantle knowledge hierarchies, promote solidarity, expand worldviews and project reach, and overall act as a catalyst for change.

Course Description

To provide an opportunity for students to engage with development practitioners in a real-world context, a community-engaged experiential learning course was developed for the first time within the International Development Studies program at the University of Guelph. A global engagement specialist was hired by the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) and the International Development Studies (IDS) program to research and design this course in line with best practices in the field. Following extensive consultations and research, the course Engaging in Development Practice (Development Practice) was created. This course explores the challenges associated with engaging with development practitioners and equips students with the necessary skills for successful engagement.

A primary component of the course is student research and analysis that answers an inquiry posed by the community partners. Before each term, the instructor worked to understand the specific priorities and contexts of the partners and turned their ideas and interests into questions that students address. Prior to starting the semester, the instructor drafts, tests, and revises research questions with the partners' feedback (Blostein, 2020).

Each student group worked with a local or international community partner on best practice scan research, which included a literature review and environmental scan explorations of existing initiatives, as well as emerging and promising practices. Students work in teams to consult with their partner as local experts/stakeholders to explore innovative ideas that help the partner organization address a challenge they are facing in their area. For specific examples of course partners and projects, see the Appendix. Each course offered during the study comprised 12 to 16 students. The course cycle and structured format was made up of four phases: team building, planning, project completion, and project sharing. The students produced four main coursework outputs:

1. Community-engaged project proposal—Student teams developed a proposal with a community engagement project plan to address a research question pertaining to a development issue identified in consultation with the community partner. The proposal focused on a project that contributed to the analysis of the development issue and potential solutions, as well as identified the intended social value of the proposed community engagement project.

2. Community-engaged learning draft and final product—Groups delivered a draft and final product for the community partner by implementing the plan outlined in their community-engaged project proposal. The community-engaged learning product develops analysis of the development issue and potential solutions. The primary audience for the final product is the community partner; there may be other secondary audiences as appropriate.

3. Community knowledge exchange conference—Project teams delivered presentations that reflect on contributions, shared knowledge, and effectively communicated learning garnered through the group's community-engaged project to peers, faculty, community partners, and other stakeholders. Presentations focused on in-depth analysis of the research question and recommendations.

4. Critical reflection essay—Individual assignment articulating theoretical and analytical connections between the community-engaged research experience and self-understanding of personal and intellectual growth, contributions as part of a working group, as well as evaluating power, privilege, and diverse roles in development.

The objective of the course is to simulate a work environment that closely mirrors that of international development specialists, policy analysts, and research consultants. As key learning outcomes of the course, students

- Identify and analyze development issues, challenges, and priorities;
- Understand and reflect critically on the perspectives of development practitioners and community stakeholders with respect to development priorities, challenges, policies, and practices; and
- Effectively communicate with said stakeholders through both written and oral forms.

Study Purpose and Research Question

Using findings from a multistakeholder evaluation, we share some of the insights gained through the integration of these multiple perspectives. We use data from a project documenting the course impacts of Development Practice, a newly developed CEEL course offered at the University of Guelph, for students, university stakeholders, and community partners. The purpose of the data collection and analysis was for ongoing assessment for this new course in addition to informing research in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In this study we assess the degree to which students achieved the course learning outcomes, focusing on the tangible skills and professional development students believed they gained. Using reflections from students and partners, we explored the course's impact on their understanding of the development context and their perspectives of development issues. We gathered their feedback on course structure and approach that enhanced their learning.

Methods

This evaluation reflects on course activities undertaken from January 2018 to April 2019. The evaluation is based on the collection and analysis of data from stakeholder consultations using surveys and interviews. Research Ethics Board approval was gained from the University of Guelph prior to all research activities taking place.

All students enrolled in the Engaging in Development Practice course during the Winter 2018, Summer 2018, Fall 2018, and Winter 2019 semesters were invited to participate in the study. Those who agreed to participate were asked to fill out pre- and postsurveys with open- and closed-ended questions online at the beginning and end of the course. Survey questions aimed to assess students' progress toward the attainment of intended course outcomes, as well as their reflections on the process and personal and professional impacts of the course on student experiences more broadly.

The research team conducted semistructured interviews with seven community partners (six local to Guelph/Wellington and one international partner) and three university stakeholders, including the course instructor and two of the International Studies Department senior leadership team. All interviews were conducted by the principal investigator using interview guides that were developed for each stakeholder group. Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participant and later transcribed.

All data was deidentified prior to analysis. Only the principal investigator had access to the identified data. In all, there are 112 data sources with individual responses for this evaluation report, including 49 preprogram survey responses and 53 postprogram survey responses from students, seven community partner interviews, and three stakeholder interviews.

