

COLLEGE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LEARNING,  
TEAMWORK, AND INSTRUCTOR CHARACTERISTICS

By

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Abstract

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This qualitative study examines student perspectives of a communications course that uses service learning as an experiential strategy. The goal of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of college students' engagement experiences where supportive relationships and experiential education are emphasized. Data were collected through interviews with former students, examinations of students' written work, and analysis of course evaluations. The findings suggest that three main phenomena support the development of student engagement in the classroom: active learning, team work, and instructor characteristics. Findings indicate that each phenomenon may be able to stand alone in supporting college student engagement. A grounded theory was developed based on the ability of students to relate to and chose phenomena that best support engagement.

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends. You have always been there cheering me on through thick and thin. Without you this would have never been possible. I love you all.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

What are students getting out of their educational experiences? What types of experiences prompt growth and support lifelong learning? These questions are frequently asked and tested throughout the K-12 education system, but what about higher education? In the mid 1980s there was a shift in thinking about assessing educational excellence. Historically, excellence in higher education has been determined by resources and reputation (Koljatic & Kuh, 2001). This view radically changed in 1984 with the highly publicized report *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute of Education, 1984). This was one of the first reports to emphasize that the best evidence of excellence was gains in academic achievement. This challenged institutions to provide evidence of academic achievement, but it also created much debate on the best ways to support and evaluate student learning.

Every year the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education prepares state and national report cards on higher education (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). Each state is assigned a grade for six performance indicators: preparation of high school students entering college, participation of the population in college, affordability, completion rates, benefits for those who graduate from college, and student learning outcomes. Every year student learning has received an incomplete rating because there is so little evaluation of student learning outcomes. Also, almost every state receives low scores on the other five performance indicators.

The results from the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) report for Washington State University prompted the current study. The NSSE is an annual survey instrument that assesses educational practices and their association with student learning and

personal development (Kuh, 2001a). NSSE results inform institutions regarding students' educational experiences and use of learning resources, thus allowing institutions to implement change to better meet the needs of students.

Based on well-known principles that promote good educational practices and increase engagement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), NSSE developed five engagement benchmarks used to evaluate what students are getting out of their educational experience. These benchmarks include level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. The NSSE 2006 report for Washington State University found that, on average, freshmen scored significantly lower than seniors on all engagement benchmarks (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). For example, under the active and collaborative benchmark, freshmen at Washington State University were significantly less likely to ask questions and contribute to class discussions. Also, they were less likely to discuss ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class. Focusing on the engagement benchmarks is one way for colleges and universities to understand what leads to engagement and where students are excelling and struggling.

Several studies and authors found that engagement is highly linked to success in learning and personal development (Astin, 1984, 1993; Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kuh, 2001b.; Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005). Hart and Keller (1980), in a study of 375 first-term freshmen, found that students who received less than a "C" average indicated lack of motivation, improper study habits, and inattention as factors for their poor performance in school. This lack of engagement can be detrimental to first-year students. Research on factors that can increase student engagement has shown positive results for student retention and completion of degrees. When

students are highly engaged they are more likely to stay in school, receive good grades, be satisfied with school, and experience personal growth. If we can learn what leads to and enhances engagement, and then implement appropriate strategies or practices, institutions can better support students and increase retention rates and student success in the process.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The constructs of primary importance in this study include college student engagement, active learning, and supportive campus environments. Following is a review of the literature and how it relates to these topics. To better understand college student engagement in learning, literature from a variety of perspectives is reviewed. Student engagement literature attempts to define the construct and indicate ways to promote engagement among college students.

#### *Student Engagement*

The basic definition of engagement is “to bind by a pledge to do something, to participate, to take part in a venture, to connect or interlock with” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2006, pg. 354). Synonyms associated with engagement include commit, pledge, retain, take on, absorb, immerse, interest, and involve. The construct of student engagement has received much attention in primary and secondary education. Student engagement can be broadly defined as the time and energy spent on the learning process in a teaching/learning environment, indicating that a student has to be actively participating in learning tasks in order to be engaged (Astin, 1984; Bryson & Hand, 2007). Appleton, Christenson, Kim, and Reschly (2006) define student engagement as “energy in action.” They consider engagement to be both the physical and psychological processes of action.

A more diverse definition of engagement is offered by Furlong and Christenson (2008). They define student engagement as a four-part typology: academic, behavioral, cognitive, and affective; in this they also describe physical and psychological components of engagement. Common ways to measure physical engagement include time in and outside of class discussing ideas with teachers and peers, time on task, extra-curricular participation, homework completion,

attendance, and credits earned toward graduation (Kuh, 2001b; Appleton et al., 2006; Furlong & Christenson, 2008). Where physical engagement includes observable indicators, psychological engagement is internal and more difficult to observe. Psychological engagement may include such characteristics as building positive relationships, connection to the school environment, feeling supported in the college environment, interest in learning, goal setting, and self-regulation.

Furlong and Christenson (2008) believe student engagement is the primary theoretical model for understanding student attrition. In order to understand the phenomenon of attrition, Astin (1984) developed a theory of student involvement. Astin encouraged researchers to focus on what the student does. Traditionally, college rankings are based on research money, prestigious professors, and cost instead of student learning. His theory highlights the importance of how much time and energy the student devotes to the learning process (engagement) for academic success. A student who studies more, actively participates in organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty and peers will be highly engaged and more likely to succeed in school. Astin also argues that the success of any educational program is dependent on the ability of that program to increase student involvement.

The best known institutional practices that lead to student engagement are defined by Chickering and Gamson (1987) as the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education: student-faculty interaction, cooperation among peers, active learning environments, prompt feedback, amount of time spent on tasks, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Chickering and Gamson identify frequent student-faculty contact in and outside of the classroom as the most important of the seven principles. Implementation of the principles is not entirely dependent on faculty. They are intended to be used interdependently

among faculty, staff, administrators, peers, and students. According to Chickering and Gamson, the use of these principles will improve the quality of teaching and learning within our educational system and lead to increased success for students.

For the purpose of this review and study, the seven principles were condensed into two primary principles: active and collaborative learning and supportive campus environment. These two principles seemed to embody and simplify the seven principles; making it easier for research purposes. Following is a review of the literature and how these principles relate to student engagement.

### *Active and Collaborative Learning*

The instructional strategies used with students can affect their engagement in the learning processes. Traditional teaching pedagogies can be referred to as surface approaches. Surface learning is didactic in nature, where the teachers are seen as providers of knowledge and the students are recipients. This approach is very effective in delivering mass amounts of information to a large group of students. In contrast, deep approaches to teaching involve class discussion, small group work, and collaboration.

Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and David Kolb are at the heart of deep approaches to teaching (Dewey, 1966; Kolb, 1984). Their work emphasizes a broader perspective related to teaching and learning than other cognitive and behavioral learning theories. These researchers and theorists all recognized that learning is an active process that one must be involved in to gain optimal results. John Dewey was a highly recognized advocate for experiential education and learning techniques. According to the experiential learning theory, students interact with their environment, gaining insight and understanding from their experiences. Such experiences help students connect information to future learning. Thus,

experience is what differentiates experiential learning theory from other cognitive and behavioral learning theories. Experiential learning theory is holistic in that it combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior to explain learning (Kolb, 1984).

David Kolb drew many ideas about experiential learning together and popularized the idea through his Experiential Learning Model. Kolb (1984) sees learning as a four-stage cycle. First, people have an experience. Second, people reflect on what has occurred to ensure understanding and meaning. Third, generalizing takes place to make connections and look for patterns. Finally, people apply the new information to new experiences. This dynamic model allows students to move to higher planes of thinking and understanding. As such, the experiential learning process is not a two dimensional process but rather a three dimensional one. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model is closely related to Dewey, Piaget, and Lewin's work on experiential learning. Figure 1 gives a clear picture of the experiential process (Kolb, 1984).



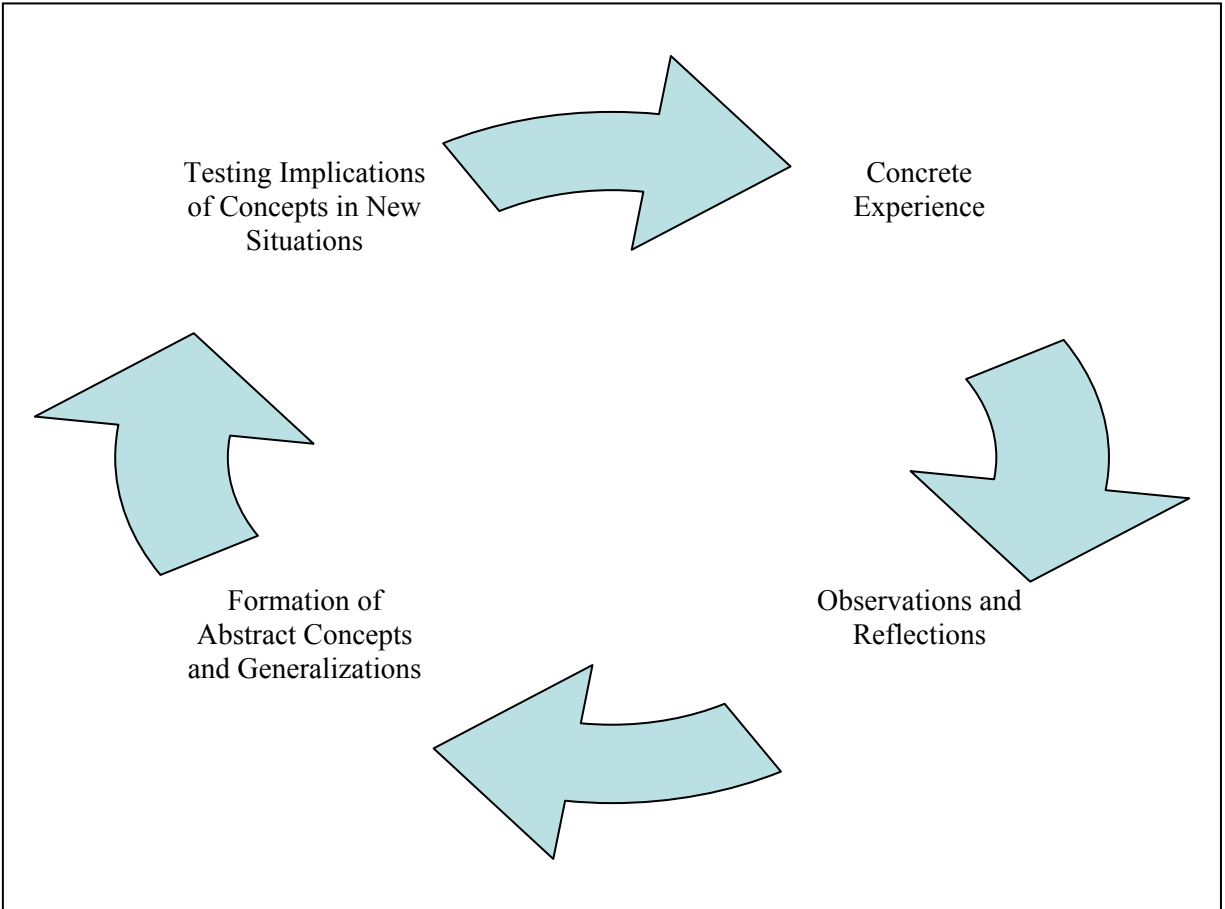


Figure 1

*The Experiential Learning Model*

Active and collaborative learning is defined as intensive interaction between teachers and students while working on complex projects (Bruffee, 2000; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). This often involves small group work and experiential activities. Students are able to build on personal experiences through completion of projects and interactions with teachers and peers (Cabrera, Nora, Crissman, & Terenzini, 2002). When working with a team, students are generally held accountable for their involvement in the project. When using deep instructional approaches, students are encouraged to take a greater level of responsibility for their learning than through surface approaches. They are part of something bigger than they would create on

their own. In this learning environment, students need to cooperate with peers, dedicate time, and interact more frequently with faculty in order to meet the expectations and goals of the collaborative learning environment. The teacher serves the role of facilitator/supporter of collaborative learning.

