

Online Modules for Community-Engaged Learning During a Global Pandemic

Alexander Lancaster¹, Barrett Bonella¹, Becky Jo Gesteland¹, Patrick Tadlock², and Richard Fry¹

¹ Weber State University, ² University of Oklahoma

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, our team created virtual community-engaged learning (VCEL) modules in response to the need to move classes to online and hybrid delivery styles during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. These modules addressed engaged learning concepts and were designed with faculty, students, and community partner organizations in mind. This paper explores the challenges of creating and beta testing these VCEL modules, as well as the creative methods taken to produce high-quality content that would continue to serve students in the wake of the pandemic. What emerged from this project is a unique set of self-contained learning modules in Canvas Commons that include built-in assessments, allowing students to demonstrate learning, and allowing faculty members to review engaged-learning theory and strategies and integrate the virtual content into their online classes seamlessly. Our beta test findings indicate that students generally had a positive experience with the content and spent approximately two hours, on average, engaging with the material. In this reflective analysis of our process, we offer an explanation of the replicable process of creating VCEL modules and a description of the outcomes associated with producing and testing the content therein.

Keywords: virtual community engagement, community-engaged learning, online service learning, e-service learning

Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our campus closed on March 17, 2020. And while we hoped for life to return to normal, we scrambled to find ways to fulfill our mission in case it did not. In early summer, we received an internal grant to develop several modules, which we made available to faculty in Canvas Commons. Here we provide thumbnail sketches of each module, explain what we learned from the time-critical process of creating this content, describe our adjustments to the ever-evolving parameters of COVID-19 policies, and outline efforts to improve our responses to community needs continually.

Context

In 2007, our engaged learning institution was at a midsize public university in the western U.S. developed a national reputation for connecting constituencies across campus and investing in our local community. In 2020, despite the pandemic, we partnered with 74 community organizations; engaged almost 5000 students in the community; and supported over 200 faculty members, who taught 283 community-engaged learning (CEL)-designated classes.

After the conclusion of the Spring 2020 semester, members of the engaged-learning institution began to consider the long-lasting implications of virtual meeting-based education and the complementary need to address questions and concerns about community engagement in situations precluding participants' physical presence. Our team faced an unprecedented challenge (i.e., developing alternative community-engagement strategies). We turned to the literature, sister institutions, students, faculty, and staff associated with the engaged learning institution to find an answer.

Fortunately, research was available on how to do community-engaged learning at a distance, based on the growth of online teaching from the late 2000s (Hervani et al., 2015). Faculty in small numbers nationwide were interested in e-service learning to bridge service gaps to students and communities in rural or hard-to-reach areas. While this did not seem to make its way into the mainstream of community engagement practice, there was enough literature on some models of e-service learning that proved useful to our task.

The best model we found is based on a literature review by Walder, McGory, and Widener (2012), which describes four types of service learning based on cases available in the literature. The first type is traditional service learning, in which classes and engagement opportunities are face-to-face, and, at most, the learning management system (LMS) is used to manage classes.

This is by far the most popular approach to service learning at our university and appears to be the primary modality employed across the United States. The second type is a hybrid model where classes are held online, but service remains face-to-face with the community partners. The third type, yet another hybrid model, uses face-to-face instruction with online service components, such as building a website or marketing plan for an organization that faculty and students do not have direct, face-to-face access. The fourth type of service learning--called extreme e-service learning by the authors--describes the scenario we faced in 2020: all classes are delivered, and all services are provided online. At the beginning of the pandemic, this service learning model was the one our institution, and we were forced to use and adapt to most quickly.

Walder et al. (2012) also identify potential best practices for e-service learning focused on three primary areas: technology, communication, and course design. Here we review those areas and how they influenced our thinking on preparing our students, faculty, and community partners for the new world of e-service learning.

Technology

For community-engaged learning to continue at our institution, we knew technology would be an integral part of our methodology. Strait and Sauer (2004) note that many faculty would not be familiar with the necessary technology to conduct online learning efficiently and would benefit from additional training on what was necessary. While the familiarity with technology has certainly improved at our campus since 2004, programs such as Zoom and Teams were suddenly ubiquitous, and learning how to use them became a priority. As such, we recognized training for these new tools would be essential for faculty, students, and community partners. We also recognized the need to make such training easy to access, consume, and retain. This meant using resources on our website as well as potentially creating modules that could easily be imported into our learning management system (Canvas). We were fortunate that Canvas Commons was implemented at our university just a year or so before the pandemic hit. We recognized this as a crucial tool for us and set about designing training with the help of our instructional designers.

