

# **Blogs as a Representation of Student Experiences in a Service Learning Course**

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## **Abstract**

*Research on service learning has demonstrated positive outcomes in several areas of student learning; however, there is a scarcity of research examining the lived experiences of students. This study consisted of seventeen students from two cohorts enrolled in a service learning class working in a rural town. The current study suggests the reflexive aspect of blogging fits well with the service learning principle of reflection and reveals the students' emotive experience over the course of the semester. Additionally, blogging demonstrates the attributes of service learning pedagogy that are not attainable in a classroom setting or through traditional classroom tools.*

During the past two decades service learning has gained popularity in higher education as pedagogy that integrates student learning and a commitment to solving problems in local and international communities (Campus Compact 2011). The principles of service learning – study, reciprocity, and reflection – are intended to bolster student learning and civic responsibility, address community identified needs, and support long-term mutually beneficial community-university partnerships (Bingle and Hatcher 1996; Butin 2010; Eyler, Dwight, and Astin 1999). While research on service learning has evidenced gains in the areas of students' increased learning and personal and social development, most studies are quantitative and narrowly focused on outcomes rather than the process of transformation or the struggles students encounter working in diverse communities, which may bear little resemblance to their home communities (Cress et al. 2010; Eyler et al. 2001).

To address this gap in the literature, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to examine the blogs of students enrolled in a service learning course working in a rural, poor, racially divided community over the course of a semester. Student blogs, reflective papers, and journals, as well as portfolio methods of assessments offer the opportunity to capture the richness of service learning experiences (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson 2005; Cress et al. 2010). The lived experiences of service learning students can provide educators valuable information to further develop pedagogy that supports the service learning principles of service, reciprocity, and reflection. Blogging was chosen for this course because of its flexibility and creative potential. Through blogging, students are able to examine their development over time, engage in a dialog beyond the classroom with an ongoing exchange of posts and comments, write and read peer blogs any time of day, discuss project experiences, and share relevant links to articles, videos, and resources that become generators of knowledge.

In this study I was a participant observer as co-instructor of the course, a first-time offering at a social work program at a major university located in a large city in the southern United States. Additionally, I was the founder and director of a community development initiative and family member by marriage to several extended family members residing in the town. Located two hours away from our campus, the rural community has an estimated median household income of \$32,000, a per capita income of \$15,050, with 21 percent of the residents' income below the poverty level. District wide, 74 percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged and 39.8 percent of children under eighteen are living below the federal poverty level. In addition to a high concentration of poverty, the town remains segregated and racially polarized, with neighborhoods still referred to as "black folks' and white folks' town."

The course brought two interdisciplinary cohorts of twenty undergraduate and graduate students to work on community development projects partnering with local residents. Projects included a campaign to restore a historical building, a community garden, supporting an art co-op, a high school essay workshop, a teen social support group, writing a National Endowment of the Arts grant, youth art exhibit, public transportation project, establishing a sub-committee with residents and the city council, an oral history project, and a cultural enrichment program for young African American girls. Students worked with the library board, school district, churches, local artists, civically involved residents, staff from the juvenile detention facility, and the African American Prince Hall Masons. The research question that guided the study was: What was the experience of students in a university service learning class as described in their blogs?

## **Background**

Consistent with theories of student learning from experiential education (Dewey 1916; Freire 1970; Kolb 1984), research on service learning has sought to understand the impact on students. A wide range of empirical research indicates positive results for students who participate in service learning, including increased intrapersonal and social development (Conway, Amel, and Gerwien 2009; Eyler et al., 2001), enhanced application of knowledge and ability to reframe complex social issues (Novak, Markey, and Allen 2007), greater problem-solving ability and critical analysis (Eyler, Giles, Jr., and Astin 1999), increased commitment to service and civic engagement (Astin and Sax 1998; Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999; Eyler, Giles, Jr., and Astin 1999; Gray et al. 1998) and, for some studies, improved GPAs (Astin and Sax 1998; Gray et al. 1998; Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Strage 2000).