Active and collaborative learning techniques have been found successful because they can promote higher levels of student achievement and personal development (Astin, 1993). Students put forth more effort (engage) and therefore reach a higher level of achievement in both academia and social experiences. Students seek outcomes that are not only beneficial to themselves but also to all members of the group. Students work together to maximize and encourage their own and each other's commitment to learning. Exchanging resources and peer feedback improves performance, improves motivation, and promotes less anxiety and stress, thus improving cognitive reasoning, involvement, and attendance (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Also, when surveyed, college students prefer collaborative learning when compared to more traditional teaching methods (Cabrera et al., 2002).

In a case study of graduate students enrolled in a collaborative learning class, Cockrell, Caplow, and Donaldson (2000) found that a collaborative approach supported student achievement and ownership of the knowledge they acquired. Kulik and Kulik (1979) found in an extensive review of collaborative learning literature that class discussions lead to higher cognitive development and long-term knowledge retention. Positive correlations between cooperative learning and self-esteem have also been established (Johnson et al., 1991).

When used together, surface and deep learning strategies can increase knowledge of content by exposing students to important concepts and providing opportunities for them to practice using the concepts. This combination of instructional strategies can be very useful in

service learning classrooms because information needs to be disseminated in order to support class concepts and set the stage for using the concepts in an interactive environment.

*Service learning.* Service learning is an active/collaborative learning method that uses civic engagement to teach certain course concepts. Civic engagement is using resources and activities to serve public needs (American Psychological Association, 2008), and is commonly referred to as community service. The goal is to help people and organizations so they can address areas of public concern and create a more positive community in which to live. This can be done collectively or individually.

In a study of 3,450 students attending 42 institutions, Astin and Sax (1998) examined the impact of community service participation on undergraduate student development. After controlling for individual student characteristics (e.g. demographic variables, service propensity variables), they found that involvement in community service enhanced students' life skills, civic responsibility, and academic development. Each academic outcome studied was positively affected by community service participation, including grade point average, retention, amount of contact with faculty, and time devoted to studying. All of these academic outcomes are necessary for college student engagement.

In response to their initial study on the short-term effects of college student community service participation (Astin & Sax, 1998), the authors conducted a study to look at the long-term effects (Astin, Sax, and Avalos, 1999). Employing a method of longitudinal follow up surveys (four years and nine years), the authors found that volunteering six or more hours per week during college nearly doubled a student's chances of post-college volunteer work. Students who volunteered during college were also found to have a greater sense of empowerment (i.e. "I can

bring about changes in society”), and were more likely to perceive that their college provided good preparation for work.

The most commonly cited definition of service learning comes from Bringle and Hatcher (1995): “service-learning is a course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility (pg. 112).” Not only does service learning provide opportunities for students to accept civic responsibility, develop leadership skills, and think critically, it also encourages students to actively engage in their academic life (Bowen, 2005). Within a large political science course, Markus, Howard, and King (1993) used an experimental design to implement two service learning discussion sections into the course. The six control groups were traditional small group discussion sections. All of the groups attended a large lecture class as well as their separate discussion groups. Students in the service learning sections showed significant grade increases compared to the control groups and were more likely to attend lecture and discussion sections.

One major component of service learning, embedded in Bringle and Hatcher’s (1995) definition, and emphasized in Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1984) is reflection. Reflection may take many forms, such as class discussion, written reflection, testing, and small group work. This is required to further understand civic responsibility and course concepts (Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005). Looking at the impact service learning had on acquisition of course content among pharmaceutical students, Osborne, Hammerich, and Hensley (1998) found that those who participated in the service learning lab as opposed to the control lab were rated

higher on complexity of writing. Students in this lab were more reflective and were more able to apply what they were learning.

The current research on teaching and learning shows that there are some universal student needs for academic success. These needs are universal in that they are needed for every student in every type of classroom. Caruso, Bowen, and Adams-Dunford (2006) describe the four assumptions of student learning in their 2006 publication:

1) Learning is both affective and cognitive. Chickering and Reisser (1993) explain the development of student identity (vectors of development). Developing competence (interpersonal and intellectual), developing purpose, and developing integrity (personalizing values while respecting others' viewpoints) are directly applicable to service learning.

2) Students bring a variety of learning styles and social-emotional needs to higher education institutions. Service learning incorporates a variety of pedagogical experiences that can accommodate for a variety of learning styles. This increases a student's ability to learn course content and actively involve them in the learning process.

3) The worth, dignity, and uniqueness of each student should be respected and supported. Service learning allows students to develop skills that are unique to them. Students become not just a name but a face in the service learning environment. They are able to contribute in a unique way and feel empowered.

4) Learning is a lifelong process. Service learning helps students develop skills that can be transferred to "real life" experiences. The "seven C's" (Astin & Astin, 1996) are the values that define The Social Change Model of Leadership Development. Consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and

citizenship are valued before entering the workforce and can be learned through service learning experiences.

These assumptions help educators understand learning, support for learning, learning environments, and the theoretical bases for understanding active and collaborative learning. Also, these assumptions speak to the need of service learning to support students' efforts to develop and grow as individuals. One way to support students' efforts is to provide an environment with supportive relationships.

### *Supportive Campus Environment*

As the assumptions of student learning demonstrate (Caruso, Bowen, & Adams-Dunford, 2006), support is an essential component of learning. Students need guidance and support in order to become fully engaged and successful. The Search Institute's framework of Developmental Assets uses data from more than 148,000 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> graders to define 40 developmental assets that promote positive youth development (Search Institute, 2006). Youth with more developmental assets have been shown to help others, exhibit leadership, value diversity, resist danger, and succeed in school (Scales & Leffert, 2004). Considering that most students who enter college are still considered adolescents, these assets still apply, but are rarely considered in the college context. Among the Search Institute's 40 developmental assets for healthy social and emotional development, many include support structures as important factors for positive youth development. Some of these assets include positive adult relationships, caring school climate, youth as resources and service to others, high expectations, positive peer influence, and interpersonal competence. This grouping of assets relies on interpersonal interactions between youth, their peers, and adults in their environments.

Student-faculty interaction and student-peer interaction are both very important for the development of supportive campus environments. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Perspective is a good example of how support can enhance learning. Vygotsky stressed that individual development is always embedded within a culture (Goldhaber, 2000). In order to understand development, one must study the context in which development takes place. In the case of college student development, one must study the environment in which learning takes place in order to understand the phenomenon of engagement.

Vygotsky's interest in culture and language led him to theorize how children internalize (learn) language and culturally mediated signs (Goldhaber, 2000). He believed this was the primary developmental task for children. In order to develop and internalize, Vygotsky theorized that children must be scaffolded through supervision and/or collaboration with more capable adults and/or peers. The zone of proximal development is the area between actual development and potential development. With guidance and support from experienced instructors and peers, students can reach higher levels of development.

Support is not always easily observed in the learning environment. Furlong and Christenson (2008) provide a distinction between indicators and facilitators of engagement. Indicators of engagement are more directly observable and convey a level of connection with learning, such as attendance, grades, time on task, and accrual of credits. Facilitators of engagement are contextual factors that influence student learning and are often difficult to observe. This might include school climate, school connectedness, student-faculty interaction, and student-peer interaction. These are important to study because they can be protective factors that provide support for student learning.

*Student-faculty Interaction.* As highlighted earlier, Chickering and Gamson (1987) find student-faculty interaction to be the most important educational practice leading to student engagement and success. Student-faculty interaction can be defined as working on a research project, talking with faculty outside of class, being a guest in a professor's home, and assisting faculty in teaching a class (Kuh, 2001b). These supportive activities have had positive correlations with college GPA, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate school. Also, they have been found to have a positive effect on intellectual and personal growth (Astin, 1993). More frequent interaction and support leads to faculty becoming role models, mentors, and guides for learning. Students may be more inclined to work harder and increase engagement if they feel supported and inspired.

Terenzini and Pascarella (1980), in a study of freshman-year educational outcomes and student/faculty relationships, found that frequency of informal contact was positively associated with academic, intellectual, and personal growth. More specifically, socializing informally was related to personal development, and obtaining course or academic information was related to intellectual development.

One method of formal contact between faculty and students is the feedback students receive from faculty regarding course work. The promptness of such feedback is often viewed by students as a standard of faculty support. A study on community college students and student engagement found that 93% of faculty reported giving prompt feedback often or very often on academic performance, whereas only 55% of students reported receiving such timely feedback (McClenney, 2007). This shows that there are differing perceptions on the level of faculty support on college campuses, at least related to this measure.



In Astin's (1993) study of student outcomes and how they are affected by college environments, faculty that were more research-oriented than teaching-oriented were found to have negative effects on satisfaction with instruction, leadership development, college GPA, and completion of a degree. Astin proposes that this issue may be more attributed to the institutional policies of research-oriented universities than to the actual effectiveness of the faculty's teaching skills. A university that focuses more on research than effective pedagogies could, without meaning to, contribute to poor student outcomes.

*Student-peer Interaction.* In Astin's (1993) study of student outcomes, the amount of interaction among peers had positive effects on student learning and development. Student-peer interaction measures included items such as working on group projects, discussing course content, and tutoring other students. These interactions, among others, had strong effects on leadership development, academic development, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, self-reported growth, and cultural awareness. Interaction with peers also had a positive effect on overall educational satisfaction.

In a qualitative study of Seattle Central Community College's Coordinated Studies Program, Tinto (1997) investigated the effect of a freshman cooperative learning group on college student involvement (engagement). Students were enrolled together in seminar and group projects. Participation in a freshman learning community enabled students to develop a peer network. While some friendships faded, others persisted and remained supportive, especially during the difficult transition into college. Students reported that the development of supportive peer groups helped balance college struggles. Also, students reported that supportive relationships that persisted outside of the classroom influenced their desire to continue their college education.

### *Summary*

The literature presents a clear message that participation in active, deep learning techniques leads to student engagement in learning, which provides benefits for content understanding and enrollment retention. The literature also demonstrates that many factors contribute to student engagement: teacher and peer relationships, active learning, high expectations, and time on task. What appears to be missing is a good example of how this level of engagement might play out in a university setting, where large classes of students, independent student schedules, and limited faculty time are the norm. In addition, the supportive factors that are more easily implemented in high school (teacher-student collaboration, peer collaboration, support with time management) are often left to the college student to create and maintain. Tinto (1997) sums it up nicely, “What we do not yet know, or at least have not yet adequately documented, is how involvement is shaped within the context of differing institutions of higher education by student educational experiences (pg. 600).”

### *Purpose of the Study and Research Questions*

This study focused on one university communications course with enrollment of approximately 200 students each semester to determine if students who were involved in critical service learning activities in a large class setting report presence of the supportive factors and engagement outcomes outlined in the literature. This study’s aim was to discover how a service learning class developed with the intent to provide a supportive environment for students can support engagement among college students. Within that, this study was designed to explore what students find to be supportive of their engagement; specifically, how building relationships within a service learning environment can support engagement within the classroom and if those relationships can further support engagement beyond the classroom. This study was also

interested in what other aspects of the class have an impact on students and what they feel the outcomes are.

Three main questions were investigated:

1. Do students who complete HD 205 report ongoing participation/engagement in academic and civic activities (homework, projects, team work, extracurricular activities, service learning, and volunteerism)?
2. What influence does participation in service learning have on the ability to understand and utilize course concepts? Do students who complete HD 205 continue to use course concepts (teamwork, stepping outside one's comfort zone, leadership, communication) in educational and personal interactions and activities?
3. Do students who complete HD 205 feel they were supported in their learning by faculty and peers and how did this support impact the means with which they approached learning and relationships?