Access to sufficient technology remained a challenge for both students and community partners. One of the benefits of the early pandemic was the “we’re all in this together” mentality, which facilitated drawing on local resources to ensure students would have access to adequate internet and technology through our library system. Providing community partners with adequate bandwidth and technology became more difficult as resources varied wildly between agencies. Although facing similar challenges due to shortages, our center did what we could with the resources we had on hand during this time for our staff and partners. We were able to acquire hotspots, web cameras, and access to Zoom for partners in need.

Communication

We had to adjust quickly to the environment of the pandemic, making communication about plans essential at every level essential. Faculty, students, and community partners would have to communicate more frequently and clearly with each other. MOUs needed to be adjusted, and faculty would need to be trained in maintaining a regular presence in the new environment. Community partners would need to adjust their availability to ensure regular communication with students who could no longer visit them face-to-face. Such training and adjustments would be necessary to maintain best practices in community engagement practices already difficult to meet before the pandemic. We worried that the new technology could hinder forming relationships since it was unfamiliar and lacked the richness of face-to-face communication. Therefore, we prioritized instructing our stakeholders on the necessity of frequent and flexible communication.

Course Design

In terms of course design, we recognized that while some of the practices of e-service learning would need to be adapted, the core principles of service learning would need to remain, such as using the seven-principle design developed by Imperial, Perry, and Katula (2007). This design includes explicit connections between the service activity and learning goals; reflection; appropriate time commitment; student input; faculty commitment; perceptible impacts; and feedback loops. While many of these principles were well known to our faculty, we determined that the pandemic offered an opportunity to provide more basic education on what community engagement is and is not. Such basics could be beneficial to faculty, who participate in community engagement but aren't familiar with the pedagogy, and students, who might not entirely grasp the concepts of community engagement other than being a class "where I have to volunteer."

We recognized that all of this would be extra work for faculty, students, and community partners, so as an organization within the university, we sought to do much of the groundwork to make the transition easier for our stakeholders. We reached out to sister institutions, read the literature on e-service learning, and attended webinars provided by other CEL organizations across the country, all of which recognized the difficult challenge we were all up against and just how little everyone knew. This collaboration led us to create centralized training on how to best do virtual community engagement in the form of exportable modules that could easily be accessed on our website and imported into individual classes using Canvas. We saw this approach as one of the best ways to get many resources out in a sustainable, reusable system that could benefit our stakeholders and us beyond the reach of the pandemic.

Much in the way our team was guided by the goal to produce content for our colleagues and students, we were guided by the following research question for this paper: What can be learned from the experience of creating and testing virtual community-engaged learning modules?

Product

Based on the constituent groups participating in the engaged learning institution's projects and ventures, we focused our project on faculty, students, and community partners.

Faculty members needed to know how to provide engagement opportunities to their students who could not meet in person. Students needed to know how to access opportunities and resources that would guide them through virtual community-engaged projects. Community partners needed to know how their needs could still be met. To meet the needs of our on-campus constituents, we created three Virtual Community Engaged Learning (VCEL) modules.

Virtual Community-Engaged Learning (VCEL)

If you currently teach a CEL-designated course--or are considering developing a course that involves CEL--we've created this Canvas Commons resource to assist you. Simply download these three virtual community-engaged learning (VCEL) modules into your individual Canvas courses:

1. *Part 1*: "Integrating VCEL into your course" (faculty focus)
2. *Part 2*: "Participating in a VCEL course" (student focus)
3. *Part 3*: "Engaged community partners in a VCEL course" (community focus)

Each module contains the following:

- Overview - objectives and outline for the particular focus
- Learning materials - videos from faculty, students, and community partners
- Resources - various project ideas, further reading, etc.
- Activity - sample assignment for you to try
- Reflection survey - Qualtrics form providing us with feedback

Feel free to explore and let us know if you have any questions!

FIGURE 1. Overview of modules in canvas commons.

Faculty and staff associated with the engaged learning institution planned and created the modules, including videos and linked resources. As part of the project, our team invited a group of students to beta test and provided feedback on each module. In the following sections, we recount our journey through the three modules (faculty, student, and community partner).

