

Experiential Learning: Benefits for Hispanic and First-Generation College Students

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Abstract. Experiential learning continues to gain in popularity within higher education in the United States. Consideration of the effects experiential learning has on different groups of student populations, however, is quite limited. Accordingly, this article examines several different examples of experiential learning assignments and projects in two specific courses at a Hispanic-serving institution to better understand the outcomes for underrepresented student populations. The analysis utilizes qualitative data collected from student reflections and assignments, as well as faculty observations, from seven sections of two classes that were comprised of half to two-thirds Hispanic students. The results highlight the benefits of learning through facilitating students' connections between their lived experience and their educational experiences. The paper also addresses how such experiences help to scaffold learning and promote more democratic classroom environments, in turn increasing student perceptions of their own learning. Specifically, the findings highlight the benefits experiential learning offers for Hispanic, first-generation students.

Keywords: Hispanic-serving; first-generation; experiential learning; pedagogy.

Introduction

This paper discusses the value of experiential learning for Hispanics who are first in their family college students. Experiential learning theory is based on a learning model that relies on students having a concrete experience(s), reflecting on the experience(s), using analytical skills to conceptualize the experience, and using creativity to apply the new problem solving skills to different situations (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). The use of an experiential learning model in higher education, when applied to address the persistent problem of retention and the achievement gap for Hispanic students, has received little attention.

The authors submit qualitative data in the form of student comments from two different modalities of experiential pedagogy that suggest experiential learning is an effective tool to engage Hispanic students, particularly those who are first in the family to attend college, by ameliorating some of the known factors that inhibit performance in traditional classrooms settings. Research

suggests that learning sociology is enhanced when students apply sociological concepts to community settings and the students are also more likely to engage with course material. This paper illustrates how experiential learning can enhance factors conducive for retaining Hispanic students at all levels of the educational pipeline: classrooms in which students trust teachers (Cooper, 2013), share a sense of belonging (Perez-Huber, Malagon Ramirez, Gonzalez, Jimenez, & Velez, 2015), forge social network ties (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013), and recognize their lived experience as valuable knowledge.

Adding to the well-documented impacts of out of the classroom experiential learning in higher education (Harris, Harris, & Fondren, 2015; Kilburn, Nind, & Wiles, 2014; Jakubowski & Burman, 2004; Luna & Winters, 2017), the authors use their observations to emphasize that out-of-classroom experiences are of particular value to Hispanics who are first in their families attending college because experiential learning that incorporates reflective writing and critical pedagogy addresses key strategies for successful adaptation to higher education for this particular population. In particular, the authors address Crisp et al.'s (2015) suggestion to expand on the work of Solórzano, Villalpando, and others (e.g., Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2003), by adding qualitative research that allows Latina/o students to voice their own lived college experiences as specifically related to successful academic outcomes (Zurita, 2004).

Review of the Literature

The Hispanic Achievement Gap

Though greater numbers of Hispanic students are attending college (Fry & Lopez, 2012), and many are first generation (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014), upon examination of the educational equity gap, when considering higher education, only six percent of all adults earning bachelor's degrees are Hispanic (Perez Huber, Vélez & Solórzano, 2014). Hispanic students start out with lower high school graduation rates of about 60% compared to over 90% for White students and 85% for Asian Americans and African Americans. Furthermore, in considering the academic pipeline—among those who graduated from high school, just under 20% of Hispanic students graduated from college compared to roughly 40% of White and African American students and almost 60% of Asian American high school graduates (Perez Huber et al., 2015).

Indeed, as reported by Crisp, Taggart & Nora (2015), when compared to other groups, "institutions of higher education continue to be least successful in retaining and graduating" students who identify as Hispanic or Latina/o (p. 250). Scholars suggest that the success and retention of Hispanic, first-generation students is positively influenced by increased self-confidence in academics, strong mentoring relationships with faculty and staff, encouragement by peers, and greater access to financial support (Crisp et al., 2015; Pyne & Means, 2013). To address several of these factors, research shows that institutions should incorporate in and out-of-class academic experiences, such as experiential learning, that are supportive and engaging (Crisp et al., 2015).