Eyler, Giles, Jr., and Astin (1999) report on three studies indicating students in service learning courses showed significantly enhanced skills in assessment, analysis of complex problems, and critical thinking ability than did students in programs with little linkage between the service option and the course of study or students with no service options. Data sets for those studies included pre- and post-test surveys of 1,500 students (1,100 service learning and 400 non-service learning students) from twenty colleges and universities across the nation; in-depth pre- and post-semester interviews

with sixty-six students from six colleges and universities; and in-depth interviews of sixty-five college students from six institutions. This meta-analysis examined the impact of program characteristics on student outcomes. These characteristics included placement quality, connection between course content and service, written and oral reflection, diversity, and community voice. In both the survey and the single interviews, students reported greater learning when they had service learning experiences that included the above characteristics. The pre- and post-semester interview data also supported this finding.

Hatcher, Bringle, and Muthiah (2004) found the integration of academic content with the service learning experience and reflection activities that were structured, consistent, and aimed at clarifying students' values contributed to high-quality service learning experiences. They suggest that there are a variety of ways that reflection activities can be structured and dispersed throughout the semester using journal entries and mini papers to identify and clarify values, including their own and those of the community.

In addition to learning gains, the literature suggests participation in service learning has a significant impact on students' intrapersonal and social development. Eyler et al. (2001) cite thirty-three articles and dissertations that connect service learning with increasing "student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development" (p. 1). Conway, Amel, and Gerwein (2009) found in their meta-analysis of fifty-eight service learning studies an average increase of twenty-one points between pre- and post-test evaluations in personal outcomes for students participating in service learning activities. Eyler et al. (2001) identify studies that link service learning with "reducing stereotypes and facilitating cultural and racial understanding" (p. 1). Two quantitative studies using large data sets also found that participation in service learning was related to students actively promoting racial understanding (Astin and Sax 1998; Vogelgesang and Astin 2000).

A meta-analysis by Conway, Amel, and Gerwein (2009) found that service learning experiences corresponded with a small mean increase on outcomes related to citizenship, with an average increase of seventeen points between pre-test to post-test means. Citizenship outcomes included measures of personally responsible citizenship, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship. Conway, Amel, and Gerwein (2009) argue that "service-learning places teaching and learning in a social context, facilitating socially responsible knowledge" (p. 233).

Research on service learning has been advanced by the development of several validated scales and questionnaires. While results from studies using these questionnaires are promising and evidence positive outcomes of service learning, relying on surveys and questionnaires alone does not capture the complexity and nuance of service learning experiences or the process of civic engagement. In their mixed methods study, Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, and Kerrigan (1996) found that service learning impacted students' awareness of and involvement with the community, including history, strengths, and problems. The study used pre- and post-course surveys, interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and analysis of

journals from four service learning classes. This is one of the few studies that used a mixed methods approach to look at converging results (Bringle and Steinberg 2010).

One possible reason there has been an emphasis on quantitative measures may be related to a frequent criticism of service learning that faculty and students may fail to reflect on and address the complex, social structures facing the communities in which students work (Beran and Lubin 2012; Butin 2010). While there are a few qualitative studies that look at reflective papers and journals that reveal insight into the student transformative processes, blogs offer an openly collective reflective process. Reflective papers and journals typically are exchanged between the teacher and student; however, blogs create a course dialog, which was a corollary to the collective work of students in the community. The current study builds on the qualitative approach to understanding the lived experience and construction of meaning through analysis of student-generated products including blogs, reflective papers, and journals to explore in-depth understanding of the students' lived experiences (Cress et al. 2010).

## Methods

The purpose of the current study was to gain an understanding of the experiential and emotional impact of a service learning class working in a rural community as described through the students' own words. Hermeneutic phenomenology was selected as the method of analysis most able to answer the research question, and because the data source provided especially dense and descriptive text. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the interpretive role of the researcher. To address this, researchers are expected to contextualize the factors that influence their interpretations through a candid and rigorous process that includes descriptive audit trails, documenting assumptions, and relevant experiences, peer readers, and extensive interviewing (Grbich 2007). As a participant observer with multiple roles, adhering to the transparency and reflexivity of the procedures stated previously was necessary to maintain integrity. Hermeneutic phenomenology is well suited to the goal of understanding subjects' lived experiences and the concern with "the relationship between researcher and the object of research and the co-creation of meaning" (Armour, Rivaux, and Bell 2009, 106). This is particularly important when the researcher is a participant observer. Phenomenology addresses questions that reflect the researcher's "passionate involvement with whatever is being experienced . . . and has a personal interest and is intimately connected with the phenomenon" (Moustakas 1994, 59). While the majority of research about service learning is quantitative and makes a valuable contribution, qualitative research provides a textural in-depth examination of the student's experience that is not quantifiable.