Student survey responses were imported into NVivo for data coding and analysis; interview transcripts were coded in Microsoft Word. Following a thorough familiarization period, a grounded approach was used to construct emergent themes that arose from the data, synthesizing the views of participants and using original quotes wherever possible to ground themes in respondents' statements.

Findings

We present the results from each of the stakeholder groups, starting first with our community partners, followed by the students, and finally the university stakeholders.

Community Partner Perspectives

Of the seven partners consulted to understand the outcomes of engagement with Development Practice from their perspective, six are local to Guelph/Wellington, and one is an international partner. Two community partners participated in a 6-week summer iteration of the course, and five participated in the standard 12-week iteration. Organization and research project descriptions are in the Appendix.

Based on their experience with the course, partners were asked to indicate the degree to which they agreed with a series of questions, which was then followed up by open-ended questions for them to elaborate on their experience. Overall, the partners reported a positive experience in collaborating with the class. The elements that the partners commented on most positively were the connection to the students and university, while also appreciating the course process and quality.

All seven of the community partners felt that they gained the most from the energy and perspective brought by the students. They valued the students' fresh ideas and genuine interest in their work above any outputs, and described the students as being "highly intelligent," "engaged," and "enthusiastic."

Many community partners felt that the students they worked with genuinely want change and to create a better world. Students are guided by a sincere interest in solving the issues at hand, giving them the freedom to approach their research topic in a way that community partners often cannot because the students are not motivated or constrained by competing factors such as funding, politics, or organizational conventions. One particularly illustrative quote stated,

> It was extraordinarily refreshing to be able to talk to a group of people that were so genuinely interested in what we were doing but at the same time not having a lot of preconceived ideas about what's going on. [For example,] if I'm working with people [already in the field] they sort of have a framework in their head or a certain paradigm or set of principles, that are colouring their glasses. . . . But the students don't have that, they're totally unbiased and even though they're students and it's a school project, I still say they had a sincere interest.

As this community partner explained, seeing the way students embraced their research questions with open minds and enthusiasm helped organizations feel a renewed sense of optimism and commitment toward their work.

New Ideas, Fresh Energy, and Drive

Community partners also found the new ideas, fresh energy, and drive that the students brought to the table motivating, as working in the field can be draining and sometimes disheartening. They valued this "freshness" and desire to learn, explaining that it "rubs off, because it's reciprocal," and that "the more interest they show, the more that I wanted to give them. So that dynamic worked really well." One community partner described the experience as "very energy giving" and that it was like "getting a little turbo boost" because students were able to take on projects that the organizations didn't have the capacity to prioritize, helping to relieve some of their workloads and save them time in the future.

Although it was hard for students to expand beyond the knowledge the community partners already had, as they are experts in their field, students brought a fresh set of eyes that partners found encouraging. One illustrative quote explained,

> Seeing the report the way that it was written, highlighted another dimension of the topic. You know when you see something for a long time and then somebody says it in a totally different way, and you say, "Wow that's it, why didn't I think of that?"

Another element of the experience some community partners discussed was the value of the students bringing their own unique lived experience and expertise to the projects. One participant spoke about how working with the students and hearing about their lives and experience was "insightful" and it was that "human connection" that made the process meaningful. They shared,

> I liked it and some of the insights that they told me, specifically having to do with how sometimes immigrant children are kind of like the family's settlement workers or the family's ambassador and one of them said that and I thought that was very insightful.

Networks and Influence

Another major benefit community partners felt they gained through their participation with the course was a connection to the university, or as one partner commented, "The university is a place of learning, but it's also a place of networking and influence." The organizations we worked with viewed students as connections to potential volunteers, as well as organizational supporters when they graduate as future colleagues, policymakers, and leaders in the field. Being able to show students what they do and teach them about the contextual realities they face was an important part of the motivation behind community partners wanting to participate, and continuing to participate, in this course. One partner explained, "We need allies in the community, and we need people that have potential to go to higher places, to senior places, to address these issues that haven't been going anywhere," and by working with the class they helped to foster solidarity and "buy-in." Another partner described this as "plant[ing] a seed," noting they "wouldn't be surprised" to see the students as future volunteer applicants.

Community partners also viewed the partnerships as providing them valuable access to the university and its research, influence, and resources. Having research that is associated with the university added to the organization's credibility. For example, if a report identified a gap in programming or evidence of project success and they wanted to use that information to apply for funding, having the report associated with the university added a level of validity to the application, or, as one partner described, meant the report "has more teeth." Other participants commented that many of these small local organizations just didn't have the time or resources to dedicate to conducting "deep dives" into the research; therefore, partnering with the university gave them "an opportunity to up [their] game." One partner described these benefits by saying,

> It gave us the chance to get that much needed research done, that was very practical and helps us make wise decisions without real financial costs, there's cost of some time, but that cost of time would've been higher if we had been doing it ourselves.

