

**An Introductory
Guide for Higher
Education Staff**

CampusEngage

Network for the Promotion
of Civic Engagement
in Irish Higher Education

Community- Based Learning

Do you work in a higher education institution?

**Are you keen to connect your
students' learning experience with
the needs and experience of civic
society organisations?**



Definitions

There are a myriad of definitions and terms that apply to community-based learning and many of these resonate with different cultures and contexts. It is sometimes also referred to as 'service learning', 'community service learning' and 'community-engaged learning' but, within Ireland, 'community-based learning' is the most common term. The definitions relating to community-based learning place an emphasis on different dimensions of the approach; some highlight the centrality of civic learning; while others focus on the necessity of capacity building and reciprocal partnerships; and others focus on learning and knowledge acquired; for example:

"An academic strategy that seeks to engage students in activities that enhance academic learnings, civic responsibility and the skills of citizenship, while also enhancing community capacity through service".
(Furco and Holland, 2004).

"Promotes student attainment of knowledge, values, skills and attitudes associated with civic engagement through a structured academic experience within the community. It aims to bring reciprocal benefits to both the students and the community partners, and the sharing of knowledge across community-university boundaries".
(2012, McIlrath).

But perhaps the clearest way of explaining the approach is to highlight its main characteristics.

What is Community Based Learning (CBL)?

Community-based learning is essentially a form of experiential education with a civic underpinning. In practice, what this means is that students gain academic credit for the learning they derive from participating in and reflecting on an experience within community and society.

Academic staff or tutors provide support by guiding students through structured reflective activities, encouraging the integration of theory with practice and initiating discussion and group activities. This pedagogical approach is well established in many parts of the world including the United States, Argentina

and South Africa, to mention a few, but it is a relatively new teaching and learning method within higher education in Ireland. It is considered as one facet of an approach to foster what is now described within the literature as the 'engaged' or 'civic' university or institution (Watson et al, 2011).

CBL characteristics

- **academic credit can be earned;**
- **knowledge and skills that are relevant to the academic discipline are applied;**
- **active engagement with the community takes place in response to a need identified by them;**
- **community organisations are valued as partners from whom students can learn;**
- **academic theory is viewed in a real world context;**
- **issues vital to social, civic, cultural, economic and political society may be explored;**
- **experiential learning techniques and opportunities are promoted;**
- **reflection strategies underpin the learning and assessment process.**

It is strongly encouraged that the community experience is linked directly to the student's academic discipline and that learners work on needs or projects identified by the community. The aspiration is that mutually beneficial relationships and partnerships develop between the community and those within the higher education institution. Community-based learning should encourage students to explore issues that are vital to society and community through a mix of methods that could include interviews, surveys and sampling as well as analysis, active participation in the work of the group, readings, discussion and reflection. The **ultimate goal** is to develop graduates who have wide and deep sense of their role as active citizens both personally and professionally.

CBL policy and practice

The value of community-based learning and other forms of civic engagement in higher education programmes has been recognised nationally and internationally in a number of major reports and strategy documents. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (2010) comments on the need to educate students for their role as “*citizens who will add to the richness of society*” and relates that it “*is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction*

and reflection, to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities” (2010, p59). Community-based learning is often described as being located somewhere between volunteering and work placements or internships. To avoid confusion, the diagram which follows identifies the features, in terms of the main beneficiary, goal and incorporation of reflection, that make community-based learning unique.



Graphic: The Relationship between Community-based Learning, Volunteering and Work Placement.
(Adapted from Furco, 1996; Kenworthy-U'Ren et al., 2006 and O'Connor et al., 2011)

Some higher education institutions in Ireland have a dedicated team who liaise with community organisations and other relevant organisations to develop partnerships that provide the basis on which community-based learning

modules or module components can be developed. In other colleges where this support is not available, academic staff initiate and develop partnerships themselves.

CBL in action

- **Through a partnership with asylum seekers, philosophy students investigate and research the ethical dimension of Direct Provision Housing within Ireland and publish reports that are aimed at the public to highlight human rights issues.**
- **Engineering students work with primary school children on computer programming using Lego robots which are entered into a 'RoboSumo Challenge' event or build prototypes that those within the community with a disability can test or use.**
- **Nursing studies students learn about nursing and medical care in a multi-cultural context through a community engaged experience in a developing world context.**
- **Law students offer pro bono legal information to community and voluntary groups or undertake community identified legal research projects.**
- **Students of art and design, work with communities to produce collaborative work that makes use of their culture and environment and, for example, may highlight issues of conflict, marginalisation or social capital.**

CAMPUS ENGAGE is a network for the promotion of civic engagement activities in Irish Higher Education and is open to all higher education institutions staff, students, community organisations and local companies in Ireland.

The network aims to strengthen the relationship between higher education and wider society, through civic engagement activities including community-based research, community-based learning, volunteering and knowledge exchange.

References and further reading

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