Building Critical Consciousness through Community Engaged Learning

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Introduction

An experience is not necessarily inherently valuable in and of itself, but becomes so because of the meaning the individual involved in that experience is able to make from it. The Community Engaged Learning (CEL) program at the University of Toronto gives students the unique opportunity to implement and build upon the theoretical knowledge learned in class through practical experiences. Students intern with various community-based organizations on social justice initiatives. These internships are complemented with bi-weekly seminars where students develop theoretical grounding in social justice concepts and are given a space to discuss, decompress, and reflect on what they have learned through their experiences.

My internship placement was as a student blogger for a non-profit community media organization that seeks to present diverse perspectives on African issues. In reflecting on my experiences with this organization, I was able to develop a better understanding of the various ways that we can work towards social justice and explore many avenues through which we can leverage our unique capabilities, experiences, and perspectives to strive towards it. The immersion in the practical pursuit of social justice served to provide me and my peers with meaningful personal and professional insights, knowledge that would have been more difficult to learn exclusively in the classroom.

In this paper, I will be reflecting upon the ways in which the CEL program challenges students to think critically in order to develop a greater awareness of themselves, the various ways they interact with their local and global communities, and the means through which they can leverage their unique skill sets and assert their agency to further social justice imperatives. I will do so by discussing five categories: the nature of the placement, social justice learning, the challenges of the non-profit world, the enhancement of academic knowledge, and personal learning and self-authorship.

Nature of the Placement

Every student was placed in an organization that engaged in a unique mode of activism. The organization I worked for focused on furthering social justice initiatives through media. I managed a student blog for a grassroots media hub whose mission was to disseminate and bolster African perspectives and alternative dissections of economic and human rights issues in Africa. At the outset of my placement, the implications and inherent assumptions of this mission statement were unclear to me. My supervisors explained that we were seeking to counter mainstream media depictions and narratives of Africa. This clarification raised several questions: 1. Is there a specific African perspective, and, if so, what is it? 2. Is there a mainstream media perspective, and, if so, what encompasses such a perspective? 3. What does "alternative" perspective or analysis entail?

When I first saw the term "African perspective," I was a little confused as I was fairly certain that it was part of my job to counter the notion that Africa is one mass that speaks with a unified voice. Another concern was that when looking at the objective of countering or nuancing

a mainstream perspective, I was initially uncertain about what exactly that entailed. I was of the naïve impression that since news outlets that are considered "mainstream" have a monopoly on how the news gets conveyed, they ought to be doing a decent job of effectively and objectively covering the news. When contemplating what "alternative" meant, only unpopular fringe blogs and news agencies lacking credibility came to mind.

However, by exploring and writing about a number of African issues, the specifics of what both an African and mainstream perspective might entail gradually became more evident. The African perspective need not be, as I had previously assumed, a monolithic voice that the entirety of the continent speaks with, but instead a perspective that emphasizes the importance of presenting African voices in both academic and non-academic spaces. In conducting research for blog posts, the mainstream depiction of Africa that the organization was seeking to counter became more easily identifiable. This perspective tends to privilege and emphasize certain narratives and issues while diminishing or excluding others. This might occur for several reasons, including that mainstream media outlets are predominantly Western, and thus the balance of reporting caters more to the appetites and sympathies of predominantly Western audiences or that the media is largely financed by large corporations and thus, issues that are harmful or not salient to those corporations are often manipulated or excluded. For example, in the same week that the shootings of twelve journalists occurred at Charlie Hebdo in Paris, there was a massacre of an estimated 2,000 civilians in a town in Nigeria called Baga. While the world stood in solidarity to mourn the loss of the twelve lives in Paris, very few people were even aware that a massacre had occurred in Baga. Explanations for this disparity in media coverage range from the fact that since there was a loss of journalists in Paris, journalists all over the world were acutely affected and therefore increased their reporting on the incident. With respect to Baga, audiences could easily dismiss the massacre as the predictable consequence of just another African war (Flitton 2015).