Fostering trust between students and teachers

Active learning, the umbrella that includes experiential learning, fosters more democratic classroom relations and deeper connections and trust between teacher and students (Byrk & Schneider, 2002). As the authors come to understand the ways their students analyze their experiences assigned outside of the classroom, they have the opportunity to foster trust by providing comments and mentorship that demonstrate they understand and relate to the students. Placing value on the students' experiences and interpretations fosters more democratic relationships through acknowledging and validating students' knowledge as real and less likely to be contested solely because it is outside the dominant discourse of higher education. (Yosso, 2005; Rios-Aguilar & Deil-Amen, 2012). Because it is within the very framework of their experience, they are the expert, while the instructors help interrogate and illuminate their reflections (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994).

Alternative Socialization to the Academy

The recognition of cultural heterogeneity focuses teachers, as partners in learning, on the value and promotion of cultural flexibility—the ability to navigate diverse social and cultural milieus (Carter, 2010). The structured experiences that occur outside of the classroom are strange terrain for the students whose social interactions have been largely confined to extended family, school, peers, and retail work settings. Through experiential learning, students apply sociological concepts to make sense of these environments. Forcing interactions with non-governmental community organizations and professional workspaces takes students to unfamiliar social and cultural spaces where, with guidance, they learn to attend to social cues, to watch for role models, and to be aware of their presentation of self. The process of making sense out of their experiences, sharing their observations with others, and hearing their teachers' framing are all important elements of expanding social and cultural boundaries. Actors who can cross social and symbolic boundaries are not only building a larger cultural toolkit (Lamont, 2000) and expanding cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), they are also becoming more nimble learners (Espino, 2014; Zell, 2014).

Social network ties to institutional agents and scaffolding learning

The pioneering work of Stanton-Salazar (1997) is often cited to illuminate the importance of extra familial relationships in assisting underrepresented youth in navigating the educational system. Many minority youth have weak or no ties to assist in developing a conceptual map of the terrain of schools. Lacking the network ties for information and connections to resources, they are left with few cultural strategies for overcoming the obstacles of a foreign milieu. Through authentic relationships with educators and community members, minority youth can forge social ties that enrich the friendship and familial relations they bring to college (Stanton Salazar, 2001).

Emphasis on social construction of knowledge

Experiential learning empowers students to recognize that knowledge is socially constructed and to value knowledge based in their lived experiences

(Espino, 2014). Academic discourse often ignores the cultural capital Hispanic youth bring, simply assessing them as deficient in knowledge. Through their perspectives as outsiders in the realm of assigned extra classroom settings, students are coached to observe, document the norms, language and practices that the professionals and volunteers deploy to make sense of the space. In reflecting on how other participants interact and define a reality, our students take sociological understanding of meaning-making to a deeper application than would be possible from readings and class discussions alone.

Although expanding cultural capital is an important feature of experiential learning, the development of social capital and social networks is equally valuable. Placement in community settings exposes students to volunteers and professionals alike. For many, this is their first experience interacting with adults who view them as journeyman professionals. Through conversations, interviews, observations, and job shadowing our students make connections beyond those available in the classroom. These social ties, in turn, can be a resource for advocacy, provision of emotional and professional support, as well as connections to bridge institutional barriers (Cochran, Lerner, Riley, Gunnarsson & Henderson, 1990; Salazar-Stanton, 1997).

Setting and Context

The authors teach at a large, public, regional comprehensive university situated adjacent to one of the largest, Hispanic, immigrant, gateway cities in the United States (Lichter & Johnson, 2009) and amidst the largest enclave of Vietnamese outside Vietnam. Designated as a Title V Hispanic and Asian-serving institution, the university also serves a large number of underrepresented, low income Asian Pacific Islanders and South Eastern Asian immigrants.