Course Process and Quality

When asked about the overall process of working with the course, all the community partners strongly agreed that it fit with their research interests. They highlighted that the course was managed effectively, well organized, and had good communication from the course instructor throughout. One partner described it as the "perfect scenario" for working with a course and said it has set the "benchmark" when it comes to working in this type of model again.

The majority of the community partners strongly agreed that the quality of the final project met their expectations and that they would share the research with their networks. The participants commented on the final reports being "comprehensive" and "high quality" while also commending the students for doing a "phenomenal job." Two community partners selected *somewhat agree*, instead of *strongly agree*, to the previous questions. They explained that the research "didn't quite hit the mark" in terms of providing the tangible content they could use in practice. One of them further elaborated, saying, "Maybe the question or challenge that we brought to the class was too big or broad which led to broad recommendations that while great, did not help move the project forward too much."

Interestingly, all of the community partners strongly agreed that the overall benefits of working with Development Practice students outweighed any burdens it may have added to their work and also that they would work with the course again in the future. They said that they felt "supported" and that the course instructor was "receptive" to their needs, which allowed them the "freedom" to pursue a research question that was best for them. These responses indicate that the greatest benefits of partnering with the course lay in the overall process and relationships, rather than the end products.

Areas for Development

During the interviews, community partners were asked to provide feedback or recommendations regarding ways in which we could improve the partnership experience in the future. The main challenge identified by the community partners was that because they are the experts in these topics, it was difficult for the students to provide research that went beyond what the partners already knew. To address this issue, partners

suggested that students take on more specific research topics with concrete parameters or deliverables. Another recommendation from community partners, echoing students' suggestions, was to increase the amount of engagement time they had with the class.

Community partners offered these key takeaways:

- Take time to develop trust with partners to make sure the process is a worthwhile investment of their time.
- Ensure built-in intentional allocated class time for students to meet with partners throughout the term to ensure engagement and input into the research process and relevance of outputs.

Student Perspectives

Demographics

We had 49 student responses to the online presurvey and 53 student responses to the postsurvey. These surveys were distributed at the beginning and end of each course, offering to the same students the opportunity to gather reflections on working with community partners for community-engaged learning projects, as well as the process and impacts of the course activities on student experiences.

Of the 48 students who responded to the question, 44% were 3rd year, 44% were 4th year, and 12% were in the 5th year of their undergraduate studies.

Presurvey

The presurvey asked students to share what skills, values, and knowledge they brought to the Development Practice course. In order from most mentions to least mentions, students discussed that they entered the course with research skills, international development knowledge, interpersonal skills, written communication skills, personal skills, and ethical values. Students highlighted their oral communication skills the least. When asked how many prior courses they have had with a community engaged learning (CEL) component, 85% had never taken a CEL course. Students largely reported entering the course with strengths in theoretical knowledge and academic competencies.

The presurvey also asked an open-ended question about challenges or concerns students anticipated within the community engagement project. A common theme (n = 10) was the expression of feeling unprepared or unqualified to take on a "real" project for an actual development organization. One student stated they were "concerned that [the] project will be more challenging than anticipated" because it was their "first time working with community partners for a project that they will be using" and they were "fearful that [they] did not have enough practical experience to be able to provide useful information and present it in a way that is beneficial to our partners." Due to a lack of previous experience in the area and a general lack of practical skills in a professional domain, some students doubted their ability to provide useful research outputs.

Postsurvey

Following the completion of the course, students were asked to complete a second survey to assess the impacts of the community-engaged component on the process and outcomes of their learning. The postsurvey data measured three main domains. First, it assessed the degree to which students achieved the course learning outcomes, focusing on the tangible skills and professional development students believed they gained. Second, students reflected on the course impact on their understanding of the development context and perspectives of development issues. Third, students discussed the elements of the course structure and approach that enhanced their learning and provided feedback on the course.

Tangible Skills. Students leaving the course reported that they had gained valuable and tangible skills to enter the development field. They discussed developing skills including collecting and analyzing data, writing and presenting a professional report, soliciting and incorporating feedback, understanding and meeting community partners' needs, and developing interpersonal skills through teamwork. When asked if they would apply what they had learned outside the course, 96% of students responded with *strongly agree* or *agree*, indicating that the skills they developed throughout the course are versatile and valuable in the long term.

