Learning *Before* Doing: Community-Based Learning as Research Methods Learning

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ABSTRACT Instructors must balance advancing student knowledge and fostering civic abilities as dual objectives of political science education. Combining these objectives has informed various approaches in course design that often follow the idea of learning by doing, with a strong emphasis on the *doing*. This article presents a pedagogical frame—"community-based learning as research methods learning"—that focuses on the *learning* side of learning by doing and centers research instruction. It suggests that community-based learning must come before community-based research and that research methods learning must come before carrying out research tasks. The article invites those who aim to address the dual objectives of political science education in their course design to do so with a methods-learning mindset rather than solely with a research-output trajectory.

In the October 2023 Special Issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics* on "Undergraduate Involvement in Research," Schmitt, Mehlhaff, and Ommundsen (2023) described the balancing act of instructors to advance student knowledge and improve civic abilities as dual objectives of political science education. This balancing act requires finding ways to "cleverly combine undergraduate research experiences with the broader normative civic-education responsibilities of political science and higher education" (Schmitt, Mehlhaff, and Ommundsen 2023, 469). Combining these two objectives has informed various approaches in course design that often follow the idea of learning by doing.

Knoll's (2016, 129) approach of learning by doing integrated a group-based undergraduate research project that applies "social science tools to answer an interesting and important question about politics here [Kentucky] in our community" into an existing course. Nonnemacher and Wilson Sokhey (2022, 413) embraced the learning-by-doing approach in their course design of a research lab that "seeks to improve experiential learning for students by prioritizing diversity and inclusion." Levine's (2022a and b) model—which was motivated by the civic question, "What should we do?"—defined the "doing" as the point to take action on the "what," a commonly agreed on issue, in the "we," the respective community. Leaning on Levine (2022a, b), Schmitt, Mehlhaff, and Ommundsen (2023, 471) presented a learning-by-doing course design of students forming their research questions in conversation with community members to gain relevant knowledge, build relationships, and grow personal commitments.

This article expands on these existing approaches and presents a pedagogical frame that connects undergraduate research and civic education with a focus on the *learning* side of learning by doing. This frame—"community-based learning as research methods learning"—reorients the foundation of course design around the role of research instruction. In the example of my "Muslims and Islam in Europe and the United States" course, I offer applied insights on aligning multitiered community engagement with multitiered research methods learning. I conclude by identifying three considerations for implementing this frame—namely, curriculum development, assessment of student learning outcomes, and institutional capacities. The objective of this article is to encourage instructors to pause before jumping into the *doing* of research and to reflect on the process that accompanies this when combined with civic education.

The article contributes to calls for shifts in political science education that emphasize interactions (i.e., community engagement) in teaching research and that foster research

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methods learning prior to conducting research tasks (Elman, Kapiszewski, and Kirilova 2015; Roulston and McCrindle 2018). It invites those who aim to address the dual objectives of political science education in their course design to do so with a methods-learning mindset rather than solely with a research-output trajectory. This not only creates a meaningful entry point to social inquiry for students; it also can overcome concerns about extractivism in community-based activities because students will learn *before* they do (Brackmann 2015; Stanlick 2024).

LEARNING *WITH* THE COMMUNITY AND *ABOUT* RESEARCH METHODS

Community-based learning and undergraduate research have been established as high-impact practices (HIPs) that enhance student engagement in educational activities (Kuh 2008; Kuh and O'Donnell 2013; McClellan, Kopko, and Gruber 2021). In political science, HIPs have demonstrated positive effects on learning, persistence to graduation, and postcollege political behavior (McCartney, Bennion, and Simpson 2013; McClellan, Kopko, and Gruber 2021). Community-based learning, defined as a form of teaching that links instruction with service, enables students to acquire knowledge through exposure to the "real world" and its diversity while simultaneously making contributions to it (DeLaet 2016; Levesque-Bristol, Knapp, and Fisher 2010). Undergraduate research, as a HIP, can take distinct formats, ranging from research with a faculty member to course-based research and creative projects (Druckman 2015; McClellan, Kopko, and Gruber 2021). My discussion focuses on a fundamental element of undergraduate research —that is, research methods learning—and the role that community-based learning can play as a vehicle for it.

Research methods learning involves understanding different strategies for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to answer research questions. In turn, teaching research methods "implies conveying the rules by which a research tradition operates and why they must be followed" (Elman, Kapiszewski, and Kirilova 2015, 40). Regarding teaching qualitative research methods at the undergraduate level, particularly when it includes community-based activities, this grasping of the why is crucial to navigate complex contexts through social inquiry. In other words, community-based learning must come before community-based research and research methods learning must come before carrying out research tasks.

