# Online Community-Based Learning as the Practice of Freedom: The Online Capstone Experience at Portland State University

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## Abstract

*Given the design of Portland State University's (PSU) undergraduate curriculum culminating in a capstone experience, the dramatic growth in online courses and online enrollments required a re-thinking of the capstone model to ensure all students could participate in this effective learning model and have a powerful learning experience. In recent years, a number of capstone courses have been developed that are offered fully online. This article examines PSU's development of and institutional support for community-based learning (CBL) capstone courses in a fully online format. Emerging best practices and lessons learned may be useful for other institutions seeking to integrate experiential elements into online learning at any level, including capstones.*

> Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2000], 34)

In recent years, in response to the growing demands of students and the desire of the university to design more online certificate, minor, and degree pathways for PSU students, a number of capstone courses have been developed and offered in a fully online format. As part of this online course development process, program staff, administrators, and instructors have been exploring ways of translating what we have done for so many years in our rich practice of offering on-site community-based learning (CBL) courses to the online classroom without losing the powerful community partnerships, deep reflective opportunities for students, and social justice framework for teaching and learning. Indeed, this work revealed that online CBL is positioned well to provide a platform for education "as the practice of freedom" as described by Freire above. PSU faculty worked to discover and develop online CBL designs that support transformative learning experiences and address the potential barriers to student access and student learning and engagement presented by capstone courses in an online format. Clearly, online community-based learning has both challenges and rewards. This article examines the literature in this fairly new and

developing field, and looks closely at PSU's trajectory. Potential areas for continued growth and improvement of online CBL are also identified.

# Literature Review

As Portland State University's capstone program team began to realize how the institution's strategic push toward increased online curricular delivery would potentially impact or alter a key pillar of our four-year core curriculum for students, we looked to the field for research regarding online community-based learning as an emerging practice. Also referred to in the literature as service-learning, PSU more frequently uses the term community-based learning (CBL). What we found was a small but important body of literature in this area starting in the early 2000s and extending to the present. Our research questions were as follows:

- What best practices and challenges are documented in this emerging field?
- Which of these models can best inform, support, and help us further develop our current practices?
- What gaps are there in the literature that we may be able to address based on our own experience in the capstone program?

The themes that emerged were threefold:

1. The potential of online CBL to benefit a disrupted university that is grappling with digital learning in general;
2. Limitations and challenges both on the administrative and faculty levels and in the online classroom itself;
3. Promising practices and models (both administrative and instructional).

Because CBL online is such a new practice (or newly documented practice) and because the number of institutions and instructors attempting such a practice is small, we were able to conduct thorough research and were in the unique position of being able also to study current practice while simultaneously developing our own practices side-by-side.

# The Position and Role of CBL in Our Current Disrupted University Setting

The intersection between CBL and "e-learning" can be articulated as an opportunity to expand the definition of "classroom" and disrupt traditional models of teaching and learning. Carver and her co-authors (2007), in their article "Toward a Model of Experiential E-Learning," speak to the potential of community-based learning to enrich and even challenge traditional modes of online instruction by asking students to connect to real-world locations and current issues in a way that is not insulated. While traditional models of online instruction often privilege the online mode as a place for publication or a place to experiment with communication, community-based or experiential opportunities may give online students an anchor as they experiment with having more agency (expected in most online courses) and taking more initiative over

their own learning experience. Indeed, "successful learners are active, goal-directed, self-regulating, and assume personal responsibility for contributing to their own learning" (Zlotkowski and Duffy 2010). Carver and associates outline a taxonomy of experiential e-learning that starts with "content sharing" and ends with "direct experience/action learning" (1997). While the authors describe the challenging nature of bringing these complex pieces together in the online classroom, they reflect that building the learning community is a key element in overall learner and class success and see experiential learning as a solution to the sometimes alienating or disconnected placement of the learner in an online learning environment that requires student agency without helping the learners connect to fellow students or to the outside world.

Hamerlinch and Houle, in a 2012 presentation for the Minnesota Campus Compact, echo some of these themes framing two different modes of online experience: passive/apathetic (students as media consumers) or active/engaged (students as media participants and creators). They also point to attitudes of instructors about online instruction, citing a 2010 statistic from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* article "Faculty Views about Online Learning": 82.1% of faculty members (from sixty-nine colleges/universities, based on 10,720 faculty member interviews) view online learning as inferior to face-to-face learning. This attitude alone frames the way our institutions may view online learning even in the face of a push to digitize our curriculum and to invite more students to attend our schools and even earn their degrees via distance education. Much like the Carver and others (2007) piece, these authors emphasize a necessary social presence as important to successful engagement of students online; unlike the Carver piece, these authors emphasize the social presence of the online instructor in their role as facilitator. With this focus on the faculty role, Hamerlinch and Houle also point to the need for traditional community-based learning or service-learning practitioners to re-envision what "service" can and should mean in an online space.

Echoing this theme, Waldner, McGorry, and Widener (2012) describe online learning as a "facilitator rather than a barrier to service-learning" and state that "e-service-learning" holds the potential to transform both service-learning and online learning by freeing service-learning from geographical constraints and by equipping online learning with a tool to promote engagement (123). Waldner and her co-authors describe an emerging e-service-learning typology with a spectrum of service learning, from traditional on-site service all the way to what they term "extreme e-service-learning," which takes place entirely online. The importance of these pathways lies in the flexibility both for instructors and students of this potential teaching and learning model.

