Abstract

Cape Breton University’s (CBU) Community Studies Department works collaboratively to design, implement, and evaluate the core courses of the Bachelor of Arts Community Studies (BACS) degree program. These core courses are called Community Studies (COMS). Unlike other departments, the COMS department is not formed around one particular discipline. The faculty backgrounds are from disciplines such as sociology, adult education, women’s studies, kinesiology, and social work. This mixture of backgrounds, along with the ability to work collaboratively, has been a source of strength for the department.

The COMS courses involve process-based learning. Some of the components of these courses are group work, problem solving, critical thinking, reflective learning, self-directed learning, and experiential learning. The role of the faculty is to facilitate the learning objectives of these core courses for the students rather than lecturing on specific topics. Consultation, collaboration and the sharing of materials and ideas among the faculty are vital to teaching in this non-traditional environment. Reviewing teaching methods, course outlines and objectives as well as graduate outcomes are ongoing practices. The students in these courses also need to collaborate. They work in groups to carry out their research and other activities. This paper highlights a model of faculty collaboration and student collaboration in the COMS 300 Community Intervention courses. Students in these process-based learning courses are expected to conduct research and implement projects that address community issues.

Background

The BACS degree was the first degree offered at CBU more than 30 years ago. In 1974 Xavier College, a Junior College of St. Francis Xavier University, and the Nova Scotia Eastern Institute of Technology merged to form the College of Cape Breton. This newly established institution was given the mandate to develop innovative and unique programs that would not duplicate the already established degree programs found in other Nova Scotia universities. The BACS degree was created to fulfill this mandate. Final approval for the degree, from the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, occurred on August 7,
1975. The institution’s name “College of Cape Breton” was changed to the “University College of Cape Breton” in 1982 and in 2005 it was changed to “Cape Breton University.”

The BACS degree began with 25 students and currently there are over 400 students enrolled in the program. The COMS department delivers the core COMS courses in the degree. It was one of the first departments at CBU to embrace distance learning. Departmental members worked out the difficulties with technology while offering COMS courses synchronously with student groups spread across wide geographic distances. Because of their efforts, the BACS degree became the first degree at CBU available on-line via the World-Wide Web. In addition to departmental functions, the COMS department is the administrative unit most involved with the operations of the BACS degree because it is responsible for the core courses. This includes, but is not limited to, academic counseling for students, registration, recruitment, new program initiatives, and ongoing program review. These degree, department, and course responsibilities are accomplished in a collaborative environment.

A goal of the BACS degree is to foster cross-disciplinary dialogue. Thus, COMS faculty who have various disciplinary backgrounds and viewpoints, collaboratively develop and deliver the COMS courses. The COMS courses are modeled after an educational approach at Utrecht University Medical School. They combine classroom learning (theory) plus work placements and community intervention projects (practice). Career aspirations, community, and collaborative learning in small groups are major aspects of COMS. Students work cooperatively rather than competitively. Learning how to work effectively in groups is essential. The central philosophy of these process-based learning courses is that students be given opportunities for learning how to learn for themselves and what they learn should have relevance to their career aims and personal development.
Process-based Learning

The COMS process-based learning pedagogy embraces both theory and practice. A process-based learning approach to education involves the facilitation of the learning process. Typically, a professor, known as an “advisor” in the COMS courses, assumes a facilitator role and ensures that the participants’ experience is valued as a rich resource for learning. This approach embraces students’ participation in their own learning. Knowles (1984) claims that a process-based learning design consists of seven elements: climate setting, involving learners in mutual planning, involving participants in diagnosing their own needs, involving learners in formulating their learning objectives, involving learners in designing learning plans, helping learners carry out their learning plans, and involving learners in evaluating their learning. Process-based learning provides a way for life experiences to be incorporated into the course material. Barker (1989) explains that a process-design approach helps students “to see that phenomena (facts, experiences, objects, and concepts) can be described from several points of view simultaneously” (p. 43). His strategy is to use students’ prior life experiences to introduce them to the formalities of contextual analysis and multiplicity thinking. COMS process-based learning pedagogy includes the following components: community involvement, self-directed learning, reflective and experiential learning, group work, problem solving, and critical thinking.