Social Justice Learning

One of the most profound lessons that students learned from their internships and the seminar, is that the efforts for "social justice" encompass a broad range of categories and initiatives, and that there are a number of ways to effectively engage in advocacy and be an activist. Over the course of my internship, I came to realize that the dissemination of the "alternative" perspective I was attempting was a mode of striving towards social justice in and of itself. My analysis of African reporting in the media caused me to realize that this perspective was one that involves shedding light on issues: that do not fall neatly into *mainstream media* narratives, that challenge these narratives, that bolster voices that do not get heard, and that recognize and give importance to the fact that there are many viewpoints that require consideration. Through my experience, I was able to see that just because a select few media outlets maintain a monopoly on the production of news, that does not necessarily render them impervious to criticism. Conversely, just because certain blogs or news agencies are less commercially popular, that does not necessarily detract from their credibility. People must maintain a critical eye while consuming the news. I came to understand that the social purpose of the organization was to critique the way that knowledge is produced and the actors that are considered relevant and prominent in the production of this knowledge. The organization responds to this critique by recognizing and giving voice to a number of alternative actors in

order to enrich the knowledge of existing issues and to report on issues that receive relatively little coverage.

The concept of "allyship" enabled students in the program to make sense of their positions of privilege relative to social justice work. The practical application of this concept enabled me to overcome the anxiety I felt about how to approach the issue of my authority and place in writing about Africa. I was initially nervous about writing on behalf of a continent that I was not acquainted with nor identified with personally. However, in hindsight, even if I was from Africa, it is difficult to argue that an individual from a single African country could comprehensively speak on behalf of all Africans. The concept of allyship transformed the way I viewed my placement and assuaged the burden I carried about writing for the blog. An ally is someone who is not a part of a disadvantaged group, nor someone who has personally experienced the disadvantaged position of the members of that group, but stands in solidarity with them and works to bolster their cause. As a student of International Politics, seeing myself as an ally allowed me to make sense not only of my position as an intern, but it also brought into focus my current academic and career path. Identifying as an ally allowed me to reaffirm my motivations for studying and seeking to address conflict and injustice worldwide.

Difficulties of Non-Profit Work

Through their placements, students were able to gain a practical understanding of the constraints that can force non-profit organizations to choose between competing objectives. In an initial brainstorming session, my supervisors recommended that I write on everything from culture to conflict, which, from my perspective, did not exactly align with the mission statement of the organization. In one particular instance, I found myself debating whether to write about a movie I had just seen on a heart-warming story of education in Kenya or on a tragic suicide bombing by Boko Haram. One of the explicit aims of the organization is to counter a notion of Afro-pessimism by shining a light on African achievements and successes. I feared inadvertently perpetuating the very depiction that I was seeking to work against by writing about Boko Haram, but I also struggled with discussing a film when 60 lives had just perished. The organization's mission clearly states that the primary focus of its online content is human rights and economic justice, yet I was being asked by my supervisors to write on a much wider scope of issues.

A lack of clarity in objectives led to inefficient work on the part of interns as expectations were broad and at times contradictory. In my case, this lack of clarity may have been a side-effect of the fact that the organization is managed by a team of volunteers who engage in this work in their spare time. Meetings between me, the supervisors, and my fellow intern occurred only whenever the supervisors could find gaps in their schedules. All of the organization's members only meet once a month. This fact forced a sustained and concerted effort to engage in the discussions required to elucidate the mission of the organization. The time needed by the organization is something that many volunteers simply do not have. A reorganization of priorities may be required in order for the organization to ensure its work has impact. Nevertheless, this experience showed me and many other students how time constraints can cause many non-profit organizations to prioritize certain imperatives over others.

Students realized that in spite of the constraints faced by non-profits, there are often many inefficiencies preventing them from realizing their objectives. I believe that because the organization I worked for failed to clearly define a target audience, it lacked an effective engagement strategy, which undermined its efficacy in realizing its mission statement. Because

the organization operates entirely online, I was surprised that its website was relatively dated and cluttered, making the content that it published difficult to access. I often felt like I was writing into an abyss as the relative inaccessibility of the website, coupled with the fact that the organization is not very well established, resulted in a sparse readership. While the organization reported lacking adequate funding to finance revitalization efforts, I believe it would have been beneficial to redistribute funding to serve different needs. Had funding been re-allocated to re-designing its website, I believe the organization could attract a far greater readership. The mandate of the organization to give voice to various constituencies that are often unheard was undermined by its lack of a clear strategy as to how to do so.