In *Community Engagement 2.0? Dialogues on the Future of the Civic in the Disrupted University*, Crabill and Butin (2014) dig deeply into the tension and the possibility between the digital and the civic. This book is framed by the overarching question of the role of community-based and placed-based learning in higher education, which is becoming increasingly less place-based itself and more virtual. Other questions raised include the issue of the heavy labor and deep relationships of CBL, in contrast to an online format that can trend toward the mechanical/impersonal. The question also arises: How does CBL transform online classrooms for the better or the worse? Can

the disruption of technology in higher education serve as an opportunity to rethink civic engagement and the way we use it in our pedagogy? CBL may be the way to firmly ground online learning.

# Limitations and Challenges

Because this body of research and writing on online CBL is still young, there is a great sense of optimism and hope described in the literature that often details new courses running online and using CBL as a pedagogical framework. The extant literature also alludes to the challenges and limitations that face instructors, students, and institutions in this work. Capstone courses are a required course for PSU undergraduates, so both institutional and instructor motivation exists to undertake the heavy redesign and critical thinking processes required to create an effective online CBL course. In institutions where CBL is not required, faculty may be more hesitant to take on the demands necessitated by this process.

These challenges can inform us in our own work and also point to future research that is needed on this emerging teaching and learning pedagogy. Major challenges arise around the difficulty of moving beyond a simple translation of the face-to-face course into an online offering, the workload/time commitments of online students, the community partnership, geographical limitations, and technology training for all involved parties. Again, since the research is still young, sample sizes and longevity of studies are still small or limited.

Strait and Sauer (2004) offer some of the earliest research on models of e-service-learning, with special focus on a model where students each have a different community partner. Here, the challenge is managing each community partnership, verifying volunteer work, and supporting each volunteer in his or her unique work. Another challenge in e-service-learning, as described by Strait and Sauer, is the self-selected student population in online classes and their personal work and family loads. They estimate that most of their online students work a forty-hour work week. Similarly, Waldner and others (2011) describe the challenge of online students who carry a heavy workload outside of the classroom and the often accelerated pace of online courses.

Carver and co-authors (2007) emphasize the challenge of breaking out of the traditional classroom course design, mindset, and teaching methods in order to liberate our thinking in online learning spaces for the best outcomes. They find this traditional mindset to be one of the most challenging obstacles. They point to the need for more instruction and facilitation around "agency, belonging, and competence" as key to facing and meeting these challenges.

Waldner, McGorry, and Widener (2010) note small sample size in online CBL (as is the case in much of the early research) and lack of comparison in outcomes between face-to-face offerings and their online counterparts. Training for all involved parties (instructor, community partner, student) is recommended; again, compressed term

length and the increasingly busy schedules of students may prevent full participation in these efforts. Technology barriers themselves, such as lack of adequate access to technology at home and lack of training in video/chat, can prevent full meeting of learning outcomes.

# Promising Practices and Models

Gaytan and McEwen (2007) discuss effective models for assessment, encouraging multiple examples and examining the intersection between effective assessment and overall effective online teaching in a community-based course. Using faculty and student surveys, the researchers conclude that (a) training for instructors specifically in online teaching techniques is a benefit to any online CBL course; (b) assessment is most meaningful when it comes in different modes (synchronous, asynchronous, peer, self, and instructor); and (c) assessment in online courses should be very timely, with a quick turnaround, so that students may draw the most meaning out of feedback. The authors recommend additional research into innovative uses of technology for assessment and increased student learning as part of the feedback loop.

In "Teaching and Learning Social Justice through Online Service-Learning Courses," a touchstone article by Guthrie and McCracken (2010), the authors delve into the question of how to create a space to connect and collaborate on the deep level needed for a transformative learning experience online. They recommend on-site service, rather than virtual, and encourage instructors to make technology a focus of discussion in terms of its possible role in reflection, connection, and social justice work. Malvey, Hamby, and Fottler (2006) found that the use of synchronous learning opportunities (video streaming and text-based chat rooms) benefited the learning community as a whole and deepened learning outcomes. And Pearce (2009) adds an important piece to this puzzle with his study of non-geographically based CBL partnerships, focusing on using Appropedia (www.appropedia.org) as a virtual space to collaborate and meet deeper community needs while being geographically dispersed.

The role of the community partner in transformative online CBL is also examined in the literature. Waldner and her co-authors (2011) present a case study in their article "Serving Up Justice: Fusing Service Learning and Social Equity in the Public Administration Classroom," describing a partnership with a local government agency as transformative to the way students engaged with and understood the course content through a social justice and cultural competency lens. A key recommendation is joint development of the content and the syllabus with the community partner and engaging the community partner in recorded or real-time learning activities/discussions. Likewise, Kane and Lee (2014) encourage development of a close working relationship and good communication between the instructor and community partner, finding digital means of documentation of the work (video/photo). They use a digital storybook as the primary means for both reflection and documentation/verification of the actual community work.

# Historical Framework of Online Capstones and Institutional Support for Online CBL at PSU

In the late 1990s, PSU established the Extended Campus Center, located in Salem, Oregon, which offered online options for students to complete courses and degrees in the social sciences and liberal arts. Over the years, this center was the primary administrative home for online course offerings. In 2013, because of what Kaur (2013) described as "a consistent migration of students to online classes," this center was officially closed in favor of focusing on university-wide support for online learning.