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

Qualitative techniques were used to explore college student engagement in depth. The proposed research questions were examined through an exploratory case study. Multiple data collection strategies were utilized to gain an in-depth look at the different support structures that are believed to encourage student engagement.

#### *Context*

Human Development 205: Communication in Human Relations is an interpersonal communications course focused on the development of communication skills and leadership. HD 205 provides students with an opportunity to fulfill the University's general education communications requirement. Course objectives focus on creating a sense of self-awareness and personal responsibility; creating a sense of awareness for others; providing context, support, and guidance; and providing opportunities to apply course concepts. Desired student outcomes include demonstrating effective interpersonal communication through application and reflection; enhancing awareness of participation in activities and relationships; demonstrating active listening, overcoming challenges, and creating positive results through teambuilding; gaining new perspectives; increasing a sense of self-efficacy and civic responsibility; and effectively speaking while creating connection.

HD 205 uses both surface and deep approaches to teaching in order to cover multiple learning styles, increase knowledge acquisition, synthesize content, and increase application. Lecture is used to convey information to a large audience. One lecture topic is how self-disclosure influences group development. In the laboratory setting students are asked to disclose something about themselves with their teams as part of group development. After

completing the self-disclosure activity students reflect on their experience in a written assignment. This combination of learning approaches illustrates knowledge acquisition as a surface technique and then illustrates how an activity and reflection can be used as more deep learning approaches.

Service learning provides an integral structure for engagement in learning. Students are assigned to “teams” of approximately 25 peers, who are then joined with a community service partner to carry out a service learning project. Students work together to create goals that will support and benefit their team and the community. Students develop interpersonal communication skills while increasing civic responsibility and doing something for their community. Community partnerships are arranged in advance to expedite the process.

Discussion and reflection are major components of the class. These methods are used to increase students’ understanding of the material. Class concepts on interpersonal communication are reinforced through experiential activities, both in lecture and lab, and opportunities to interact in a dynamic way. Examples of lecture topics and experiential activities include active listening, building consensus, personality types, and differing perspectives. Students are held accountable for participating in activities by team members and facilitators, and they are asked to step outside of their comfort zones in order to explore their strengths and weaknesses. Students actively engage in a project that respects diverse talents and ways of learning. The class is centered on reflection as a tool for learning.

The nature of the class requires developing and sustaining a supportive and engaging environment. Course facilitators share leadership to increase students’ ownership of and commitment to learning. Students and facilitators interact regularly during and outside of scheduled class times to plan and implement course projects.

*Participants.* This study's sample consists of students who completed HD 205 in the 2008 spring semester. There are three reasons for choosing students from the 2008 spring semester. First, the data collection time is approximately one year after completion of the course, providing an opportunity to investigate any possible long-term effects the class may have had on college student engagement and support. Second, relatively complete written course data exist in the electronic learning system, which was accessed by working with the course facilitators. Finally, the likelihood of students still being on campus, and available for interviews, was high since most students who take HD 205 are freshmen or sophomores.

There were two lecture groups of HD 205 with approximately 100 students per group during the 2008 spring semester. Each HD 205 lecture group was comprised of four discussion sections with approximately 25 students per section. Since only one of the instructors in the 2008 spring semester chose to have assignments turned in electronically, this study included one lecture group with a total enrollment of 91 students.

A sampling of students and student work was utilized for this analysis. Since the researcher served as an assistant course facilitator during this semester, a series of random samples were drawn from possible student participants to avoid selection bias. The sampling was as follows:

- Twenty five students were randomly selected from the lecture group for analysis of written course documents.
- Forty students were randomly selected from the same lecture group and sent an e-mail (see Appendix A) asking them to participate in an interview about student engagement and college experiences. Follow up e-mails were sent to encourage student response. Seven students responded and were invited to participate in the

- An aggregate course evaluation report from the chosen lecture group was analyzed. 65% of the students enrolled completed the course evaluation.

Descriptions cannot be provided for the students from whom the written work and course evaluations were obtained as these documents were provided anonymously. Of the students who participated in the interview process, four were male and three were female. Those who were interviewed were at various stages in their college careers: two sophomores, one junior, two seniors, one post graduate, and one first-year graduate student. Similarly, there was a variety of majors represented including hospitality, elementary education, digital technology, veterinary medicine, and psychology.

#### *Data Collection*

An exploratory case study uses multiple data collection methods in order to gain an intimate understanding of specific phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1991; Merriam, 1998). In this case, written course documents and student interviews were used to examine college student engagement and how it is supported through relationships and college environments. Student perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, and views can give us a clearer picture of what students perceive they experienced in this course. The course lead facilitators downloaded documents into anonymous files for analysis. The written documents include reflections, papers, self-assessments, and course evaluations. Brief descriptions of each document follow.

Due to the reflective nature of service learning, students in HD 205 are assigned several written reflection assignments throughout the semester. One of those assignments is an ongoing journal in which students are asked to reflect on what is working and what is not working with

their service learning project. Students often reflect on their personal journey, feelings and attitudes about their projects and the course in general, team work, and relationships. Analysis of journal entries provided an understanding of students' experiences while navigating through a service learning project.

Several other written documents were analyzed in this study. One was a series of two papers that were written by students after completing a challenge course with peers. Students completed two challenge courses throughout the semester with the goal of working together as a team, building relationships, and stepping outside of their comfort zones. After each challenge course students were asked to reflect on the experience by answering a series of questions about support and teamwork, personal and team strengths and weaknesses, the ability to relate the experience to other areas of life and their project, awareness and observations of personal behavior, and interpersonal communication skills. See appendices B and C for assignment guidelines.

Self assessments were completed twice during the semester (See Appendices D and E). The purpose of the self assessment was to allow students to identify personal strengths and weaknesses based on characteristics valued by their team (i.e. attendance, teammate support, and attitude). This process encourages students to assess personal accountability for their contribution to the team and make specific adjustments as necessary to improve team functioning.

A semi-structured interview was used to gain in-depth information about how students engage, how they best feel supported, how HD 205 supported their engagement, and if they were able to continue supportive relationships after the class was finished. Both structured and open-ended questions were asked about students' experiences. See Appendix F for a list of interview



questions. Students answered open-ended questions during the beginning of the interview in order to generate dialogue. This was intended to see if they recollected HD 205 without being prompted. If students did not mention HD 205, they were asked more direct questions about their experiences in the class.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. The interviewer recorded notes during the interview to help remember key items and to develop follow-up questions as necessary. Although undue harm was not expected from interviews, as sensitive questions were not asked, participants completed a consent form (see Appendix G) and the importance of confidentiality was stressed. To ensure that participant responses and identities were kept confidential, interview transcripts are identified only by a number and date. Consent forms and interview materials are stored in separate, locked files. The WSU Institutional Review Board determined that the study satisfied the criteria for Exempt Research (see Appendix H).

Every semester the College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences conducts course evaluations intended to gain a better perspective on student learning. HD 205 is among the courses evaluated by students. The course evaluation is available online for students to access and complete. Within these evaluations, students were asked to evaluate the course and the facilitator. The specific questions analyzed in this study include how well the course positively affected working on a team, synthesis of material, and becoming a lifelong learner. The course evaluations allow students to assess how well the instructor(s) supported engagement. Questions regarding the instructor include how well the instructor provided timely and frequent feedback, provided availability outside of class to discuss problems and progress, communicated expectations, responded to concerns, graded fairly, valued contributions, and

treated students with respect. The literature finds all of these support strategies important for increasing college student engagement.

### *Plan of Analysis*

This study analyzed data from multiple data sources including written reflections, course evaluations, and semi-structured interviews with students. This is often called a case study, or a holistic description and analysis of a single unit (Merriam, 1998). Analyzing multiple data sources allows us to look for patterns in responses to identify specific themes. In accordance with the objectives of the study, interview questions focused on engagement in learning course concepts, connectedness to community, awareness of responsibility to civic engagement, support from faculty and peers, and development of relationships. Qualitative data analysis allows the data—the words and experiences of the students—to identify important themes. Often times in research, we only seek to answer specific questions and may lose out on important information that can be found by utilizing qualitative research techniques.

This study's analytic procedure is based on the qualitative procedures outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1991). Strauss and Corbin's qualitative approach to research is a step by step process of analysis. The process utilizes several stages of coding (open, axial, selective) with the ultimate goal of establishing grounded theory, when the data are sufficient to draw such conclusions. The data for this study were analyzed through the process of developing a grounded theory. The analyses that resulted from axial coding provided responses to the research questions. The grounded theory provides a picture of the students' overall experiences in the context developed through HD 205.

A constant comparative or open coding method is the first technique used for data analysis (Merriam, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1991). Open coding is a process of analysis

involving the categorizing and naming of phenomena observed in the examination of data. Data are compared to identify similarities, differences, changes, and patterns in order to formulate questions and ideas related to phenomena. This process requires a continuous comparison of respondents' remarks and writing. One document is analyzed at a time and then compared to previous documents. Groups are then formed by merging common concepts. Within those groups, sub-groups are often found and can further extend the analysis.

The next step in qualitative data analysis, outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1991), is axial coding. Axial coding uses data from the open coding process and puts it back together to make connections between categories and sub-categories. This begins the process of synthesizing the data to help explain them. The goal of axial coding is to develop a paradigm model consisting of six components: phenomenon, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1991).

Phenomena refers to the categories or ideas that emerged during open coding. Once the phenomena important to the study are defined, axial coding is used to find causal conditions. When investigating causal conditions researchers ask: What events lead to the occurrence of certain phenomenon? After causal conditions are identified, the context is described. Context refers to when and where the phenomenon takes place such as the physical location or a specific time of day. Within this context there may be intervening conditions that either promote or hinder the development of phenomenon. These conditions may be such things as attitudes or physical ability. A strategy, or action/interaction, may be used to overcome the intervening conditions. Strategies are outcomes of intervening conditions. Finally, consequences are the results of strategies used to overcome intervening conditions.

The last step in this analytic procedure is to generate a grounded theory through selective coding. If axial coding is complete, selective coding is used to create a generalization. This generalization is like a story that then becomes a grounded theory. A core category is usually chosen that can integrate all of the phenomena found through the axial coding process. The development of grounded theory was explored, based on the completeness of the data provided through course student written work, interviews, and course evaluations.

The case study analysis using qualitative methodologies provides a well-rounded exploration of student experiences in HD 205. The course developers' focus on utilizing active learning and developing support networks may or may not be supported by the students' experiences.

#### *Reliability and Validity*

Reliability and validity concerns are important when conducting qualitative research. With careful consideration of reliability and validity issues, this study took necessary steps to ensure concerns were addressed.

Reliability pertains to external and internal design issues and whether or not findings can be replicated (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Qualitative studies generally look at unique phenomenon in natural settings, making exact replication difficult. While exact time and place cannot be replicated by any study, this study does try to be as precise as possible when describing the context, methods, and results in order to make replication easier for future research. Multiple aspects of reliability were addressed in relation to the data collection for this study: a) researcher status position, b) informant choice, c) social situations and conditions, d) analytic constructs and premises, e) low-inference descriptors and f) multiple researchers.

Researcher status position was important in this study. The researcher for the study had been a teaching assistant in the course. This potential issue was handled in a few ways. Data for the study were not collected during the semester the students and the researcher were in class together. Data collection was completed a year after the course ended. The researcher's position of grader did not influence the data gathered for the study.

Related to the researcher's position as teaching assistant is informant choice. To avoid selecting student work specifically from students with whom the researcher may have worked, the primary course facilitator randomly and confidentially selected the written work of students. What may have been lost in this process is the selection of work representing greater variation in student perspective, because purposeful sampling of the work was not conducted to gather positive and negative responses. When sampling for interviews, the request for interview participation was sent through the e-mail of the researcher's mentor. This was an individual the students would not connect with the course being studied, and someone the students probably did not know. When interviews were conducted, the mentor conducted interviews with students the researcher had worked with in class. Descriptions of the participants are somewhat broad due to the nature of sampling used for document analysis. Since the researcher did not know the identities of the students whose written work, or course evaluations, were analyzed, detailed descriptions are not possible.