Personal Skills. Students identified a range of personal skills that were developed or strengthened by the course. In both the pre- and postsurveys, students discussed feelings of inadequacy and having to deal with imposter syndrome when they first

started the course. As the course progressed and they were required to reach out to development experts and regularly interact with group members and community partners, students expressed that their confidence grew. One student shared that "Being propelled to do more than I believed I could resulted in me gaining confidence and insight on all the abilities that harbour within me." Their increased confidence helped build resilience and belief in themselves to realize their "opinions and insights matter," and their "thoughts will be validated" when they enter the workforce. An area students particularly lacked confidence in was oral communication and public speaking, with participants commenting that prior to the course they "hated public speaking and presentations." However, in the postsurvey questionnaire, 90% of students responded with *strongly agree* or *agree* to leaving the course with increased confidence in their ability to present research findings orally, with the other 10% selecting *somewhat agree*.

Confidence also contributed to the ability to both receive and provide constructive feedback. One student said they usually would not ask their group members to change things because they "wouldn't want to offend anyone," but their approach shifted as they realized that their feedback "helped the report." Receiving feedback was also discussed as an area of growth for many students as they sometimes struggled with how feedback made them feel; however, they recognized its importance and worked to disentangle their personal worth from their work.

Interpersonal Skills. Students also developed many translatable interpersonal skills, including relationship development, effective communication, and understanding and meeting the needs of others. This course offered many students their "first opportunity to work in a large group setting," and required them to work closely with their peers on data collection and analysis, report writing, editing and feedback, and the final presentation.

Students also discussed interpersonal growth in their ability to connect with others and work as a team. Students shared that they learned how to "productively allocate roles" and delegate and share tasks effectively. Some students also shared that they gained "participation skills" as they developed confidence about their intelligence, "speaking out in a small group setting," and their "ability to effectively collaborate" with team members. A few students discussed how they "gained perspective" and learned from their peers. As one student shared, "The biggest skill I picked up was learning about how to be in a group with seven other people that you don't necessarily see eye-to-eye with."

Multiple students discussed the advantages of building new relationships, including communication skills and knowledge exchange. For instance, one respondent shared, "I think the relationship-building was hugely beneficial for me. Working with a group . . . taught me so much about communication and knowledge mobilization that I will continue to apply in the future." Team discussions, "bouncing ideas off one another," and "constant check-ins" pushed students out of their "comfort zone" and gave them a glimpse into what teamwork might look like in the workforce. Their teamwork experience taught them how to gain trust, be patient with others, show and receive respect and support, and "make sacrifices" to "be there for the group." Participants also discussed that learning how to effectively communicate with various stakeholders and the community partner was the most valuable aspect of the course.

Although students reflected positively on relationship building and teamwork, students also struggled with these areas the most. Group work challenges, such as finding suitable times to meet outside class and managing group dynamics among different working styles and personalities, were mentioned frequently. Even though most development work is highly collaborative, one student stated that "in the program, people often aren't challenged to work in group projects." However, by working through these challenges students were able to learn strategies to help them communicate and reach compromises that they can take with them into the future.

Professional Skills. When asked if they had developed the ability to identify priorities for development practitioners and community stakeholders, 96% of students indicated they *agree* or *strongly agree*, suggesting that students gained many relevant professional skills, including how to work for others to meet their needs, accept and incorporate feedback from project partners, and practice professional communication, as well as identify and assess solutions.

Students commented that connecting with the community partner "was an extremely important part of the project" because it helped ensure they "were keeping in line with stakeholder and development practitioner perspectives and priorities." These consultations provided students with an opportunity to engage in professional discussions to establish a shared understanding of the expectations and goals of the project. When asked if they learned to reflect critically on perspectives of development practitioners, 96% of students indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree*.

Another professional competency that students discussed was developing their written communication skills. These skills encompassed several areas, such as accessible report writing, writing for different audiences, and knowledge mobilization. In the postsurvey, 96% of the student responses indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they can communicate effectively with development practitioners and stakeholders through written and oral forms. In the open-ended responses, one student shared that they learned how to create "a written document that is accessible to a wide variety of audiences rather than being riddled with academic jargon." Another participant wrote that they were already applying these concepts beyond the course, stating, "I have been testing my knowledge mobilization skills in papers I have been writing, and [I] even explained [knowledge mobilization] to a peer when editing their work."

Avenue to Development Work and Networking. Another benefit of the course identified by the students was that these structured interactions with community partners proved to be incredibly useful for students' understanding of the challenges and complexities of development work. Several respondents pointed out the importance of having practical and applied experiences with community partners. As one student commented,

> I think most people, including myself, have not had much experience in development work. This class gives us a great opportunity to get a taste of what a real project would look like with actual organizations and how everything works.

Further, 89% of students indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they have made valuable connections with individuals from the community that they likely would not have made outside this course. Multiple students discussed how this course reaffirmed their desire to pursue employment in the development sector after graduation and that the course exposed them to different types of development work that they had not previously known about or considered. One student shared, "I want to work in the community development sector someday, and without this course, I wouldn't have known all the options that are available to me after I graduate."