A limited number of capstone courses have been utilizing technology for some time now. In the mid-2000s, courses began to move to a hybrid format, and a few additional courses began to be offered fully online. The earliest online capstone offerings were grant writing or media-based capstones, with the community-based element of the course happening online, as opposed to on-site. Faculty with an interest in moving to an online format or creating a new course online developed these courses without much formal institutional support. Technologies utilized at that time tended to be restricted to the learning platforms adopted by the university, starting with WebCT, then Blackboard, and currently Desire to Learn (D2L). Additionally, some instructors began to use YouTube as a delivery platform. These online capstone course offerings were few, and the instructors designing and instructing them were in many ways "flying solo." Capstone faculty involved in teaching hybrid or online courses did, in fact, take advantage of some of the earliest online professional support opportunities offered by the university, including workshops supporting hybrid teaching and learning. However, even with the professional support that was available, so little was known then about teaching and learning CBL online that in many ways these early pioneers were breaking into new territory.

In June 2013, the Office of Academic Innovation (OAI) was created at PSU. Prior to that time, technology support as well as teaching and learning support was available for faculty, but these services were provided by three separate and distinct offices: the Office of Information Technology (OIT), the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE), and the Center for Online Learning (COL). Support for faculty teaching CBL online was available, but scattered. Faculty members were often left to search out and familiarize themselves with new technologies on their own, reaching out to OIT for technical support as needed and/or arranging separate consultation meetings with CAE or COL staff.

Following an extensive consultation process with faculty and staff across the institution, the new, comprehensive Office of Academic Innovation was formed. Under the direction of the vice provost and OAI directors, OAI provides leadership and support for campus activities that explore and promote excellence in teaching and learning, innovative curricular technology use, and CBL. Many instructors who now teach online CBL courses found the merger of technology support with teaching and learning support into one office to be a very helpful development. OAI supports

campus initiatives that respond to changing curricular and educational delivery models; improve student success; and value the importance of teaching, learning, and assessment. In practice, this includes offering frequent workshops for faculty focusing on a variety of new technologies, CBL course syllabi development, creating accessible course videos, timing and logistics for online and hybrid courses, and screen casting, to name a few.

In addition to hosting these frequent drop-in workshops, from time to time OAI offers the opportunity to participate in more intensive work groups, in which a small group of instructors work closely together, with a facilitator, on specific skills that support successful online CBL courses. OAI instructional designers are available for one-on-one consultation as well, and many faculty have found it helpful to work with an online course designer in the development of and the maintenance of their online community-based capstones. OAI also boasts a robust faculty-in-residence program, through which a full-time faculty member is engaged with OAI in a part-time appointment, in order to focus on providing leadership on strategic initiatives that are a priority for the university. In the past several years, these roles have included Faculty-in-Residence for Engagement, collaborating with OAI to explore new modalities for online CBL, and Faculty-in-Residence for Learning Technology, collaborating with OAI staff to explore innovative technology tools for student success, among others. Finally, OAI recently created the position of Teaching, Learning, and Engagement Associate to develop, implement, and evaluate teaching, engagement, and CBL programming sponsored by OAI. This is a unique position that focuses on faculty support in both the implementation and assessment of CBL both in traditional and online settings. The development of OAI and all that it offers is a great benefit to the whole campus, and faculty teaching CBL online courses are especially excited about this new office and the tremendous support and innovation it provides.

Also in 2013, Portland State University launched its reTHINK PSU project, to "deliver an education that serves more students with better outcomes, while containing costs through curricular innovation, community engagement, and effective use of technology" (https://www.pdx.edu/oai/rethink-psu). This initiative funded projects that would enhance online learning and the innovative use of technology in advancing and supporting student success and graduation rates. University Studies (UNST), the four-year general education program at PSU and home of the Senior Capstone, was awarded a grant to create online general education pathways. Because of increased degree and minor pathways online, the capstone program anticipated increased need for online capstone offerings and asked instructors with strong course evaluations in on-site capstones to pilot online versions. From this initiative, in addition to positive outcomes at other levels of the University Studies program, six new online capstone courses were developed. Project facilitators worked closely with OAI from project inception to completion. Additionally, a point person for continued support of online pedagogy, an experienced capstone faculty member with extensive experience in teaching and learning online, is employed through University Studies.

While there is a good amount of institutional support for online CBL pedagogy available from the wider university, OAI, and University Studies, additional supports could make online capstone courses even stronger. Additional resources for technology for both faculty (including adjunct faculty) and students are recommended. Faculty would benefit from a university-wide adoption of enhanced technology tools, such as VoiceThread to complement D2L. (Currently VoiceThread licensure is offered to only a select few faculty). While a satisfactory "home base" for online courses, D2L does not allow for the deeper, face-to-face connection that other platforms can provide. The creation of a strong classroom community is enhanced with additional audio and visual options. Also, it takes a substantial amount of time to develop and revise online courses in order to keep current with the latest technological advances. Faculty would benefit from temporal and fiscal support to sustain this work. Later in the article we address the need for better technology access and supports for students. These supports could include practice courses in order to familiarize students with the technology; clear, across-the-board expectations for what online learning is and is not; and better access to the technology tools necessary to engage in a deep level with online learning. Online CBL would also benefit from an overall shift in institutional attitude about the validity of online learning. While reTHINK and the accompanying projects did a great deal to enhance positive attitudes about online learning, there are still segments of the PSU campus, and indeed, many higher education faculty nationally, that view online learning as somehow less rigorous than, and inferior to, face-to-face learning, for both faculty and students, which, indeed, is not the case (Hamerlinch and Houle 2012).

