

This chapter describes a multidisciplinary faculty self-study about reciprocity in service-learning. The study began with each co-author participating in a Decoding interview. We describe how Decoding combined with collaborative self-study had a positive impact on our teaching practice.

Building Bridges from the Decoding Interview to Teaching Practice

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In February 2014, fourteen students and two professors traveled to the remote jungles of Honduras to participate in a global service-learning project. Upon consultation with community leaders, it was determined that footbridges would be built along a flooded path to ensure that the children in the community could safely walk to school. Believing that this initial consultation meant working with the community rather than dictating what should be done for them, the group got to work, collecting materials from the surrounding jungle and beginning to construct bridges. Very quickly, however, it became apparent that the students and professors were ill-equipped to build effective bridges; the construction was incredibly difficult and the roads continuously flooded despite their best efforts.

Throughout the morning, members of the community began congregating around the construction sites, watching the lack of progress and laughing at the group's efforts.

Realizing that the locals had tremendous knowledge and experience, the group began to consult with them to determine the best way to construct bridges that would actually meet the needs of the community. Moreover, the locals began to assist with the construction. By the end of the day, the group, in collaboration with local community members, had built a number of bridges that provided the children with a dry path to reach their school.

*Working **with** the community was substantially more effective than working **for** them. This*

experience made the faculty members question their grasp of the concept of reciprocity, something integral to community service-learning projects and a concept they originally felt they understood.

The experience of this group of students and their professors, two co-authors of this chapter, is all too common and not an isolated incident. This is not surprising given that it has been argued that “service learning pedagogy requires and fosters learning—often transformational, paradigm-shifting learning—on the part of everyone involved, including faculty” (Clayton, Bringle & Hatcher 2013, 245). Indeed, given that service-learning necessitates faculty giving up control and working reciprocally with partners, sometimes much more than bridges need to be shifted and changed. Recognizing this, and due to our commitment to developing our teaching practice, we, the authors of this article, set out to investigate our own thinking with regard to reciprocity through a collaborative self-study, which included the use of a Decoding interview (Pace & Middendorf 2004).

Our initial research examined how the Decoding interview followed by our self-study process generated learning about reciprocity specifically (Miller-Young, Dean, Rathburn, Pettit, Underwood, Gleeson, Lexier, Calvert, and Clayton 2015). In this chapter we report how Decoding had an impact on four areas of our teaching practice: 1) our identity and role as teachers, especially in an experiential learning setting; 2) the discovery of similarities and differences we shared with colleagues from diverse disciplines; 3) new strategies for forging meaningful and truly reciprocal relationships with partners in global service-learning field schools; and finally, 4) our design, delivery and assessment in field schools.

Background and Methodology

Our self-study stemmed from the creation of a multidisciplinary collaborative faculty learning community on service-learning in field schools. In particular, motivated by experiences such as the one in Honduras described above, we had a common purpose (Schoenfeld 1999)--we were curious to explore the similarities and differences among our field schools and we wanted to analyze the different ways that we approached reciprocity in these service-learning courses (see also Miller-Young et al. 2015). We also attempted to at least partially address Kreber's (2013) argument that the scholarship of teaching and learning has not lived up to its potential as it "has not adequately taken up the bigger questions of social justice and equality *in* and *through* higher education" (Kreber 2013, 3).

Our group members varied in our level of experience with service-learning and faculty-led field schools, and we came from a range of disciplinary backgrounds. Our field schools were equally diverse (see author biographies at the end of this chapter for further information). Kitchen and Ciuffetelli Parker (2009) maintain that the self-study methodology is particularly effective within this collaborative type of community of practice. Indeed, Louie and colleagues (2003) argue that "when compared to participation in traditional teaching workshops, self-study research has numerous benefits. It specifically addresses the faculty member's teaching context, including the subject matter, student population, and other unique aspects of a class. Rather than playing the role of passive participants, faculty members engaged in self-study research actively control the purpose, agenda, and timing of their work as well as its outcomes. Self-study research also enables faculty members to create a tangible product from their work in the form of teaching knowledge that is transferable to colleagues" (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, and Stackman 2003, 51).