Academic Knowledge Enhancement

Through the Community Engaged Learning program, the knowledge students gained in the classroom was reinforced and nuanced via practical application and real-world comparisons. As a student of international politics, I was able to draw parallels between some of the conditions that facilitate and influence the success of international institutions, as well as those that inform effective community-building processes. Concurrent with the CEL program, I was taking a course that examined justice mechanisms that were instituted in the period of a country's transition from a conflict to post-conflict society. The course stressed the importance of including the voices, experiences, and needs of the victims in the aftermath of a conflict so that they are able to receive a measure of justice that they want, and not justice that is imposed on them or fails to address their concerns. Through an article read in the seminar-component of the CEL program, the class looked at how environmental policy is sometimes formulated in a way that excludes affected communities, and how there can be dissonance at the local community level similar to many discourses on post-conflict transitional justice. There are many instances where previously adversarial communities are entirely excluded from the process of determining the externally imposed mechanisms to reconcile them. The significance of incorporating voices and narratives as comprehensively as possible to institute effective, productive, and relevant policies became more meaningful to me because of seminar discussions and my internship work. I was implicitly working to give voice to perspectives, individuals, and stories that do not often get heard in everything from academic debates to local reconciliation processes. Through my internship experience, I developed a first-hand appreciation for the way that both dialogue across perspectives and the sharing of narratives can empower communities and give them a say in the outcomes that affect them.

The CEL program pushed many students out of their comfort zones and challenged many long-held assumptions. The numerous perspectives that this program explores and dissects gave me the opportunity to develop my own well-founded opinion based on which lines of argumentation I found to be most compelling. Not only did I realize which forms of scholarship and which kinds of perspectives I am drawn to, I also realized how insulating the university setting can be. I helped organize a panel discussion evaluating the Millennium Development Goals for my placement, and the panelists spoke about their beliefs concerning the privatization of education in some developing countries. It was my first time encountering widespread support for this proposition. Within my own academic circles, there was an implicit consensus on the opposite conceptualization of education, seeing it as one of the primary functions of government. Nevertheless, encountering this idea, one held by all of the panelists, further cemented my

opposition to that view on education as I was put in a position where I had to articulate and defend my viewpoint.

The placement component of the program also gave students the opportunity to develop proficiency in a discipline that was completely outside of their academic background. As a blogger, I acquired knowledge of the media without ever taking a course in journalism. By researching my blog posts, I examined the way that mainstream media outlets depict and frame issues. It heightened my sensitivities, sharpened the way that I consume the news, and propelled me to engage in advocacy that encourages students to be critical consumers of the media. In the aftermath of a massacre at Garissa University in Kenya, as coverage of the attack was meager, a number of people shared graphic images of the victims on Facebook with the intention of honoring their lives and giving them the recognition that the mainstream media was failing to provide. However, the sharing of these images inadvertently, and quite ironically, served to perpetuate the devaluation of human life. The bloodied images left the victims to be remembered not for the people they were and the lives they led, but for the horrific way they were killed. Because of my internship experience, I came to appreciate the importance of alternative voices in the media by repeatedly identifying stories where these voices were excluded.