# A Closer Look: Case Studies

## Reporting Live: A Study Abroad Capstone

Reporting Live is an international capstone course that, via blog, connects Oregon middle school classrooms with study abroad students while they are overseas. Grounded in peace journalism and intercultural competence theory, this capstone consists of a pre-departure orientation, ten weeks of interactive blogging, and a final in-person celebration with the partner middle school classroom when the student returns from study abroad (or online if the student remains abroad).

As made clear on the course website, http://www.pdx.edu/capstone-reportinglive/:

> There are two program objectives. The first is to supplement middle grade social studies, language arts, and/or foreign language curriculum, and to support state learning standards with a fun and easy-to-use social media tool. The goal is to maximize experiential learning while minimizing outside teacher prep time.

> The other program objective is to enrich the overseas experience of the participating study abroad students. By framing these students as peace journalists and providing them a readership of young learners, the students are poised to approach their new context with sharpened senses and a critical mind. Observation, asking questions, suspending judgment, building

relationships, and seeking out voices that are missing from the dominant discourse are all attributes of peace journalism, the practice of which will enable the study abroad students (and middle school students back home) to meaningfully connect across cultural difference.

This online course was developed by a new instructor in 2011. The instructor had no online teaching experience but had a background in international conflict resolution, had studied online, had previously taught middle school students, and had lived and studied abroad. All of these lived experiences culminated in this course proposal to the capstone committee, which was accepted and supported.

In this capstone, which operates in partnership with the Office of International Affairs Education Abroad office at PSU, students must apply to participate. Requirements to enroll include studying or interning abroad at time of participation and having regular access to the Internet while abroad. Beyond that, the application process examines study abroad destinations and logistics, a survey of previous travel experience, and an examination of online communication skills. A statement of intent is also required, which gives the student an opportunity to discuss why they want to participate, how they plan to engage middle school students, what aspects of their host country they think will most interest middle school students, and how their major will inform their reporting. All of this information helps the instructor to include students that are well prepared for this international learning-through-serving experience.

In most cases, the instructor arranges partnerships between middle school teachers and the capstone students. There is an ever-evolving pool of participating classrooms, some of which have partnered with the program from the beginning and others trying it out for the first time. Originally, all partner teachers were within the Portland Public School district, but the program expanded outside the city, and even the state, with the realization that partnerships between students and their own former teachers were much more robust and interactive. For students who work with teachers that they themselves had in middle school, there is an added personalized and special experience, an extra sense of giving back.

Students in this online CBL capstone are required to attend one in-person meeting together prior to the start of the term. This is the pre-departure orientation. As part of this orientation, the instructor invites previous participants to share their stories and experiences with the incoming students. This one face-to-face meeting helps students begin to feel connected to one another in this experience, which supports a strong sense of community among students throughout the term. Additionally, prior to the start of the term, students are required to meet in person or virtually with the middle school teacher that they are paired with to discuss the upcoming term and the use of the blog in the middle school classroom. There are a great variety of classrooms that participate, so it is essential that capstone students learn and understand the unique needs and interests of their audience to enable them to successfully customize their blog. This pre-term meeting allows them to do that.

The CBL aspect of this course is almost entirely virtual. Each week of the ten-week term, students are required to make a blog post, sharing stories about their adventures abroad and highlighting various aspects of culture and geography. The instructor developed the assignments for the posts around state standards for middle school learning in order to make the posts most useful for the middle school teachers. Teachers engage their students with the posts in a variety of ways. Additionally, capstone students are required to read a minimum of two of their colleagues' blogs each week and respond to one another. This also contributes to a strong community feel among capstone students. In addition to their blog posts, capstone students are required to complete assigned readings and to reflect and respond in an online discussion forum utilizing the D2L platform. Finally, at the end of the term, and upon the capstone students' return home, there is a celebration with the partnering middle school classroom. These in-person gatherings provide valuable closure for both the classroom and the capstone student, allowing them to commemorate their learning experience together through cultural song, dance, food, and other activities. For those unable to return within the K-12 academic school year, students hold the celebration virtually, finding creative ways to make the experience special.

The Reporting Live capstone is a successful offering, attracting full enrollment each term with study abroad students who want to simultaneously complete their capstone requirement. A review of the capstone students' blogs (available on the course website) indicates that most capstone students find that the experience of framing their travel and study abroad in a way that is also informative and useful for middle school students and teachers enriched their own experience. Additionally, course assignments are consistently updated to align with changing state standards. From the instructor's perspective, the most challenging aspect of the course is managing the variety of community partnerships, which involve different teachers, schools, and districts. Indeed, research confirms the challenge of a multi-community partner model (Strait and Sauer 2004).

## Mobilizing Hope Capstone: Engaged Spirituality

This online capstone course was developed in the summer of 2013, during the early stages of the reTHINK PSU project mentioned previously which encouraged and supported the development of increased online capstone offerings. After thorough review of the course proposal by the capstone committee, the course was accepted, with the recommendation to work closely with other faculty and instructional designers from OAI for assistance in developing the fully online course format. At the time that the course was developed, support for online CBL instruction was not yet established in a uniform manner, but was available ad hoc. The instructor worked individually with an instructional designer, as well as with the Faculty-in-Residence for Community-Based Online Learning in the OAI, to become familiar with a variety of teaching and learning online tools and to develop the online course structure.

