

# **Finding Community in Crisis: Service-Learning Mentoring and Transformative Outcomes**

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*This study explored whether mentors in a tiered undergraduate service-learning mentoring program served as a bridge to develop critical outcomes in service-learning, focusing on the mentors' transformative learning experience. As part of a larger study, this study used a consensual qualitative research method to assess outcomes for service-learning mentors through analyzing weekly reflections and an end of semester reflection. Findings highlight the process of how service-learning mentors engaged in a transformative learning process through their role as a mentor. This study, conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the importance of community in times of crisis.*

*Keywords: higher education, transformative learning theory, COVID-19 pandemic, mentor outcomes*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the winter and spring of 2020, COVID-19 turned higher education on its head. Suddenly, all the social norms that brought us a sense of structure and connection were flattened by the public health guidance of lockdown, quarantining, and social distancing. Left was a remote landscape—bustling dorms and classrooms were deserted, transitioning the social and academic world into online spaces. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic allows us to step back and reconsider our goals for higher education. Freire (1970, 1985, 1993) argued that education must be transformative to liberate people from oppression. By integrating experiential activity and academic content, service learning helps higher education meet this goal by engaging in a critical reflection process. Another keyway to support a transformative learning shift is

through mentoring. We argue that learning in and with the community must be the path forward, and service-learning mentoring can be the key towards critical, transformative outcomes.

The transformative learning theory (TLT) proposed by Mezirow (1990) views education as the process of a deep shift in perspective, developing a new interpretation of one's experience to guide their future action. Mezirow's TLT argues that the essence of higher education is to develop learners who connect knowledge acquisition to actions in their own life, creating learning that lasts beyond the classroom. We argue that a critical transformative learning approach requires a shift through conscientization to create social change. Conscientization is the process of developing a critical consciousness of one's social reality through reflection and action (Freire, 1993). Drawing from feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and critical ethnography (Crotty, 2015; Kinchelow & McLaren, 2000; Patton, 2002) critical transformative learning involves learning that creates collective structures and systems that support a fair society (Brookfield & Holst, 2010).

Service learning, a reflective experiential pedagogy that connects students with communities, can potentially engage students in a transformative learning process (see Carrington & Selva, 2010; Feinstein, 2004; Kiely, 2004; McBrien 2008). Learning that lasts a lifetime is the major goal behind service learning. A unique pedagogy to traditional classroom structure, service learning combines experiential service, academic content, and critical reflection in a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience. Mitchell (2008) developed a critical service learning model that seeks to educate students to become justice-oriented, democratic citizens. However, research reveals that attaining critical outcomes from a model of critical service learning remains difficult (see Butin 2015). Reasons may include lack of faculty time and resources to engage in effective critical service learning (Harkins et al., 2018) and lack of a course structure focused on mutually beneficial partnerships and critical reflection (Shea et al., 2023). We propose that service-learning mentoring may be one missing component to achieving the desired critical outcomes. This approach to service learning provides more support to faculty and community partners as students transition into this new experience of learning (Grenier et al., 2021; Harkins et al., 2020).

Mentoring from a feminist framework aligns with a critical approach to service learning to provide additional support to faculty, community partners, and students. Arczynski (2017) incorporates feminist ideals in a critical model of mentorship that prioritizes transparency, collaboration, and reflexivity in mentoring relationships. Theorists from a critical feminist mentoring approach view mentoring as a contextually attuned process focusing on power differentials, both of status and identity (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017; Chan, et al., 2015). Taking an intersectional approach to mentoring relationships (Crenshaw, 1991), mentors and mentees have a deeper recognition of how aspects of social identities can create layers of power, privilege, and oppression.

This study uniquely sought to explore the relationship between critical service learning and students' transformative learning through peer mentoring within a service-learning classroom. We define service-learning mentoring as a relationally focused process that supports students' professional, social, and civic development through reflection on what it means to help; the role of power in helping; and how personal values impact helping (Harkins, 2017). By bringing a peer-mentor into a service-learning classroom, critical outcomes of service learning are fostered through engaging peer mentors in a leadership role to deepen their learning and transform perspectives. By decreasing the power differential between mentor and mentee through shared status as peers, peer mentoring provides a unique opportunity for mentees and mentors to connect, viewing them as a role model and someone with a shared understanding.