Well-developed critical thinking skills are essential in today’s modern world. Refining our ability to choose amongst competing ideas, and to act appropriately in a given situation is of the utmost importance (Hughes, 1996, p. 16). With its emphasis on process-based learning, COMS courses provide the ideal setting for students to encounter, understand, employ, and enhance their critical thinking skills. Shermis (1992) notes that critical thinking skills should be developed in a process-based learning environment that encourages students “to raise questions, cite evidence, and respond to queries about the meaning and validity of their knowledge” (p. 45). According to Brookfield (1987), this type of critical thinking is a way of being open to alternatives in examining a topic. In being open to alternatives, students are able to develop an awareness of assumptions, pay attention to the context in which the ideas are generated, and become skeptical of single answers to problems. This is what happens in a COMS
classroom. Nixon-Ponder (1995) claims that critical thinking skills can be
developed and strengthened in a process-based learning environment by using a
tool called ‘problem-posing’. However, she discovered from personal
experience that “some students had a difficult time with the non-traditional
format of the class. Most were not used to being asked their opinions or beliefs.
They did not believe in themselves; they did not believe that they were capable
of helping to build the curriculum of their class” (p. 12). Some COMS students
experience similar problems but they become acclimatized to this format. In
COMS courses, students develop their problem solving skills in response to the
real-life situations that arise during their community involvement and group
interactions. Central to the COMS pedagogy is working in small groups.
Schneider, Corey and Corey (2002), as do others, support the concept of small
groups. They maintain that group size should be no more than eight people
(p. 107). After more than thirty years of teaching in small groups, the COMS
faculty concurs with the literature on small group learning. Small groups
promote interaction, communication, problem solving, collaboration, and
commitment to the group. Additionally, Burn (2004) contends that groups can
enhance productivity. In the context of the COMS courses, students work
collaboratively to research, design and implement a project.

Throughout the COMS courses, reflection is encouraged and integrated into the
course requirements. Mezirow (1991) describes reflection as “the process of
critically assessing the content, process, or premise(s) of our efforts to interpret
and give meaning to an experience” (p. 104). Reflection is a key component of
the COMS courses and central to experiential learning. Since these courses
include experiential learning in addition to a theoretical requirement, learning
through reflection is important in order to bring meaning to these experiences.
As students work together in their groups conducting research and community
projects, they are accumulating a multitude of experiences. Critical reflection is
necessary to learn from these experiences and to apply this learning in new
contexts. The students are encouraged to reflect upon their experiences
throughout the process to better understand the complexities of the situation and
to problem solve as necessary. The students reflect through writing assignments
as well as through discussions within their group and with the advisor. This
provides the opportunity to examine assumptions, to gain new knowledge and
ideas, and to obtain deeper insights. There are several learning models that
include reflection. The Kolb model, for example, is an experiential learning model that emphasizes the importance of experience in the learning process (as cited in Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, p. 12). The British Further Education Curriculum and Development Unit (FEU) model also includes reflection. The FEU (1981) states: “The individual’s experience needs to be followed by some organized reflection. This reflection enables the individual to learn from the experience, but also helps identify any need for some specific learning before further experience is acquired” (as cited in Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, p. 13). Apps (1994) suggests that educators should encourage students to reflect upon their individual experiences in order to understand themselves better personally and professionally. Since COMS courses involve self-directed learning, critical reflection of the students’ experiences is important. Self-directed learning is a particular learning format that provides students with the primary responsibility for planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Brookfield, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). Self-direction provides COMS students with a sense of ownership and responsibility for their learning and allows students to focus on their interests thus encouraging a higher level of participation. COMS students have several opportunities to experience self-direction. In groups, with the guidance of an advisor, students accomplish their course objectives both in the classroom and in the community. Merriam and Caffarella stress the fact that self-directed learning can occur both inside and outside institutionally based learning programs. Self-directed learning is one of the approaches utilized to develop skills that are valuable to students engaged in their communities. In the context of BACS, “community” does not only involve the local community where CBU is located. It refers to numerous communities across Canada and in other parts of the world. BACS students can complete COMS courses by distance in the communities where they live and work.

**A Model of Collaboration: COMS 300 Community Intervention Course**

In the COMS 300 Community Intervention courses, students work in small groups of approximately eight student and focus on problem solving, critical thinking, self-directed learning, reflective learning, and experiential learning. These courses encourage students to identify their own personal assumptions,
entertain other points of view, build their skills of inquiry concerning a problem or issue, do library research and test hypotheses. The emphasis is placed on community intervention. Once a community issue has been identified and examined, students seek to intervene in the community in a practical and positive way. Students conduct extensive secondary research and if needed, primary research, to fully understand the theory associated with the issue they have identified and the community intervention project developed to address the problem.