A concern regarding social situations and conditions did not apply for most of the data utilized in this study. Students' written work was selected randomly a year after the completion of the course. Students did not write responses to their class prompts with the intention of being included in a research project. The interviews were conducted within a research space in the Department of Human Development. Because of the location of the interview space, and the

name of the researcher on the consent form, some students did conclude that the interview would deal with HD 205.

Methods of data collection and analysis are thoroughly described for researchers who wish to replicate the study in the future. As noted earlier, exact replications are not possible, but a replication of the methodology is possible based on the information provided.

Qualitative researchers often take field notes that require elaboration at a later time. To avoid misinterpretation of their notes, they utilize low-inference descriptors – descriptors that need little translation at a later time. This was not an issue in this study as all documents were utilized in their fully written formats, and interviews were recorded and transcribed.

A final consideration in the reliability of qualitative research is the use of multiple researchers. The researcher in this study was guided by a mentor seasoned in qualitative research. Both researchers agreed with one another when describing the phenomenon that emerged in this study.

Where reliability is whether or not findings can be replicated, validity pertains to the accuracy of findings and whether or not observations and measurements are authentic (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Validity also applies to the ability to compare representations across groups (generalizability). Common concerns of validity include a) history and maturation, b) observer effects, c) participant selection, d) mortality, and e) spurious conclusions. Specific actions were taken in the collection and analysis of data for this study to reduce these concerns.

History and maturation are often controlled by collecting data over long periods of time to make sure that the phenomena that emerge are consistent. This was done in two respects. Written student work spanned the entire duration of the course (semester) giving the researcher

some indication of the consistency of the phenomena that emerged. Secondly, the student interviews occurred a year after the course finished. Phenomena that were identified and supported from interview data indicated consistency.

Observer effects are often a concern when the researcher is interacting with the study participants. Sometimes the presence of a researcher can change the information that is shared by and among participants. Observer effects were reduced in this study since the written documents were completed a year prior to the data collection and were not written with a purpose of being included in a research study. The students in the course were not aware that one of the teaching assistants would be reading their work at a later time for this study. To reduce these effects when students were invited to participate in interviews, the request to be interviewed was sent through the e-mail of the mentor for this study. This was not a person the students would associate with the course, and probably would not know. When students did volunteer to be interviewed, the researcher interviewed students she did not work directly with in the laboratory groups. Those students were interviewed by the mentor.

Issues of selection and mortality were not relevant for this study. Random selection of the written work did not cause specific students to volunteer or not for the study. When students were invited to be interviewed, they were not told that they were selected because of a specific course, so their choice to participate should not have been influenced by a good or bad experience in HD 205. Only one interview was held with each of the seven students who agreed to participate, no one dropped out of the study.

Spurious conclusions is a final validity concern. Because this study used three diverse sources of data collection, some of the students may have provided input from more than one data source. However, chances are that most participants did not overlap in the data collection.

Therefore, the emergence of similar constructs from more than one source, and support of constructs from more than one source provides validity to the findings (triangulation). As highlighted in the results section, all of the data collection sources led to similar, if not identical, conclusions. The use of both the researcher and mentor to review the constructs identified in accordance with the data provides an audit of the results.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

This study used qualitative methods to look at a communications course that utilizes service learning and its relation to student engagement outcomes. Three main themes emerged from the data that led to a grounded theory. The results that follow are organized in order of the qualitative coding methods.

#### *Open Coding*

This study used several data sources from which open coding was necessary to open up the data and identify preliminary themes. Student written documents (CC1, CC2, SA1, SA2, and journals) were the first data sources used to find emerging themes. Table 1 shows the open coding themes found in the student written documents, and the number of students, whose written work contributed to the development of each theme.

Most of the themes found in the open coding process for written documents emphasized the importance of team work, trust, peer support, feelings of friendship, communication, attendance/participation, and fear of failure.

Table 1

*Open Coding: Themes from Students' Written Work (N=25)*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Number of Students with Entries</i>
Team	25
Care	16
Trust	20
Bond	18
Support	24
Encourage	25
Comfort	18
Friendship	16
Motivate	10
Fear of Failure	15
Stepping out of Comfort Zone	22
Compete	12
Success	18
Attendance	25
Participation	25
Confidence	15
Communication	25
Community	20
Conflict	16

Student interviews were transcribed into individual written documents. This made the analysis of interview data easier. Themes identified from the interview data both supported themes found in the written student documents and added themes to the analysis process. For example, the importance of experiential learning activities was a theme that emerged in both the interviews and written work, whereas support from instructors was a main theme found throughout the interviews. Through the interview process students were asked to discuss engagement experiences. Some of the interview responses include perceptions developed from other courses across campus. Table 2 identifies the open coding themes found in the interview data and focuses on the themes that were found to support student engagement.

The number one theme students reported in the interview was the personal characteristics of the instructor. This theme included student experiences in HD 205 and other courses. The

enthusiasm of the instructor was the number one characteristic reported to support engagement in the classroom. Passion, sense of humor, energetic, and a joy for teaching all embodied the students' definition of enthusiastic. Other than personal characteristics of the instructor, students found academic characteristics of the instructor and teaching strategies to be most beneficial for encouraging student engagement. Having clear expectations, making the material relevant, leadership opportunities, enrolling students in class discussions by asking questions, experiential activities, and class discussions all supported students' engagement in the classroom.

Table 2

*Open Coding Themes Leading to Student Engagement: Student Interviews (N=7)*

Themes		Characteristics
Instructor	Personal	Enthusiastic Energetic Passionate Funny Warm Open Flexible Creates a personal environment In tune with students needs Colleague/peer mentorship attitude Enjoys teaching Engaged with students in the learning process
	Academic	Clear expectations High expectations Makes material relevant Enrolls students by asking questions
Strategies		Leadership opportunities Experiential activities Hands on Interactive Small discussion groups Large class discussions

The student open-ended comments and ratings from course evaluations were also analyzed. No new themes emerged from the comments that had not already been identified in the open coding process used for the other documents (assignments and interview transcripts). An overview of the comments is not provided in this section as this information was already covered in the open coding for the students' written course work and interviews. The course evaluation comments served primarily to support themes that had already emerged. Several questions within the course evaluation related to the concepts of this study. Table 3 provides an overview of those questions and the student ratings associated with each. The 5 point likert scale ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree, 5 being strongly agree.

Many of the important themes found in the open coding process received high marks in the course evaluations. For example, 97% of students strongly agreed and agreed that HD 205 positively affected their skills in working on a team. Also, 91.5% strongly agreed and agreed that the class positively affected their skills in speaking. These are two of the main course objectives for HD 205. Many of the instructor support themes received high ratings from students. Being available outside of class, having clear expectations, being responsive to students concerns, valuing students contributions, and respecting students all received over 90% of responses at strongly agree and agree. And finally, students strongly believed that the hands on activities and approaches helped them better understand and relate course concepts to the real world. All of these findings support the themes developed during the open coding process and highlight the importance of using specific strategies in order to support college student engagement.

Table 3

*Student Ratings from the Spring 2008 HD 205 Course Evaluation (N=59)*

<i>Evaluation Questions</i>	<i>Strongly Agree (%)</i>	<i>Agree (%)</i>	<i>Combine (%)</i>
<i>Skill Development</i>			
Positively affected skills in:			
Speaking	47.5	44	91.5
Working on a team	82.5	14.5	97
<i>Learning Environment/Instructor</i>			
How strongly do you agree with the following:			
Timely and frequent feedback	54.75	33.75	88.5
Explained material clearly	49.25	34.5	83.75
Available outside of class	58	32	90
Clear expectations	69.5	23.25	92.75
Responsive to students concerns	69.75	27.25	97
Fair grading	59	26.25	85.25
Valued my contributions	66.75	29	95.75
Respected students	67.25	28.5	95.75
<i>Critical Engagement</i>			
How strongly do you agree with the following:			
Hands on activities helped me understand concepts	55.5	33.75	89.25
Approaches helped me relate concepts to the real world	62.5	33	95.5
I improved at collaborating with peers	70.25	26.75	97
I worked harder than I thought I could	42.5	33.75	76.25
<i>Program/Department/Discipline</i>			
How strongly do you agree with the following:			
The content will help me meet my program/degree goals	40.5	40.75	81.25
<i>Overall Rating</i>			
	<i>Outstanding</i>	<i>Above average</i>	<i>Combine</i>
Instructor	65.75	19.5	85.25
Course	48	32.25	80.25

### *Axial Coding*

While the description of how to conduct axial coding looks quite linear, the process is really very fluid. During this study, analysis often went back and forth between open coding and axial coding to verify the themes, to identify the similarities and differences between cases that were similar and dissimilar until all six paradigm components were clearly identified and synthesized into phenomena. Three phenomena were identified in the analysis of these data. These phenomena are active learning, teamwork, and instructor characteristics. The phenomena represent the most highly developed themes from the data. The three phenomena and their components are each described in the following tables. The paradigm components of each phenomenon come from the students' words in written assignments, interviews, and course evaluations. The axial coding data for active learning and instructor characteristics includes students' descriptions of experiences in HD 205 and other courses.

Table 4 highlights the phenomenon Active Learning. Students reported increased engagement under conditions where there are experiential activities, service learning, small group discussions, and large class discussions. The context in which this happened was through a communications course with service learning as facilitating activity; and the course was organized as a large lecture group with smaller discussion sections for team work. Within the larger context, Washington State University is a research-based institution. This context was defined by the students throughout their written assignments and the course evaluations.

Intervening conditions included more complicated assignments and interactions than other courses, and more work than traditional classes. These intervening conditions demand that students be organized and utilize their time more efficiently. Students had the ability to practice

course concepts in real time. Finally, students were put into situations that are challenging. This pushed them outside of their comfort zones and led to learning and growth.

This paradigm leads to students' engagement through being more able to understand and internalize course concepts (consequences). Being part of a service learning project connected students to their community and they engaged more because they wanted to do a good job for the community. Students felt supported by instructors and peers when the activities put them outside of their comfort zones. This usually created confidence and a feeling that the students were valued, or made a difference in a larger context. Having the opportunity to develop leadership skills also created confidence and allowed students opportunities to learn, understand, and internalize course concepts.

Table 5 highlights the phenomenon Teamwork that emerged during the axial coding process. Students reported under conditions where trust, caring, bonding, and support are created through experiential activities focusing on group processes and working toward common goals, friendship is established (casual conditions). The context in which this happens is through a course structure that requires groups to work toward common goals and provides team building activities that help groups begin to know and trust one another. In this particular case, service learning was part of the context that helped establish friendships.

One main intervening condition included fear of failure. This stemmed from not wanting to let teammates down due to the close bond established through the class. This fear led students to take one of two actions. One response was to step out of their comfort zones (action/interactional strategy) and actively engage in the group process. A second response was to withdraw from the group activity (action/interactional strategy) while still engaging by supporting others' attempts to work harder (action/interactional strategy). Similar to students

who feared failure and stepped out of their comfort zone, some students were inclined to compete (intervening condition), not wanting their efforts to be less than others, and also causing them to step out of their comfort zones (action/interactional strategy).

Support from the instructor and peers (intervening conditions) was very important for whether or not students chose to step out of their comfort zones, engage with the group, and motivate themselves to work harder for the team and participate and attend class (action/interactional strategies). This support was also important in order to practice communication strategies and accomplish goals for the community service project (action/interactional strategy).