Criterion sampling was used in this study. Students were enrolled in a three-component service learning pedagogy model that capitalizes on the structure of a university-community partnership, mobilizes interdisciplinary teams of students for community-identified projects, and promotes reflection on complex economic and social justice issues. The criterion was completion of the course and a retrievable blog when the study commenced ( $n = 17$ ). Although twenty students were enrolled in the

two cohorts, the sample included seventeen students for the following reasons: one student removed online access to the blog at the end of the semester before the study began, another did not complete the class, and one student had an insufficient number of blog posts. Students enrolled in the class came from a variety of disciplines including social work, engineering, psychology, fine arts/theater, government, architecture (community and regional planning), and political science. The two cohorts were predominately Caucasian and female with eleven graduate students and nine undergraduate students. The breakdown by gender and ethnicity was 82 percent female, 18 percent male, with one African American female, one female international student, a Hispanic male, and two Hispanic females.

## **Procedure**

The seventeen blogs used in this study were initiated by students the first week of class and concluded thirteen weeks later at the end of the semester. Students were asked to respond to assigned readings and questions and blog weekly about their work in the community; however, students were given a great deal of latitude on frequency and style of blogging. Students could choose to blog more than the required weekly post and some supplemented written entries with media and art. The required text, *Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts* by Knight and Schwarzman (2006) presents a theoretical model, CRAFT (Contact, Research, Action, Feedback, and Teaching), that guided community engagement and project implementation. Other assigned readings included journal articles, which engaged the students in comparative analysis of community development in the United States versus other countries, rural versus urban development, and websites and newspaper articles describing models relevant to the student projects.

Although photographs and peer and instructor comments were included in student blogs, this analysis did not include the photographs and comments; however, they are used in this article as an illustration of the students' experience. The university institutional review board for research with human subjects approved this study as part of a larger investigation of academic service learning classes. While the blogs were in the public domain, students voluntarily agreed to have their blogs made available for analysis and signed consent forms to participate in the study.

## **Data Analysis**

I used a combination of the various approaches to phenomenological analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). The steps used in this study to analyze the blogs incorporated Moustakas' detailed modification of several phenomenological methods that work with the descriptions of participant experiences in a form of text, most often transcripts. The use of blogs as a "living text" create a "feeling and understanding of the phenomenon" (Willis 2004, 8, 10). Before beginning the analysis, it had been nearly two years since I had read the blogs. My involvement in this course was more than co-instructor; my husband's extended family are decades-long residents of the town, and I am the founder/coordinator of a community project aimed at revitalizing

the town. As co-instructor, I was a participant observer who interacted with and observed the students over the semester, including holding conversations with students during our three-hour round-trip drive to the town, in class, and via e-mails. In this study, I have focused on the content of the blogs and what the text reveals about the students' lived experiences; however, my position in the classroom and community cannot be ignored and was addressed through adhering to the phenomenological procedures of writing assumption statements, bracketing, writing field notes throughout the analysis process, and peer review.

Procedures of phenomenological analysis were used as follows: (1) recording a list of assumptions about the students and their experiences in the town to approach the research with "a sense of newness" (Anderson and Spencer 2002, 1331); (2) bracketing my experience working in the community, as a student and blogger; (3) conducting a naïve reading to study the entirety of the data; (4) reducing and eliminating data that did not pertain to the lived experience of being a student working in the community; (5) creating meaning units from the significant statements (see Table 1); (6) eliminating repetitive and overlapping meaning units; (7) categorizing meaning units into clusters of meaning (themes); (8) test themes against the entirety of data (validated by the full text of blogs). Consistent with Armour, Rivaux, and Bell (2009), the reliability of themes was assessed with two peer readers familiar with the methods and topic.