COMS 300 begins with problem identification. This usually takes place through brainstorming, examining the community through newspaper articles and other media, as well as talking to various community agencies/resources. Once the student group has identified a community issue, they begin the process of determining what the best method of intervention might be. They research how this problem has been addressed in the past locally, in other parts of Canada, and in other countries. The first term focuses mainly on conducting secondary research on the topic itself or other areas where the students need to self-educate. As well, there are usually meetings with people in their chosen community, along with the planning and design of their intervention.

Students do an oral presentation in mid-October. It is then that they present their ideas for intervention to the entire full time COMS faculty. The faculty listens to the presentation and then meets to ascertain the ethics of the intervention and to determine whether the students are far enough along to be allowed to proceed with their plan. Within a few days they receive a written report from the advisor team, either giving them permission to proceed or asking the student group to present again at the end of term. This process serves two purposes. For the student groups who are proceeding well and have their plan well defined, this gives them an opportunity to begin their intervention sooner rather than later. For those groups who are still unclear or uncertain about their plans, the October presentation gives them the opportunity for early feedback and guidance. For those student groups who re-present in November, the same process is repeated. There is a third and last chance for approval in January. If, still, at that time the student groups are not given permission to proceed, the intervention becomes a virtual intervention and they are not able to go into the community. This rarely happens, however, the safeguard is in place.
Most of second term focuses on the intervention itself. During this time student groups are in the community executing their intervention and the level of self-direction is at its highest peak. At the same time, the students return to the classroom to analyze the process and the learning as well as their actions and reflections. They prepare for their final oral presentation, attended by the entire full time faculty, where they usually briefly demonstrate, by some visual medium, what their intervention was. In addition to their presentation, there is a question and answer component where faculty has the opportunity to question the group and to discuss the community intervention project. The final group report analyses the entire years’ process and learning and integrates the theory with experiential learning.

Throughout the academic year and at the end of each term, students and their community intervention projects are assessed through individual and group papers, individual and group oral presentations, peer and self evaluations, and tangible evidence from the community intervention projects. The types of tangible evidence vary depending on the particular project. For example, it may be in the form of program evaluations, letters of assessment from those involved with the community intervention projects, video interviews with community individuals, pre-tests and post-tests.

The COMS 300 course is designed to offer students the opportunity to achieve the following: the skills associated with self-directed learning, the confidence and understanding necessary for assuming an active role in community life, the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage in group work, broad and adaptable primary, secondary and applied research skills, the ability to effectively analyze a wide variety of issues from different perspectives, flexible, audience-sensitive, written and oral communication skills, and the ability to respond creatively to problems and develop solutions. These objectives are infused throughout the course, providing coherency of philosophy, pedagogy, and evaluation that is adhered to by all COMS advisors.

Teaching a non-traditional course demands a non-traditional approach. COMS faculty call themselves advisors and see themselves as facilitators for their students rather than professors in the traditional classroom. The advisors and students become co-learners as the COMS 300 Community Intervention...
proceeds. Advisors consult with each other on possible advising issues as challenges can arise with the groups and the community interventions. Faculty collaboration is an integral part of this course. Advisors are involved in all the COMS 300 projects. The primary objective of this collaborative effort is to increase the effectiveness of the process and thus the students’ learning. Unlike faculty in other disciplines, who may deliver the same courses individually without consultation with their peers, COMS advisors collaborate extensively. There is a sharing of ideas, student handouts, assignments, and student learning exercises. Collaboration is maintained through regular department and teaching meetings, shared participation on department projects and almost daily lunch gatherings. Due to the nature of teaching in a non-traditional environment, COMS advisors are continually reflecting on their teaching. The advisors have found that a high degree of personal commitment to one another helps the team with high performance. Also, their community experience enhances the COMS courses.