The Engaging in Development Practice course provided an important opportunity for experiential learning, enabling students to discover relevant job opportunities. As one student put it, "I now feel more affirmed in my skillset and knowledge. As I venture into the international development sector post-grad, I remind myself that I have the capacity to [succeed]."

In addition to enabling students to envision a future career path, this course also provided an opportunity to network and connect with professionals and organizations within their field. Although students are often told about the importance of networking, there is little to no instruction or opportunity to practice throughout their undergraduate degree. This course, however, provided a safe and supportive space for students to practice this skill, which students can incorporate to obtain volunteer and employment positions in the future.

Evolved Worldview. CEEL has great potential within IDS to promote solidarity and to expand worldviews and project reach. One of the central themes that emerged from student feedback was the impact of the course on their worldviews and perceptions of development issues. Participants shared many profound insights into how their understanding of development and their role within development changed over the semester. Students acknowledged that there is no "correct answer" to development issues, that struggles for funding, lack of time and resources, and the difficulties of addressing multifaceted challenges are not going to be solved easily. Yet, despite these realizations, students were not discouraged; in fact, they expressed feeling empowered. As one student shared, "The small things you do actually matter."

Working with partners also helped students

understand the systemic barriers faced by communities and development practitioners working toward long-term progress. As one student said,

> Our group kept coming back to the idea that there needs to be policy change to really address the development issues, . . . which is not necessarily in the capacity of our partner as a service organization rather than an advocacy organization.

Policy change was not within the partner's capacity; nonetheless, these students now understand that development issues are inherently policy issues. Although these challenges were difficult to navigate, they allowed students to gain firsthand experience into possible workplace realities, including difficulty connecting with and meeting the needs of colleagues and external partners.

Working with a variety of partners, both local and international, students discussed how the course shifted their lens to see that "there are problems that need help at home too," such as youth homelessness and immigrant health inequity, which bridged "the gap between the local and the global." Several students commented that this local focus challenged their belief that they had to focus on a global scale to "make a difference." As one student said, "I now understand that local and international development are both important, and one does not outweigh the other."

Throughout the semester, students also challenged their "biases and assumptions about deficits in the communities" to instead employ an asset-based community-engaged approach. Several participants recognized that "communities already have the knowledge, but [they] need a way to allow it to come to fruition," which is where community-engaged researchers' expertise becomes valuable. Another student reflected on the fact that "community members are experts in their own experiences," which prompted them to begin to unpack their privilege within academia and critique academic tendencies to monopolize space and shut others out.

Related to this critique, multiple students also commented that this course helped them practice humility and fight for justice alongside equity-deserving communities rather than view these communities as charity cases in need of saving. One student expressed how understanding the vulnerability context discussed in class helped them examine the systemic elements beyond their control that hold people back. They shared, "People's situation is often a product more so of their environment rather than their personal choices or attributes—poverty is often a systemic problem and thus requires a systemic solution." This recognition of the root causes and external forces of the long-term cycle of social and economic exclusion demonstrates the student dissecting and examining the structural and economic conditions that perpetuate inequity. This process leads to a shift in their thinking toward addressing systemic issues through solidarity for societal transformation.

A particularly profound insight (it inspired the title of this article) that reveals the transformative impact a course like Development Practice can have came from a student, who said,

> I learned that development work is justice not charity. Developmental work should be implemented in order to provide long-term and sustainable change that should not only be for a period of time but is continuous and effectively makes a change for the better.

Areas for Development

In the final section of the survey, students were asked to provide their comments and recommendations for how to improve the course for future cohorts. Although the feedback from the students was overwhelmingly positive, they did provide several critical observations and suggestions.

As we discussed previously, students highly valued interacting with the community partners and expressed their desire for more frequent meetings throughout the semester and more opportunities to solicit their feedback during the report-writing stage. Time spent with the community partners was crucial for relationship-building, networking, and understanding experiences in real-world development jobs, so the professor incorporated this consideration into future iterations of the course. Feedback noted how the instructor helped students schedule regular meetings with the partner every few weeks and made time for students to discuss the report and presentation with the partner immediately following the conference.

Another recommendation was to keep the class size small. Students emphasized that this course required a lot of one-on-one interaction and support, which students didn't "think . . . would be possible in a large class." Students also highlighted that the small class size enabled them to feel comfortable with their peers and helped facilitate effective working relationships that might be lost if the size of the class increased.

Students offered these key takeaways:

- With regular interactions among group members and community partners, students expressed that their confidence grew.
- Exposure to the field through community partners helps students feel connected and belonging to a future in development.
- Ongoing instructor supports are critical to foster course success for students.