Building the Modules

During the Summer of 2020, the VCEL team met several times between May and August, focusing on how to divide the work of creating the modules. We began by exploring the constituent groups needing access to the content, ultimately deciding on three modules focusing on three groups: faculty, students, and community partners. Several faculty members worked on the faculty module, while faculty and staff worked on the student and community partner modules. Our team decided each module should include resources and content to help faculty members create meaningful virtual experiences and opportunities for students and community partners. Thus, we separated the larger team into small subgroups that focused on creating content for each module and bringing the

larger team together, as needed, to update one another on our progress and review the content in each module.

Faculty

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, members of the engaged learning institution wanted to help faculty members find creative solutions to the problems associated with teaching community-engaged classes virtually. Prior to the pandemic, most CEL-designated classes included an engaged service project, which required students to work with community partner organizations to complete an assigned task. Beginning in March 2020, most community partner organizations stopped asking for and/or needing students to be physically present, and new policies and laws forbade students from attending classes and events in person. Faculty members faced a yet-unseen challenge: teaching community engagement components in their classes without having the opportunity to meet with students face-to-face or to send them out in the community to serve partner organizations.

To keep faculty interested in CEL, we created a learning module for faculty to explore and discuss “virtual” opportunities for them and their students. We created several pages of information--gathered from various resources--and developed nineteen videos, quizzes, assignments, and discussions. Videos were recorded and edited in “interview style,” where the facilitator would ask the “experts” questions: to share anecdotal experiences and make suggestions for integrating CEL in a virtual environment. Several resources were consolidated, and faculty were invited to contribute and discuss.

Ultimately, the VCEL team created a module in Canvas Commons that offered faculty members resources on community-engaged learning, as well as a sample assignment that focused on community-engaged research and democratic engagement, which could replace the typical engaged-service project. The team wanted to make this content accessible and easily integrated into the existing LMS used at our university. Once all components were integrated into the module, we exported it to Canvas Commons, which could be imported into any existing Canvas class. We also invited feedback from engaged learning institution-affiliated members of the campus community. Eventually, a full course was created, with assignments and quizzes for faculty to complete as part of a Community of Practice Cohort. The images below are snapshots of the overview and layout for the faculty module.

Overview - faculty focus

Objectives

After completing this module you should be able to

1. Define CEL pedagogy and its purpose
2. Implement CEL pedagogy in a virtual environment
3. Recognize risks associated with CEL
4. Be aware of student concerns when teaching in crisis conditions

Outline

- [Learning materials - faculty focus](#)
- [Resources - faculty focus](#)
- [Activity - faculty focus](#)
- [Reflection survey - faculty focus](#) [ⓘ] (please complete after you have explored the entire [Integrating VCEL into your course](#) module)

Next ▶

FIGURE 2. Overview of faculty module.

▾ Part 1: Integrating VCEL into your course (faculty focus)
📖 Overview - faculty focus
📖 Learning materials - faculty focus
📖 Foundations of Community Engaged Learning for Faculty
📖 Creating Virtual Community Engagement Opportunities for Students
📖 Teaching in Times of Crisis 1
📖 Teaching in Times of Crisis 1 - quiz
📖 Teaching in Times of Crisis 2
🗨️ Teaching in Times of Crisis 2 - discussion
📖 Teaching in Times of Crisis 3
📖 Resources - faculty focus
📖 Activity - faculty focus 50 pts
🔗 Reflection survey - faculty focus [ⓘ]

FIGURE 3. Layout of faculty module.

In response to a call for beta testing, four students spent between one and two hours reviewing the content in the faculty module. These testers were instructed to review the entire module, access all content, and provide feedback on the integrated quizzes and a reflection survey at the end of their beta test. Feedback on the module was largely positive. Testers indicated that the content was easily accessible and valuable for teachers looking to integrate community engagement materials (e.g., engaged-learning theory and terminology) into their classes.

Students

The subgroup that focused on building the student module wanted to create a resource that would allow students to learn community-engaged theory and terminology, as well as how to create a piece of reflective writing. Moreover, the subgroup wanted students to learn about community engagement and community research opportunities that did not require physical participation and were offered in various classes. The student module was designed to be dropped into any existing Canvas class and to offer students access to theory and key terms that they would need to use in any CEL-designated class, as well as practice and learning resources surrounding reflective writing and engagement opportunities. The images below are snapshots of the overview and layout for the student module.