Despite several years of teaching hybrid courses using the D2L format, this fully online capstone was a new experience for the instructor (who at one point in time would have described herself as a "technophobe"). Teaching fully online meant that

the instructor could not rely upon those once a week face-to-face sessions to build a relationship with students that she was familiar with in-person or through hybrid teaching. Additionally, while the instructor was acquainted with and had been using D2L for a number of years in hybrid courses, she felt that the ability to engage with students on a deep level and to support them in engaging and collaborating with one another, as is required for successful and transformative online community-based teaching and learning (Guthrie and McCracken 2010), would be limited by using only that tool. Identifying and becoming adept with other technology tools that would allow for deeper engagement and relationship building was an initial hurdle. Thankfully, other, more seasoned online faculty members were available for support and ideas. A series of work sessions one-on-one with the Faculty-in-Residence for Community-Based Online Learning was also extremely helpful in this regard.

The Mobilizing Hope capstone course asks students to examine and discuss their own spiritual traditions, beliefs, and wonderings, and use this set of traditions and beliefs as a springboard and a foundation for social justice activism on an issue of their choosing. Additionally, this course empowers students to become involved in social justice work in the community, addressing a wide variety of issues and areas, depending on their passions and interests. Students are required to develop their own partnerships and/or social justice projects and to work during the course of the term on these. As mentioned by Strait and Sauer (2004), managing multiple community partnerships can be challenging for faculty, but also has its rewards. The wide variety of CBL work allows students to examine varied content associated with that work and provides for a rich learning environment. As recommended by Guthrie and McCracken (2010), the CBL is on-site in the community rather than virtual in this course.

A great deal of work happens prior to the start of the term beyond typical course preparation. The instructor must assist with the development of, and approve, all CBL partnerships and projects. This requires that the instructor be in communication with students well before the start of the term (in fact, shortly after students' registration in the course) to work with students in developing appropriate projects for the upcoming term, so that their CBL can begin at the start of the term. Additionally, students must review and sign an Assumption of Risk and Release of Liability form for PSU as well as a Partnership Agreement, the latter of which is also signed by the faculty member and a representative of the community partner, so all expectations and requirements are clearly delineated.

Two main technology tools for teaching and learning online are utilized in this course: D2L and VoiceThread. The combination of these tools seems to work well together, allowing for a basic course shell, or "home base," with announcements, assignments, and similar items housed on D2L, and a deeper engagement with one another as a class community and with course material and content through VoiceThread. Clear guidelines and structure are especially important in an online classroom space so that students feel connected and understand the flow of the course (Palloff and Pratt 2007), and the Mobilizing Hope capstone is set up with expectations that are the same each week. Students are expected to complete roughly twenty hours of CBL over the course

of the term. Each week, using VoiceThread (which allows for audio and video posting, along with a text option), students are required to report to the class community an update about their CBL for that week. In addition to their own report, students are required to reply to the postings of two colleagues, at a minimum, in a meaningful way: to support them, brainstorm an issue, congratulate them, ask a question, make a connection, or whatever makes sense in the context of that week's blogs.

VoiceThread is also used for the weekly discussion regarding the assigned readings. These discussions are asynchronous, and as previously mentioned, text, audio, and video responses are permitted, with most students utilizing the audio and video options. Each week, as with the CBL reports, students are asked to respond by making an original post in response to the question(s) posed by the instructor, and then also to reply to a minimum of two colleagues in a meaningful way, referring to the readings in the discussion.

Finally, there is the group work aspect of the course. In small groups based upon the nature of their CBL projects, students find and post articles, videos, discussion questions, and other material, allowing them to delve deeper into the content of their particular social justice issue. These discussions take place on D2L. These smaller group discussions are surprisingly rich and diverse and are a favorite aspect of the course, based on student evaluations.

The level of engagement of students in this online capstone has been impressive. While a few students each term inevitably fall into the "passive/apathetic" category (Hamerlinch and Houle 2012), the majority of students seem to appreciate the use of VoiceThread and engage quite well, as if they were in a classroom discussion. The only difference is that the discussion takes place over the period of a week, asynchronously, and from different places, free from geographical constraints, instead of over an hour in a classroom.

From the faculty perspective, one aspect of this course that should be highlighted and celebrated is the fact that students are able to participate in so many different CBL projects in a variety of geographical areas, adding a rich dimension to the course discussions and student learning. For example, a student developed a partnership with an equine therapy group, developing a project whereby she brought horses into a youth correctional facility in Oregon to provide equine therapy for incarcerated young men. Another example involves a student who partnered with Stand Up 4 Kids in Houston, Texas, for his CBL, working to end the cycle of youth homelessness. He had recently moved to Texas and wanted to finish his PSU degree, and this online capstone was a perfect fit for him. Another student also had recently moved away from Portland and needed to complete his capstone; he worked for an after-school mentoring program in California to engage in his community-based work. Several students have completed the course from abroad, conducting CBL in another country. These diverse CBL opportunities from various geographical areas could only happen in an online CBL course, and they add richness to the course and to the discussion that is not found in a traditional CBL classroom.

This course could continue to be improved by developing more interaction and course involvement with each of the community partners. Currently, there is interaction between the community partners and the instructor before the start of the term, at the set-up phase, and again at the close of the term, at the review-of-the-term stage, but an ongoing relationship throughout the term and participation in the course activities and dialogue, in general, is lacking and could add a rich element to the teaching and learning (Kane and Lee 2014). Additionally, synchronous learning opportunities have not yet been incorporated into this course, which according to Malvey, Hamby, and Fottler (2006) could serve to deepen the learning outcomes.