Global Service-Learning (GSL) and Reciprocity. Service-learning has been described by many as "a high impact teaching practice," one in which students "learn more, gain better

understanding and application of the course material, improve writing and critical thinking skills, and can better apply course principles to new situations.” (Wilsey, Friedrichs, Garbrich, and Chung 2014, 79, 81). Clearly service learning can have a beneficial impact on students, but it is not without its faults. As Stoecker and Tryon (2009) explain, “there has been growing dissatisfaction among people both inside and outside the service learning movement since the 1990s, particularly when it comes to the issue of whether service learning truly serves communities” (5). Faculty who lead GSL activities are typically motivated by a sincere belief in the potential for positive reciprocal relationships with community partners (Hartman and Kiely 2014; Sharpe and Dear 2013). Yet, faculty involved in GSL need to critically reflect on the extent to which they are actually involved in reciprocal relationships. While some models to guide practice have been developed (such as Leffers and Mitchell 2011), more remains to be done. Hence our desire to study and deepen our own thinking about the concept of reciprocity and how it affected our teaching practice.

Our Self-Study Process. The Decoding the Disciplines model was initially created to help faculty articulate, and subsequently to help students learn, discipline-specific ways of thinking through the study of a “bottleneck” or difficult concepts. Typically Decoding uses a cross-disciplinary format to study ways of operating in a discipline, such as history, political science, or music (see, for instance, Díaz, Middendorf, Pace and Shopkow 2007, Bernstein 2012, and Burkholder 2011). However, we discovered that Decoding can also assist faculty in articulating and reflecting upon their thinking about a difficult concept which they themselves struggle with (Miller-Young et al. 2015), which in turn can have an impact upon teaching practice. Our data comes from three sources and two phases of self-study. First, we each participated in a Decoding interview in which we were repeatedly asked to delve more deeply,

and to better explain our ideas and claims about reciprocity in our courses. Second, self-study group members wrote two individual written reflections, one of which was written after reading the transcription of each individual's Decoding interview, and another after a group discussion. In the second phase of our study, over a year after we conducted our Decoding interviews, we engaged in recorded group discussions where we focused on the changes we had made to practice as a result of our study.

The Impact of our Decoding Self-study

At the conclusion of this second phase of our self-study, we determined that the Decoding process and self-study had a significant influence upon four main areas of our teaching practice.

Our Identity and Role as Teachers, Particularly in an Experiential Learning

Setting. The first area that the Decoding process had an influence upon was our identity and role as teachers. Interviews, reflections and group discussions often revealed that in order to be successful in the setting of field schools, we needed to adopt an approach different to that typically taken in a traditional classroom setting. This counter-normative nature of service learning which positions faculty, students and community partners simultaneously as both learners and teachers (Sigmon 1979) and which invites all of these partners into unfamiliar and challenging reciprocal relationships as co-creators, can be disconcerting due to academic norms which "reinforce the distinct identities of faculty as educators and generators of knowledge, students as learners, and community members as recipients of academic expertise" (Clayton et al 2013, 246). Yet Boyer (1990 as cited in Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015, 11) has argued that "good teaching means that faculty, as scholars, are also learners."

Pettit explained in the last group discussion that *“it is humbling how little you know sometimes, and how much people share with you and are willing to share with you.”* Likewise, through Decoding Pettit learned that she was actually not as in control of the field school as she initially supposed to be the case, as did Calvert: *“I am used to being in a structured environment where I can control the A, B, C...and I control the assessment...and then we go through something like this and reflect upon it deeply and you realize, ‘You are ten percent of this. Maybe 15.’...as a professor in a structured course, we are the drivers. In a course like this I feel more like a conduit.”* Gleeson fittingly explained that *“if we are trying to model this idea that reciprocity is important and that we are working in partnerships, then being top down with the students is not going to work.”*