Our college and our major disproportionately serve Hispanic and Asian students who are first in their family to go to college—over 50% of the undergraduates in our college identify as Hispanic and an additional 12% identify as Asian (CSUF, 2017). In a recent survey of Latin@ students in our college, almost three-fourths of the students reported being first generation college students (Harrigan, 2016). And, over two-thirds of respondents reported that at least one parent had not completed high-school. Thus, there are very low-levels of parental education at home.

Our unique population foreshadows demographic changes that will impact universities across the United States as the Hispanic and Asian populations grow and migrate to small and medium size communities in the Midwest and South (Lichter & Johnson, 2009; Passel, 2011; Suro & Passel, 2008). Not only will Hispanics become the nation's largest minority group, but immigrant and first generation Hispanic youth now comprise a quarter of students under age eighteen (18) and are projected to be a third of the 100 million school age children by 2050 (Passel, 2011). Many of the students at the authors' university are not only the first in their family to attend college, but also live in poverty with parents who have often completed no more than a few years of elementary school in another country. This pipeline of immigrant and first generation students will have a significant impact on higher education across the country in coming years.

Central to the authors' pedagogy is the assumption that Hispanic and underrepresented students possess heterogeneous cultural schemes: not all students who are first in their family college students share the same experiences nor do all students from the same neighborhood share the same experiences; neither do Hispanic students have common ways of interpreting the experiences they might share. First in the family students to attend college are also composed of immigrants, first, second, third generation Hispanics. While the majority of our students claim Mexican ancestry, our Hispanic students also come from diverse Latin American ethnicities. Recognition of the cultural heterogeneity among our Hispanic students allows the authors to be open-minded about the experiences communicated to them as teachers reading students' reflexive work. The comments on the students' reflexive journals provide a bridge between the students' experience of their field work and the conceptual analysis connecting their knowledge to the course concepts (Espino, 2012).

Findings

Developing a New Class: Using Sociology for Career Success

As part of our college's student success initiative, aimed at helping those who are first in their family to go to college and underrepresented students, the second and third authors created a 3-credit semester long applied sociology class called **Sociology for Career Success**. This class is not a "Careers in Sociology" class, but rather helps students learn to apply their knowledge of sociology to their success in school, their success in the transition to work, and their success navigating career trajectories throughout life. The course is in its pilot phase, having been offered four times to 113 students, approximately six in ten of whom are Hispanic (See Table 1 below), and recently approved as a permanent part of the degree program.

Table 1
Using Sociology for Career Success Enrollment

Semester	Number of Students	Percent Hispanic Students
Fall 2015	34	56%
Spring 2016	37	62%
Fall 2016	24	50%
Spring 2017	18	67%
Total	113	58%

As part of its scaffolding of learning, the course is rooted in a community wealth model (Yosso 2005), which places at its center the kinds of knowledge and networks that students already possess. This approach, along with a relatively democratic classroom, helps guide students to identify and build on their particular strengths and connections while empowering them to identify areas that were less well developed and to generate their own plans to fill in where *they* identified gaps that might prevent them from achieving their goals. This differs markedly from a deficit model of treating first-generation students

as lacking in cultural or social capital as a problem that needs to be fixed by the professor.

The course is at its heart an applied sociology course, where students engage in experiential learning projects that connect the classroom material to their own experiences and goals. Sometimes the aims are fairly small—for example, discussing how Weber’s notion of bureaucracy highlights the actors and processes involved in resume and cover letter scanning or how Goffman’s ideas about the presentation of self can be used to guide communication with potential employers and prescribe dress for and behavior during interviews. When students make these connections, they walk away empowered to create more successful job application materials. They also begin to understand the relevance of sociology to their own lives.

Adding another layer of scaffolding, students are encouraged to go out into their communities, activate their networks and connections, and research potential careers. As part of this applied focus, students are expected to complete three experiential learning projects: a networking assignment, a mentoring assignment, and a mixed-methods group research project exploring a particular occupation or career.