Table 1

Weekly Schedule

Week	Topic	Assignment
Weeks 2–3	Muslims and Islam Around the World	Readings
Week 4	Community-Based Learning	Readings
Week 5	Research Methods Learning	Readings
Week 6	Guest Speaker	Interview Notes
Week 7	Debriefing	Worksheet
Week 8	Mosque Visit	Observation Notes
Week 8	Iftar	Focus-Group Notes
Week 9	Debriefing	Worksheet
Week 9	Iftar	Focus-Group Notes
Week 10	Debriefing	Worksheet
Weeks 11–13	Project Finalization	Presentation Preparation
Week 14	Project Presentation	Presentation

LEARNING *BEFORE* DOING

In Spring 2024, I added a research methods learning component to my course entitled "Muslims and Islam in Europe and the United States." The course covers the histories and contemporary dynamics of Muslim identities and Islamic practices through a comparative lens, and it generally includes two research papers, weekly case-study analyses, and reading discussions, as well as a presentation. This was my third time teaching this upper-level seminar course (average class size of 15) at my current institution, a small private university. From the beginning, community engagement formed a central aspect of the course. It was based on students' comments that I gradually expanded on this, evolving from a short reflection memo on one mosque visit to the elaborate course design described herein.

Community-based learning must come before community-based research and research methods learning must come before carrying out research tasks.

Teaching research methods through community-based learning introduces students to contextual, "connected" ways of knowing, making research more "appealing and accessible" (Glazier and Bowman 2019; Mello-Goldner 2019; Strand 2000, 85, 89). The following section describes an example of how this can be achieved through a semester-long project that aligns multitiered community engagement with multitiered research methods learning. The project follows a staggered structure, incorporating introductory and debriefing sessions alongside a sequence of worksheets tailored to each community-engagement experience (table 1).

Learning About Community Engagement

The first question that I ask students in this course is: "How many of you know a person who identifies as Muslim?" This usually results in one to three students raising their hand. I then pose the follow-up question: "How do you derive your knowledge about Muslims and Islam?" In addition to naming

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their main source of information, which overwhelmingly is the media, this question typically prompts a critical self-reflection that highlights the students' limited knowledge, just as their personal encounters with Muslims and Islam do. Community-based learning provides a solution to this by creating connections with the "world around us"—in this case, partnerships with Muslim communities in Portland.

My partnership with the Ahmadiyya community (i.e., Portland Rizwan Mosque) existed before the Spring 2024 semester, whereas my partnership with the Bosnian community (i.e., Bosnian Islamic Center) was new. Both community partners were chosen intentionally, given their histories of oppression and displacement, to demonstrate diversity within the Islamic faith. Student feedback reinforces the value of this strategic partnership choice: "This community learning allowed me to diversify my perspective and experience of Islam, and I feel grateful to have had the opportunity to learn how it manifests through different [Muslim] communities."

The students, who were all non-Muslim with the exception of one who identified as a non-practicing Muslim, were acquainted with these histories before their first interaction with community members (see table 1, weeks 2–3). In addition to this background knowledge, I prepared students for the multitiered community engagement by summarizing general objectives, opportunities, and limitations of community-based learning with specific attention to ethics (see table 1, week 4). Students contemplated topics such as objectivity, generalizability, ambiguity, and positionality, and they articulated collective and individual learning objectives for the project.

Whereas students retained autonomy over their individual learning objectives by reflecting on them only in their final presentation, the collective-learning objectives commonly were agreed on before the initial community-engagement experience and were assessed regularly. These collective objectives included (1) expanding our understanding of ways of knowing and meaning making; (2) challenging our preconceived notions about the unfamiliar and stimulating mutual curiosity; and (3) building community relations. The significance of setting up collective and individual learning objectives is demonstrated by this student's comment: "I think my biggest challenge was definitely feeling like I was taking up space where I didn't belong, but this was also such an amazing opportunity for me because I learned not only that my fear was unfounded, but that the community at the Portland Rizwan Mosque is seeking out these types of conversations with people like me from different walks of life."