Interestingly, self-study participants also realized that the Decoding process revealed more than information about their teaching practice. Lexier, for example, in the final discussion described how *“A lot of what came out of my Decoding interview was about my own activism and why I do what I do, and it became much more of an internal focus...The Decoding process for me was really good both in terms of understanding what the heck we are really doing when we go to Honduras, but also understanding my own internal dynamics and why this is what I am doing.”* Calvert also explained that Decoding *“helped me crystalize. ‘Ah, this is what I am doing here. This is my value. This is why I am motivated to come and work.’”* In other words, our interviews and reflections gave us a venue within which we could reflect upon topics beyond our teaching practice. This came as a surprise to many, as did the impact, both positive and negative, of coming from a variety of disciplines and types of field schools.

Discovery of Similarities and Differences We Shared With Colleagues from Diverse Disciplines. Using the Decoding interview to launch a self-study composed of faculty from a

variety of disciplines was not without difficulties. At the start of the study, disciplinary differences that ranged from simple misunderstandings about terminology to significant differences in methodologies and theoretical approaches seemed like they might be barriers to learning. At the end of the entire Decoding process Pettit described her attendance at the first Decoding group meeting in the following way: *“I was terrified at that first meeting...I didn’t think we had any commonality at all.”* Similarly, mid-way through the process Calvert explained that *“This experience has been like a trip to a foreign culture. One of the challenges is the process itself – it is not linear, it is spiral with feedback loops. In my previous experience, I controlled the process and created a linear structure with a finite sequential process and deadlines... The peek into the values and assumptions of faculty in other disciplines has been a bit surprising.”* At the start of the study, Rathburn was also concerned about her ability to effectively contribute to the group due to disciplinary differences. In her reflection on the process she noted: *“I felt there was a huge disciplinary divide – they were talking about social justice and I remember sitting in the car thinking ‘What is social justice and how do I even fit into this?’...The language used by those in the ‘caring fields’ is very different than what I am used to and that was a bit unsettling.”*

As the Decoding process unfolded, however, shared experiences, values and characteristics emerged (Miller-Young et al. 2015). In the final discussion Underwood explains that *“we shifted to a commonality that we didn’t start with.”* Indeed, one of the major strengths of this group, according to every participant, was the perspectives and values from different disciplines that helped to inform our understanding of reciprocity. For example, despite initial misgivings, Lexier later claimed that *“While it has been difficult sometimes to understand other approaches and where people are coming from...it has been incredibly positive to do that.”* Similarly,

Gleeson stated: *“I think the fact that there are people from different perspectives and different academic disciplines has been great because we learn a lot from each other; even though we have the same kind of issues, we have different lenses.”* Dean reiterated this point in her reflection on the group dynamics: *“this cross pollination of ideas is incredibly deep and is fully shaping my work and professional and personal identities... I am getting increasingly aware of my own thinking and approaches.”* Likewise, in the final discussion Lexier reiterated that *“we had shared values. That is what brought us together. The values we wanted to implement in our field schools...”*

One of the most important values that faculty sought to realize in their field schools was forging respectful reciprocal relationships with partners in service-learning courses. Again, the Decoding process revealed how best we could do this, the result of which was a deeper understanding of reciprocity and the specific changes that needed to be made to the relationships with our partners.

New Strategies for Forming Meaningful and Truly Reciprocal Relationships with Partners in Global Service-Learning Field Schools. For Dean, Pettit, Gleeson, and Underwood, for whom reciprocal approaches were part of their disciplinary training, reciprocity was not a new concept, but the Decoding interview and ensuing activities caused them to question their assumptions about whether or not they were fully enacting the concept in their partnerships. Thus, even for study participants for whom reciprocity was a concept that was integral to their disciplinary training, the Decoding method provided new insights about reciprocity and teaching practice. Perhaps most importantly, our collaborative reflections helped us all to more clearly see the importance of working *with* and not *for* our community partners (Clayton et al. 2013); that as Calvert explained in the last group discussion, *“we need to focus on*

the partner in partnership.” We realized that we needed to more fully respect and appreciate what our partners give our students, rather than simply focusing on what we contribute to our partners through service-learning projects. As a result of this more comprehensive and deeper knowledge about reciprocity, we determined a number of specific changes in our relationships and dealings with our community partners which needed to be made.