**Table 1. Example of Significant Statements and Meaning Units**

Significant Statement	Meaning Unit
<b>Visiting Mart was a great experience. It put into perspective all the things I have studied during my college career surrounding institutional racism coupled with the effects of hegemony on individuals' psyche.</b>	<b>Applying what I have learned in school to a real-life situation</b>
<b>To hear Mrs. Hurst say there were NO black businesses or professionals was sobering. Here, in 2010, in the United States of America, existed the same conditions as sixty years ago (in many cases worse; at least during segregation blacks had an existence in the professional world).</b>	<b>The segregation is deeply rooted. The situation is worse in some ways than during segregation when blacks had professionals in their community.</b>
<b>As we drove and passed the numerous abandoned houses, I was speechless.</b>	<b>Shock at the abandoned houses.</b>
<b>I was baffled by the lack of progress or effort to improve the conditions and more intrigued by the persistence of such conditions.</b>	<b>Perplexed by the lack of effort to improve conditions (built environment).</b>

**It is amazing to know that these girls may complete this program with totally different world views than the ones they had begun with.**

**Seeing self and project as a change agent.**

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The clusters of meaning resulted in the five essential themes. Table 2 contains an example of a theme cluster that emerged from their meaning units. The validated themes were used to write a textural description or “what” the participants experienced. Additionally, the themes were used to write a structural description of the setting and context – also referred to as the “how” participants experience the phenomenon (Creswell 2007). From the integration of the textural and structural descriptions, a composite description of the essence of the phenomena was constructed, synthesizing the common experiences of the group as a whole (see Table 3). Pseudonyms are used in reporting specific comments.

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**Table 2. Example of a Cluster and Associated Meaning Units**

**Racial Issues: Shock at Segregated Spaces:**

**The three neighborhoods are designated by race.**

**People use the black cemetery as a dumping ground, which I find outrageous.**

**It is hard to fathom that segregated cemeteries still exist.**

**I was shocked that the white cemetery is well kept and the people dump trash in the black one.**

**The condition of the black part of town was appalling.**

**Now that black people live in the former white part of town, it is run down as well.**

**The segregated Masonic lodges do not interact, though they are all Masons.**

**The juvenile facility is located in the black part of town, which seems like no accident.**

**I see the effects of deeply rooted segregation.**

**The dismal condition of the African American Masonic lodge and the rest of Mart, particularly the African American part of town was shocking to our group.**

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A social constructionist perspective framed this research. Social construction is well suited for phenomenological research (Grbich 2007) as humans are constructing meaning through their interaction and experiences inclusive of the social, historic, cultural, and natural aspects of their environment (Crotty 1998). Lock and Strong

(2010) discuss meaning making from a social constructionist perspective as follows: “Meaning making, being inherently embedded in socio-cultural processes, are specific to times and places. Thus, the meanings of particular events, and our ways of understanding them, vary over different situations” (p. 7). Social constructionist research considers the context of events and the larger social circumstances on the meaning making process (Grbich 2007). Insight into how service learning students working with diverse communities construct meaning can provide valuable information that may contribute to service learning pedagogy and community engagement that is reciprocal and authentic.

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### **Table 3. Synthesis of Student Experience**

**The experience of students in a service learning class that worked in a rural, impoverished, and segregated town was characterized by an initial shock at the segregated spaces, pervasive disparities in status between white and black people, and the deterioration of the built environment. The students approached the semester with a sense of optimism for the potential they and their project could make. At the same time, they expressed a strong belief that if their project and larger efforts to revitalize the town were to be successful, the community had to be the pivotal force of change.**

**The initial excitement was tempered by the challenge of starting projects from the ground up. Students learned to regroup, develop new strategies, and focus on the process and relationship building as a way to engage the community. They saw the tangible outcomes of their work and the potential for projects continue to develop. Students grew personally, academically, and developed skills they could use in their future endeavors. They began to see themselves as change agents and their work as part of a larger effort beyond the semester. Students learned by “doing” and through the relationships they built with their peers, professors, and community partners with mutual benefits to themselves and the community.**

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## **Results**

Five essential themes emerged from the blogs: (1) implications of race, (2) working with the community, (3) deterioration of the built environment, (4) capacity of art, and (5) learning as a result of the course.

### **Theme 1: Implications of Race**

The issue of race, racism, and segregation threaded throughout the students’ experience in the town. This theme was divided into four sub-themes to recognize the complexity and significance of race.

**Shock at segregated spaces.** Students expressed shock at the segregated cemeteries, neighborhoods, and the disparities between the white and black parts of town, openly described as “black and white folk’s town” by residents.