Overview - student focus

Objectives

After completing this module you should be able to

1. Define community-engaged learning (CEL) and its purpose
2. Define the four components of the experiential learning cycle
3. Describe two or more benefits of reflective writing, and produce a reflective writing sample
4. Better understand the impacts of virtual CEL both inside and outside the classroom

Outline

- [Learning materials - student focus](#)
- [Resources - student focus](#)
- [Activity - student focus](#)
- [Reflection survey - student focus](#) (please complete after you have explored the entire [Participating in a VCEL course](#) module)

◀ Previous

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FIGURE 4. Overview of student module.

▾ Part 2: Participating in a VCEL course (student focus)
📖 Overview - student focus
📖 Learning materials - student focus
📖 Communicating Professionally
📖 Foundations of Community Engaged Learning for Students
📖 Student Reflective Learning Page 1
📊 Reflective Thinking Survey
📖 Student Reflective Learning Page 2
📊 Reflective Writing Quiz 8 pts
📖 Reflective Writing Assignment 10 pts
📖 Student Reflective Learning Page 3
📖 Resources - student focus
📖 Activity - student focus 50 pts
🔗 Reflection survey - student focus ↗

FIGURE 5. Layout of student module.

Within the student module, faculty members prepared lessons on professional communication and foundational elements of community engagement. These lessons were designed to aid students in presenting themselves as knowledgeable and credible in their written and spoken communication. In addition, and especially geared toward general education and/or introductory courses, the modules presented students with short, fundamental lessons in community engagement. These lessons broached topics such as what community engagement is, why we engage with the community, and how it fits within higher education. The team hoped that this module would aid students and faculty in teaching community engagement in virtual spaces. We, therefore, turned to students to beta test this module.

Three undergraduate students served as the beta testers for this VCEL module. They spent one to two hours going through the content and completing the associated quizzes and assignments. The beta testers reported that the student module contained content useful for any student going through a CEL-designated class and also helped them learn key terminology and discover engagement opportunities. The team was pleased that the student beta testers' findings were consistent with our objectives for the student module.

Community Partners

We designed our community partners module for faculty and students to better understand the community partner needs during the pandemic. This module showcased five community partners and included a recorded town hall meeting and discussion of their most pressing needs. This module was unique in providing an insight into community needs by directly asking partners what the university and its students could do to help during the pandemic. Due to the pandemic's ongoing impact on the community--most of our partners were still trying to figure out what was next and how to adapt--this module was the most difficult for us to produce. Many of the partners we spoke with still did not have the appropriate technology even to participate. This gave our team a look into what would be needed for VCEL to happen and for community engagement to continue during the pandemic. The images below are snapshots of the overview and layout for the community partner module.

Overview - community focus

Objectives

After completing this module you should

1. Be familiar with five local nonprofit organizations and their mission.
2. Gain awareness of the needs of each organization.

Outline

- [Learning materials - community focus](#)
- [Resources - community focus](#)
- [Activity - community focus](#)
- [Reflection survey - community focus](#) [ⓘ] (please complete after you have explored the entire [Engaging community partners in a VCEL course](#) module)

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FIGURE 6. Overview of community partner module.






▼ Part 3: Engaging community partners in a VCEL course (community focus)
 Overview - community focus
 Learning materials - community focus
 Resources - community focus
 Activity - community focus 50 pts
 Reflection survey - community focus [ⓘ]

FIGURE 7. Layout of community partner module.

As with the faculty and student modules, we asked three students to beta-test the module. After spending between one and two hours (on average) reviewing the content, the students reported that the module was easy to understand and helped show them our community partners' needs. We found this feedback particularly useful because students are the primary audience to whom this module is directed.

Results

Our pilot program to produce the VCEL modules led to several outcomes: growing our university's engaged learning institution resources, providing instructional materials to our faculty, and creating new opportunities for community engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. We approached this project with one guiding question: What could be learned from the experience of creating and testing VCEL content? To address this question, we provided a reflective narrative of our experiences and the beta testing done by students, who reported on their experiences in each of the modules. Our summarized findings from this project follow.

The primary finding from our work is that it is possible to develop content that effectively provides virtual community engagement opportunities for students, which faculty can implement in their classes and which addresses community partner needs. To succeed in creating this content, we had to reimagine how faculty could effectively create engagement opportunities for students who could not meet in a physical classroom or have face-to-face meetings to provide engaged service. One example of this reimagining is a democratic engagement project that a CEL-designated Communication class used to replace the long-standing engaged service project required of students enrolled in the class. The new assignment required students to choose an issue of importance in their community, research the issue, and write a letter to elected officials requesting that they put into action a plan to ameliorate the problem identified by students. This assignment effectively utilized the resources provided in the faculty modules and exemplified how instructors can augment their engaged service projects to allow students to work virtually with community partners.

