

Co-Learning and Co-Leading in a Capstone Course: Exploring the Possibilities of Transformative Learning

Susan Garrow-Oliver

Mount Royal University

Emma Murphy

Mount Royal University

Taylor Syrja

Mount Royal University

Abstract

This article shares the reflective experiences and learning of two students and a faculty member from the Bachelor of Child Studies degree at Mount Royal University who embarked on a collaborative learning journey in a 4th-year capstone course. Capstone courses provide students with real-life projects within a community agency where they are able to apply theories and knowledge under the guidance of a faculty member and community partner. Key themes are shared that led to transformative change and learning. This was done through collaboration, relational practice, co-learning, and critical reflection.

Keywords

collaboration; transformational learning; capstone; community; relationships; leadership; co-learning; students; reflective practice

Introduction

This article provides reflections and insights of students engaged in a collaborative learning experience during a 4th-year capstone course in Mount Royal University's Bachelor of Child Studies (BCST) degree. Scholarly work and authors are used to connect reflections and to highlight the value of capstone experiences and transformative learning that can occur with pedagogical support in the learning space. The capstone course offers students majoring in early learning and childcare and child and youth care an experiential learning opportunity with a faculty member, 12-

15 peers, and a community partner in the final year of the degree. Students are participating in real, on-the-job, project work related to their practice with children, youth, families, and communities. This two-semester course provides students with diverse opportunities to collaborate on a large community-led project by utilizing the skills and knowledge gleaned from the first three years of the degree. The culmination of the previous courses, which also includes three practicum courses, along with students' lived experience, makes for a unique and valuable learning experience. Students and faculty come to the capstone in the fourth year of this degree with differing and often conflicting motivations. Members of the capstone must collaborate to navigate these contrasting motivations, which can pose a problem. However, the unique qualities of this specific capstone—including process over product, brave spaces, collaboration, and the practice of relationships—allowed an authentic learning environment to be fostered and resulted in a transformative learning experience for students co-authoring this article.

What Is This Capstone?

As an active learning opportunity, capstone collaborative projects and community-based learning are seen as high-impact teaching practices as identified by Kuh (2008). Goldstein and Fernald (2009) posit that capstone courses provide students with the opportunity to reflect on previous courses and apply their knowledge outside of the classroom in professional settings. Opportunities for collaboration provide students the chance to learn to work together in efforts to plan, work through conflict, and solve problems by contributing thoughts and being open to diverse opinions and ideas. Working with community partners gives students direct experience on topics related to their respective disciplines. Working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life (Kuh, 2008). Kiener et al. (2014) explain that what most human service capstone courses have in common is that they all hold the same goal of supporting students through an experiential learning opportunity that bridges them from student to professional. Capstone experiences help to provide students the chance to exercise the skills and knowledge they have acquired in ways that further prepare them for the workforce—thus, helping students to manage similar situations they are likely to experience when entering the professional workforce.

During undergraduate education, students usually take the role of observer and compliant follower in order to learn and understand their field of study, due to the nature and structure of postsecondary education. Capstone experiences within the BCST encourage students to engage in leadership practice, taking the lead on tasks and being an active follower and team player. As effective followers, students demonstrate their willingness to be active participants by respectfully challenging others and engaging in critical thinking. Leadership in this context did not focus on traditional top-down hierarchical models of leadership. Rather, ethical leadership focused on leadership being “a similar process of continued learning and adapting to the new challenges” (Shakeel et al., 2019, p. 622). The process of interpersonal interactions creates meaningful relationships when students are empowered to lead. A concept that is crucial in undergraduate leadership is the growth and process of the leadership capacity over time, and the capstone course during the two semesters provides this for students.

In this specific capstone, the students were partnered with a large not-for-profit social service agency and focused the project on professional and personal development. The agency staff looked to the students for their enthusiastic sharing of knowledge and current research to enhance the programs and practices within the agency. Student learning outcomes of the BCST capstone

include aspects of leadership, research, program design, and professional practice along with learning outcomes related to the specific capstone project tasks and deliverables. The project deliverables identified by the community agency often lead to social and policy change, along with the enhancement of current programs and practices. Through the capstone process, the community partner takes a lead on the project with the students while the faculty member supports all stakeholders through the course and provides students with the knowledge and skills to achieve learning outcomes. Ultimately, students are expected to take on a leadership role in project tasks while working as a team with their peers. This type of experience provides students with meaningful tasks related to their chosen discipline that they will encounter after graduation in the workforce or graduate studies. Student assessment in this capstone was based on project task work, professional practices and team contribution, leadership and facilitation activities, engaging in critical conversations, and self-awareness activities such as reflective journaling.