Another highlight was driving around the town and visiting the two separate cemeteries – the black one and the white. The disparity was vast and astonishing. The black cemetery, located in black folks' town, of course, was overgrown and poorly maintained. A resident showed us an area hidden around a corner that had been basically turned into a dumpsite. It was ridiculous and offensive. The white cemetery, in contrast, was well kept and quite large in area. I couldn't believe that in this day and age, two separate, race-based cemeteries still exist. (Jill, graduate social work student)

Another student connected the economic and environmental decline of the town to the deeply rooted segregation:

Our two trips to [the town] have helped us understand its history and how segregation still impacts the way the city looks and functions today. The tours showed us the different sides of the city and we were able to see first-hand the run-down homes and abandoned buildings that serve to illustrate both the history of segregation and the current lack of economic opportunities that affects the entire community. (Mark, undergraduate bridging disciplines major)

**The racial dynamic.** Students worked with a variety of residents during the semester. Community partners included active citizens, city council members, pastors, and school district staff. However, regardless of the group's composition, students expressed awareness of racial discord. As one student wrote, "Can't put my finger on the details, but my sixth sense picked up some definite racial tension before, during, and after the meeting." Students also noted the absence of black professionals in city government, the schools, and businesses. One student responded to the lack of representation as follows: "From our limited time in the town, it was pretty evident that it is still a racially divided community in many ways. For example, we met with board members of the public library during our visit, all of who were white." And another student remarked:

To hear [pastor's wife] say there were NO black businesses or professionals was sobering. Here, in 2010, in the United States of America, existed the same conditions as sixty years ago. It [lack of black professionals] made me more driven to help this community. (Carrie, undergraduate psychology major)

The response to the racial dynamic in the town was ongoing in the blog posts throughout the semester, as it permeated their experience working in the town with a variety of residents.

**Confronting personal issues about race.** Students also confronted their own personal biases and grappled with the deeply rooted segregation in a personal way. One student working on a project designed to bolster the self-esteem of young black women wrote, "I continue to think critically about my role as a white woman helping to facilitate a program that centers so much on black identity." Students became more aware of their

assumptions and biases as the semester unfolded and articulated this in their blogs. A white student conducting oral history interviews wrote:

I went into this interview with Mr. G. with a strong sense of apprehension. His home is not as well put together as Mrs. S., and for whatever reason that made me uncomfortable initially. He is an older, blind black man, who I was expecting to be calloused toward me. I started to run so many stereotypes and expectations in my head that it made me nervous and far too conscious of racial aspects. I really thought it was going to be a short-lived interview because he wasn't going to want to open up to me, but at the same time I shut myself off to the interview, and I don't feel like I was able to go into it as warmly as I had with Mrs. S. I was uncomfortable to say the least. But why? And I think I am still processing that while I type this. However, the interview really did go well. Overall, it was a fantastic interview, and I really enjoyed my time with Mr. G., and I am disappointed I went into it with such a racist mindset. (Michael, undergraduate political science major)

Students were able to make connections in a real-life setting through relationships and encounters. As one student blogged, "Visiting the town was a great experience. It put into perspective all the things I have studied during my college career surrounding institutional racism coupled with the effects of hegemony on individuals' psyche."

**Helping to close the racial divide.** Students saw their projects and themselves as having a positive impact on the racial divide. A student who started a social support group with high school students wrote about a breakthrough moment with two of the participants:

So, in last week's group, I had an "a-ha" moment/teaching moment/inspired reaction to two students. An African American girl and an Anglo guy were talking about their families; the guy had a very difficult life, although he made his stories humorous, but deep down they sounded very traumatic. The girl was responding and talking about her life, and then she said, "Hey, we should sit together at lunch tomorrow. I never see you. I'll go sit with you!" as he responded, "Okay, cool!" [In] that moment two students from different races, backgrounds, and families decided to bridge that gap. This is why I do groups like this . . . because of moments like that. (Emma, graduate social work student)

## **Theme 2: Working with the Community**

Working in partnership with versus for the community, was the centerpiece of the course. Students wrote extensively about the need for community volition, ensuring sustainability, clarifying expectations, and how community members perceived the role of the university students.