Assignments: Social Networking and Mentoring. One of the first experiential assignments in the class asks students to begin to explore their social networks in effort to gain information on their occupation of choice, or look for a job or internship. The second and third authors introduce the concept of social capital (Portes, 2000) and Granovetter’s (1973) social network theory. In the assignment, students identify different types of social capital they already have access to via friends, family, fellow students, etc. They then choose four or five of their ties with whom to discuss their career goals, potential employment, internships or other information that might be helpful to the student. In addition, students ask those in their networks for recommendations of others who might help them out down the road and introduce themselves for similar discussions. This assignment helps students start to explore the and activate the networks they already have, build their networks, and helps distinguish the kinds of help available from strong ties and weak ties. The exercise often demonstrates the strength of weak ties principle (Granovetter, 1973).

This assignment gives students a low pressure opportunity to explore and activate their networks. Discussing your career goals with someone for an assignment is less stressful than asking for a job. Students often don’t realize they have access to people in their networks who can help them. One student noted that the networks assignment “forced me to think of all the people I know as more than just friends, co-workers, etc. and look at them as possible networks for my career.”¹

Second, students begin to build their networks and recognize networking as an area they needed to work on. One student enjoyed the assignment precisely because “it made us go out and search for our networks.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes come from anonymous student evaluations and reflections completed in class designed to improve instruction.

The assignment made me realize my weak networks and what I should begin working on.”

For some students the connections they explored in the assignment led directly to a job or internship at a later date. For example, this student emailed to let us know that she got a coveted internship in the field she was interested in.

For the social networking project I had interviewed an employee in that department which gave me a foot in the “door” and through consistent communication I was able to strengthen my ties with this employee. I ...would not have gotten this internship if it was not for the great information that I learned in this class and the application of it through our assignments.

Similarly, the mentoring assignment required students to meet with at least one professor in their office hours and a least one other person who would serve as a mentor (could be professor or someone else). Students were supposed to open a conversation about their career goals and also discuss whether the person would be willing to serve as a reference or a letter-writer and what they could say about the student. Again, the point was to get students to explore and activate their own connections in a fairly low-stakes way. Some of these connections in turn led to leads for careers, graduate school applications, and in one case a recommendation for an award. One theme that emerged was that being forced to take the time to meet with professors helped them “realize that I have a lot of people to reach out to...it feels great to know I have their support.”

Assignments: Mixed Method Research Project on a Career or Occupation. In groups of three to five, students conducted a mixed-methods research project exploring a career or occupation of their choice. The project included a quantitative analysis of salaries, job growth, and other characteristics, in-depth interviews, job shadows and observation, and content analysis of job postings. For many students, it was the first time they had actively researched the occupation they thought they were interested in. Even for those who had done some research, it was clear that students explored careers in much more in-depth way than they had before.

Some students realized occupations were not for them, while others came away with a renewed commitment to the field. A normally very reticent student presented on his job shadow of a social worker and literally could not stop beaming he was so energized and ecstatic about his job shadow. Others in his group had less positive experiences; with two of them realizing that the occupation was probably not for them. Concerns about salary and job growth are raised by a large number of students in their presentations. While others highlighted concerns about emotional labor and potential for burn-out in caring professions. While we discussed these issues in class, seeing them first-hand made the issues much more concrete for some students.

Overall Assessment. Students’ overall assessment of the course was quite positive. Many noted how much they learned in the class and that they felt more ready for the transition to work after school. One student noted “I feel

this class has been the biggest learning experiences in my three university years...helping you grow up as an adult rather than as a student.” Another noted, that the class “taught me more than I anticipated and really prepared me for the transition after graduation.”

Other students expressed that they were developing skills that might otherwise be lacking upon graduation. Echoing a theme expressed by many, one student noted “this course is all the ‘important’ information we actually need to learn before graduating and building on our careers.” While another said “I feel like this class teaches many of the skills people lack leaving school.” Many noted that the class should be required “not only for sociology majors, but for all graduates.” It is important to note that it is not just the content of the course that sparked these responses, but the ways in which students engaged with the material – the experiential learning component was instrumental.