With this paradigm in place, students reported several changes to their levels of engagement and social/emotional development. Students reported that they learned course concepts easier while in HD 205, partially due to working in groups and having the ability to practice course concepts in real time. Students believed they became better communicators and learned to navigate through conflict (two of the main course goals). Students also reported that they became more organized and managed their time better while being in an environment where they needed to communicate and people counted on them. All of these factors led to engagement. Students reported that an environment was created where they wanted to attend class and in which they worked harder than in other classes. Some students even commented on having more passion for school and their careers after the class ended. Some contributed this increased passion to accomplishing a goal for the community and being able to relate to the community. Ultimately, all of these factors led to students feeling a sense of increased confidence and valued by their peers.



Another part of the context was whether or not students chose HD 205 because it fit into their schedules, former students recommended it, or they didn't like the alternative choice for an oral communications course. This aspect of the context did not seem to affect student engagement. Also, some students reported they desired to work independently and felt less support for the group goals concerning the service learning project. These students continued to participate in the group processes and the project, but were motivated more by a grade, than by teamwork and the support received through teamwork.

Table 4

*Axial Coding: Active Learning*

<i>Phenomenon</i>	<i>Causal Conditions</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Intervening Conditions</i>	<i>Action/Interactional Strategies</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
Active Learning	Experiential activities	Large lecture class	More complicated assignments and interactions than other courses	Practice course	Understand and internalize course concepts
	Service Learning	Smaller lab sections for group work		Have to be organized	
	Small group discussions	Communication course	More work than traditional classes	Organize time more efficiently	Care about doing a good job for the community; connecting to the community
	Large class discussions	Service learning as facilitating activity		Put you out of your comfort zone	Worked harder
		Research-based university			Students feel support by instructors and peers
					Leadership opportunities
					Confidence
					Felt valued

Table 5

*Axial Coding: Team Work*

<i>Phenomenon</i>	<i>Causal Conditions</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Intervening Conditions</i>	<i>Action/Interactional Strategies</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
Team Work	Common goals	Course structure which requires groups to work toward common goals	Fear of Failure; afraid to let group down	Step out of comfort zone	Engagement
	Trust, Caring, bonding, and support is established (friendship) through experiential activities focusing on group processes	Team building activities that help groups begin to know and trust one another	Competition	Withdraw from group	Learned course concepts
		Students choose class based on recommendations	Support of instructor	Engage with group	Became better communicator
		Students chose class because they do not like the alternative choice for communication credits	Support of team members	Motivated to work harder for the team and more likely to participate and attend class	Learned to navigate through conflict
		Students choose class based on schedule	Specific activities	Support others' attempts to work harder	Better time manager; more organized
		Graded	Desire to work independently		Worked harder than other classes
		Service learning to support community and learn course concepts	Less support for group goals	Practice communication strategies to accomplish goals	Wanted to attend class
			Graded		More passionate about school and career
					Accomplish a goal to serve the community; relate to the community
					Confidence-Felt valued

Table 6

*Axial Coding: Instructor Characteristics*

<i>Phenomenon</i>	<i>Causal Conditions</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Intervening Conditions</i>	<i>Action/Interactional Strategies</i>	<i>Consequences</i>
Instructor Characteristics	The instructor is: Enthusiastic about teaching, outgoing, passionate, has a sense of humor, is available to talk, asks questions, makes the material relevant, in tune with students' needs, flexible, engaged, and has clear and high expectations	Large lecture class	Students' perceptions of:	Learns students' names; creates a personal atmosphere	Engage-Disengage
		Smaller lab sections for group work	Instructors who are student focused	Mentorship attitude	Willingness to participate
		Communication course	Instructors who are research focused	Treats students like a peer/colleague	Attending class; wanting to be in class
		Service learning as facilitating activity	Large lecture class	Asks questions about progress, group functioning, about material of course, how to make information relevant	Paying attention in class
		Research-based university	Smaller lab sections	Encourages group	Participating in class discussions and activities-share ideas
				Disengaged instructor	Motivated to study
					Less likely to procrastinate
					Step out of comfort zone
					Learning course concepts
					Understanding course concepts
			Confidence-Felt valued Respect		

Table 6 highlights the phenomenon Instructor Characteristics that emerged during the axial coding process. Students reported under conditions where the instructor is enthusiastic about teaching, outgoing, passionate, has a sense of humor, is available to talk, asks questions, makes the material relevant, is in tune with the students' needs, is flexible, is engaged, and has clear and high expectations (casual conditions) that they felt supported in their learning and engagement in school. The context in which this happened was the same as the Active Learning phenomenon. However, students in the interviews felt that instructor characteristics that lead to support can be equally present in different contexts. As long as the personal instructor characteristics listed above are present, students felt that they were supported no matter what the context.

An important note is that the students' perceptions of their instructors were what mattered most for encouraging student engagement (intervening conditions). Students who felt their instructors were more research focused were less likely to feel supported and therefore less likely to engage in the class (consequence). Students attributed this perception to the instructors being less engaged with the students (action/interactional strategy), and less likely to create a supportive environment because they are disengaged (consequence). Students who felt their instructor was more student focused perceived the instructor as more supportive and were more likely to engage (consequence). Also, students combined this perception of the instructor with whether or not they were in a large lecture class or a small lab. Students felt when they were in a large class there was little support from instructors, unless the instructor implemented large class discussions and asked questions.

Action/interactional strategies of the instructor are important for developing a sense of support in the classroom. When instructors learn students' names they create a personal

atmosphere. Also, having a mentorship attitude and treating students like colleagues was important for student engagement. Finally, asking questions and encouraging students are important for increasing engagement.

All of these action/interactional strategies create an environment where students feel respected, develop confidence, and feel valued (consequences). Because they feel supported, students are more likely to participate, attend class because they want to be in class, pay attention in class, participate in class discussions and activities, share ideas, be motivated to study, and step out of their comfort zones (consequences). Students also reported that they were less likely to procrastinate (consequence) when these conditions existed. This environment led students to feel that they were learning course concepts and experiencing a deeper understanding of course concepts (consequences).

The results found through this qualitative process respond to the research questions.

1. Do students who complete HD 205 report ongoing participation/engagement in academic and civic activities (homework, projects, team work, extracurricular activities, service learning, and volunteerism)?

A couple of students interviewed felt that they were more engaged academically after taking HD 205. One student offered this reasoning, “The nature of the class was to be more engaged. The more you engaged the more you got out of it.” Students often reported that they took this attitude with them into other classes and engaged more in them. “I learned that I need to be more engaged in my classes to get something out of it.” The fact that many students felt they had to work harder because of the high demands of service learning and working in a team, may have contributed to the ongoing increased academic engagement in other classes. Working harder, and in a team, led to better organizational skills and improved study habits. Students also

felt they had more opportunities to practice skills and course concepts within their team. Also, they wanted to do better because they cared about their team and the community service project. Students reported that this level of engagement led to better outcomes such as understanding course material, attending class regularly, and participating more.

Many students did not report ongoing participation in civic engagement activities after they completed HD 205. Time constraints due to school and work schedules kept students from choosing to continue engagement in civic activities. However, time constraints did not affect their interest in civic engagement. Most students said that they were interested in civic engagement and would like to volunteer in the future. It would be difficult to know if participation in HD 205 led to students' interest in civic engagement due to the fact that a majority of students interviewed volunteered during high school.

Those who did participate in ongoing civic engagement activities after HD 205 were often required to do so for a class. However, all students reporting civic engagement activities in these classes said they were not as engaging as HD 205. Students felt the service learning components in other classes were rarely connected to the course concepts. Also, reflection was not an important part of the service learning in other classes mentioned by students. Some students reported journaling about their experiences, but rarely did students discuss their service learning experiences during class.

2. What influence does participation in service learning have on the ability to understand and utilize course concepts? Do students who complete HD 205 continue to use course concepts (teamwork, stepping outside one's comfort zone, leadership, communication) in educational and personal interactions and activities?

As stated above, the students reported that working in a team and working on a complicated service learning project pushed them to work harder. Students found that they had to learn how to organize their time and use teamwork to get things done. As one student wrote, “Collaborating with peers and engaging in activities makes you think about the course concepts differently, and being engaged makes you practice and understand the concepts better. You can relate the concepts to real life and in real time, which makes it easier to understand.”

Most students said they plan on, or already do use the course concepts learned in HD 205 in their daily lives. They contributed this continued utilization of the concepts to working in a team and having hands on experiences that allowed them to practice communication skills. The ability to practice allows a student to internalize.

It is important to note that most students mentioned hands on strategies as a way to engage them in the class and learn course concepts. One strategy may be service learning, but as discussed earlier, many classes use service learning in a disengaged way. One student wrote, “Sometimes little commentaries, stories, or illustrations were used and it not only allowed me to think further into the context but it also helped me apply the strategies and concepts that we were being taught in class.” It seems that experiential activities need to be directly connected to the course concepts in order for students to fully engage in such a way that the activities help them learn the course content. This combined with the rigorous nature of service learning may lend itself to optimal engagement.

3. Do students who complete HD 205 feel they were supported in their learning by faculty and peers and how did this support impact the means with which they approached learning and relationships?



Students in the interviews, papers, and course evaluations all felt supported in their learning by faculty and peers in HD 205. Personal characteristics of the instructor was the number one reason students mentioned for increasing engagement. Students felt that when instructors were enthusiastic about teaching, cared about the subject, were passionate and outgoing, had clear and high expectations, engaged with students, showed warmth, were flexible, and had a colleague/peer mentorship attitude toward teaching, that they were more likely to show up to class, do their best, participate, share ideas, and step out of their comfort zone. Ultimately this makes it easier for students to be engaged, leading them to remember course concepts.

Sample student statements illustrate their perspectives about the instructor's characteristics:

- “The instructor was very interested in, and devoted to, the subject matter and really cared about each and every student.”
- “Having a positive and helpful instructor creates a positive energy which makes it easier to study and motivates you to do stuff.”
- “Having people who really love to teach is the best thing a university can do for themselves.”
- “I ask myself, does this professor look like they want to be here?”
- “If she's going to spend her time on it, I might as well enjoy it too.”
- “Teachers need to be more engaged and more willing to talk to the students and ask questions.”
- “Engagement largely depends on the instructor and their level of engagement.”
- “When people care it makes it a lot easier to come to class because you matter.”

Service learning in this case study was centered on working within a team with approximately 25 individuals. Working in a team requires students to share work load, compromise, cooperate, communicate, share common goals, and organize. This aspect of

service learning combined with experiential activities such as self disclosures (sharing information about oneself), team building exercises (CCI, CCII, conflict resolution), and small group discussions, led to a strong bond between peers where students felt cared for, developed trust among members, and provided encouragement and support. This group dynamic led to feelings of friendship; making it more comfortable to ask questions, share ideas, and communicate with peers. This was written by one student in the course evaluations, “We formed a tighter camaraderie that impacted our group’s overall speed, efficiency, and achievements.” Many students mentioned the feeling of family throughout their writings: “The only other support like this experience is family.” Students often felt this led to personal growth, increased confidence, and feelings of being valued. “The most growth I have ever received in a class, I can truly say came from this one and mostly from working in a group.”

Students said they were more motivated to work hard in a team because they felt supported (compared to their motivation in other classes). Not wanting to let teammates down was a strong motivator. Students often reported stepping out of their comfort zones and engaging more than they would have on their own for the success of the team. One student wrote, “Others push me to speak up when I try to back down.” Having this support from peers led them to not let their fear of failing hold them back because their fear of disappointing teammates was stronger. This was similar for students who used competition as a means to engage with the group. Some students pushed themselves to do their best and become more engaged because they did not want other students showing them up, or they wanted to prove to others they could work hard.