Community Partner Benefits of Capstone

Vernon and Ward (1999) identify students' eagerness and excitement to learn as one of the many benefits of service and experiential learning for communities (as cited in Campbell & Lambright, 2011). With the capstone being unpaid, the agency benefits from the volunteer time, which Bushouse (2005) explained is a significant benefit for not-for-profits, which "often must do more with less" (p. 32). Students help revitalize, bringing in new and fresh perspectives and encourage the staff to reflect on why they do the things they do. Students in this project conducted research of relevant literature; produced a scan of the internal processes, policies, and documentation; and developed an online orientation training module for all agency staff. With the lack of resources and external support for not-for-profit programs, this work might never have been achieved without the support of the students. In their research findings, authors have noted that agencies found that students were organized, professional, flexible, and enthusiastic and suggested that community programs had a great opportunity for learning with this win-win partnership (Schachter & Schwartz, 2009). They also encouraged these partnerships because of the benefits to both students and agencies as well as the children, youth, and families being served.

In the spirit of reciprocity and collaboration, capstone course benefits are experienced by students, faculty, and the community partner. Goldstein and Fernald (2009) suggest that as a student-centered approach to learning, capstone engages students in experiences that help them to understand the connections between professional identity and their sense of self, while navigating their way through the collaborative team building process and agency culture. This connection is made evident in this reflective article through the student co-author reflections about their risk-taking, motivation, and embracing of and trusting in the capstone process. The experience provides students the opportunity to integrate their knowledge in a vocational context. Schachter and Schwartz (2009) highlight the importance for universities of finding ways to give back to their communities as a form of service, and the work produced by capstone projects is a practical and valuable way for universities to accomplish this objective. In addition, Geller et al.'s (2016) work with community schools found that engaging with students "enabled them to fulfill their mission of promoting social justice" and "believed in its potential to educate a future generation about their work and improve their own job quality" (p.155). In Schachter and Schwartz's study, the agencies said they "found comfort, through the capstone teams' work" (2009, p. 456), because they could rely on students to focus on and meet the intended project outcomes. In the studies shared, common reflections concluded that community agencies were satisfied with student participants and found

that service-learning provided useful service in communities and enhanced community-university relations.

The Problem: Conflicting Motivations

Students enter postsecondary studies for a variety of reasons. For some it is the social norm following high school, for others it is a cultural expectation and strong encouragement from parents, while others decide later after some life experience to return to studies. These factors can influence student motivation, priorities, and goals for being in their chosen program. In a study and review of the literature, Colver (2018) found that students pursued higher education for a number of reasons such as avoiding industrial employment, improving self and securing a stable career, the social aspect, and investing in postsecondary education as a return on investment—all external motivators. Some of the internal motivators identified by Colver (2018) included motivations towards accomplishment, motivation to know, and motivation to experience stimulation being immersed in the learning process. This is important to explore as the student, faculty, and community partner motivations impact the team dynamics, communication, commitment, and ultimately the project outcomes.

While faculty focus on ensuring students meet the learning outcomes, and community partners are more task- and outcome-focused, it is common for students to focus on the assessment of assignments and what they need to do in order to achieve the grade they want. These narrow focuses can distract from the ability to stay present and appreciate the experience and process itself. Early childhood education practice embraces the concept of “process over product” as a critical piece of children’s play and learning. It is in the process where children are able to test theories, challenge themselves, make mistakes, explore new ideas, and learn. This is also an important concept within adult learning and experiential learning. As the faculty member connected to the capstone project, Susan reminded students and advocated for the idea of process over product throughout this capstone experience; however, some students were skeptical of this, instead remaining fixated on the assessment or end product. Emma, one of the student co-authors, reflects on this further, stating, “I have always been a highly task-oriented person. Within my four years of university, this translated into grade-oriented motivation: ‘What do I need to do to get a good grade?’ was a consistent thought and driver in my learning and education.” Although there is arguably nothing wrong with being product-focused, for Emma this meant she was possibly missing out on opportunities for learning in the process and being fully present in the experience. It was through the process where the relationship-building and collaboration occurred. Therefore, when students are focused on the end product, they sometimes fail to experience the growth and transformation the process fosters.