To begin, we learned to be less leery about overworking our partners. Rathburn, for instance, realized that she *“must be more strategic and intentional with my partners and I need to include them in all aspects of the service-learning project. Part of my thinking was to not add any additional workload to partners, but I realize I was missing out on a huge opportunity to collaborate meaningfully.”* Similarly, Underwood learned that *“only if you are really engaged with a partner, and you are both involved in planning the course that you are moved to a high level of showing reciprocity.”*

We also recognized that we needed to spend more time prior to the field schools brainstorming with our partners, ideally in a face-to-face setting. In addition, rather than telling our partners what we thought would work, we allowed them to take control, which resulted in more meaningful experiences for both them and students. For example, in the past Pettit asked her community partners to plan specific activities. After the Decoding process she instead asked her partners to organize what they thought best and what they wanted to do, and the result was a much more elaborate and meaningful activity: *“They set up a traditional painted lodge tipi for us in the mountains and brought in elders and played traditional games. Those partners have since come to the university and given workshops and lectures.”*

We also realized that successful, sustainable and reciprocal field schools require a longer-term approach. As Calvert explained during the last group discussion, *“that level of partnership*

will only work if you have a long-term relationship.” To foster this type of connection, Lexier and Rathburn, for instance, now travel to Honduras even in the years in which their field school is not offered.

We also learned about the importance of sharing with our partners the impact that the field school has on field school students and beyond. At the end of the Decoding process Rathburn described how *“one of the complaints that comes out of many field schools, and from people we have talked to, and from our partners in Honduras, is that volunteer groups come in, they volunteer, and they leave. Nothing ever comes back. They don’t even know the outcomes.”* We discovered that one particularly effective way to show partners the impact of the field school was to invite them to Calgary, Alberta to our university. When Gleeson and Underwood invited their Dominican Republic partners to Calgary, for instance, their partners were taken aback when they saw posters about the field school and that a university publication had been written about the field school; Gleeson explained that *“when they saw that they were thrilled...they were surprised.”* Likewise, since we started this study, Pettit and her co-instructor have made a concerted effort to bring their community partners to the university, resulting in a number of co-organized events such as a speaker series and the implementation of an elder-in-residence. As Rathburn pointed out *“you can bring your partners back to campus so that you are affecting not just your students, but changing an entire institution.”* Such visits though, also made faculty appreciate the onerous nature of their partners having to host faculty and students. Underwood described this recent experience in the following way: *“We are now the hosts and feeling what they feel...there is time and effort to make all this work. Well imagine what it feels like if you hosting eighteen people all at the same time!”* In addition to making faculty reflect more fully

on their relationships with partners, our study has also had an influence on curriculum design, delivery and assessment.

Changes to our Design, Delivery and Assessment in Field Schools. As a result of realizing our shortcomings despite our experience and disciplinary expertise, we also realized that we could do a better job of preparing our students for service learning. For instance, by interrogating her understanding of reciprocity, Underwood gained a better respect for the challenges that her students face when dealing with this potentially difficult topic: *“it really helped clarify for me that for students, of course they are going to find this a bottleneck concept! They haven’t had the experience we have had, they haven’t been out there... it reminded me not to brush it over as much as I was, and think ‘Why aren’t you getting this?’”* Through Decoding we were reminded that field schools are about more than developing skills and content—they are about developing values and helping to create global citizens. Such integration of ways of thinking and being takes time.

