

## **“I FEEL LIKE ANOTHER I HAS GROWN”: BIOGRAPHICAL LEGACY OF THE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

Anchored in a qualitative approach, yet informed by the constructivist theoretical perspective, this paper addresses a research issue related to the transformative potential and biographical legacy and impact of community-engaged learning model (service-learning) on twelve students who participated in the *Gender, Sexuality, Identities - From Oppression to Equality* course. This course is the first such in Croatian universities that, integrating the community-engaged learning model, covered the thematic areas of human rights, gender equality, gender-based violence and gender theory. For students who participated in this research, all of it represents the first such educational experience - so far they have not been exposed to the mentioned contents, they have not participated in a course of such specific didactic and methodological features, they have never collaborated with civil society organisations, they have never written reflective diaries, nor were they previously engaged in tasks similar to those that awaited them in this course. This paper therefore intends to contribute to the current academic debate on the positive outcomes of community-engaged learning for students in the context of its transformative potential viewed from the perspective of contributing to changes in student biographies. In addition, the paper seeks to answer the (research) question of whether the narratives of students who participated in such a course for the first time are narratives of disappointment or empowerment, continuity or change, and whether they have developed a tendency to modify (their) habitus? The main identified dimensions of the students' experienced change are classified through new knowledge or competencies, educational and professional paths, intentions of further (civic) engagement and personal development. Drawing on Turner's concept of "liminality" (1969), Bourdieu's habitus (1977, 1984) and Mezirow's Theory of transformative learning (1981), students' participation in the course with full integration of community-engaged learning model is interpreted in this paper as a liminal phenomenon of the otherwise traditional (higher education) teaching and learning field, which led to the modification of students' habitus, while indicating their empowerment and propensity for further socially responsible and active contribution within their communities.

**Keywords:** *Community-engaged learning, service-learning, transformative teaching & learning, liminal experience, habitus modification.*

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### **1. Introduction**

On the basis of a qualitative research approach and within the framework of participatory research, this paper presents research findings regarding an educational intervention carried out in the form of a (new) elective course at a higher education institution. It stands out by its complete integration of the community-engaged learning model, which still represents an innovation in the national higher education space. Community-engaged model of teaching and learning (also known as service-learning) has been systematically researched for decades so there is a plethora of studies that point to its transformative potential in different contexts of (academic, personal and professional) growth and development of students, and its positive developmental impact on student biographies. A higher education teaching process that integrates a community-engaged learning model is organised in such a way, according to Ćulum and Ledić (2010), that it encourages purposeful and active participation of students in activities carefully designed in collaboration with representatives of organisations and institutions in the local community. In addition to encouraging the adoption of course content-related learning outcomes, the model also affects the development (of a wider range) of knowledge and skills of students, contributing to their deeper understanding of the needs and problems of the community and to more active civic engagement in the community. Numerous authors, as Furco (2011) points out, describe

this model as a balanced approach to experiential student education that has the potential of contributing to active citizenship education. Through a review of a series of research Brown (2011) concludes that unlike the traditional approach, community-engaged learning is far more successful in encouraging civic responsibility and active citizenship of the younger generations. There is a broad consensus in the literature today that the experience of participating in a teaching process that integrates community-engaged learning is associated with later civic participation (Billig, 2000; Hart et al., 2007).