Faculty approaches to teaching and learning also differ. Teaching philosophies and approaches to learning create inconsistencies as teachers and students engage in the critical question of the purpose of higher education. These differences in perspectives add to the challenges and anxieties felt by faculty and students alike. There is continued discourse in academia on the focus of grading as “students have been led to believe the primary purpose of schooling is to achieve As” (Blum, 2020, p. xiii) and the assessment or final grade. This external reward approach from their years of traditional approaches to education, along with societal expectations, can disrupt the authentic learning and capstone experience as Susan reflects:

My approach to capstone courses is to encourage students to take risks by getting out of their comfort zone and taking an active role in the development of tasks to achieve the project outcomes, along with helping to design the learning outcomes and assessments. By helping students identify their own strengths, areas for growth and personal goals, providing choice in assessment can help meet individual goals. However, this type of assessment approach often leaves students feeling anxious as to how they will be assessed, and their work and learning measured.

These are a few of the common motivations that participants enter capstone with, and it is evident that these conflicting motives for success in the project would prove to be an obstacle. Balancing the faculty, student, and partner goals had to be considered in decisions, approaches, and project tasks and outcomes. However, this specific capstone strongly focused on relationship-building, along with several other components that helped to foster a space where students, faculty, and community members felt valued and comfortable exploring their learning on a deeper level.

The Solution

Practice of Relationships

Throughout the BCST program, students learn that their role with children, families, and peers is built on a foundation of relationships. There is also great importance in the building of, and fostering of, relationships to create an element of trust between students, faculty, and the community partner. In many university degree programs, class sizes create barriers to building intentional and meaningful relationships with students. Fortunately, the small class size of this capstone allowed this to not be an obstacle. It was important that the group be engaged in activities to foster a space to share in the discomfort while embracing the unknown. Susan spoke about this:

I was inspired by the students' willingness to let go of the focus on grades and assessment and to eventually trust in the process, which ultimately became a process of collaborative inquiry and co-learning. Through team building activities, building curriculum with students, providing qualitative feedback, peer and self-assessment processes, trust was gained to nurture and strengthen the relationships. As we moved into the final month of the first semester, students began to feel more at ease about the assessments and expectations due to the efforts made to provide open, honest, and respectful communication. When the trust was gained, students flourished in their efforts towards the project work and personal learning. Students relied less and less on the instructor for answers and began to trust their own knowledge, skills, and ability to contribute and make decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in remote and online circumstances during this academic year, which presented some challenges. The online platforms, Google Meet and Zoom, reduced the opportunities for personal conversations with one another or a few people. These intimate conversations are often an effective way in which people get to know one another better. Furthermore, these platforms challenged students who were not quick to raise a hand or share ideas, resulting in a reliance on the chat box and "video off" option. However, the smaller task teams that the students broke into offered a more comfortable space for those students to grow in leadership and initiative. Relationships were largely built through icebreaker questions and

“check-ins.” These questions included ideas such as what Netflix shows teammates were bingeing on or what they were feeling grateful for that day. One of the assessments in the course was a critical friend activity that allowed students to engage in courageous conversations to provide and receive reflective and constructive feedback each week with their partner throughout the second semester. The capstone experience offered different group elements and dynamics, which contributed to the scaffolding of learning and risk-taking for members of the group. Having individuals with varying personalities and strengths in different pairings, partnerships, and teams allowed for a range of relationships to grow and created a brave space for all to grow in.

Brave Spaces

As the students allowed themselves to open up and take risks, the experience offered the opportunity to cultivate trusting, reciprocal relationships, which in turn created a brave space for all to learn, grow, and challenge one another. Stanlick (2015) describes brave spaces as environments that offer opportunities for members to share authentically and honestly with one another while learning from varying understandings and perspectives. In contrast, safe spaces often place more boundaries, rules, and expectations around interactions in an attempt to safeguard the community space, which can sometimes lead to less genuine relationships and conversation. By instead creating a brave space, the capstone group was able to support one another in an authentic way while not passing over the steps necessary for genuine learning and change. This learning experience pushed and challenged members of the capstone team in different ways, which required individuals to step into unfamiliar roles, acquire new skills, and adjust to different forms of communication. Because of the eight-month time frame for the capstone course, students, faculty, and the community partner were able to invest in relationships and cultivate an environment where meaningful learning, critical thinking, and personal reflection could take place. Through weekly check-ins and reflective questions and conversations, the capstone team was able to create brave spaces in this learning environment together by leaning into vulnerability and honesty.