Part of a larger tiered mentoring model (see Grenier et al., 2021) and mixed methods study, this study focused on an in-depth qualitative analysis of learning for Service-Learning Assistant Mentors (SLAMs). SLAMs are undergraduate students with experience in service learning who served as a peer mentor to undergraduate students enrolled in a service-learning course, and a bridge between the community partner, faculty member, and undergraduate students. Through this role, SLAMs engaged in a weekly training course where they critically reflected on their experience serving as a mentor. Based on Robinson and Harkins' (2018) findings regarding components of successful mentoring relationships, research team members trained SLAMs to build an alliance; provide support, motivation, and scaffolded learning; and evaluate the mentoring process. This study explored to what extent a context where a SLAM: 1) engages

as a mentor with undergraduate students; 2) works with the community for a greater length of time; 3) builds relationships with faculty members; and 4) takes part in reflexive practice through weekly critical reflection, created critical transformative learning. We used a qualitative approach to investigate transformative learning outcomes to answer the research question: *how does critical transformative learning develop through a student's engagement as a Service-Learning Assistant Mentor?*

## METHOD

### Study Participants and Course Information

This study consists of four participants enrolled in the 16-week Socially Responsible Leadership course during the spring 2020 semester. The research team accepted students with experience in service learning and/or non-curricular service into the program as SLAMs. All SLAMs ( $n = 4$ ) who enrolled in *Socially Responsible Leadership* in the spring 2020 semester were participants in this study. SLAMs identified as female (100%), with 50% identifying as BIPOC ( $n = 2$ ) and 50% identifying as white ( $n = 2$ ). SLAMs were either in their junior or senior year. SLAMs were matched with three service-learning courses in the disciplines of Psychology, Education, and Radiation Sciences. Class size ranged from 15 to 25 students. Service learning in these courses began in-person and transitioned to remote service-learning activities after the COVID-19 lockdown guidance in March 2020, eight weeks into the semester. This study received IRB approval, and all participants completed informed consent before participation.

### Procedure

Qualitative Data from SLAM journal reflections completed weekly throughout the *Socially Responsible Leadership* course was used. These ongoing reflections were oriented around SCOT analyses. A SCOT analysis is a short, structured reflection tool that assesses a program or organization's strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats. SCOTs are adapted from a SWOT framework (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats), replacing *weaknesses* with *challenges* to reflect more strengths-based terminology. SCOTs allowed participants to assess both internal and external positive and negative aspects of their mentoring experience within a formal evaluation.

In the *Socially Responsible Leadership* course, the seminar leader (first author) and SLAMs revisited their completed SCOT reflections to start discussions, promote reflection, and deepen learning. The first author kept weekly notes during these discussions. In addition, an individual, in-depth reflection of the semester's work and SLAM learning occurred at the end of the semester in the form of a final reflection paper and final seminar discussion.

### Data Analysis

SLAM weekly SCOT reflections, end-of-semester narrative reflections, and the final seminar discussion was coded with of transformative learning and critical outcomes using Mezirow and Associates' (2000) and Brookfield's (2012) theories of transformative learning through the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method. The coding team comprised two clinical psychology PhD students and one psychology-sociology undergraduate student. Using CQR, coders established credibility of findings through analyst triangulation and triangulation of sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analyst triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999; Patton, 2002) was also used to establish credibility across raters and consistency of findings. Multiple data points from different points in time were used to establish triangulation of sources. A clinical developmental psychologist served as the team's auditor as a final check to assess coder bias in analysis (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999; Patton, 2001).

A codebook was developed based on Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. Coders generated 10 codes that outline Mezirow's ten stages of transformative learning, from (T1) disorienting dilemma to (T10) reintegrating ideas into life. Coders then group codes into overarching domains (D1, D2, D3) to capture the complexity of the transformative learning process. Coders tagged each code as *critical* if captured student statements that identified a critical level of transformative learning (Brookfield, 2012),

critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008), and critical feminist mentoring (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017). Quotes are identified by SLAM number (e.g., S1, S2, S3, S4) throughout to preserve anonymity of SLAMs.

## RESULTS

### Domain 1: Initial Learning

Domain 1, *Initial Learning*, captured student sentiments presented in their beginning stages of transformation, including experiencing a disorienting dilemma, grappling with emotions related to this recognition, and critically assessing their previously held assumptions. Overall, there were 40 Domain 1 codes for participants, 30% ( $n = 12$ ) tagged as “critical” and 70% ( $n = 28$ ) tagged as “not critical.” Among SLAMs, general themes during Domain 1 included response to disorienting dilemmas with either reactions of emotions or critical assessment: *insecurities*, *recognizing critical service learning*, and *the impact of COVID-19*.

