

Engaging in Community: Investigating Service Reflections

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Understanding coding as a heuristic process of discovery (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2019), I approached the data by first establishing a depth of familiarity before embarking on first cycle coding. After establishing an understanding of the data, I began investigating the relationship between the reflective responses of three students (Toby, Paige, and Emily) and the research question: How do students participating in a service immersion program engage meaningfully, though temporally, in a community? The notion of ‘how’ led me to process coding. Process coding allowed for the identification and naming of sequenced actions (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2019).

Primary process coding allowed for the emergence of eight codes. These codes sequentially included *relating personal interests*, *recalling previous experiences*, *predicting future experiences*, *valuing community*, *doing community*, *identifying with community*, *reflecting growth*, and *resisting community*. Each of these codes is narratively described in the following pages. A further synthesis of the steps used to arrive at these codes and its implications for my future practice concludes the paper.

When students first related personal interests, they drew connections between themselves and others. Emily demonstrated the way this connection can serve as an inroad to community engagement, “I am immensely grateful for the chance to dive into a cause that I am so passionate and eager to learn about.” Later Emily expanded the notion of personal interests as an inroad to community into a means of maintaining community, “It’s quite a large, long-term project, and one that I know will have relevant and effective implications for my own social work knowledge and experience.” Emily, as well as the other students, saw the role of interest convergence

Perhaps influenced by their personal interests in the tasks which brought them into community, each of the students also recalled previous relevant experiences. When discussing the idea of “Poems on Demand,” Paige shared, “I practiced last week at Tallahassee’s First Friday and it went surprisingly well.” Similarly, Emily mentioned previous volunteer experience working with a community bike shop, before outlining a plan for serving with a metropolitan bicycle advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

Toby, the third student whose reflections were analyzed as part of this assignment, often predicted future experiences. While the outcome of the predictions were not always accurate to the original expression, the prediction itself seemed to serve as a motivating goal for engaging in the community. Toby shared, “This summer will give me the opportunity to devote full days of work to an organization...” Almost a month later Toby excitedly predicted, “I will be a community-engagement master!”

At the depth of many of the student’s experiences was a benign act of “being,” that developed into the doing community code. This code was built on the active choices to enter into relationships with others. It was not always service-based, but it was always mutual. Most incredible of these otherwise benign acts was Paige, who goes on at length about what she refers to as a “coincidence,” where she randomly met the daughter of a woman who sold her a bookcase for her apartment four days earlier. Similarly, Emily reflected unpacking and learning her way around the community; “Since moving in on Monday, I’ve unpacked and decorated my room, got lost downtown and in the neighborhood, and figured out the metro system!” These seemingly plain tasks ultimately can be seen as a commitment to sharing space with the community. They are a manifestation of choosing to be engaged.

The way students spoke about their perceived relationship with the community was also of note. All of the student's whose posts were analyzed entangled their personal identity with the community or organization they were serving. Toby began the trend early, sharing "I have grown to deeply respect and admire in my new local community." Paige continued, "But I've also been thinking a lot recently about how to transition in a way that makes it feel like this is where my life is—if that makes sense." Less significant, but more common students used the words "with," "our," or "us," to describe their position in relation to their agency. While Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2019) press the importance of allowing qualitative data to exist without quantity that may erase contextual weight, I feel obliged to also mention the rate at which students entangled their identity with their community appeared to increase on-face as their experience preceded.

The process of community engagement these students were involved in may appear to contain properties hallmark of a cycle. That is, after relating, recalling, valuing, doing, and identifying with, the students were led to reflecting on their own growth within community; it was of value to them. Just one week into her new experience Paige shared, "I'm officially one week into my service and I've already learned so much." At this point in the process however, one student found a particularly pronounced cross-roads. Toby began to become critical of their growth, "It's forcing me reflect on my own intentions and ideology as a white person working in a predominantly African-American community."

All of the students expressed some concern about their relationship with the community. Most of these concerns were expressed early on and subsided to some extent as time passed. Early forms of this resistance often appeared in the division of their personal identity from the

community, with words such as “their,” to differentiate between the student and the agency or community. However, for Toby these concerns grew;

“As much as I wanted to avoid being just a person passing through by volunteering my time with TFN before this summer, that is essentially what I am. Even if I worked with TFN for the whole time that I lived in Tallahassee, two years is just an instant when you’re working towards something like community revitalization and youth empowerment that take many years to accomplish.”

Toby went on to explain that their White racial identity and its history with the community they were serving prevented a more rapid formation of a trusting relationship.

In describing the steps of this process, it hopefully has become clear that students relate their interests and recall previous experiences in a way that positions them favorable for community relations. The students then locate a community of value and engage in it. As the cycle completes itself, students begin to identify with the community and reflect on their growth. When that reflection is positive, students tend toward sustaining their engagement even in removed contexts. As Toby demonstrated however, this reflection also represents an off-ramp, where criticality allows disengagement.

As a researcher, this process necessitated a discomfoting colonization of other people’s experiences. My standpoint, and my empirical removal from the situations discussed in the reflections, limits my ability to presume an accuracy to the original student feelings in coding. However, seen not as an interpretation of primary experiences, but as the interpretation of the relaying of them, my coding may at least be known as accurate to myself. This understanding

then calls into attention my own experiences in the meaning-making process. As a student program coordinator for service leadership programming in the Center for Leadership and Social Change, I have come to see service as an inherently anti-oppressive multicultural initiative driven by equitable relationships, brought together by a shared interest in change. It was from this lens that the reflections were analyzed, the codes created, and the prompt answered.

This exercise allowed me to become more comfortable with a hitherto new process, one which will be critical to the meaning-making of my own research project. As my study and my interest in education as a concept continues to develop, I am challenged to find an argument for quantitative research in social sciences. I struggle to see how society has proven itself generalizable or predictable. Instead, perhaps humanity exists qualitatively, descriptively, and ready to be proven wrong – for the better or worse – tomorrow.

References

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2019). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Chapter 4: Fundamentals of Qualitative Data Analysis