Drawing on previous research, this paper seeks to address the research question related to the biographical impact of community-engaged learning models on students taking the course *Gender, Sexuality, Identities - from Oppression to Equality*, for whom participation in this course was the first such experience in their educational paths. The course and complementary mentoring programmes were co-created and implemented in partnership between Faculty's Centre for Women's Studies and civil society organizations from the local community - Lesbian Organization Rijeka "LORI", Human Rights and Civic Participation Association "PaRiter", and SOS Rijeka - Centre for Nonviolence and Human Rights.<sup>1</sup> This paper intends to contribute to the current academic debate on the positive outcomes of community-engaged learning for students in the context of its transformative potential viewed from the perspective of contributing to changes in student biographies. In addition, the paper seeks to answer the research question of whether the narratives of students are narratives of disappointment or empowerment, continuity or change, and whether they have developed a tendency to modify (their) habitus? Relying on Turner's concept of "liminality" (1969), Bourdieu's theoretical concept of "habitus" (1977, 1984) and Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1981), student participation in the course with full integration of community-engaged learning models is interpreted as a liminal phenomenon of the otherwise traditional (higher education) teaching field, which has led to the modification of the habitus of students and indicates their empowerment and propensity for further socially responsible and active participation in the community.

## 2. Theoretical design: Liminality, habitus and the transformative learning theory

Turner (1969) describes liminality as a phase that has few or no characteristics of the previous or the next phase and in which an individual or group has ambiguous characteristics. It is the state of 'in-between', the state of interspace in which one passes from one experience to another. In this liminal 'space and time', individuals are deprived of their usual identity while on the verge of personal (or social) transformation. This liminal situation for Turner is characterised by freedom, egalitarianism, informal togetherness and creativity. Liminality can be observed in individuals, groups, or society as a whole. As this paper is oriented to the level of individuals, i.e. students attending the course, liminality is observed and interpreted in it precisely from this point of view. An innovative course that fully integrates the community-engaged learning model is viewed as a liminal phase, i.e. as that (educational, innovative, creative, interdisciplinary) interspace into which students have moved from previous experiences of attending (dominantly) traditional teaching in a chosen disciplinary field.

Bourdieu (1989) describes habitus as a set of symbolically structured, historically inherited, enduring, and transferable dispositions adopted during socialisation that guide individual action, perception, and interpretation of the world, and that turns the individual, through customary norms, to institutional rules. For him, habitus is the mental structure through which the social world is observed, i.e. the unconscious and internalised 'map' of the path to action with coded beliefs, social class and action strategies, which becomes a *modus operandi* for action, which the individual continuously regulates and (re) defines. Nevertheless, the 'life' of students is shaped in predominantly traditional educational fields and therefore has a tendency of (continuous) empowerment of traditional patterns, rather than change (Ćulum and Doolan, 2015). However, Fanuko (2008) recalls that habitus is not *fatum* - it is permanent, but not eternal. This is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subject to the influence of (new) experiences, thus reproducing its structure, as well as modifying it. Accordingly, habitus change is possible.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1981) seems to be a "fertile" platform for observing such inclinations. Mezirow (1981) understands learning as the process of using a previous interpretation to construct a new or revised interpretation of one's experience in order to direct future action. Mezirow (2009) describes transformative learning as transforming problematic frameworks of reference to make them more inclusive, less discriminatory, more reflective, more open, and more emotionally capable of change. In an institutional educational context, usually three situations that follow one another, says Mezirow (2009), can lead to transformative learning - experience, critical thinking, and reflection on lived experience accompanied by a substantiated discussion.

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<sup>1</sup>Authors have the consent of all the above collaborators to publish their data.

### 3. Methodology

The focus of this paper is the experiences of twelve students attending a course based on the full integration of the community-engaged learning model, and the meanings they give it in the context of transformative potential (of the new) learning experience and, consequently, its biographical legacy framed as modifications of their own *habitus*. Although heterogeneous in their disciplinary areas, the students participating in this research are connected by two realities - (I) participation in this course was the first such (teaching, educational, didactic-methodological) experience for all of them, and (II) they have not yet been exposed to the content brought before them by the course.