Reflective questions—from what key points of learning were, to how each person had grown throughout the project—helped the group to grow in understanding and support for one another. By encouraging this brave space, students were able to have more transparent conversations about other critical aspects of the capstone experience, such as difficult conversations about ideas, differences in understanding, biases, etc. Taylor, one of the student co-authors, explained that, for her, having the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and goal-setting gave her the confidence to begin taking risks and stepping into leadership roles in the larger group settings. This process continued to increase her confidence as she realized her leadership strengths and worked to learn how to utilize those to benefit the final project outcomes. Taylor was able to use the feedback and encouragement of her peers to take calculated risks throughout her capstone experience, which not only helped to grow her confidence but also challenged her ability to collaborate, which will help her in future interdisciplinary work and settings as she moves forward into her career. Self-reflection, vulnerability, and discomfort play a critical role in the process of transformation (Stanlick, 2015). This brave space allowed members of the capstone team to be honest and to undergo learning that transformed their previously held knowledge.

Shared and Authentic Leadership

“Authentic leadership theory suggests that when leaders are authentic or true to their values and strengths, they enable others to do the same, leading to a positive organizational culture and employee performance” (Walumbwa et al., 2008, as cited in Regan, 2016, p. E55). Because of these trusting relationships, students and faculty were free to be their true, transparent selves, letting one another see their areas in need of support and growth along with their areas of strength. Too often within education settings, such as high school and postsecondary schooling, collaboration among students is a façade. Within the school setting, students often fall into their safe leadership styles in a group, leading to sufficient, but not exceptional work. The driving factor of this poorly executed collaboration is commonly a lack of or fear of authenticity, as vulnerability can be an intimidating concept for many. Emma, one of the student co-authors, reflects that this was true for herself:

Prior to capstone, I would have described myself as a team player. Now in hindsight I would argue that I didn't know the true meaning of teamwork and collaboration. Because I was always focused on the end product and how we were going to get there, I frequently found myself doing whatever I needed to, to ensure that the product would be completed and achieved. That sometimes meant taking control and leaving little room for delegation, agreeing with others so we didn't have to waste time reaching consensus, and ensuring my teammates used their strengths, rather than allowing them to grow in their weaknesses. But working with 15 colleagues in capstone transformed my leadership and collaboration approach. Throughout the process, I was able to build meaningful relationships with my peers, enabling me to trust them and let go of the control I was so hungry for in the past.

The structure of the capstone course allowed for authentic relationships to be built, which led to moments of vulnerability and transformative learning. Harmer et al. (2021) further speak of the importance of relationships among students in another BCST capstone, stating, “As [the students] began to learn, they also began to rely on one another in new ways” (p. 22), allowing for success in the project. These relationships challenged students’ comfort zones and provided them opportunities to step into leadership roles that they would not normally take on. Students were able to learn how to adapt as leaders to different situations, apply the appropriate leadership style to support one another, and collaborate to achieve the group’s overall goals.

Collaboration and Creative Problem-Solving

Capstone students “experience the value of professional networks and get an early introduction to many value conflicts and ethical dilemmas similar to those they will face in their careers” (Smith, 2005, as cited in Schachter & Schwartz, 2009, p. 446). Students demonstrated collaboration within this capstone experience through problem-solving regarding communication issues. At the beginning of capstone in a subcommittee meeting, it was identified that there was an issue with communication amongst the whole team. When addressing it, a student stated, “It feels like the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing,” because each team was focused on their tasks, failing to recognize that communication and collaboration were essential steps in the process. Collectively, the team decided to create a group chat that would allow for quick check-ins, updates, and questions, along with weekly Friday meetings for more in-depth conversation

and planning. In addition, collaboration was exemplified when new tasks were introduced in the second semester, requiring new teams. The students conversed about each of their strengths and areas of growth to determine who each team would be comprised of. While some students decided to take on the tasks they felt they would excel in, others decided to take on new challenges. These examples reflect authentic collaboration through the vulnerability, honesty, and risk-taking the students demonstrated. Life happens and messiness can be expected, but capstone allows for dialogue to be kept open and students are taught to stay at the table to work through and manage the challenges while fostering their ability to be adaptable and build resiliency skills.