In line with not wanting to let teammates down or feeling the need to prove oneself emerged the importance of attendance and participation. Students felt that attending and

participating shows others that you care because attendance and participation helps the team progress and each team member is valuable. One person missing is letting the team down and can hinder the team from reaching their goals. When you're surrounded by friends, you don't want to let them down so you engage. Sample student statements illustrate their perspective on attendance and participation:

- “Being a part of something means being a part of everything.”
- “This class has shown me I need to be accountable, participate, and show up.”
- “You have to be involved to get anything out of it.”

In contradiction to stepping out of their comfort zone because of fear, some students let their fear of failing hold them back. This often came from not wanting to let teammates down if they did fail. This caused students to engage in different ways. These students often reported engaging by playing a supportive role for other teammates when they felt they were not capable of performing. They also tended to talk about sharing the work load and the ability of teammates to pick up the slack when needed. However, those in this category often wrote about regret for not engaging more because they understood the importance of engaging in order to get the best experience out of the class.

It is important to note that not all students were willing members of the teams, and would have preferred to work on their own. However, these students still participated in the process. Two students mentioned the importance of finishing the class with a decent grade. Therefore, even when students are not interested in participating in experiential activities and group work, they may be inclined to be motivated by grades and chose to participate solely for the grade.

*Grounded Theory*

The completeness and variety of data in this study was sufficient for the development of a grounded theory. A grounded theory attempts to provide a generalized description of the students' experiences. The grounded theory tells a story indicating the conditions for the primary phenomenon, a phenomenon that ties together those phenomena identified in axial coding, the overall context, actions taken by the students, and the outcomes experienced by the students.

At Washington State University, students are required to complete two communications courses as a component of their general education plan. Many degrees require a speech class for at least one of those courses. HD 205 is one of the options students can select to complete this requirement.

The facilitators of HD 205 developed a course that utilizes a collaborative service learning component as the facilitating agent to expose students to, and practice, communication skills. The course is designed so that the facilitators scaffold concept development and student's abilities to become leaders and teachers.

Students enroll in HD 205 for a variety of reasons (fits into schedule, interest in service learning, a friend is enrolled, someone recommended the course, dislike alternative options). Once students are enrolled in the course they are made aware of the course structure and goals. Students who remain in the course are provided many different opportunities for becoming engaged members of their working group: participating in group processes, contributing to the group product, participating in experiential learning activities, engaging in discussions with peers and faculty. Within this multitude of opportunities, students identify and engage with components of the course that lead them to successfully complete the course. The most salient of these course components, identified by students, through the axial coding process, were active learning, teamwork and instructor characteristics.

Students arrive at their engagement decisions within a context that includes collaborative groups focused on group development so that the students get to know one another and learn to work together, facilitators who are available to assist individuals and groups both during class time and beyond, active learning activities that allow students to learn and practice communication skills, and planning and implementing a community service learning project that requires them to pull all of the classroom experiences together.

Students engage in varied ways within such a context. Some students become very excited about the group/team they work with and will step out of their comfort zones to attempt activities to support the work of the team. Others want to support the team but find that they are more comfortable encouraging the actions of others. Others still, do not connect with the team, but cooperate in order to reach the final goal and earn a passing grade in the course.

Most students connect with an engaging and supportive instructor. This connection helps them become interested in the course and want to attend.

Some students connect with the experiential activities and find these activities helpful in learning the course content. Others find that the activities are not necessary for connecting with the course content.

The phenomenon here is that each student ‘chose’ a way to become engaged. Some students connected through the instructor, others through the team, others still through the activities – or some combination of the three. All students identified with at least one course component that helped them engage with the class.

Students demonstrate this engagement through participation, attendance, supporting others, stepping out of their comfort zones, asking questions, sharing ideas, being involved in group discussions, organizing time, working harder than other classes, practicing concepts,

studying, procrastinating less, and paying attention in class. Participation in these activities helps them achieve the outcomes identified in the study.

The outcomes for all of the students are surprisingly similar. Student outcomes included understanding, learning, and utilizing the course concepts, completing the requirement, earning a successful grade, enjoying the class, feeling respected, valued, and supported by instructors and peers, gaining a sense of community through acquaintances on campus, gaining confidence, and feeling excited about their careers and doing something good for their community.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

As discussed earlier, three main phenomena emerged from this study: active learning, teamwork, and instructor characteristics. These three phenomena are also the first three principles highlighted in Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. The findings of this study indicate Chickering and Gamson's last four principles might be viewed as components of the first three. The following discussion section will be organized by Chickering and Gamson's principles. Support for Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model, the 40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute, 2006), Caruso, Bowen, and Adams-Dunford's (2006) four assumptions of student learning, and Vygotsky's (Goldhaber, 2000) work on the Sociocultural Perspective will be included in the discussion where appropriate.

The active learning phenomenon found in this study is similar to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principle: active learning environments. Data from this study indicate that students contributed their ability to better understand and utilize course concepts, even after the class was finished, to being able to practice concepts in a service learning environment. Working in a team and engaging in hands on activities allowed students to practice concepts more than traditional classes. This finding directly relates to the Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1984). If students have the ability to practice what they are learning they will continue to use it and move to higher planes of learning. They are incorporating what they have learned in order to gain better understanding for other concepts.

Within the active learning environment, students also reported spending more time and working harder in service learning classes and in classes where experiential activities were used

because the classes demanded time and effort, students enjoyed being in class, and they cared about doing a good job for the community. This is closely related to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) amount of time spent on tasks principle. The more time students spend on learning, the more engaged they will become. Cabera et al. (2002) found that students preferred active and collaborative learning when compared to more traditional teaching methods. When students prefer active learning environments they may choose to spend more time and engage.

Finally, students reported that they felt valued and had leadership opportunities in an active learning environment which in turn created confidence and engagement. This is related to the Chickering and Gamson (1987) principle: respect for diverse talents and ways of learning, and to Caruso et al.'s (2006) assumptions of student learning. Students did report that in active learning environments they are able to contribute in unique ways and are given opportunities to develop leadership skills. Also, students felt that their contributions and personal input was respected by faculty and peers in an active learning environment.

The teamwork phenomenon found in this study is similar to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principle: cooperation among peers. Data from this study indicate that when students work closely with peers and develop trust and support, they are more likely to engage. This is because students were motivated to work harder for the team and didn't want to let their teammates down. Cooperation led to feelings of dedication to the team. Students often reported feeling like a family. This is a time when students move away and during the important transition to independence from family it may be important to establish a family like connection on campus. This may be especially meaningful during the first couple of years in college when moving away from home and the stress of transition to a new environment and adulthood may cause difficulties with engagement and motivation.



Initially this study was interested in timing effects and whether or not students who developed supportive relationships in classes continued those relationships. During the interview process, former students were asked if they continued relationships with any peers from HD 205 and if those relationships continued to support them academically. While a couple students said they continued relationships, most did not. However, most of the students wrote about becoming part of a family of peers, and creating lasting friendships. So if students felt they were supported by peers while in HD 205, why did these relationships not continue?

Most students named time conflicts as the number one reason given for not continuing relationships. Jobs and other college classes took precedence in a student's life, making it difficult to focus on newly formed friendships. Another reason given was the stage in life a student was in compared to their peers. Many students interviewed were seniors in a mainly freshman and sophomore class. These students felt that they were simply having different experiences that did not encourage a relationship after the class was finished. Different interests also contributed to not continuing relationships with peers. While in the class students felt they had a common interest that bound them. When the class was complete, students returned to their original friend groups, hobbies, and classes that emphasized their major.

Although many of the students did not continue friendships formed in the class. Most of them felt they could still call on peers from HD 205 for support. Some stayed in touch over Facebook and other online tools and most said they recognized each other on campus and said hello or even stopped to chat. It is apparent that working in a team and developing strong relationships is beneficial while in a class in order to support engagement. What may be more important after the class is finished is a strong sense of community that is gained through feeling connected to your community, recognizing faces on campus, saying hello to people on campus,

sharing experiences, and knowing there is someone that will be there to support you if need to call on them.

These findings support research on the 40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute, 2006). A caring school climate and bonding at school are important for healthy social and emotional development. Caruso et al. (2006) assume that learning is both affective and cognitive. Working in a team not only allows students to practice concepts (cognitive) but they also feel valued (affective). Additionally, students feel respected and supported: an important assumption made by Caruso et al. (2006).

The instructor characteristics phenomenon found in this study is similar to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principle: student-faculty interaction. Data from this study indicate that even if their favorite class wasn't within their major or something they would normally be interested in, a great teacher was the number one thing that led students to engage and gain enjoyment from the class. Most of the students interviewed talked about the availability of the HD 205 instructor inside and outside of class. These students felt that the instructor was available to talk about personal and academic issues. This characteristic of the instructor led students to perceive the instructor as caring and engaged with students. These students also mentioned this as a trait other instructors had in their favorite classes.

As highlighted in the literature review, Chickering and Gamson (1987) found student-instructor contact as the most important of the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. While students in the interviews may not have reported being in direct contact with the instructor all the time, the perception of whether or not an instructor was available was very important to students. Students wanted to know they could approach an instructor even if they never needed to. Two additional Chickering and Gamson (1987)

principles, communicates high expectations and prompt feedback, was found throughout the data. While these were not as strongly indicated by students, there was support for the importance of these two principles in relation to the instructor characteristics phenomenon.

What is interesting about our findings is the addition of enthusiasm and other personal characteristics. The students in this study found personal characteristics of the instructor more important than any of the seven principles highlighted by Chickering and Gamson (1987). While this is very important to students and their engagement, it is important to note this is based off of students' perspectives. An instructor may try to be enthusiastic about teaching and their subject, but have a difficult time conveying this to his/her students. Or, the instructor may feel they are enthusiastic while the students have a differing perception. This difference in perception may be very difficult for instructors to overcome.

A couple of students interviewed chose to reject support from the HD205 instructor. However, these two students still recognized that the support was there and that the instructor was supportive of them and other students. Even these students still chose personal and academic characteristics of the instructor as the number one thing that engaged them in a class.

When asked what college classes did not support their learning, students were quick to point out that traditional lecture classes with teachers who did not have enthusiasm for teaching were the classes in which they chose not to engage. The word 'chose' is used here because engagement is a choice. If students do not feel validated, supported, connected, and interested in a classroom, they can opt out of engagement. Students in this study strongly indicated that the instructor is the number one variable that can make the difference between choosing to be engaged and choosing not to be engaged. Students often felt that instructors who were not

engaging only seemed interested in research and tended to hold a traditional surface learning lecture class.

This finding on lack of engagement in classes where students felt instructors were more research oriented is similar to Astin's (1993) study of student outcomes and how they are affected by college environments. While this study is based on students' perceptions, Astin did find that research-oriented faculty had negative effects on satisfaction. This study's supportive finding highlights the importance of student perceptions. When students perceive that instructors are student-focused they feel supported and engage.

In line with the 40 Developmental Assets (Search Institute, 2006), was the finding that students engaged more when they felt respected and valued by instructors. Being respected and valued led to increased confidence which in return led to engagement. Healthy social and emotional development is important throughout the lifespan, but especially important during crucial transitions and developmental periods such as adolescence. Similar to the teamwork phenomenon, these findings on social/emotional development also support the first and third assumptions of student learning outlined by Caruso et al. (2006). Students need to feel valued, respected and supported in order to fully engage in the classroom.

The findings that active learning, teamwork, and instructor characteristics all develop engagement outcomes such as participating, attending class, working harder than other classes, understanding course concepts, and internalizing course concepts speak to the importance of the Sociocultural Perspective and scaffolding proposed by Vygotsky (Goldhaber, 2000). Vygotsky proposed that learning occurs in a social environment that makes sense to the learner. Here, facilitators and students work together to create this environment and both act as the guides necessary to help all students learn. Facilitators establish an order to the content and team

building. Students then become responsible for not only learning, but assisting their peers in the learning process. Both facilitators and students become agents of the scaffolding process.

Vygotsky's work provides a profound theoretical base for the students' experiences.