#### *Insecurities*

The first disorienting dilemma that SLAMs experienced involved stepping into a leadership role as a mentor. Students’ experiences of this process varied. One student identified feeling unprepared to take on the role: “When I think back to the program’s start, I remember how insecure I felt about accepting the position. I wasn’t sure if I had enough service experience and wasn’t sure if I was fit to be in a mentorship position because of it” (S3). SLAMs discussed levels of insecurity throughout the semester particularly as they considered a new way of teaching and learning, “I was quite uncomfortable with sharing my ideas and thought processes from the beginning of the semester since most of my classes are not discussion-based” (S1), and not always knowing how to respond to mentees within the discussions:

One difficulty I had was getting everyone to share issues with their [community partner]; even when they did, I struggled to respond to their challenges. Since I felt the need to help them with problem-solving, I was unsure how to overcome those issues they were having (S1).

Here, SLAMs processed their insecurity by stepping into a new role—not only new for their role as an undergraduate student leader; but also, a new way of engaging in service-learning pedagogy that is more discussion-based rather than lecture-oriented. SLAMs engaged in a critical assessment of themselves and their attributes, and experienced emotions that may accompany this assessment and the reckoning that they still have much to learn.

#### *Critical Service Learning*

Many of the critical codes in Domain 1 included recognizing the tenets of critical service learning. SLAMs were in the process of developing an understanding of critical service learning and trying to bring their students along with them. This resulted in frustration and anger when reflecting on the service-learning process. S3 struggled to effectively share the message of what it means to help and how to be an effective helper with their undergraduate mentees:

Under the surface I found myself frustrated with some students and their orientation towards service. Through various comments and group discussions, I heard comments like, “Why isn’t this working for me. Don’t they know that we’re trying to help them? I listen to their frustrations but I’m having a hard time explaining repeatedly that it’s just part of helping—things aren’t always going to be cookie-cutter perfect and it’s not always obvious how to help or what help looks like (S3).

### *Impact of COVID-19*

Once SLAMs began adjusting to their role as a mentor and effectively navigating multiple disorienting dilemmas that resulted in them pausing and reflecting on their new position, another disorienting dilemma restructured the service-learning courses: the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shift to remote learning. For a second time in the semester, SLAMs took a leadership role in the shifting landscape of service learning, this time with the added challenge of navigating the new territory of remote learning. One SLAM reflects:

Things have been crazy! I had a bit of a rough week these past few days because reality kind of settled in. When things first started shutting down and [university] closed, it was a whirlwind of action trying to get used to new situations and things (S3).

SLAMs worked with their faculty and community partners to navigate how to shift courses and service into a remote format. This proved challenging, with SLAMs reflecting specifically on how to engage students in a remote landscape particularly for the discussion and reflection portion of the courses. S2 states: “My challenge/threat was the virus outbreak and online teaching- which often meant muted and dark screens.”

Not only were students struggling with the logistical shifts with COVID-19, but they also commented on the significant emotional challenges that were associated with the pandemic. SLAMs were coping with the very real changes that the rest of the world was facing adapting to a new normal and being fearful for the health and safety of themselves and their loved ones: “Now, I’m kind of just anxious all the time. It’s hard to get to sleep at night, it’s hard to wake up in the morning. Things got tense in my household because everyone is on edge. I go to work later today and I’m not sure if I’m feeling so good about that either...” (S3).

S2 shared that their service-learning classes and *Socially Responsible Leadership* were the only connections they had with others in the university setting, as many other classes had switched to asynchronous learning: “During quarantine season, all my life went on hold. They furloughed me from my job, the spring break trip I had been planning since last April was canceled, and they transformed all my classes to an online format that would not use Zoom.”

Beyond the typical difficulties that service-learning stakeholders grapple within terms of logistics for orienting service-learning partnerships, SLAMs were adjusting to a shifting environment—on both a local and global scale—that the COVID-19 pandemic forced upon them. In the second domain, there was a change in tone as students shifted from being aware of the current situations and reacting to them with multiple emotions—anger, shame, guilt, fear—and assessing their previously held assumptions, to exploring how to change in these areas.

### **Domain 2: Learning Through Exploring**

Domain 2, *Learning Through Exploring*, captured students in the intermediary phase of transformative learning, where students recognized shared transformation in others, explored new roles for themselves; planning a course of action, and acquired skills to succeed in these new roles. Overall, there were 92 D2 codes for participants, 41% ( $n = 29$ ) tagged as “critical” and 71% ( $n = 63$ ) tagged as “not critical”. Among SLAMs, general themes during Domain 2 included: *SLAM as bridge* and *fostering connection*.