University Stakeholders' Perspectives

We conducted interviews with three university stakeholders to explore the intended and unintended outcomes of this course and identify recommendations to ensure the further success of this model going forward. Overall, the course was noted to meet the following outcomes:

1. Establishes the model of CEL in ID-disciplinary context
2. High level of course impact on students in providing career readiness through field connections and opportunities. Valuable addition to the International Development Studies program, addressing students' desire for more practical experience in the degree program
3. Links program and department to the noncampus community and external stakeholders

Demonstration of Concept

Prior to running Development Practice, a global engagement specialist was hired specifically to research and design a community-engaged experiential course rooted in global community-engaged learning best practices. Extensive consultations and research were carried out to inform the format and structure of the course, and its success has provided university faculty and administration a tangible model that is a valuable addition to the international development curriculum. Through the implementation of this course, university stakeholders were able to see many benefits of experiential learning, with one of them noting that

> You take away just a very different set of insights when you are part of a team and you're having to work on a specific problem as opposed to reading what so and so wrote about the politics of agricultural policy. . . .

Seeing the positive feedback from both students and community partners has also given the university stakeholders more "confidence" in continuing the course and inspired them to explore ways they might expand or create more experiential learning opportunities within IDS. One of the participants explained,

> I think now there's a demonstration effect, . . . once you see how it can work well and look at some of the foundations of what might need to be in place to make it successful. Then it's not so hard to think about the possibility of doing something like this at the Master's level.

The course was created to address a gap in student experiential learning; however, the university and International Development Studies program wanted to ensure that it was academically rigorous and involved the application of analytical skills and core development concepts. Connecting with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute was seen as a critical component of not only designing a high-impact course but also maintaining its success and understanding its impacts, because they brought expertise in community-based learning and pedagogy that was described as not found "typically in the traditional social sciences." One university stakeholder stated,

> I think the links with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute are critical. We have people who are experts in this area, and so that will be all the better for us, so that's fabulous. It also allows that link to scholarship.

Having such a strong connection to the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute

and bringing in their expertise also contributed to proving the validity of this model within the ID context because, as one stakeholder explained,

> I think with community engaged models of education, there's a tendency or a danger of people thinking that it's easy, or it's just like course plus community, whereas Liz and Sam [engagement unit director and course instructor] carried out extensive consultation and review of existing programs. Sam is deeply familiar with best practices, both in ID and in CES, and I think that's another reason that this course is working as well as it is.

Addresses Curriculum Gap

A key motivation for designing and implementing the Engaging in Development Practice course was to address a gap in the IDS curriculum at the University of Guelph in creating transitional career opportunities for students. University stakeholders had become aware of students' desire for more opportunities to apply their disciplinary knowledge in applied and practical settings. Development Practice was therefore intended to allow students to gain the relevant field experience and understanding of the complexity of the community development context to better prepare them for the transition into the workforce. As one university stakeholder stated, "For international development, it was a real gap for many years. The closest we had to this was something on case studies and development, which would vary. . . . So, it's really filling a need." The addition of such a high-impact course was felt by all stakeholders as really responding to students' requests for more practical experience in the degree program. The positive response to the course has been highly encouraging for the department and has reinforced the knowledge that through this course they are really addressing a need. One participant reflected, "I've heard that a lot from students that they were just waiting for this. There's a lot of similar feedback where people are saying, 'I've waited my whole university career to be able to take a course like this.'"

Links to Wider Community

Another main outcome that university stakeholders wished to achieve through this course is connections to a broader base of external partners and potential supporters. One university stakeholder noted that the course is intended to foster "linkages with the outside community, this is something that we always wanted to enhance." The individuals interviewed for this evaluation felt that the course helped to facilitate strong partnerships with a range of organizations, both locally and internationally, and also enabled students and community partners to connect, which helps establish professional networks for future employment or volunteer opportunities.

The success of these partnerships has made university stakeholders realize the strength of community engagement, leading them to imagine ways to further their connections with these organizations and beyond. One participant was particularly impressed by the commitment and involvement of the community partners, noting,

> The community partnerships appear to me to be really good. I mean the fact that people in the [international] country office were in [the final presentations] live today was notable to me and it seems that they've been, despite the logistical challenges, both willing and able to interact and [want to] again in the fall, [they] seem to be really excited about the partnership and about seeing it continue on into the future. It strikes me that that was a really successful experience.

Areas for Development

The university stakeholders were asked to discuss any elements of the course that they felt might need further development or any challenges they noted at the institutional level. Although all participants felt the course met all its intended outcomes and were excited to see where the course goes, they did mention a few challenges.