**Volition.** Students were vigilant about not asserting their voices over the community's. One student wrote, "Forcefully pushing a project onto a community will most likely lead to a failed or unsustainable result," and "Community residents should be involved

in deciding what changes they want to see in their communities.” One student noted the importance of community volition as follows:

While it would be easy just to go in to the town and tell everyone what we think they need to further develop their town, it is not up to outsiders to decide. We need to fully involve the community and ask rather what they need and want. (Jane, graduate social work student)

Students also expressed uncertainty about strategies to engage the community. “Right now, I am just not sure what the best way to get community input is.” Students also experienced varying reactions from the community partners: “I felt somewhat of a disconnect between what we were envisioning [for the garden project] and the [middle school] principal,” and “It made me so happy to know that this [youth social support group] is something that not just the high school wanted, but the community wanted in general.” The process of working with community members to define needs, set goals, and implement projects was written about throughout the semester.

**Sustainability.** The potential for projects to continue beyond the duration of a semester was a common aim: “Dreaming big, I hope that I can experience true and sustainable community transformation from the inside out.” Ideas for work beyond the semester were often discussed in the blog: “I would like to do more work with the artists’ co-op, developing a leadership body which can carry on activities in the space after the class work concludes.” Students also realized this was a major concern of the community as well: “It was made very clear to my team at the garden project meeting that this would have to be a project with low sustainability.” Students recalibrated their expectations and projects to increase the potential of sustainability: “I am constantly thinking of ways to make this sustainable and have a large impact . . . I am always re-evaluating our progress.” Student concerns for sustainability were threaded throughout each blog.

**Facing the challenge: It seemed like a good idea at the time!** Students encountered time limitations, a sometimes over-ambitious scope of work, balancing school and work, lack of community participation, local bureaucracy, and the difficulty of distance. When permission to install a water catchment system at the middle school was denied, the student who designed the system wrote, “It looks like we didn’t get permission for the rain water catchment. I was afraid this might happen. There is no way to get around public school bureaucracy.” Another student wrote of the enormity of the scope of work and the wisdom of taking it slow:

The hardest part of action, for me, was the overwhelming nature of what to do. But with these small steps, hopefully, we can shape the lives of at least a few people since nobody can change the world overnight. (Lauren, graduate social work student)

Scheduling demands and getting to the town more frequently to work on projects was a common obstacle as one student described: “I am getting increasing requests from residents to be interviewed which is encouraging. However, I am finding it very

difficult to balance my schedule and find time to do more interviews.” Lack of participation threatened a project for one student: “I was pretty excited about the program, so I’m disappointed that I might have to let go of the idea.” Another student summed it up as follows: “There is nothing easy in this type of work.”

**Student role.** The presence of university students in town was a new experience for most community members outside the high school, which had previously worked with students from another university. Some community partners that were new to the experience of university partnerships erroneously viewed the students as “the experts” and over-relied on them to implement projects.

To be honest, the lines are a little blurred for me at this point regarding ownership of the project. As beneficiaries, this group does not seem interested in developing the plan themselves. I am confused at this point, because it’s not as though the three of us have any more knowledge or experience in developing such a plan than the library group themselves. Yet, we are being asked to develop this aspect of the project. (Pat, graduate social work student)

Overall, students felt welcome and high regard for the university presence. One student expressed, “I am also starting to pick up a vibe on how important the university is to the town. We bring a mood to the town – excitement, change, inspiration, possibility, hope, etc.” One student wrote of her curiosity about how the students were viewed by residents: “This town is still a work in progress, and I personally would like to be a fly on the wall when community discussions involve our presence in town.”

### **Theme 3: Deterioration of the Built Environment**

The dire condition of the built environment and the decay of the town, including abandoned buildings and homes, historic buildings on verge of collapse, empty store fronts, people living in homes that were dilapidated, and public spaces in disrepair was unfamiliar and disturbing. Some students described the town in great detail and others were blunt: “Downtown is desolate and broke down.” One student described the potholes in the roads as “giant craters” and another wrote, “One of the most notable aspects of the town was the large number of run down, abandoned buildings.” The students had not experienced this level of environmental decay; therefore, these types of observations were frequently shared in their blog posts.

### **Theme 4: Capacity of Art**

The arts-based initiatives underway in the town are part of a larger strategy to revitalize and increase community cohesion. While some students were involved in arts-based projects, those who were not were exposed to how art was being used to stimulate positive change: “The new art co-op is the only building with a creative storefront and only one that has begun to be renovated/ remodeled,” and “I can imagine the town becoming an artist destination, too.”