It may be that students in environments where they are participating in active learning in a team with supportive peers and with guidance and support from an experienced instructor have a better chance for engaging and reaching new levels of development. Scaffolding is combined with students working in a team where they feel the need to work harder for outcomes that are not only beneficial to themselves but also to all members of the group. Students become interdependent of one another while learning how to become independent learners. Encouraging each other and working together creates a commitment to learning and increased confidence (Johnson et al., 1991).

Interesting, all three phenomenon that emerged through the axial coding process led to similar consequences or outcomes. While this shows the importance of introducing holistic approaches in university classrooms; it is also important to note that one is better than none. While each of the phenomena have similar outcomes; they are mutually exclusive and may be used as separate approaches to teaching and learning. For example, many students interviewed talked about a simple lecture class they took that had an enthusiastic and supportive instructor. These classes did not necessarily have experiential and team components imbedded in the curriculum; however, students reported having many of the same consequences/outcomes. Having all three phenomena present in the classroom may be ideal, but may not be necessary in order to support student engagement on university campuses.

### *Limitations and Strengths*

*Limitations.* Self selection bias is something that must be considered in this study. Because this study is not an experiment, students were not assigned to control and experimental groups. Also, because there are two commonly utilized speech options for communication credits a certain type of student may be enrolling in HD 205. This type of student may not like public speaking, or they may like community service. Also, if a certain type of person chooses HD 205, he/she may be the type of person to be more engaged than those who do not. Students may hear from their friends that it is a lot of work and that you have to work with a team. This may attract a certain type of person to enroll in the class. The students who were interviewed were asked their reasoning behind taking the class. A variety of answers emerged; however, none of the reasons seemed to affect students' engagement. With the students who provided written course documents and course evaluations, the reasoning behind taking the class is unknown. Without a control sample, there was little control over this issue.

Because a random selection design was utilized, the breadth of student experiences may not have been captured through the written work in this study. Had this sampling been more purposeful rather than random while gathering written work, a larger continuum of experiences may have been found. It is important to have a variety of experiences in order to see the whole picture.

Student reflections were utilized to gain an understanding of the students' knowledge and use of the course concepts while in HD 205, and also gain an understanding of their general experiences. This study did not have such ongoing written reflections to gauge how they might be continuing to use course concepts. This study was not able to look at a casual relation between reflection, a necessary step in the experiential learning cycle, and

engagement/utilization and continued use of course concepts and in return was not able to validate the processes students were using to continue to use course concepts over time.

*Strengths.* Qualitative research is also a strength of this study. Very little in depth qualitative research has been done that emphasizes student's experiences in service learning classes and the impact on student engagement. Also, little qualitative research has been done on supportive relationships during the college years. Gaining a deep understanding for what engages students from their own words allows researchers to see perspectives that may not have been anticipated; therefore, allowing for further investigation guided by students' experiences.

While the written work may have been lacking in diversity, the diversity of student experiences noted throughout the interview process was a strength of this study. Students interviewed covered a continuum of really liking and disliking the course structure. Considering we did not seek to find specific groups, it is important that we found them in the random selection. This allowed a holistic view of student perspectives which in turn benefited the study.

#### *Future Directions*

The grounded theory provides one explanation for the students' experiences in this class. Different foci for the analyses may result in similar or different findings. Further qualitative study may serve to validate or alter the grounded theory presented.

It would be ideal to carry out an experimental design that closely resembles this study. Having a control group would allow researchers to make comparisons and possibly find casual relations. It would be interesting to compare HD 205 to a traditional communications course to see how students learn communication concepts differently while working more individually. Also, comparing different service learning classes on campus to each other would be interesting to see how service learning is used and what conditions make it most meaningful to students.

Data from multiple lecture groups of HD 205 are needed because students have different experiences when in a class with different instructors and peers. This would not only create more data but would show differences in characteristics between instructors. Because this study found instructor characteristics important for engagement, it would be interesting to see the differences between engagement outcomes in each lecture group. Also, looking at both lecture groups would provide a larger sample providing the possibility for more data and interviews.

Finally, longitudinal research would be beneficial in order to see the effects of time. Having students journal about experiences after course completion may show the processes used after the class ended. The use of content continuation along with continued community service and relationships formed in the class could be investigated further.

### *Implications*

There are many potential opportunities for universities to increase engagement among students. First, universities should focus on assessing student engagement on their campus. Assessment is the first step in understanding student experiences and making the necessary steps to correct issues. The NSSE (Kuh, 2001a.) is a survey instrument that was developed through research in the area of student engagement. Using an assessment tool like the NSSE may help universities find better ways to support student engagement.

Next, it is important for universities to emphasize the importance of good instructors. Universities need to provide training and support for instructors and teaching assistants to learn teaching strategies that support engagement. Also, universities should support and reward instructors' enthusiasm for teaching and building supportive environments for their students. Washington State University does provide some professional development seminars and workshops focused on improving teaching methods. The question is whether or not instructors



and teaching assistants are attending. Identifying appropriate incentives may be a challenge for institutions. The instructors that do attend may already be concerned about their teaching; therefore they may be more motivated to continue education and improving their teaching skills. One way to get instructors and teaching assistants that are in need of teaching strategies into seminars is to make them mandatory through departments.

Another possible way to improve teaching on college campuses is through mentoring. Pairing more experienced instructors with new or less experienced instructors may create a supportive environment for faculty to assess and improve teaching. Peer review and observation coupled with reflection and application of what the instructor learns should create a cycle of learning and improvement. This pattern of practice and reflection to enhance learning was highlighted in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) in relation to students. Kolb's ideas apply to instructors as well because we ask them to continuously learn and grow.

Some students interviewed indicated that instructors who seem to focus mainly on research do not provide enough support for students to be engaged. Students' perceptions are powerful and should not be ignored. Sorting out students' perceptions from reality would be beneficial for increasing engagement. Instructors may not know they are viewed as research-focused and not supportive. In the same respect, students may benefit from learning from different teaching styles, not all information comes to learners in the style they prefer.

Research is a great experiential activity and professors are often enthusiastic about their own research. If instructors can find ways to integrate their research into their curriculum they may be perceived as more enthusiastic about teaching. Instructors might engage students in research as course activities or as extracurricular opportunities. Student assistance with research

may engage students, increase research productivity, and provide an opportunity for student-faculty interaction.

While it is important for universities to support research efforts, the need for enthusiastic and supportive instructors needs to be emphasized as well in order to retain students' interest and engagement. The availability of the instructor runs in contrast with the emphasis on research for promotion in the university setting. Research takes a great deal of dedication and time. Finding a balance between the time it takes to do research and being an available instructor is essential for student engagement.

Finally, universities should acknowledge the importance of creating a sense of community on campus. Peer support was a very important finding in this study. A few students who were interviewed suggested HD 205 as a Freshmen Focus course in order to build community through supportive relationships. Freshmen Focus is for freshmen students living in the dorms at Washington State University. It is intended to encourage success and build community among first-year students. Students live together and take similar classes their first year.

Creating community during the first crucial years of college should be emphasized at every institution. Combining a structured environment through Freshmen Focus and a class that emphasizes teamwork and support like HD 205, might lend itself to engagement and continued enrollment for freshmen.

It seems that many of the things that are important for college student engagement are focused around building a sense of community and personal characteristics of the instructor. Maybe it is not as important to carry on relationships formed in the class in a formal sense. Maybe the sense of community created, and support during class, is more important. If more

classes used techniques to build a sense of community, and instructors were given the tools needed to be engaged themselves with their students, students may do better because the nature of the class would be engaged. Also, they may be more likely to remember and internalize course concepts because they are more engaged. Maybe this practice with an intensive engagement experience early in students' careers will help them feel more able to actively engage in later courses.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Request Emails

#### Email 1

Hello!

You are being contacted as part of a research study being done at Washington State University in the Department of Human Development. You are being asked to take part because you were enrolled in a class that is of interest in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with a researcher.

This interview will take approximately one (1) hour on the WSU campus. Questions will pertain to experiences in college classes, relationships with peers and faculty, engagement in learning activities and community service, and experiences outside of college. Your interest and time is greatly appreciated, and you will be compensated with \$20 after the interview is completed.

If interested, **please respond to this e-mail by Friday, April 17, 2009**. We will be setting up interviews during the weeks of April 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. Please indicate the best means of contacting you to set up an interview time (e-mail, telephone). Let me know if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and *Go Cougs!*

#### Email 2

*Thank you to those who have already responded to this request. Please check your schedule and see if you can help us with this study. We will schedule an interview around a time that works best for you. If you have not responded, and are willing to participate in this interview, please reply to this e-mail by Friday! See more information below. Thanks!*

Hello!

You are being contacted as part of a research study being done at Washington State University in the Department of Human Development. You are being asked to take part because you were enrolled in a class that is of interest in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with a researcher.

This interview will take approximately one (1) hour on the WSU campus. Questions will pertain to experiences in college classes, relationships with peers and faculty, engagement in learning activities and community service, and experiences outside of college. Your interest and time is greatly appreciated, and you will be compensated with \$20 after the interview is completed.

If interested, **please respond to this e-mail by Friday, April 17, 2009**. We will be setting up interviews during the weeks of April 20<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup>. Please indicate the best means of contacting

you to set up an interview time (e-mail, telephone). Let me know if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and *Go Cougs!*

Email 3

*Please take this opportunity to share your learning experiences with us – and be compensated for your time.*

*Please check your schedule and see if you can help us with this study. We will schedule an interview around a time that works best for you. If you have not responded, and are willing to participate in this interview, please reply to this e-mail by Friday! See more information below. Thanks!*

Hello!

You are being contacted as part of a research study being done at Washington State University in the Department of Human Development. You are being asked to take part because you were enrolled in a class that is of interest in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with a researcher.

This interview will take approximately one (1) hour on the WSU campus. Questions will pertain to experiences in college classes, relationships with peers and faculty, engagement in learning activities and community service, and experiences outside of college. Your interest and time is greatly appreciated, and you will be compensated with \$20 after the interview is completed.

If interested, **please respond to this e-mail by Friday, April 25, 2009**. We will be setting up interviews during the next two weeks, before students leave campus. Please indicate the best means of contacting you to set up an interview time (e-mail, telephone). Let me know if you have any questions. Thank you for your time and *Go Cougs!*

## Appendix B

### HD 205, Spring 2008 Reflection Assignment for Challenge Course I

**Please respond in detail to each of the following questions. In addition:**

- Type your name and team number at the top of the first page.
  - Your response to each question must be presented in 350 words minimum to 750 words maximum. Please number your answers.
  - The document must be **single-spaced**, spell checked, and proofread.
1. Based on your experiences during CC I, what are your team members' greatest strengths and weaknesses as team players? How might these attributes contribute to or hinder your success as a team? How might your observations/awareness of your team members affect your ability to assess or relate to other experiences in your life?
  2. Describe what you noticed, learned, felt, or realized most during CC I, and explain in detail how or why this experience impacted your awareness of how you act (perform, etc.) and who you are. (If what you most noticed, learned, felt, or realized was about someone or something else, describe how your assessment of that person, thing, or event affected what you did and how you performed during CCI.) How might your observations/awareness of your behavior as a team member during CCI affect your ability to assess or relate to other experiences in your life?
  3. Based on what you learned about yourself and your group concerning teamwork, what will you personally do to enhance your team's effectiveness during the execution phase of your team community service project? How will what you plan to contribute to your team project support, expand or improve your interpersonal communication skills?