Former students have written after the class ended to the second and third authors to tell them of new jobs, internship placement successes, acceptances to graduate school, things they tried (like study abroad) that they were inspired to do by the course. Others have come to ask for letters, references, or job advice. Of course, not all of the feedback was positive – students complained about too much reading and too difficult reading since the professors often asked them to read original works. On the other hand, the students capably discussed, explored, and critiqued many of these same readings.

This reflects a major strength of this experiential approach to learning particularly for our student population. While the authors believe this would be a useful course for all universities, it is particularly useful at a Hispanic-serving institution like ours that serves such a large number of students who are first in their family to go to college and so many underrepresented students. There has been a well-publicized push among California public university systems to focus on student success by shortening time to graduation. While getting more students to finish quickly is a laudable goal, experiential learning empowers students in this process and helps them identify and build the skills they need to be successful after college.

Problem-Based, Team-Based Service Learning

Research suggests that problem-based learning, particularly couched within experiential learning processes, such as service learning, facilitates in students a stronger ability to think critically, collaborate amongst peers and with external organizations, and synthesize information (McDonald & Ogden-Barnes, 2013). Furthermore, combining problem-based learning with service learning encourages a sense of student ownership and responsibility in one’s own experience (Morgan & Streb, 2003; Sproken-Smith & Harland, 2009). With these benefits in mind, below the first author discuss the changing structure and outcomes of problem-based, team-based service learning in a **Sociology of Family Violence** course over three semesters. During this time, 134 students took the course over half of whom are Hispanic (See Table 2 below).

Table 2
Sociology of Family Violence Enrollment

Semester	Number of Students	Percent Hispanic Students
Spring 2014	46	54%
Fall 2014	43	44%
Spring 2015	45	64%
Total	134	54%

Description of Course Experiential Learning by Semester. The initial integration of problem-based, team-based service learning in this course, included projects that were hyperstructured: teams of 5-6 were assigned, and all students selected projects based on summaries given by a single community partner. Each team had a contact person for their specific project from the community partner. The teams were given 12 weeks to complete their projects and each individual student was expected to complete at least 20 hours of service learning work. Project outcomes varied considerably. For example, one team researched, prepared, and presented to several high school classes two educational presentations—one on teen dating violence and another on the relationship between teenage pregnancy and teenage dating violence. Another team contacted social service agencies around the community to collect information on the services they offered and then developed a system for organizing these materials for the community partner. This team also developed a referral system for the community partner.

Some students reported very positive outcomes, including increased pride in themselves as they came to recognize their abilities educationally – and the link these skills had to contexts outside of education. One student stated:

What this experience helped me learn about myself is that I do have far more knowledge than what I had given myself credit for. I learned that when presented with a problem I can look for solutions and also a way to better approach the situation at hand. ²

Another student noted the benefit the learning experience offered in terms of preparation and experience for the workforce: “As a graduating senior, I am happy that I was introduced into the professional environment that I hope to be working in after graduate school.”

The instructor-structured organization of the experience, however, also had a variety of negative outcomes. Depending on the community partner “problem” or need, students reported difficulty finding connections between the

² Students completed three reflection assignments during the course of their service learning experiences for all three of the sections of the Sociology of Family Violence course. Passages included are drawn from these reflection assignments.

course material and the projects they worked on, though they still acknowledged gaining certain skills that they felt they otherwise would not have (e.g., improving professional communication and networking with professionals in the workforce). Additionally, some students felt they were seen as “burdens” by their contact person at the community partner site and others experienced a lack of interest between the community partner and their team—perhaps both as consequence of not being able to choose, for themselves, who they were going to work with and then, democratically negotiate with that partner, what problem or need they would tackle. About this, one student reported:

I could not help but feel that my group and [the community partner] were disconnected. I felt that a weekly meeting on their premises would have been beneficial. Perhaps such a meeting would have been helpful in providing the students with the feeling that the work they are doing with [the community partner] is more than just a side project.