Students articulated their feeling about the relationship of art to their projects and the development of the town: “I feel it is important for people to live in beauty because what we see every day affects the way we feel.” One student decided to incorporate art as part of her reflection, writing, “I will definitely make a collage as a means of recording the process of this project implementation.” Whether it was in response to the community art projects underway, their own passion for art, or using it in their project as an art novice, students engaged in art in some way over the semester.

### **Theme 5: Identifying Learning as a Result of the Course**

The experience of being in a service learning class was a new experience for a majority of the students. They identified a combination of trepidation and excitement about a new approach to learning and entering a community. Students wrote about the uniqueness of the course: “It is so surreal being in this course and very difficult to describe. I kept having to remind myself that I was in school.” The characteristics of the community, the poverty and segregation, and traveling three hours round-trip were a completely new way to experience higher education. One student wrote, “Besides our class, I do not know of many opportunities for students [at our university] to get involved in rural issues.” Students began the class with hopeful expectations, though not always for a set outcome: “Beyond this initial trip, I have great expectations for the mutual learning and transformation process that will take place. In other words, my expectations and hopes are more tied to ongoing processes, rather than completion.”

As part of their community engagement efforts, students attended church, community events, and ate dinner with their community partners, peers, and professors. One student remarked, “Come-on – Who goes to church with their professors?” These informal, interpersonal experiences helped students build relationships with the community: “It has been an interesting experience in regards to meeting with and growing relationships with the people of [the town],” and another student wrote, “Spending time with him [community partner] has allowed me better understanding of the town and what is going on in the community.”

Students described the learning process as reciprocal with the community: “I went into this process feeling like I had so much information to provide, and I must admit, I think I am learning more than the girls [I am working with]!” Another student wrote, “The crazy thing is, I don’t think they will ever know how much of an impact they have on us.” Students also identified a variety of skills they developed as a result of the course including confidence, ability to listen, comfort speaking in public, interpersonal skills, and grant writing. One student who helped write a successful national grant wrote, “I realized that it [writing the grant] integrated a variety of skills and goals for the course, and most importantly, it was an incredibly valuable experience that I’ll use again.” Students saw tangible outcomes of their work and the impact on the community. A student blogged about the social support group she started for high school students: “I went home with a content feeling . . . and an inspiration . . . that this group is making a difference.” A graduate student nearing completion of her degree wrote, “It’s so funny and appropriate that I should find this course in my last

semester of course work, since it directly engages in all the things I wanted to take away from graduate school.”

## **Discussion**

There is a scarcity of qualitative research in service learning that articulates the lived experiences of students working in communities (Ash, Clayton, and Atkinson 2005; Cress et al. 2010). While previous research has focused on student outcomes, this study was concerned with gaining insight into the service learning experience of students through the reflexivity of their blogs. Dewey (1933) stated, “reflective thinking impels inquiry” (p. 7) and “perplexes and challenges the mind” (p. 13). Students blogged throughout the semester, therefore, capturing the experience of working in a diverse and unfamiliar community as it unfolded over time. The current study suggests that student blogging fits well with service learning pedagogy and its core principles and addresses some of the previously identified shortcomings related to the lack of in-depth processing of complex socio-economic and social justice-related concerns. Reflection through blogs provides an option to gain knowledge about student transformation and growth that is not attainable solely in a classroom setting or through traditional classroom tools, such as exams and papers.

Learning about segregation and its persistent legacy through personal encounters was very different from deconstructing racism in a classroom. Students wrote descriptively about the lessons they learned from community members they worked with, and how the experience enabled them to apply and understand the academic knowledge they previously acquired in school. Students grappled with the complexity of racial issues as they built relationships with people who shared their experiences about the era of segregation, as well as “walking” in the segregated spaces and seeing first-hand the disparity between black and white environments. Reading about or seeing a picture of trash dumped in a black cemetery was one thing; stepping over it was another. In their blogs, students disclosed both the discomfort and growth that resulted from working in an environment where deeply rooted racial divisions are so pervasive.

Students blogged about their desire to see tangible results and sustainability of their projects; however, they came to appreciate how time-consuming community development and relationship building really is. Students expressed a realization that outside of the university a semester is not necessarily a relevant time frame; therefore, they wrote about adjusting expectations, setting the stage for future cohorts, and the value of process. Plans were often recalibrated many times over causing frustration and disappointment; however, the blogs revealed that students continued to subscribe to the importance of community volition over project completion without full participation despite setbacks. As projects unfolded, there were many stops and starts; however, through their attempts to engage residents, students came to realize that there is “nothing easy” about community work.