Learning About Research Methods

In my introduction to qualitative research methods, I familiarized students with interviews, observations, and focus groups. Although they did not use these methods with a defined research agenda or output in mind, the broad introduction provided an opening for students to grasp different modalities of knowledge production, their respective epistemological foundation, and their parameters. Each of the community-engagement experiences loosely concentrated on one qualitative research method: guest speaker (i.e., interview); prayer service (i.e., observation); and breaking of fast (i.e., focus groups) (see table 1, weeks 6, 8, and 9).

For interviews, I stressed the importance of having an interview protocol while also creating a comfortable environment, establishing trust and rapport, and being an active listener. In preparation for the guest speaker, each student shared three questions that they were curious about and we then developed an interview protocol structured around key themes (e.g., gender, religious denomination, race, and nationality) (see table 1, weeks 5–6).

For observations, I distinguished between descriptive and reflective information. I included examples for students to practice taking notes around this distinction, which led to a necessary discussion of biases in data interpretation. In preparation for the prayer service, students identified their preferred way of taking notes (e.g., telephone, tablet, or notebook) and created a basic coding scheme that linked to the key themes (see table 1, weeks 5 and 8).

For focus groups, I outlined the difference between open-ended and closed-ended questions as well as considerations in designing focus groups. The latter was crucial because one of the sites for the breaking of fast was separated by men and women whereas the other was not. In preparation, we explored how these predetermined focus-group settings might affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation and how they relate to the key themes (see table 1, weeks 5, 8, and 9).

As part of the introduction to research methods, I also charted the debriefing sessions, which followed the same prompts to identify comparative points among community-engagement experiences. Correspondingly, the worksheets served as an organizational tool for students' notes after each experience by providing space to list three challenges and opportunities of the respective research method (see table 1, weeks 7, 9, and 10).

Student feedback underscored how community learning can serve as a vehicle for research methods learning and how a staggered structure can enhance its effectiveness. For example, "Before this [course], I had never been to a mosque or to an Iftar, so just being there and getting this new knowledge and embracing a different culture was a great experience for me. Being able to observe the services and ask questions presented an opportunity to compare what I saw."

TOWARD LEARNING *BY* DOING

After learning about community engagement and research methods, students entered each experience with at least a basic understanding of multiple avenues for exploring social inquiry. The impacts of this learning-focused preparation (i.e., learning *before* doing) were demonstrated in the debriefing sessions, worksheets, course evaluation, and final presentation. The presentation was facilitated as an open lunchtime celebration at the Diversity Center and was inspired by me receiving the university's Innovation in Teaching Award in the categories of community engagement and Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice for the project (see table 1, week 14). The event drew a large audience of students, faculty members, and staff, as well as members of the Ahmadiyya and the Bosnian communities.

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Students shared insights from their community-based learning and linked them to the project's key themes. Whereas each student individually analyzed their chosen theme, the share-out was conducted in small groups, which allowed for interesting reflections on and varied interpretations of their findings. This prompted several noteworthy questions by the audience about the research methods learning component of the course that raise several considerations toward learning *by* doing.

For example, in response to a question about challenges in conducting research while also staying present in the moment and immersing oneself, a student acknowledged that "Since this was my first time in this type of environment [mosque visit], I was definitely nervous and felt a little unsure of what I should be observing or taking notes on." The student then followed up with how they navigated this for the subsequent community-engagement experience (e.g., breaking of fast) by organizing their notes in advance so that they could draw linkages between their findings and delve more readily into remaining questions.

This led to an insightful exchange between the students and the attending community members about objectivity and generalizability, informing a subsequent question on positionality. The question inquired about the students' sense of comfort in unfamiliar spaces. To this end, a student concluded that "I realized that if I'm brave and set aside my preconceived notions, there's a far higher likelihood that I will be welcomed." The relevance of overcoming obstacles as part of the research process moved us to the final question asked at the presentation to close the semester—that is, what is next.

For at least one student, what was next was staying involved with the community partners. They stated: "I need more time! I loved learning from the community members and am eager to continue the conversation." This enthusiasm was shared by the community partners who expressed a warm welcome for upcoming events. There certainly is more learning to do.

CONCLUSION

In the wake of recent developments in higher education, specific programs—as well as institutions as a whole—have taken significant measures to enhance student engagement in educational activities (Blumenstyk 2015; Rogers 2021). As suggested in this article, community-based learning as research methods learning as a pedagogical frame presents an innovative approach to this. Based on the example of my "Muslims and Islam in Europe and the United States" course, I outline three considerations for implementing this pedagogical frame.