## Appendix C

### HD 205, Spring 2008 Reflection Assignment for Challenge Course II

**Please respond in detail to each of the following questions. In addition:**

- Type your name and team number at the top of the first page.
  - Your response to each question must be presented in ½ page minimum to 1 page maximum. Please number your answers.
  - The document must be **single-spaced**, spell checked, and proofread.
1. Based on your experiences during CC II, how has your team evolved as a group? What worked better than it did during CC I? What still needs improvement? How might your observations/awareness of your team members affect your ability to assess or relate to other experiences in your life?
  2. Describe what you noticed, learned, felt, or realized most during CC II, and explain in detail how or why this experience impacted your awareness of how you act (perform, etc.) and who you are. What was different from CCI? (If what you most noticed, learned, felt, or realized was about someone or something else, describe how your assessment of that person, thing, or event affected what you did and how you performed during CCII.) Does the way you handled CCII show up in other areas of your life? (Do you see any ways that the way you were during CCII is how you are in other areas of life?)
  3. Did any adjustments you made from CCI make things better/worse/the same for CCII? How can you evolve it for the end of the semester? How will what you plan to contribute to your team project support, expand or improve your interpersonal communication skills?

## Appendix D

### HD 205, Spring 2008

#### Self Assessment I

**Please respond authentically and in detail to each of the following questions. In addition:**

- Put your name and team number at the top of the first page.
  - Your response to the questions must be presented in 1/2 page minimum to 1 page maximum (which equates to 1 page minimum to 2 page maximum for the written portion of the assignment). Please number your answers.
1. Using the definitions your team created for the assessment categories, rank the level of contribution you have made to your team project thus far. In addition, justify, explain, and provide examples of how you did or did not contribute that prompted you to give yourself this ranking.
  2. From a perspective of personal accountability, describe what you have noticed about yourself as far as contributing to your team. In addition, describe specific adjustments you intend to make between now and the end of the semester to improve your contributions and/or the results that you are creating with your team.

Appendix E

**HD 205, Spring 2008  
Self Assessment II**

**Please respond authentically and in detail to each of the following questions. In addition:**

- Type your name and team number at the top of the first page.
  - Your response to questions 1 and 2 must be presented in 1/2 page minimum to 1 page maximum (which equates to 1 page minimum to 2 page maximum for the written portion of the assignment). Please number your answers.
  - The document must be single-spaced, spell checked, and proofread.
1. **a)** Using the definitions your team created for the assessment categories, rank the level of contribution you have made to your team project. Please justify this ranking.  
**b)** Identify the single most important contribution that you made to your team, and explain why this contribution was valuable or important to the outcomes of the project.
  2. **a)** What lessons have you learned through this team experience that will support you in being a better contributor to team projects in the future? Please provide examples of how these lessons were learned.  
**b)** If you were to start this process over again, what would you do the next time that perhaps you did not do this time to enhance your results? Please justify your answer.

## Appendix F

### Interview Questions

Thank you for participating in this study. Through this interview I hope to gain a better understanding of college student learning experiences and how to best support learning in the college classroom. Do you have any questions before we begin?

- 1) How old are you?
- 2) What is your year of enrollment (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, etc...)?
- 3) What is your major? Why did you choose this as a major?
- 4) Are you involved in any extracurricular activities or social groups (fraternity or sorority)?
- 5) Have you participated in community service or volunteer work? What was it for? Do you volunteer on a regular basis? Did you volunteer in high school?
- 6) If you were to name the top three classes that you have benefited from the most what would they be?
- 7) What characteristics did those classes have that allowed you to benefit the most from them? How did they support your learning?
  - Describe a typical class period...what was the format (lecture, discussion. Etc...)
  - What types of activities/tasks supported for learning (help you learn better)?
  - What was your responsibility for each of the classes? (reading, discussion, listening, taking notes, etc...)
  - Being engaged in a class can be seen as: studying, turning in papers on time, showing up to class, participating in class discussion, discussing ideas outside of class with peers and instructors, interacting with instructors and peers outside of class, applying course concepts to other areas academically or personally, building positive relationships....etc....What tasks/experiences help support your development of engagement?
- 8) Think of the professors and/or instructors that you have benefited from the most in college; what characteristics did or do they possess that support your learning?
  - Were they a professor or TA?
  - Did they possess communication skills that worked well for you, give prompt feedback, have high expectations, etc...
- 9) What supports you the most while navigating through college?
  - What relationships support you?
    - What do those relationships look like?
  - What tasks/experiences help you develop supportive relationships in college classes?

- What class experiences support you?
- What teaching techniques support you?

10) Have you taken HD 205?

- Why did you take the course?
- What was your general feeling of HD 205? What are some specific memories from the class that were meaningful? What made them meaningful/helpful?
- We talked earlier about engagement. After taking HD 205 are you more inclined to be engaged in other areas of your life and in other college classes?

11) A big component of HD 205 is service learning. What influence does participation in service learning have on the ability to understand and utilize course concepts?

- Did/do you find yourself utilizing course concepts (teamwork, stepping outside of your comfort zone, leadership, conflict management, personality types, self disclosure, the four agreements, communication, etc...) in educational and personal interactions and activities? If so, which ones stand out to you? If not, why not?
- If so, what is it about HD 205 that supported your ability to apply course concepts to other areas of your life and other classes? (study skills, interdependence, support, experiential education, etc...)
- What is the benefit of applying these concepts?
- Do you have the skills necessary to set up and apply concepts on your own?

12) Did you find yourself participating more in civic engagement after you completed HD 205? Why or why not?

13) Have you taken other classes with a service learning component? What were your experiences?

14) What tasks/experiences in HD 205 helped you develop supportive relationships with peers? (discussing ideas, team work, friendship, sharing resources, studying together, etc...)

- Have you continued these relationships after the class? Why or why not?
- If so, how do these relationships continue to support you personally and academically? Do you find that these relationships support your engagement?

15) Did you feel supported in your learning by faculty in HD 205? (discussing career goals, discussing informal issues, receiving timely and supportive feedback, instructor having high expectations, quality of relationship: valued, respected, fair, communicated expectations, felt encouraged to ask questions)

- Describe your relationship with you HD 205 instructor and/or TA.
- Did this relationship with your instructor provide support for you to become further engaged both academically and personally after completion of the course?



## Appendix G

**WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY**  
*College of Agriculture, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences (CAHNRS)*  
*Department of Human Development*

### **Research Study Consent Form**

#### **Study Title: Supporting College Student Engagement**

#### **Researchers:**

*Deborah J. Handy, Associate Professor, Department of Human Development*  
*(509) 335-2935*

*Ruby V. Jackson, Graduate Student, Department of Human Development*  
*(509) 335-2923*

You are being asked to take part in a research study carried out by Deborah Handy and Ruby Jackson. This form explains the research study and your part in it if you decide to join the study. Please read the form carefully, taking as much time as you need. Ask the researcher to explain anything you don't understand. You can decide not to join the study. If you join the study, you can change your mind later or quit at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of services or benefits if you decide to not take part in the study or quit later. This study has been found exempt by the Washington State University Institutional Review Board.

#### **What is this study about?**

This research study is being done to understand college student learning experiences and how those experiences are related to being engaged in academic and personal growth. You are being asked to take part because you were enrolled in a class that is of interest in this study. Taking part in the study will take approximately 1 hour.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I am in this study?**

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with Deborah Handy and/or Ruby Jackson. Following the interview, we may ask that you answer some follow up questions over e-mail or in person. Questions will pertain to experiences in college classes, relationships with peers and faculty, engagement in learning activities and community service, and experiences related to classes outside of college. We will not be asking any sensitive questions; however, you may refuse to answer any question. During the interview you will be voice recorded in order to gather accurate responses. Also, notes will be written during the interview to ensure the interviewer remembers specific details. If you are interested in the results of this study please contact Deborah Handy at [handy@wsu.edu](mailto:handy@wsu.edu). We anticipate results by August 2009.

**Are there any benefits to me if I am in this study?**

There is no direct benefit to you from being in this study. However, if you take part in this study you may help educators make informed discussions about developing classes that enhance learning and support student success.

**Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?**

The potential risks from taking part in this study are possible discomfort from the interview process. Interviewers will attempt to make the interviewing process as comfortable as possible. If you become uncomfortable with the interview process, you may stop at any time.

**Will my information be kept private?**

The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law. No published results will identify you, and your name will not be associated with the findings. Data will be coded and a key will be maintained to ensure privacy. Your name and any identifiable information will be removed and your responses (voice recording and written notes) will be assigned a participant number and stored in a locked file. In case we need to contact you for further questions, your name and corresponding participant number will be kept in a locked file with this consent form separately from your responses. Your name and responses will not be discussed with other participants or other people not involved in the research study. Data can only be accessed by Deborah Handy, Ruby Jackson, and WSU's Institutional Review Board (upon request).

The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain anonymous.

The data for this study will be kept for 3-5 years (3 year minimum requirement by WSU).

**Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?**

There will be no costs to you for taking part in this study.

You will receive a \$20.00 upon completion of the interview.

**Who can I talk to if I have questions?**

If you have questions about this study or the information in this form, please contact the researcher:

Deborah Handy  
Human Development  
Washington State University  
519 Johnson Tower  
P.O. Box 644852  
Pullman, WA 99164-4852

[handy@wsu.edu](mailto:handy@wsu.edu)  
(509) 335-2935

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or would like to report a concern or complaint about this study, please contact the Washington State University Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-3668, or e-mail [irb@wsu.edu](mailto:irb@wsu.edu), or regular mail at: Albrook 205, PO Box 643005, Pullman, WA 99164-3005.

**What are my rights as a research study volunteer?**

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

**What does my signature on this consent form mean?**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You understand the information given to you in this form
- You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns
- The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns
- You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

**Statement of Consent**

I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.

I agree to respond by e-mail to follow-up, clarification questions as needed by the investigators. My e-mail address is: \_\_\_\_\_

I do not wish to be contacted by e-mail to respond to follow-up, clarification questions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

**Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent**

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and potential risks of participation.

I also certify that he or she:

- Speaks the language used to explain this research
- Reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her
- Does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research.

---

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

---

Date

---

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

---

Role in the Research Study

## Appendix H

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Deborah Handy and Ruby Jackson,

FROM: Patrick Conner, Office of Research Assurances (3005)

DATE: 3/19/2009

SUBJECT: Certification of Exemption, IRB Number 10813-001

Based on the Application submitted for the study titled "Supporting College Student Engagement," and assigned IRB # 10813, as well as the follow-up communication, the WSU Institutional Review Board has determined that the study satisfies the criteria for Exempt Research contained in 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4).

This study may be conducted according to the protocol described in the Application without further review by the IRB.

This certification is valid only for the study protocol as it was submitted to the IRB. Studies certified as Exempt are not subject to annual review. If any changes are made to the study protocol, you must submit the changes to the IRB for determination that the study remains Exempt before implementing the changes. Request for Amendment forms are available online at <http://www.irb.wsu.edu/forms.asp>.

Exempt certification does not relieve the investigator from the responsibility of providing continuing attention to protection of human subjects participating in the study and adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants.

In accordance with federal regulations, this Certification of Exemption and a copy of the study protocol identified by this certification must be kept by the principal investigator for THREE years following completion of the project.

Washington State University is covered under Human Subjects Assurance Number FWA00002946 which is on file with the Office for Human Research Protections.

If you have questions, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-3668. Any revised materials can be mailed to the Office of Research Assurances (Campus Zip 3005), faxed to (509) 335-6410, or in some cases by electronic mail, to [irb@wsu.edu](mailto:irb@wsu.edu).

Review Type: New Protocol

Review Category: Exempt

Date Received: 3/16/2009

Exemption Category: 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4)

OGRD No.: N/A

Funding Agency: N/A

\*It is important to note that certification of exemption is NOT approval by the IRB. You may not include the statement that the WSU IRB has reviewed and approved the study for human subject participation. Remove all statements of IRB Approval and IRB contact information from study materials that will be disseminated to participants.\*

You have received this notification as you are referenced on a document within the MyResearch.wsu.edu system. You can change how you receive notifications by visiting <https://MyResearch.wsu.edu/MyPreferences.aspx>

Please Note: This notification will not show other recipients as their notification preferences require separate delivery.