First, compared to traditional courses, Development Practice is much more resource-intensive due to the extensive instructor involvement needed to ensure the quality of the course and partnerships, as well as continued program redesign, development, and assessment. In addition to the instructor's work of delivering and developing the content of the course, many hours of work went into the identification and confirmation of potential partners, listening to their research priorities, and developing viable research projects for the

class to undertake before the class had even begun. This course benefited from a high level of institutional support, including a staff role that supported the course development and partnership building, informed by the recognition that "it's a somewhat slow, intentional process." One stakeholder summarized, "Moving forward, you know, we will need more resource[s] to recruit the partners, we may need more research costs, or honoraria, but we need to make sure that we have the budget to do that." Not only is the funding important, but also the commitment to maintaining the partnerships beyond the 12-week course to, as one stakeholder put it,

> really think about what it means to partner in this way and if we're really talking about true and deep mutually beneficial trusting relationships. Recognizing that there are resources and things that need to be put in place in order for that to continue.

This is where the connection with the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute is critical, because having "an institute on campus that has the capacity to have long and sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with partners" allowed the instructor to be much more "nimble" and "responsive" to the needs of the community and partners.

Institutional stakeholders offered this key takeaway:

- Invest in specialized personnel with cross-department collaboration for effective resource and expertise sharing.

Discussion

As we identified previously, this type of comprehensive analysis has been scarce within the scholarship of teaching and learning literature, which can result in a fairly unidimensional understanding of the outcomes and impacts of CEEL (Hammersley, 2013). Our results report broad similarities between each group, suggesting that the course was indeed mutually beneficial and reciprocal. Although we did not see any points of disagreement, each stakeholder group provided unique insights into the strengths and limitations of the course that would not have been observed otherwise.

Stronger Networks, Expanded Reach

From our analysis, one of the main themes that emerged for all stakeholder groups was the benefit of this course in facilitating the establishment of strong networks, resulting in the expansion of the reach and impact of each group. Students spoke about the importance of connecting with professionals and organizations within their field, as for many this course represented the first time they had the opportunity to do so. This course provided a supportive and collaborative environment for students to develop essential employability skills, while also allowing them to envision a future for themselves within the development sector.

University stakeholders and community partners saw their connection to students, as well as to one another, as a vital strength of this program model. Community partners viewed students as potential future supporters, volunteers, and colleagues; therefore, this course offered an opportunity for them to influence the next generation of development workers. Notably, past students have already gone on to volunteer with the organizations they worked with during the course. For the university stakeholders, Development Practice allowed them to meet a need for applied experience identified by past and current students. The connection between the university and community partners was also of critical importance to both, enhancing the sharing of resources and knowledge, and expanding professional networks.

Disciplinary Knowledge

Reflections from all three stakeholder groups indicate that students achieved the desired course learning outcomes. Although students reported they entered the course with considerable theoretical knowledge, the practical application of that knowledge was seen as extremely valuable in solidifying their understanding of it. The ability to not only recognize and describe concepts and theories, but to apply and adapt them as well is critically important in the field of ID because development practitioners must be able to both understand and address the complex issues facing the world. Development Practice provided students with the opportunity to further develop their disciplinary expertise through the analytical application of core development concepts.

Course Impact

Our findings parallel similar studies looking at the advantages of CEEL and experiential learning more broadly, demonstrating the effect these types of models have on student learning and skill development (Peterson, 2009; Tiessen et al., 2018). This study demonstrates that CEEL impacts go beyond learning and skill development, also contributing to the shaping of student worldviews and perceptions of development issues. Throughout the analysis it was clear that students were making global to local connections, challenging their preconceived assumptions surrounding development issues, and gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation for what asset-based, justice-led approaches to development work look like in practice. In doing so, students were developing thick understandings of global citizenship as they began to confront their own positionality within structures of oppression.

From the community partner perspective, the primary impact of the course was not necessarily the tangible end product, but the overall process of engaging with the class. These findings support the growing body of literature that expands the benefits of CEL for community partners beyond that of simply increasing organizational capacity (Cronley et al., 2015). Rather, the main benefits of the course were strongly linked to the enthusiastic energy of the students, as well as the opportunity it provided to contribute to the development of student worldviews and by extension the chance to influence the next generation of development leaders. This finding has implications for university stakeholders, as it underscores the importance of recognizing community partners as coeducators and necessitates ongoing relationship building and collaboration. Additionally, an important impact of the course from the university stakeholder perspective was that students were meeting the learning outcomes and participating in academically rigorous research projects.