The process of collecting data through a focus group, structured interviews and creative qualitative research procedures (example of writing a 'farewell letter' to their mentors in collaborating organisations) took place during February and March 2020. The focus group represented a central data collection process, and its protocol was focused on issues related to various aspects of students' experience (motivation, satisfaction with content and didactic-methodological determinants, acquired knowledge, (value) position in relation to new knowledge, cognitive and emotional experience, attitudes, reflection on oneself before and after the course, future plans, challenges, etc.). Structured interviews and qualitative creative research techniques were the complementary methods used, and the technique of writing 'farewell letters' enabled researchers insights into deeper spheres of students' experience. Mason (2006, according to Richards and Morse, 2013) states that creatively combining different methods can make it easier for researchers to think "beyond boundaries and frameworks" and generate new ways of researching and understanding one's reality. The issue of research ethics was answered from the aspect of the approach to participants, (written and audio) informed consent and accountability towards the participants. All collected data were transcribed, and the Dedoose software for qualitative data processing was used for their analysis. Coded data were subjected to a thematic analysis - a method adequate for the analysis of qualitative data and in particular the interpretation of their meanings (Schreier, 2012), and/or an analytical process focused on the inductive identification of recognizable patterns (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

### 4. Analysis and discussion: The New 'I' as an experienced change of course participation

The analysis unequivocally speaks in favour of a series of cognitive, emotional and value changes that students associate precisely with the experience of attending the course. The importance they attach to this experience is predominantly related to a number of different assignments they worked on, especially those of a reflective nature. Along with the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, those tasks enabled them to think critically about the current social problems related to the course topics, as well as themselves, their (dis)positions and the roles they have (or could/should have) in the context of addressing these same challenges and social problems in the community.

The students very openly shared impressions of their specific experiences as extremely significant, transformative, and in some cases emancipatory. For example, female students who were part of the PaRiter mentoring programme gained completely new insights into women's rights, especially labour and reproductive rights. Before taking this course, they were, in their own words, deeply convinced that in the modern social context women really enjoy great (labour) rights, but the research and analysis they studied while performing the tasks convinced them of a completely different reality, which they emphasise "*really stunned*" them. This course helped them to become more aware of this very moment of reality, which, as they ardently point out, made them especially angry because it shows them the denial and disrespect of their personal goals. Their (new) conscious attitudes is best illustrated by the following statement:

*"The course helped me to become aware of the reality, which means that tomorrow they will look at me on the market as a woman, and then as a potential pregnant woman and mother, while men are not seen that way, regardless of the fact that they have the right to go on parental leave - I was not aware of that at all, and that is simply a fact - regardless of whether you want a child or not, the market is simply programmed to see you as a woman as a future pregnant woman and mother, regardless of the fact that your wishes and plans may not head at all in that direction."*

Students involved in the LORI mentoring programme pay special attention to the new, deeper and different personal frame of reference for considering the rights, challenges and difficulties of people in the LGBTIQ community. One student puts in this context a re-experienced situation in which she witnessed the 'coming out' moment of her gay friend. The course allowed to observe and analyse the challenges and difficulties of LGBTIQ people in a multifaceted framework, which resulted in the

transformation of one (intimate) moment from the category of funny to the category of significant and true gratitude, as best evidenced by her words:

*"My friend's first coming out was precisely to me ... at the time I didn't even realize what big a deal this was for him because I knew he was gay anyway, I even found it a bit silly that he told me that, of course I knew... but this course helped me understand how important this really was for him, to say it out loud to someone he trusted... Only now do I really understand what he had to go through."*

Students engaged in the SOS mentoring programme also denote this course with the significance of being transformative and emancipatory. They did not know (much) about the topic of gender-based violence before the course or, at least, as they say, *"we did not understand or experience it as a neighbourhood phenomenon."* Their engagement in the course immersed them deeply in the topic, but also in the vivid and painful experiences of women who were (and/or still are) victims of violence, and with whom they had the opportunity to talk. The strength of the personal change they experienced is best illustrated by their statements that they have become different, better and richer people:

*"We learned a lot about gender-based violence. I was very intrigued by the topic and I want to continue to deal with it somehow... I'm very glad we had this experience because I feel like a much better and richer person."*