The second time the course integrated problem-based, team-based service learning, the first author assigned students a broad topic within which they were required to identify a problem and then work as a team to find a solution or create a recommended outcome. Topics were related to various sociodemographic variables (i.e., intimate partner violence and religion, socioeconomic status, disability, geographic area, race, and immigrant status) and all students were assigned as teams of 5-6 students by the professor. Student teams were given more freedom in how they approached identifying the specific problem for their topic and in how they addressed the problem.

Project processes and outcomes varied. The team on intimate partner violence and race, for example, contacted a number of local shelters for battered women to determine needs often left unmet or unrecognized by the community. It was determined that there were needs specific to various racial and ethnic groups and, as a result, the student team held a donation drive to collect items, such as makeup and hair products, for African American women and food items that met dietary restrictions of certain ethnic groups. Additionally, the team worked to construct a bridge between one particular shelter and several local chain stores in an effort to have a continued impact after the class wherein the stores would make reoccurring donations of certain products. While this team did work with an off-campus community partner, during this semester, it was more common that the students worked within the bounds of the campus community. For example, the geographic area team conducted research on the resources available in both urban and rural settings and created materials (interactive games, pamphlets, and poster boards) for a campus booth and then worked to raise awareness of their topic over the course of four days.

Students, overall, reported more positive outcomes than those reported during the first iteration of service learning in this course. Students experienced a sense of pride and empowerment based not only on their personal actions, but also in the class (their peers and themselves collectively) as a result of feeling they had made a difference in the community. Of their experience, one student said:

However small the number, we were still able to make some sort of an impact even if it was for a hundred thousand people or just one person. [...] Overall, our class and my group has had a great impact on our community and hopefully it will continue to grow.

The increased autonomy the individual students and student teams had in this structure of their service learning work also led to an increase in the investment and commitment students had in the projects. A student stated:

My experience with the service learning gave me a sense of responsibility to further educate myself on the given topic. I was able to analyze what I researched based on the concepts that I learned in class. This empowered me and reaffirmed that I was learning valuable material throughout our course. In addition, the service learning activities showed me how I can apply it to the community instead of just keeping the knowledge to myself. It enhanced my learning and my development as a social activist.

The quote above demonstrates some of the benefits that resulted from the service learning in terms of enabling students to see themselves through the lens of making change. Ultimately, the increase in individual responsibility and the sense that they could do something to improve a social problem also led students to utilize networks, resources, and information they had both prior to the course and as a result of the course in order to succeed:

This project encouraged us to reach out to our community and understand other people that come from different backgrounds than ourselves. It made us get to know the people in our surrounding cities and pull difference resources from different organizations and put them together to help the same cause.

The third time the first author implemented the service learning, she incorporated more flexibility and kept in mind that giving students input in their experiences enables the greatest benefits from service learning (Morgan and Streb 2003). Students decided on their own teams and were not mandated to work with a particular community partner or within a particular parameter of sociodemographic variables. Instead, their projects only needed to fill the problem-based component by meeting one of the following:

- Centering the problem around a sociodemographic factor and identifying and addressing at least one problem faced by the particular community/communities related to your chosen factor
- Centering the problem around a need identified by a community partner
- Centering the problem around identifying, evaluating and summarizing scientific research on a specific topic pertaining to family violence with a goal of moving this knowledge to forms useful for private and public action

- Centering the problem around designing an education program for a specified target group to address topics of family violence in relevant and age-appropriate manner

While students reported more confusion initially about what problem-based service learning was, the end result in terms of feedback and outcomes were more positive as students identified issues based on their own communities and lived experiences, which validated these as important. Many teams identified problems related to particular groups not being educated about topics related to family violence. These teams self-selected into educational opportunities wherein they developed materials to engage the campus community or gave presentations at local schools and organizations. They then worked to develop longer-term solutions to the education problem by developing standalone websites, creating pamphlets and materials that could be reprinted and offered by campus and community organizations.