Course Structure and Pedagogy

Through structured and purposeful course activities, students shared that they were able to comprehend the complexity and difficulties of addressing multifaceted issues more fully. Despite these realizations, students did not feel discouraged; instead, they felt inspired and more confident that they can help tackle these challenges. Based on the postsurvey, 90% of students indicated that they *agree* or *strongly agree* that they feel more confident in their ability to apply the principles of development practice because of their involvement in the course. We found that this was not only due to exposure to development professionals working in the field as well as their organizations, but also the result of ongoing critical reflection and instructor support. The intentional design and facilitation of the course enabled this deep learning through elements such as structured mentorship, incorporating the voices of diverse knowledge holders, and step-by-step project planning and leadership.

Community partners also felt that the course was well managed and organized, which many attributed to the course instructor's strong communication skills and receptiveness to partner needs and feedback. They reported that the students produced high-quality, comprehensive final reports and that the overall experience was energy-giving. From the university stakeholder perspective, the extensive consultation and research instituted to inform the format and structure of the course were borne out by its success, which provided tangible proof that this model is a valuable and attainable addition to the IDS curriculum in terms of achieving learning objectives. They recognized that this course, despite being much more resource intensive than other classes, filled a gap in the program curriculum and that its success stems from the high level of instructor involvement and the quality of community partnerships.

Future Research Directions

Critical reflection is seen as one of the primary components of CEEL, facilitating the examination of personal positionality and, crucially, connection to structural factors and norms that contribute to inequity (Langdon & Agyeyomah, 2014). Our results demonstrate that students actively engaged in these reflective practices, leading to a shift in their conceptualization of "development" and their role within it. By incorporating discussions around concepts such as critical theory, global/local perspectives, and asset-based approaches, students were able to begin building those connections, realizing that development wasn't some static end goal waiting to be achieved by communities in far-off places; rather, it is an ongoing process happening every-

where. The insights shared by the students highlight the transformative nature of CEEL within IDS, showcasing its potential for building solidarity with equity-deserving groups and confronting the oppressive power structures that reinforce inequities. Further research is encouraged to explore how the results transfer across educational settings and classroom environments.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore CEEL in the context of IDS and discuss the challenges and impacts of CEEL using evidence from a multiyear evaluation of a 3rd-year undergraduate course offered at the University of Guelph and assess the degree to which students achieved the course learning outcomes, focusing on the skills students gained. Students and partners reflected on the impact of the course on their understanding of the context and perspectives of development issues. This reflection also provided insights on the course structure and approach that enhanced their learning. Analysis of the data showcases the numerous benefits of CEEL on student learning outcomes, as well as on the expansion of relationships and networks for students, university stakeholders, and partners alike. These findings support and improve our current understanding of the impact of CEEL by providing a comprehensive assessment of the specific benefits and drawbacks experienced by the main stakeholders involved in the course. As we highlight in the title of this article, a key strength of this model of CEEL in IDS is that it can help foster thick forms of global citizenship by challenging the structural conditions underlying development issues and leading to a shift in perspective from charity to solidarity, in both policy and practice. This work indicates that actualizing community-engaged experiential learning that is grounded in justice and committed to critical reflection and reciprocity has the potential to dismantle knowledge hierarchies, promote solidarity, expand worldviews and project reach, and overall act as a catalyst for deep and mutual impact.

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Appendix

Organization description	Research question
Organization providing services and programs to alleviate poverty in a medium-sized Ontario city through community building, social supports, and immediate relief.	What are best practices for social enterprises that offer woodworking training and employment opportunities to marginalized people (including people coping with addictions, as well as people with cognitive disabilities) in an integrated work environment?
Settlement agency assisting newcomer families to integrate and thrive in southwestern rural Ontario county.	What are best practices for providing English as a Second Language training to newcomers in rural Canadian communities?
Community health center in a medium-sized Ontario city providing accessible health care and social services to individuals with barriers associated with the social determinants of health.	What are best practices for how Community Health Centers and other service providers offer support and deliver services to uninsured/undocumented clients?
A collaborative initiative in medium-sized Ontario city focused on addressing the root causes of poverty through system and policy change.	What are best practices for YIMBY (Yes In My Backyard) campaigns focused on supporting developments that meet the needs of low-income community members?
A network working directly with neighborhoods across medium-sized Ontario city to provide resources, trainings, and support to community-led initiatives.	What are examples of best practices, challenges, and success factors for community-level asset mapping?
Agency providing support and resources for community members to foster self-sufficiency in rural Southwestern Ontario county.	What are the best practices for evaluating a rural youth homelessness awareness campaign?
Canadian-based international development agency focused on sending volunteers overseas, working directly with program offices in rural and urban Ethiopia.	What are best practices, challenges, risks, and success factors for introducing women-owned homestead production initiatives as infant and family nutrition interventions? What are the key practices, challenges, risks, and success factors in training women and engaging them in livelihoods strategies to bring homestead-produced food to market for income generation?