Personal Learning and Self-Authorship

Beyond the notion of allyship, the CEL program helped students conceptualize their roles as social justice activists, and empowered us to leverage our perspectives and identifications as assets in the work we were doing. At the outset of my placement, I saw my position as a South-Asian Muslim woman who grew up middle class in Toronto, and who had never visited Africa, to be an impediment to my ability to write about African issues. While the notion of allyship helped me to make sense of my place in writing about these issues, I was still nervous that I might be culturally insensitive or that the culture that I grew up with might subconsciously impart a sense of ethnocentrism in the way that I viewed African issues. However, I came to realize that as individuals we are not separate from the work that we do. While we may not be directly disadvantaged by a specific phenomenon, our experiences and perspectives are useful tools that can help us engage in activism. I was told that one of the reasons I was chosen for this internship was because of the unique perspective that I brought as a Muslim. I was concerned that being chosen in part because of my identification detracted from my merits and skills. However, I now believe that as a Muslim who worked for this organization I was, in many ways, the embodiment of what they seek to do. My perspective and my voice on issues as a South-Asian Muslim woman was not a perspective this organization had ever had. The analysis that I brought to what I wrote was colored by my uniquely lived experiences. This process helped affirm my identification as an activist and an ally.

At the beginning of the program, each student had to write down goals and expectations that he/she had for his/her experience, only to find that by the end of the program many of our pre-conceived notions were disproved. One of my initial goals for this experience was to be able to move out of the gray area of neutrality and take clear stances on issues I would be writing about. As a result of what I learned through my internship, and from related seminar discussions and readings, I believe that I went through (and am still undergoing) a process of self-actualization whereby I slowly concretized my opinions and values. While I believe I have definitely transcended that gray area, I have also come to realize that things seldom are as black and white as I had believed they were. In the blog posts that I wrote it would have been difficult

to make definitive arguments that could unequivocally be proven correct. Such rigidity of perspective impedes healthy dialogue. I found that a balanced ability to evaluate competing claims is consistently a better approach than a dogmatic insistence on one particular view.

Because we were assigned roles in our internships for which we were already qualified, the placements allowed us to develop and hone our skillsets. Through this experience I acquired a greater understanding of how to write depending on the context I am examining and the audience I am addressing. Moreover, I have come to appreciate the implications of specific word choices. I carefully and critically consider the implications of words that I employ to avoid being deterministic, reductionist, or insensitive of others' experiences by failing to examine the connotations and contextual significances behind those words. Owing to my placement and the critical reflection pieces written for the seminar portion of the course, I made a conscious effort to shed esoteric language and to employ correct and appropriate terminology. I also furthered my ability to cater my writing to specific groups. My writing process has become a way to exercise conscious and critical citizenship by being mindful of the way that I present issues.

Finally, the class experience showed many students which pedagogies were best suited to their respective learning styles. While I have had lecturers throughout my undergraduate career whom I have enjoyed and admired, this opportunity to intimately learn from my peers was unprecedented as I had never been in a seminar that placed emphasis on critical reflection. Getting to learn from the shared stories, perspectives, experiences, and opinions of my classmates challenged the way that I think; each person added value to the discussions through unique contributions, especially given the diverse range of internships each was involved in. The experience was a holistic and engaging way to consider the efficacy of contemporary initiatives for social justice.

Conclusion

While this process was rife with unpredictable challenges, this course and internship experience helped me to better understand myself and what my strengths are, and helped to build my sense of agency in tangibly contributing to the pursuit of local and global social justice. It changed the way I think; I was moved beyond merely making criticisms and pointing out flaws to being constructive and able to propose solutions or suggestions for amelioration. The duality of theoretical and practical learning in this program enabled us to identify the challenges and intricacies of non-profit work that our readings warned us we would encounter. It also enabled us to identify an entirely separate realm of obstacles that only first-hand experience could acquaint us with. Unless we challenge ourselves to seek exposure to different points of views, different possibilities, and different experiences, we risk becoming dogmatic in our thinking and conception of the world, and static in our self-development. This experience enabled me to learn more about and better express myself, and to empower me to be unapologetic in my reasons and resolve for engaging in social justice work.

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I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Linzi Manicom at the University of Toronto for challenging her students to think critically about the ways that they conceive of the world around them, and for encouraging them to reflect critically on their agency in contributing to society, and on the implications of these contributions. Thank you for empowering us to cultivate and

leverage our passions in being conscious citizens. I would also like to thank Professor Phillip Motley of Elon University for working with me to develop this piece and to deepen my own understanding of my experiences.

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