The achieved transformative potential of this course is best reflected in the students' behavioural dimension and selected personal "battles", that they decided to wage with people - among their friends and/or in their family environment. The new insights gained in the course, but especially the personal experience of these insights, awakened in them a strong feeling that they themselves should work to eliminate stereotypes and prejudices of people from their environment. In that sense, the students spoke openly about their *"hard core anti-gay roommates," "fathers who have backward attitudes," "grandmothers who just don't understand at all."* Their personal efforts and endeavours, as they say, have borne fruit, so, for example, the mentioned roommates *"hang out with my gay friends today."* Another student cites an example from the family environment and describes how, in addition to (persistently) passing on the acquired knowledge and current research findings, she presented a set of arguments to her family members that influenced their understanding of the context and consequently their change of attitudes towards LGBTIQ couples of the community.

Post-course reflections on the new 'I' are also placed by students in the context of their further educational and career paths. Namely, there is a consensus among the students that they are *"very taken"* with all the topics. Not only do they therefore want to continue to deal with them and further educate themselves, but they also want to continue to work with their mentors. It is interesting to note that in the context of the desire for future activities on these topics, students seem to be most held and pushed by the anger that this course aroused in them, i.e. the insights into the realities of the topics they dealt with.

*"The course made me angry, it made me very angry; I mean, the topics we dealt with made me angry; in fact people who don't act the way they should; I was angered by the younger generations who are turning out even more stupid and more backward than us... and in general the attitudes about gender roles that are only passed on to new generations of children and young people. That's why I think we have to do something more with this, I don't yet know what, but we have to do something because the situation is very worrisome."*

The anger expressed through this quote is not hidden by the students at all and they are considering how it can further direct them and lead them towards shaping their own meaningful future professional activity. Some of them are thus considering expanding on the activities that were developed in this course and raising them to a new level. Some of them are thinking about how they could integrate these topics into their chosen profession, especially valuing the newly acquired knowledge and diverse skills - *"this course enabled me my first experience of preparing a radio show and I think it's great to take something like this with you into life."* Some see their role in educating future youth generations, given that *"children and young people today are poorly educated about these topics, which is why we think it's really necessary to work on this and that these are ways we can influence future generations and society."* For some, this course, and especially the experience of reflection, stimulated thinking about their own future and the desired further professional orientation. Regardless of the mentioned (contextual) differences, it is certain that the course, in their own words *"got them very worked up"* and that everyone is seriously thinking about how to lead these new 'I's to the new professional challenges:

“This course helped me a lot, my knowledge on these topics was nothing; in addition to giving me such a corpus of new knowledge, it helped me to apply that same newly acquired knowledge further in my life and understand that I am an individual who now has that knowledge and that I should act accordingly... maybe to transfer that knowledge to someone else... and to change things for the better...”

## 5. Conclusions

The biographical impact of community-engaged learning model on students is analysed in order to contribute to understanding its transformative potential in the context of modifying the habitus of the students. As a transgressive ‘interspace’, in an otherwise traditional higher education teaching field (at least in the national setting), the course students attended ends up being surprisingly fruitful for a spectrum of personal change covering new knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, personal development, or simply put, ‘new students’, ready for socially responsible and active engagement in the community. Students’ ‘post-teaching’ habitus was clearly transformed in such a designed course which represented a liminal educational-activist experience - “I feel completely different after this course”. Relying on Crossley’s argument (2003) that activism implies a constant attempt to change our usual ways of existing in the world and its interpretation, it can be concluded that this ‘new’ student habitus, to which they testify in unison, is characterised by a propensity for activism and a strong need for personal contribution to (positive) social changes. In this context, the biographical impact of this (higher education) teaching experience reveals narratives of students’ empowerment and personal change.

How much of a biographical impact this experience has left on the students who have taken this course is best illustrated by one of students’ statements - *I feel like another I has grown.*”

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