## Social Justice in K-12 Education:
## Addressing Opportunity Gaps and Advocating for Change

The Social Justice in K-12 Education capstone was transformed from a traditional face-to-face offering to a fully online model in winter term 2014. This course focuses on public conversations, policy, and practices surrounding the concept of "opportunity gaps" for students in the Portland metropolitan area. In this capstone, we frame our exploration by looking at four wealth/opportunity gaps (international, racial, economic, and systemic) as students work in community education sites with the goal of ultimately becoming more deeply engaged in local and national communities through their social change work. The focus is on current local and national education issues, educational equity in public education, and hands-on and virtual tools for transformative social action. Capstone students work either on-site, engaging directly with youth (recommended), or virtually, with an education advocacy organization (under special circumstances).

The instructor, who has a longstanding partnership with several local organizations, arranges on-site CBL placements for students in the Portland area. Remote students completing on-site CBL, as well as students needing virtual online placements, are supported through various volunteer guides and search engines to find their own placement with a local education nonprofit or school, or with an education advocacy organization. Students are given email and phone scripts in addition to information on other protocols for contact and modes of introduction/communication to assist them in connecting with potential community partners. Additionally, the course is currently exploring a virtual relationship with the writing center at Roosevelt High School in north Portland. In all cases, on-site and virtual, a CBL agreement letter is signed and submitted to the instructor from the student and community partner. A mid-term email check-in and a final feedback form submitted by the community partner directly to the instructor are also required to verify and evaluate the CBL work.

The students who register for this course are approximately 75 percent local and 25 percent outside of the Portland metro area. Because issues of educational equity are fairly consistent across states in the United States, it is often fairly easy to identify community partners in any state where a student may reside or any city outside of the Portland metro region. Thus, on-site volunteering is the norm for students outside of the local area. In general, two or three students each term choose a virtual option.

Being able to incorporate students from multiple geographical areas and to embrace students who may have to volunteer via a virtual option (due to work, home, or other factors) encourages equity in access to this social justice topic and allows us to have a diverse student population (parent students, working students, and others) participating in a dynamic way.

As with the Mobilizing Hope capstone, this online capstone course was developed through the reTHINK project's "pathways" initiative. With over ten years of online teaching experience, the instructor was a strong candidate to bridge the gap between CBL and online learning and was able not only to develop this course but also to serve as a faculty-in-residence for OAI, supporting other faculty during their online course development processes. While the Social Justice in K-12 Education capstone was already an approved face-to-face offering, moving it online did require that a revised proposal be submitted to the capstone committee. Instructors proposing to move a traditionally face-to-face capstone online are asked to detail changes to community partnerships, how reflection/group work will be incorporated online, and in what ways students will be provided ample spaces to discuss and engage with each other in the learning community. The capstone committee offers feedback and recommendations and is particularly careful in the approval process for online courses, as the program has been very strategic in creating its online offerings to the same standard of engagement as hybrid or face-to-face offerings. After feedback and approval from the capstone committee, the instructor worked with instructional designers at OAI to create course modules and to discuss the "look" of the course. Due to years of online experience, pedagogy training, and teaching, the instructor was able to design the course with little outside technical support. This background in teaching with technology has been invaluable to the success of the course and the ease of transition. Even with a strong background and years of experience in teaching with technology, the instructor found the issues of making contact and setting up community partnerships early (before the term's start date), creating multiple volunteer pathways/community partnerships, and making space for a highly engaged discussion forum to be the most challenging aspects of the design process.

Because PSU runs on a quarter system, it is a challenge to establish community partners with geographically dispersed students quickly. It is important to communicate with students both about their community work and about the virtual nature of the class before the term begins. This instructor created a virtual "toolkit" for students that resides on her blog, "PDX Education Action Network" (www.pdxean. wordpress.com). The toolkit is password protected, and students are given access via a "welcome" email distributed to them upon registration for the class. Inside the toolkit, students find information about the instructor, the history of the class, the context for community partnerships, the CBL agreement form, and a test forum for VoiceThread, the primary discussion tool in the course. Students are also asked to contact the instructor prior to the start of the term, and a brief phone conversation orients them to the details of the course. The combination of the toolkit and early phone and email conversations to set up the partnerships and to discuss the way the course works gives students a running start to the course.

In terms of creating spaces for the deep reflection and discussion that is the heart of this kind of learning, the instructor uses a formula of optional synchronous discussion sessions three times each term in Google Hangouts and weekly asynchronous discussions using VoiceThread as the forum. The three synchronous sessions include the optional course orientation in the first week of the course, a community volunteer work check-in in the fourth week, and a CBL check-in and discussion of privilege in the seventh week. PSU uses Google as its email platform, so each student in the course has a Gmail account and easy access to Google Hangouts. All students are invited to participate in an evening discussion from 8:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m. This ensures that most students are home from work and school and that parenting students have settled their children for the night. In the orientation session, the discussion covers the course syllabus, course components, tips for success, and ample time for introductions and a question-and-answer session. In the check-ins during weeks four and seven, there is a simple agenda, and the conversation evolves, naturally, around questions arising from the CBL work, feedback, the need for advice/troubleshooting, and so on. In general, two-thirds of the class participates in each Google Hangout. An alternative asynchronous VoiceThread forum for students who are unable to participate is also provided.

The weekly discussion forums take place using VoiceThread. This tool allows students to post their thoughts not only in text form but also, and primarily, in video or audio form. The instructor facilitates the discussions in the first and second weeks of the course to model best practices. In the second week of the term, the class participates in a meta-discussion about what VoiceThread does best, as well as its limitations, and authors guidelines for discussions through this course. These guidelines are then used to assess engagement in the weekly conversations throughout the term. By the third week of the term, students begin to co-facilitate discussion by submitting their own prompts and serving as facilitators throughout the week, checking in each day to make connections, ask questions, bring in resources, and so on. Because discussions are student-led, there is a higher level of engagement both from facilitators and participants. Participating students want to support their peers in their efforts and feel more motivated by discussion that is arising from their fellow students. Each facilitator submits a self-evaluation of engagement after their week of facilitation; the student discusses their strengths and areas for growth, in addition to how to be a strong participant in discussions led by their fellow students going forward.