#### *SLAM as Bridge*

The SLAM role served as a bridge between students, faculty, and community partners. Here, a SLAM identified a day-to-day task that captures the role of a SLAM as a bridge to plan with multiple stakeholders: “This week, I worked with my faculty and community partners to come up with student team role descriptions to outline the projects they will work on over the semester” (S4). This was a critical code, as SLAMs partnered with faculty and community partners to design the service-learning project, reflecting a mutually beneficial partnership.

Giving students the opportunity to work closely with faculty members, community partners, and students allowed them to foster relationships among different parties. Students learned not only from faculty members and partners, but also from their mentees. One student reflected: “Next week we have students starting their micro-teaching and that will take most of our class time. I am looking forward to it and to learn [sic] new things from the students” (S1). Another critical code highlights how SLAMs engaged in bidirectional learning alongside their student mentees, allowing them to learn from each other and not remain beholden to a typical power hierarchy of mentoring.

This theme had the most critical codes, as it represented a new way of learning from a higher education perspective but also engaging in a type of service learning that was mutually beneficial and sustainable for partners. SLAMs reflected on their daily tasks that involved working with community partners to develop and design programming, both at the start of the semester and as things shifted remotely. This SLAM discussed the planning that occurred after the shift to remote learning:

This week, I spoke with [community partner liaison] on the phone about how we can redirect our efforts to best serve [community partner] and the families. We went through each team and revised their role description to help with the challenges being faced during this pandemic. We also discussed a better plan of communication for students and the option for them to meet with her on Zoom and assigned a team leader for each group to be the point contact person (S4).

Again, this quote reflects a mutually beneficial partnership for both parties in the service-learning relationship, and the SLAMs role as a bridge while adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SLAMs recognized the need for sustainable support and relationships that extend beyond a typical higher education semester schedule. S4 discussed the importance of designing service-learning partnerships that continue to support community partners outside of the typical semester-long schedule of higher education.

During my weekly check-in meeting with [professor] this past Wednesday, we were discussing how to continue our relationship with [community partner] through the summer and fall to sustain our impact as a service partner. She offered me the opportunity to continue working with her and the [service-learning class].

This quote shows the SLAM was focusing on a critical method of service learning with a sustainable impact beyond one semester, in contrast to a service-learning program where the service structure benefits the university calendar and not the community partner's needs.

### *Fostering Connection*

SLAMs' relationships with each other and their faculty extended to their mentees and community partners. SLAMs served a role in fostering relationships among groups, particularly that of mentees and community partners. One SLAM reflects: “My goal for the upcoming week is to make sure the volunteers feel comfortable and recognized at their sites and not feel like they are a burden at their service-learning sites” (S1).

While this was present in the first few weeks of the semester, it resurfaced after the remote learning shift. Again, SLAMs had to work to foster connection for students and their peers, as well as with the SLAMs themselves. “We planned on how to make the online platform easier for students and to ask each student about their feelings by checking in and doing an online community building activity in our next class” (S1). One SLAM reflected on the challenging nature of this, because of burnout and disconnection in the new, remote landscape. She worked closely with her faculty member to increase connection with students:

Last week during my weekly check-in meeting with [professor], we discussed the disconnect in communication between us and students. We decided it may be beneficial if I planned individual Zoom meetings for each team to meet with me so we can discuss the changes of their project and talk about how they feel about the class overall (S4).

As Domain 2 demonstrates, SLAMs shifted from noticing and reacting to the environment, to engaging in the process – learning new roles and making plans to better engage as a service-learning mentor. The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the nonlinear process for students. Throughout the semester, SLAMs vacillated between Domains 1, 2, and 3 as they navigated new challenges and new roles when the semester went remote. This further deepened their transformative learning experience. Next, we turn to Domain 3, which includes reflections from students as they became more successful in their roles.

### **Domain 3: Lifelong Learning**

As SLAMs settled into their role, and then recalibrated to shift to remote learning, they increasingly gained confidence in their ability to succeed as peer mentors in service learning. This brings us to Domain 3, *Lifelong Learning*, which included statements on the new roles they were trying out and how they built confidence in these roles, as they made plans to incorporate their new ways of learning and living into their lives. Overall, there were 71 Domain 3 codes for participants, 42% ( $n = 30$ ) tagged as “critical” and 58% ( $n = 41$ ) tagged as “not critical”. General themes from this domain included: *action in roles, plan, and recognizing growth*.