First, we must consider how research methods learning (already) is embedded in the curriculum. For all of the students in my course, irrespective of their discipline, this was the first time that community-based learning was aligned with research methods learning. This alignment was top rated in the course evaluation; students reported that the course provided a valuable learning experience, that the teaching methods effectively conveyed the content, and that the course stimulated their interests. Although this "first" was tremendously impactful for the students, it caused me to contemplate broader questions about curriculum development and where this type of pedagogical frame fits in. In this context, different curricula pathways that have been identified in the field—notably, the "curriculum-as-process" pathway, which involves community-based learning, as well as the "curriculum-as-product" pathway, which focuses on student-learning outcomes (e.g., research skills)—warrant revisiting (McClellan 2015, 2019).

The second consideration is an assessment of student learning outcomes with the question: "How does community-based learning as research methods learning meet existing student learning outcomes and in what ways might it add new ones?" The literature on community-based learning emphasizes that "some service-learning experiences are more valuable than others" (Strand et al. 2003, 11). The "quality" of the service-learning placement in connection to the course material, as well as the extent to which students "confront political and ideological barriers to change," informs their learning (Mooney and Edwards 2001; Strand et al. 2003, 11). In my course example, the staggered debriefing sessions and consecutive worksheets captured the learning outcomes throughout the semester and allowed for an assessment of the students' learning progress. Although their interview questions initially were rather vague, their inquiries became more precise with each community-engagement experience. Moreover, in several instances, the challenges described in response to a previous experience were overcome and reflected on in subsequent sessions.

Third, the consideration of institutional capacities for community-based learning as research methods learning must not be underestimated, especially in light of institutional size and typical course offerings. Difficulties in meeting logistical arrangements and timelines are to be expected because community-based learning as research methods learning means managing schedules of all of those involved while retaining the course content and assignment deadlines (Glazier and Bowman 2019; Mello-Goldner 2019). Leaning on literature about conducting community-based research with students, instructors must determine clear goals, set realistic expectations and time frames, establish support systems, and facilitate personal investment in the project to avoid logistical roadblocks (Ingman 2016). I made these preparations in my course; nevertheless, changes to schedules and differences in students' learning progress required adjustments to what was planned. I turned this into yet another moment of reflection for the students and myself in that both community-based learning and research methods learning require flexibility and patience, given the dynamism of these practices. It is more important, then, that we learn before we do.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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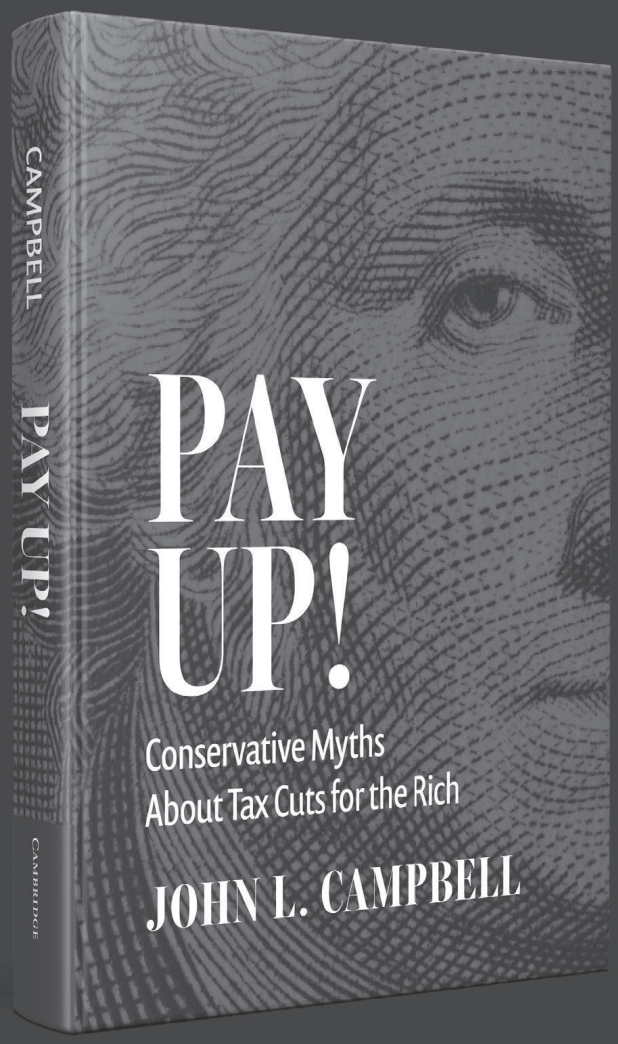
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