Other teams identified social issues around the construction of family violence in institutional settings, such as within media. One team, in particular, was able to write a newspaper article published in a local newspaper and on a local law enforcement online news forum. Though given the opportunity to publish with a third source, the team declined because the source wanted them to use “catchier” language (e.g., wife beater) that the team felt was counterproductive to their article point. The team reported this as an empowering moment as they balanced what to do—not allowing their excitement about the possibility of publication to get in the way of addressing a larger community problem.

As more emphasis was placed on the role of the students in determining the problem or need they would tackle for their service learning, students expressed an increase in concern of time management. With this, though, came the acknowledgement that the service learning experience was worth the increased effort and challenge. One student recalled of his experience:

Taking 5 classes, working two jobs, and still having to do service hours has been very challenging, but it has been so much fun. I do not think I would change any part of it. It has been very interesting having to do field work for an actual cause.

Another student identified her team members as a source of support and relief for her as she worked through the challenges associated with the service learning structure. The stronger connections student had to their team members may be seen as a result of the increased collaboration students were required to engage in as they not only solved the community problem or need together, but also had to identify the problem or need amongst themselves. This led to a stronger sense of community within the teams.

It gave me the chance to meet and bond with 4 amazing girls. My teammates really helped me throughout the process of this service project and in class because we would talk about our opinions, feelings,

and basically share each of our own interpreted knowledge of the project and the lessons in class.

Overall Assessment. Students' experiences were described as fostering connections amongst peers, developing trust and a perspective of the professor as not only a professor, but as a resource, necessitating networking with their own community members and those in larger organizational and institutional structures, and, most importantly, highlighting to them the strength and knowledge they had based on their own lived experiences and that they had gained as a result of our course. Ultimately, the features of flexibility and the increased provision of educational autonomy and control in their problem-based service learning led to much reward for the students as the formatting enabled and encouraged them to take more responsibility for the problem identification, project construction, and experience outcomes. Specifically, students were more likely to reflect on their own lives and communities as they worked to identify problems or needs. As evidenced in the student comments, the first attempt at problem-based service learning, took valuable learning opportunities away from the students and disempowered them by defining the problem on which each team should focus. The students were placed in much the same space as other courses, and perhaps their lives more broadly, where they had little say over what they were doing, how they were learning, and, instead, were being told what needed to be done instead of being empowered to identify meaningful and relevant social needs in their own lives.

Outside of the formal reflection assignments students wrote based on their service learning experiences, the first author has received word from students that the problem-based service learning experience during the course assisted them in obtaining successful job placement and internship placement, that they have shared the course information with their broader social communities (job sites, religious communities, social networks), and that they are glad to have experienced such a unique opportunity at the authors' institution. As a Hispanic and Asian-serving institution wherein large numbers of first-in-the-family and underrepresented students are present, these outcomes, in addition to the student quotations included above, together show that problem-based service learning is a pedagogical approach that structures learning as a bottom-up design building on the diverse social and cultural settings of our students, on their individual and collective capabilities, and on the experiences, social, and cultural capital the students have acquired over their lives.

Discussion and Conclusion

The examples of experiential learning described are effective, in large part, because they offer students an opportunity to link their lived experiences with their educational experiences—something missing from most educational structures and efforts in which students are, instead, taught using a top-down approach. These course assignments and projects not only allow for, but actively encourage, students to identify connections between their lived experiences and educational learning.

As a result, the students engage in the elements available to them through the scaffolding experiential learning offers—democratic relations and deeper connections between teacher and students, the enhancement of cultural flexibility in students, the development of social network ties, and the empowerment of students to value their lived experiences as a source of knowledge. Students enrolled in the courses in which these examples of experiential learning were implemented report increased confidence, greater accessibility to and understanding of application of course concepts. And, perhaps of utmost importance, these pedagogical tools offer Hispanic, first-generation students a lens through which they are able to view themselves as personally successful, intellectually empowered, and as productive community members.

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