While traveling three hours round-trip was an obstacle to visiting the town more often, students wrote about the relationships they developed with their peers and professors,

and the conversations that occurred as a result of the van rides together. Additionally, they wrote about how the service learning class differed from their other academic experiences, specifically the opportunity to work in a community, build relationships, create projects from the ground up, and develop useful skills such as grant writing. Students wrote about the uniqueness of course activities, including eating dinner with peers and professors, attending community activities (church, city council meetings, and homecoming), and how these experiences bonded them to each other and the community. The act of blogging itself was a way students created an ongoing dialogue, shared insights and support, and formed a learning community.

The blogs elucidated the connection students made between assigned readings and their application to the work underway in the community. The CRAFT model used in the text was referred to in all the blogs and used to guide community work that focused on process and relationship building as a foundation for projects and engagement with the community. The use of art-based community practice was new for most students; however, they wrote of the role creativity played in their own lives, their admiration for the art created in the town, and capacity of art to bring people together and stimulate positive change.

The reflexive aspect of blogging provided insight to the students' emotive experience over the course of the semester, including their epiphanies, discomfort, disappointment, excitement, and satisfaction. There is a scarcity of research in service learning literature that examines the importance emotion plays in reflection (Felten, Gilchrist, and Darby 2006). Dewey (1934) discussed the importance of emotion in the experiential learning experience when he wrote, "Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what it selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to material externally disparate and dissimilar" (p. 42). The flexibility of blogging allowed students to blog at any time and capture moods and emotions as they occurred.

Students wrote of learning opportunities they received through the course that they had not previously experienced in a traditional classroom. Through their blogs, students articulated their growth and development in their own words. They shared fears, anxiety, joy, disappointment, confusion, camaraderie, optimism for the future, sadness to leave the community, and how the class and working in the town had changed and transformed their lives. These transformations included a renewed determination to make change in their home community, confront discomfort about difficult issues, acquire useful skills, and build confidence to take on new challenges.

The study's results are limited to seventeen participants who were enrolled in the first two cohorts of this course; however, several other courses networked with this community-university partnership, totaling nearly 140 students over the three years. Some of those courses used blogs or created a variety of multi-modal reflections including videos, mapping, and other forms of writing. Restrictions of time and resources prevented increasing the number of participants to include a wider sample of students, a variety of reflective mediums, a second round of interviews, or focus groups. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample of students who worked

with community partners, and a longitudinal study to track the long-term impact of service learning on the students.

While students candidly acknowledged the difficulties encountered along the way, they wrote of seeing themselves as agents of positive change and felt a sense of accomplishment regardless of the end result of their project. The initial excitement was tempered by a strong dose of reality and shock at the racial segregation and disparity, poverty, and the decaying environmental conditions of the town. Starting projects from the ground up was overwhelming at first and caused students to regroup, develop new strategies, and redefine success. Dewey (1916) believed that education should offer students real-life, guided experiences that build their capacity to contribute to a democratic society. Toward that end, the blogs written by students in this study describe a lived experience that supports the promise of service learning pedagogy to provide mutual benefits to both students and communities.

## **Conclusion**

Further research into the lived experiences of students participating in service learning courses is needed to explore the ways this pedagogy facilitates mutually beneficial outcomes to students and communities. The use of blogs, journals, and reflective papers offer unique insight into the lived experiences of students in their own words that surveys, scales, and other quantitative measures are not able to provide. Future research might also include the analysis of multimedia incorporated into the reflective process, for example photographs, video, poetry, and other creative expressions used in blogs. Student comments posted on their peer's blogs would offer an opportunity to study the value of building a collective discourse and learning partnership between students and faculty.

Based on the results of this study, service learning pedagogy provides students with an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills, apply theory to practice, experience reciprocal community engagement, and further their academic, social, and personal growth and development in a way not solely attainable in a traditional classroom environment. Additionally, the use of blogging can serve as a tool to strengthen the reflective requirement of service learning and provide students a flexible and creative way to share experiences, resources, and become generators of knowledge. Service learning pedagogy that adheres to the core principles of study, reciprocity, and reflection can result in mutually beneficial outcomes for students, universities, and communities, and assist higher education in achieving a broader civic mission.

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