Over the years the advisors have reflected that there are common elements necessary for effective student collaboration. These include commitment to the task and interest in the project selected. Advisors will ask the students to carefully choose their community intervention based on whether there is consensus on the choice of community intervention, and interest and enthusiasm for it. There are also group dynamics elements, for example, there needs to be an opportunity for equal input and responsibility, lots of discussion and energy, and trust in each other for a successful community intervention. In order to facilitate student collaboration there needs to be a manageable number of members in the group and group members should have equal interest and commitment to accomplishing their community intervention. It is important for them to have agreement on the goal which needs to be accomplished in a time specific period. The project must also be of a large enough scope that there is a role for everyone as well as an opportunity for students to try new roles.

Not every group works effectively though. Sometimes members quit, the community project is not as successful as it could have been, or the collaboration is just too hard. Challenges that advisors face include student apathy, lack of interest, no agreement on the goal or process, personality issues, conflict issues, and lack of leadership. As the student group works through the
process of completing a community intervention there are a number of issues for students and advisors to collaborate on.

The classroom and the community become a safe laboratory/environment in which students can experiment with different roles and learn new skills. Completing the community intervention gives students a sense of autonomy and empowerment as they learn how to solve problems by themselves. Course evaluation is based more on group work (70%) than individual work (30%), emphasizing the significance of working collaboratively and effectively in a group setting to complete a community intervention.

**Community Intervention Projects**

COMS students have implemented various types of intervention projects to address community problems. Here are some examples of these projects: increasing the profile of food banks in the community, designing and implementing safety programs for young children and parents to address child safety issues, information fairs for seniors, cemetery reconstructions, implementation of school breakfast programs, the design and delivery of an after school reading program to address literacy problems, organizing career fairs for high school students, recruiting volunteers for community organizations, the design and delivery of after school physical activity programs to address the problem of inactive children, the development and inclusion of drug education programs in the classroom curriculum at the junior and senior high school levels, environmental workshops for junior high school students, conducting a popular theatre program at a local youth center to help children deal with various problems they were experiencing, and organizing a forum on the topic of gay marriage.

Some of the above intervention projects have continued in the community while others end when the students finish their course. For example, the following projects continued to make an impact on the community. A day care center playground was repaired and made wheelchair accessible. A local day care had recently renovated their building and during the renovation, the playground was badly damaged. Although the day care had some money for renovations, it was
limited. A COMS group took on the challenge of making the playground wheel chair accessible and also planted, with the children, small vegetable gardens for them to harvest and include in their lunches at day care. The garden was a “learning garden” and taught children about planting and growth. According to the day care director, the project exceeded their expectations. “It was amazing to see everyone join together from the community as well as the students to see the project through. The team of students was resourceful and committed to this community project. All children still enjoy the walkway around the yard. Our garden is replenished in the spring by the children and staff” (Campbell, 2006).

A new elementary school was built but it did not include a school library. The COMS students worked with the principal and a librarian from the local school board to establish a library in the school. Among other accomplishments, they recruited and trained volunteers to operate the library which continues to provide services to the elementary students. The former Principal explained, “just as I have retired from the teaching profession, these university students have long since moved on in life, but the impact of these students has resulted in a lasting legacy to each and every one who participated; the library is still utilizing the methodology they developed and the Harbourside library is successfully fulfilling the purpose that these students set out to accomplish when they assumed the challenge of launching our school library” (Beaton, 2006). The COMS 300 students who completed the elementary school library project as noted above, acknowledged that the project had an impact on the group as well. “Our skills improved as we continued with the intervention. Communication skills, interpersonal skills, writing skills, research skills, and leadership skills were used frequently throughout the year. We recognized which of these each group member excelled in and used this knowledge to improve ourselves as a group. We also allowed group members who lacked in areas to improve and practice these skills” (COMS 300 group paper, 2001). The impact of these interventions on the community and on student learning is substantial.

**Conclusion**

The COMS 300 Community Intervention course highlights faculty collaboration, student collaboration, and process-based learning. Through
experiential learning, students in this course are expected to conduct intervention projects that will have a positive impact on the local community. The students’ role is to learn to work collaboratively in a small group as well as collaboratively with a community group while implementing a community intervention. The advisor’s role is to help ensure that the central theme and design of the project(s) will enable the student groups to explore the community issue while keeping in mind the process-based learning components outlined in the paper. In this non-traditional environment, advisors consult, collaborate and share ideas with each other and groups of students in a transformative manner. This paper has addressed the evolution, design, and implementation of the collaborative model used in the COMS 300 Community Intervention course.

References


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