Group work, another required element of all capstone courses, takes place in the form of the Participating in Community (PIC) team project. While the primary CBL placements are arranged by the instructor, the PIC is an opportunity for students to push themselves to grow and to act with Mitchell's (2008) three critical service-learning goals in mind: building authentic relationships, redistributing power, and working from a social change perspective. These PIC team projects can take very different end-product forms. All must include 1) a positive direct or indirect impact on kids/families to support educational equity in some way; 2) hands-on (face to face or virtual) engagement of people outside of the PSU classroom; and 3) analysis of the process, the end result, and future possibilities for continued work/engagement. At the beginning of the term, students self-select into one of three umbrella themes

addressing school inequities. Team composition is determined based on student schedules and availability. Teams define their own project work, goals, and actions; past teams have initiated work with local nonprofits, libraries, schools, and grassroots organizations to take action on issues related to educational equity that are important to the team. The end product of the PIC is a video story showcased within a blog post that is shared publicly on the course blog.

# Common Themes

As indicated by these case studies, online capstone faculty agree upon some essential common elements and practices in their work.

1. Faculty should expect to spend substantial preparation time prior to the start of the term, even more so than for a face-to-face course. Early communication with community partners and students, distributing and gathering all the necessary paperwork, and familiarity with the best use of various technology platforms are all elements to be handled before the term begins.

2. Online CBL students need access to technology tools and platforms that allow for deep engagement with each other, with the course material, and with the instructor. Visual and audio contact develop stronger online learning communities.

3. Online CBL students need easy and frequent access to personal communication with faculty. Indeed, online capstone faculty often comment that they are more frequently and deeply engaged with and connected to their online capstone students than they are with students in an in-person classroom setting. A great deal of one-on-one communication takes place, both electronically and telephonically, and, at times, face-to-face. Undoubtedly this requires a great amount of time and availability from the instructor throughout the term, but the rewards of this connection are great.

# Assessment of Online Capstones: The Student Experience

Assessment of online capstone courses currently involves three aspects, including both formative and summative processes. As addressed in the article focused on faculty support, the formative assessment used is the small group instructional diagnostic, or SGID (see "Cultivating Community: Faculty Support for Teaching and Learning" in this issue). In an online setting, these feedback sessions happen using two different methods: (1) asynchronous group sharing by students in a VoiceThread forum or (2) a link to a student survey, whereby the link is provided to students, and the faculty member overseeing the SGID summarizes the feedback. Some faculty members provide incentives for a certain percentage of students to complete the surveys. Results are shared in an anonymous and general way with the faculty member, in order to assist them in strengthening the course and improving teaching and learning, as well as with the director of the capstone program and the director of University Studies. Instructors are encouraged to close the feedback loop by creating a space to debrief and discuss the feedback in order to strengthen the course through the end of the term.

Additionally, in terms of summative assessment, students complete end-of-term evaluations, again in an online survey format. Results are shared with the faculty member, the directors of both the capstone program and University Studies, as well as with the assessment coordinator for University Studies. The data are also considered when making decisions about future offerings of the course. Finally, instructors are asked to participate in work sample assessments, typically every other year, as described in the above-mentioned article.

Data collected from 223 students who were enrolled in and completed online capstone courses during 2013-2014, indicates that PSU is doing well in offering compelling and transformational online CBL courses and that there is also room for continued growth. With regard to the effective use of technology, over 63 percent of students agree that instructors use technology effectively to engage students. However, roughly 29 percent of students were at best neutral about the instructor's effective use of technology to engage students, with the highest portion of those (15.84%) strongly disagreeing that technology was used effectively to engage students. Clearly, there is additional work to do in training and supporting online CBL faculty to use technology in more engaging ways in their courses.

Likewise, a large percentage (over 65 percent) of students found their instructor to be easily accessible by phone, email, or through other means, while over 26 percent reported a neutral, or worse, experience in the accessibility of their instructor. If a quarter of students felt that they enjoyed less than adequate access to their instructor, this can certainly be improved upon.

In terms of group work, over 70 percent of students reported neutral or better in terms of their experience working in groups. The highest percentage of students did feel that the group work in the online capstones helps them to feel connected to their classmates. However, roughly 20 percent had a negative experience with online group work. A common theme was that "group work is easier in person," but, of course, in today's world so much work and collaboration does happen online, so we should be doing a better job of supporting students in effective online collaboration. This is an additional place where continued faculty and course development support is needed. With a growing offering of online capstone courses, additional research and assessment are needed and would assist the online CBL courses to continue to work toward meeting the needs of students and providing rigorous and transformative learning experiences online.

# Areas for Growth: Practices for Equity in Access to Effective Online CBL Experiences

The capstone faculty at PSU are fortunate to have many avenues for faculty support and conversations about online learning as we embark on this process to increase our online CBL offerings. We are uniquely positioned to simultaneously participate in the disruption of what we have considered traditional CBL teaching and learning and have

administratively supported space to reflect on, challenge, and innovate our practices. Yes, higher education is changing; the "disrupted university" is a place where our assumptions about students must change. Scobey (2014) explores this topic in "Technology, Education, Democracy: Elements of an Emerging Paradigm," calling us to question the meaning of the "public good" and the core belief that the goal of education is to emancipate our students in the face of efforts to digitize our curriculum and offer so-called access to all potential students. He challenges us to reframe our conversations about online learning to consider the implications of our use and promotion of emerging technologies while critically thinking about the many and sometimes conflicting realities in emerging technologies with and among our students.