The Result: Transformative Learning

This capstone course demonstrated a transformational learning experience that was responsive to the initial differing motivations participants had as learners. According to Mezirow (1991), a principal goal of adult education is reflective and transformative learning. Through the formation and nurturing of strong relationships, a brave space was created to support and transform student learning. Students collaborated and engaged in creative problem-solving while participating in shared and authentic leadership. Students in this course played an integral role in shaping their learning experience, and the faculty member facilitated opportunities for the students to be actively engaged in the learning process. Social interactions and active participation are foundations for growth that have informed experiential learning courses in the Child Studies degree. Students learned to become more aware of others' perspectives, ideas, strengths and needs and were critically reflective of the learning space and roles in their collaborative and individual learning.

In this learning space, students demonstrated the ability to build professional competencies such as analytical problem-solving, planning and organizing, communication, and teamwork. According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning encourages students to be more self-reflective while promoting empowerment and a sense of community, which is what was observed in the capstone experience as they strengthened their relationships with one another, the faculty member, and the community partner. Students became more interdependent and confident while developing a sense of responsibility for supporting peer personal development at the same time. The faculty member leading the BCST course most often finds the experience as rewarding as students and the community partner. Susan, the faculty member and co-author, shared:

Although this was my third time working with a community partner and group of students on a capstone project, I ended the year feeling a great sense of pride and joy. Each time I teach the course, I am in awe of student growth and achievement. Students begin with unease, anxiety, and apprehension because of the unknown and fluid nature of the project work, and at the end of the year are confident, knowledgeable, and competent practitioners ready to engage in making a better world for children, youth, families, and community.

Students make sense of new knowledge and experiences by engaging in critical thinking and reflexive practice, thus transforming their approaches to the learning experience (Mezirow, 2000). This was evident as the students moved away from focusing on the course and project outcomes, to leaning into the discomforts of the unknown and trusting the process along the way. Students were encouraged to help shape the course curriculum and design assessments that aligned with their personal learning goals and project objectives. Transformative learning happened when

students participated in solving problems together, reflected on their own as well as peers' participation and knowledge, and engaged in deep critical reflection. Students did not play a passive role; rather they were highly active and engaged in the learning process. As the course progressed, students began teaching one another. For example, in groups they facilitated sessions on different adult learning theories and concepts, discussed and debated ideas, and reflected upon their own points of view. As noted by Mezirow (2000), transformative learning happens when students engage in social interactions and problem-solving and are exposed to differing perspectives.

Concluding Thoughts

By focusing on an educational philosophy and pedagogy that values a student-centered approach, constructivist self-guided curriculum, and learning through process over the product, student authors reflected on how this transformed their learning experience. Kohn (2006, as cited in Blum, 2020) shares that students think less deeply, avoid risk-taking, and lose interest in learning itself when grades are the driving motivator for learning. Adams-Kollitz (2011) concurs that students end up admiring the product without being completely immersed in the process. These students and faculty reflections bring to light the incredible value that lies within the learning process driven by meaningful internal motivation. Participants come to capstone projects with contrasting motivations, including grades and product outcomes, presenting a collective problem that must be overcome in order to be successful. Though this can be a challenging task, the specific qualities of this capstone allowed for success, outcomes to be achieved, and transformative learning to be experienced for some. These qualities include, but are not limited to, relationship building, shared leadership, reflection, and collective problem-solving. While the projected learning outcomes are typically achieved in capstone projects, there is significant value in the hidden curriculum that includes the unspoken or implicit values, behaviours, and knowledge that support the student transformational learning experience. The student authors noted this learning when they spoke about increased confidence and competence, trusting the process, and taking risks with their peers. This capstone motivated learners to face new challenges and further push their learning boundaries as they move forward in the Child Studies field, and thus proves to be an invaluable component of the BCST program.

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