We also discovered that significant changes needed to be made to our curriculum design, delivery and assessment. One of the most important takeaways from our self-study was the value of not scripting too many things ahead of time, that serendipity has a valuable role to play in field schools. We also learned that dissonance and discomfort is not necessarily a bad thing for faculty and students. Another discovery was the importance of providing space and time for non-graded reflection and allowing students to help shape their assignments and service-learning activities. Most importantly, we realized that student and faculty learning is not always immediate or quantifiable. As Rathburn explained during the last group discussion, *“It is nice seeing the development of students over time and the things they might not have realized at the time...one thing they are reporting during interviews that come months after field school is that*

it has changed how they participate in their community.” We also came to an agreement that assigning grades presents a special challenge in field schools, though we did not have concrete solutions to this issue. As Pettit explained it *“sometimes it feels like we are putting a round peg in a square hole, especially when marking service learning.”*

Throughout our self-study we also began to think more about the needs of our students. Though field schools are relatively short in duration, our self-study helped us understand that students often need help acclimatizing back to Canada and to the university setting. Rathburn, for example, shared in our final group discussion that during recent post-course interviews students revealed that *“they couldn’t talk to people here and people didn’t understand what they went through.”* Students reported that the field school had a much larger long-term impact than they anticipated. Many expressed a desire to act as mentors for future field school participants so they could share their experiences, and/or to continue their learning in advanced field schools. Our students also sought out ways to sustain the relationships they had built with community partners. However, many also struggled with the effects of taking part in field school. As Pettit explained, *“we have had students break down in tears when they return. They didn’t realize what it felt like to be a minority. They also recognized they were not as culturally sensitive as they originally thought.”* As a result of reflecting more about the needs of students, many of us have included more post field school activities and meetings with students.

In addition, the self-study made us reflect more on how teaching in a field school setting could result in an impact on teaching practice beyond field school. During the final group discussion Rathburn, for example, described how new insights as a result of Decoding *“changed how I approach even my classes that don’t have anything to do with service-learning...It has changed how I am teaching students and how I am talking about issues, to think about multiple*

perspectives...I am starting to think about how this bleeds into all my other courses.” Similarly, Gleeson explained that *“because we have been on field schools, we see students differently.”*

Conclusion and Looking Forward

Fitch, Steink & Hudson (2013) argue that “well-designed service learning experiences serve as bridges between the curriculum and the world outside the classroom” (57). Hence, it is not only actual bridges like those described in the vignette at the beginning of this study that are of significance, but also the “bridges” or connections that need to be made between faculty, students and host communities. Decoding combined with self-study allowed us to explore and analyze those links. As Calvert aptly pointed out during our last group discussion, *“what is key is reciprocity not only between us and our partners and partners and students, but also us and our students, us and other teachers.”* It can be argued that the Decoding interview and self-study process we utilized in this study served as an impetus and enriched faculty understanding of the vexing and oft-misunderstood concept of reciprocity, which in turn had a significant impact on four important aspects of our teaching practice. This enhanced knowledge encouraged us to alter our global service-learning courses in pragmatic ways with the goal of encouraging meaningful and beneficial experiences for faculty, community partners and students, resulting in everyone becoming co-learners and co-educators. As Lexier said during the final group discussion, *“this is a journey we have all grown from.”* Indeed, during this process of becoming critically aware about reciprocity we moved beyond notions of faculty as “expert” and generators of knowledge and instead became learners ourselves.

In addition, to validate our findings through outside perspectives, some of us are expanding upon this work. For instance, Rathburn and Lexier are currently engaged in a research study that involves interviewing students about their understanding of service learning,

Underwood and Gleeson are exploring host partner perspectives regarding collaboration and partnership (Underwood, Gleeson, Konnert, Wong, and Valerio in press), and Dean is engaged in a collaborative self-study with her students and field school's host partner, exploring all partners' experiences of reciprocity during the India field school (Dean, Field, Cole, Sharan, Sharan, Dorrestijn, May, Sinclair, Pitre, and Gopalkrishan 2016). Hence, we recognize that this is a continuous process and that much remains to be learned with every new adventure we embark upon with our students and community partners at home and abroad.

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