One of the most important pieces of our practice involves developing communities of practice; gathering with our colleagues to share, reflect, and innovate. These forums support practitioners, allow for the exchange of ideas to aid in the teaching process, promote the development of scholarship related to the work, and allow those who are interested but have little experience to learn from their colleagues. One of the forums for this collaboration took place in partnership with OAI. In the last three academic years, we have co-hosted two reading groups with faculty, primarily from the capstone program but also from across the university, with the themes of CBL online (2013) and social justice in online learning (2014 and 2015). Based on the experiences of our program directors, faculty, and students, we draw from the larger research base to select pertinent findings in order to answer and discuss bigger questions arising in our teaching practice.

It is the 2014 and 2015 reading groups that allowed us the space and the time to really grapple with questions arising around access, equity for online learners, and social justice (both as a topic in our courses and as a practice in our university for our learners). The barriers to successful online learning that our students face are often directly related to technology training (whether students have been trained as consumers or as creators of technology), access to technology tools (e.g., up-to-date laptops), and the ability to form a real relationship with their instructor and fellow learners. In "Democratization of Education for Whom? Online Learning and Educational Equity," Jaggers (2014) raises the basic question: Are we really "democratizing" education with technology? Beyond MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), how do online degree pathways and offerings improve access to higher education for students who would otherwise be unable to attend? And how can we in the capstone program, with a built-in social justice framework, start more conversations and practices that work toward serving our most underserved students?

In a study titled "Online Learning: Does It Help Low-Income and Underprepared Students," Jaggers (2011) focuses on community college students in online courses and identifies three reasons why our most underserved students struggle in online courses: technical difficulties, increased "social distance," and a relative lack of structure inherent in online courses (Jaggers 2011, 19). While the University Studies program at PSU has a very strong and well-developed relationship with OAI, support for instructors with technology, and a help desk for students, the issue of "social

distance" and any technology issues related to lack of access to updated technology tools are beyond the reach of our technical support. Instructors themselves must seriously consider what course design elements can reasonably be developed and used by our students. The institution at large may be the only entity that could make change in terms of access to technology tools. Jaggers also posits that providing tools for technology to students, offering courses to prepare students to be successful in online learning, and studying when/how online learning improves low-income student success are imperative next steps in providing true access.

We can look to the literature to find additional practices that we must consider in order to better support low-income students, first generation students, and students of color. As social justice practitioners, it is imperative that we find ways to understand and integrate the research and our own experiences with students to provide social justice learning that provides access to those who need it the most. Some best practices gleaned from the literature on this topic include the hiring of student advocates to engage with a caseload of students whom they support as they participate in their courses online (Garcia 2006). These advocates are not technology experts but instead individuals with skills around mentoring, understanding university resources, and relationship building. In addition, Garcia suggests integration of a practice of peer review by instructors of each other's course shells prior to teaching their courses and throughout the life of each course (Garcia 2006). Jantz (2010), in her article "Self-Regulation and Online Developmental Student Success," advocates for offering instruction on self-regulation for online success and incentives for students (including technology or financial incentives for completing training to catalyze success in online learning). Finally, Okwumabua and co-authors (2011), in "An Exploration of African American Students' Attitudes Toward Online Learning," indicate that we must address the roots of the digital divide and the lack of confidence in using technology to further academic learning, and engage in more work around showing students explicitly how technology can be a tool for research, connection, and even social justice work.

Through their online CBL teaching experiences, capstone faculty have found that the greatest challenges they face as instructors (beyond training in innovative uses of technology to connect with students) are not assisting students in meeting the learning outcomes of deep social justice learning, reflection, and working on real social problems, but rather truly serving students equitably, giving our most underserved students meaningful access to higher education and rich online educational experiences allowing room for social justice learning and thinking. If CBL and critical discourse around social justice issues are pillars of what is considered to be a well-rounded higher education experience, PSU must offer rich CBL experiences to all of its online students. We agree with Guthrie and McCracken (2010) that experiential education is at the heart of social justice pedagogy. These authors call us to consider the social justice framework as we apply it to our online students and offerings, stating that "teachers instructing curricula that involve multiple levels of learning are challenged to maintain their focus on the social realities demonstrated in their online classrooms and the ways in which they impact the integration of overall learning and the application of technologies" (Guthrie and McCracken 2010).

## Conclusion

The capstone program at Portland State University is committed to "education as the practice of freedom," as described by Paulo Freire. Capstone courses offered in an online setting are no different. As online capstone faculty, we seek to provide course structures, access to technology platforms, and deep engagement with students that allow and encourage them to "deal critically and creatively with reality and to... participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire 2000, 34). Indeed, liberating our thinking and teaching from the traditional CBL in-person courses and classrooms and toward a different model for online learning spaces allows for the best transformational learning experiences for online capstone students (Carver et al. 2007). Finally, providing equity and access for underserved students is imperative for us as a faculty, and the next phase of our development must focus on additional practices and resources that we will consider and adopt in order to better address true educational equity through our online teaching and learning. We are grateful as a faculty for a visionary and immensely supportive capstone program director; a collaborative, innovative and reflective faculty; and the strong programmatic and institutional support that we receive. Our guiding principle is that we must translate all of that into deep and transformative learning experiences for all students.

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