Another result of this study has to do with the viability of virtual community-engaged learning modules for integration into LMS classes. Specifically, based on the assessments provided by beta testers, we found that the VCEL modules would be valuable resources for faculty, students, and community partners, giving each of these groups information and ideas for conducting community-engaged projects in a virtual environment. As our team worked interdependently to create these modules, we found that our individual and shared experiences allowed us to create a novel approach to community engagement, focusing on opportunities that would benefit our students and serve community partners' needs without requiring drastic changes to course content and curriculum. Thus, our team's success in creating these viable modules is a testament to the flexibility and creativity required to address the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion

Our experience creating and testing the VCEL modules complements existing literature concerning online community-engaged learning and provides several meaningful, practical applications for researchers and practitioners alike. In many ways, our challenge mirrored that of Mejia (2020), who stated, “those of us teaching community-engaged scholarship are being asked to figure out, most often by those who do not teach, how students can ‘answer the challenge that COVID-19 has put in front of us’ using the skills learned in our classes” (p. 2). We focus on each of these areas separately yet acknowledge that the two are still very much interdependent, as scholarship informs community engagement, and community engagement informs engaged scholarship.

Beginning with scholarly implications, the present study provides a direct application of the work that engaged scholars have conducted since, and even before, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The VCEL modules directly reimagine community engagement (see Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020) in connecting and executing projects in a virtual space. Indeed, much like Ream (2003) described the risks that lead faculty to question community engagement for their students, our team explored the need to adapt to the novel risks associated with the pandemic and the governmental restrictions that remained in place for much of 2020 and 2021. The resulting online modules answered the challenge presented by Revere and Kovach (2011), as they provided content that faculty could import into online CEL-designated classes, thereby standing as an example of the “...opportunity for educators to design courses that engage students through the use of technology” (p. 123).

Before addressing the practical applications associated with our work, we want to discuss two internal applications that grew out of our beta test program. First, members of the team used the information created as part of the VCEL modules to update the community engagement training required of all students who engage in direct service projects. Integrating this content into the training modules allowed us to move the VCEL content to a larger group of students across the university. It expanded the team's original purpose when we planned and created this content. We turn now to suggested external applications of our findings for other engaged learning practitioners.

Our team's work led to two practical applications for online education and community engagement. First, the successful creation of VCEL modules shows that it is possible to move from traditional, in-person community-engaged learning to a virtual form of engagement that still serves the needs of community partners and their constituents. It is reassuring to faculty, students, and community partners that students can continue to learn and provide service even when they cannot meet with one another or work with partners in person. Second, our team was gladdened by the extremely positive response from student beta testers. We believe that future iterations of VCEL modules will provide increasingly desirable and necessary tools for students to succeed in their

community-engaged classes. Specifically, our work indicates that students can learn imperative community engagement terminology and theory by navigating well-designed virtual modules that supplement online instruction. In short, the VCEL modules will hopefully serve as valuable materials for instructors to utilize in their online and virtual community-engaged learning curriculum.

Discussion

Our team's efforts to create usable modules for instructors to integrate into their online and hybrid classes were successful. Although the project was reactive since our team had never considered needing to transition community-engaged learning to a completely online or hybrid style, we nonetheless created content that addressed the need to fill the gap created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our team learned that we could supplement traditional online instruction strategies with content that students and faculty members would find engaging and useful.

As with any undertaking, this project suffered from a limitation that can be addressed in future studies on online community-engaged learning. Specifically, our beta-testing program was limited by the fact that we could find only four students to test all of the modules. Although the team had wanted a larger group of students, faculty members, and community partners to serve as beta testers, the timing surrounding our creation and pre-deployment of the modules was not conducive to finding faculty members or community partners who would be able to assist as beta testers. Specifically, we were working during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when faculty members were experiencing extreme burnout, and community partners were struggling to serve their constituents and maintain their organizations. This historical effect was unavoidable, but it explains why our team was limited in the number of individuals who could serve as beta testers.

Overall, our team found that it is possible to integrate CEL terminology, theory, and principles into online classes through modules, thereby meeting the needs of students, faculty, and community partners. We hope that these materials will continue to be useful in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and that our team can continuously improve them as we return to in-person community-engaged learning opportunities in the new normal.

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