#### *Actions in Roles*

SLAMs used their SCOTs to address the actions they were taking as SLAMs. There was a shift in this domain from *learning* and *exploring* the role to *doing* the role, notably how students shifted their language from tentative to trying out to more definitive statements. Major areas of action that SLAMs discussed were mentoring students, collaborating with faculty, and leading reflections.

**Mentoring.** SLAMs worked closely with each other and faculty members as they helped plan and execute service projects for their service-learning mentees. Specifically, SLAMs helped guide students to interact in a service-learning partnership: “Last week S2 and I helped the class prepare for their teaching assistant or volunteer positions in the school. We guided them regarding the class dynamic and how they need to be open-minded when working with children” (S1). Mentors helped students develop plans to throughout the semester, but even more so after the switch to remote learning. S3 reflects:

The students are working on at-home online projects that count towards hours and are replacing the final. I'm working with a group, so they stay organized and on task. I also let the students know that I'm a resource for them to come to whenever they have a question or need someone to talk to. So that was good, too. We keep on keepin' on!

When S4 had difficulty with her students in connecting, she devised a way to connect with them online. At first, no students attended her open meetings. Using her newly learned skills, and discussion with other SLAMs and the group leader in CAS 302, she revisited this plan by having students sign up for mentoring slots. She reflected:

I created a Doodle poll and sent it to the team leader of each of the 6 team...Every team signed up for a spot and I met with 4 of the 6 teams today. Each meeting was 10-15 minutes long with as many available team members, and we talked about their feelings and progress with the coursework.

Here, she created a space for students to not only reflect and discuss logistical tasks such as completing coursework but provided a space to share feelings in this time of crisis. She scaffolded a framework for students to engage in relational mentoring by providing a framework for them to set up mentoring

appointments, which was successful in terms of turnout – a challenge for many in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Collaboration With Faculty.** To be effective in their role as a mentor, SLAMs worked closely with faculty to help design projects. S4 reflected on developing a project that would benefit the community partner, one that was sustainable across semesters:

This week, I worked with [professor] to design the honors project for the honors section of students in the class. We centered the project around a seed grant in which we will request a sum of money from [university's] Center of Community Engagement to benefit the community partner. Since the seed grant application only had four written sections, I created other assignments related to the seed grant or the service-learning aspect of the course that will benefit [professor] when she teaches this class in the future.

SLAMs worked with faculty week-by-week to track students' progress and the course's effectiveness. In this process, SLAMs and faculty collaborated in real-time to identify problems and work together to come up with solutions. This SLAM reflected on how much she appreciated the opportunity to work closely with faculty: "I am glad we are of help to [professor] since she takes a different approach in teaching, and she seems grateful that we are there to listen to her and help her out." This critical reflection demonstrates the openness that this faculty had in working with her student mentors.

**Reflection.** Much of the mentoring that SLAMs engaged in with their mentees involved reflections around students' service. Overall, structured reflections were a major role for SLAMs to engage with student mentees and an opportunity to provide them with mentoring.

SLAMs highlighted this experience:

During class on Thursday, I led my first small group critical reflection. [Professor] and I each took half the class, so each group was approximately 9 students, and we had selected two questions to spark a discussion. The questions we asked were: What did you do this week that made you feel you made a difference? How were you stretched or challenged this week? Overall, I think having a structured set of questions and then having students answer in a circle was effective and led to a productive conversation as all students had to take part (S4).

### *Student Plans*

Near the end of their reflection, SLAMs shared their intentions for how they planned to continue to use what they had learned during this semester in their plans. Some students were straightforward and broad in their future orientation. S2 reflected: "For future opportunity [sic], I can use these skills that I learned to do meaningful service." This same student named the importance of reflection while engaging in service and shared an intention to do it more in the future: "Now that I understand the value of reflecting on service, I will engage in it more even if I do it individually." Another SLAM was more detailed in her plans, including continued work with the same faculty and community partner through the summer:

I plan to continue communicating with [community partner liaison] and [professor] through the summer, as I will complete my honor's independent study on service learning in the fall. [Professor] and I have discussed different projects that could be substantial and meaningful, such as creating a service-learning manual for students. With my major being public relations, I could also potentially create a campaign for the SLAM/service-learning program overall to promote its greatness all over campus! (S4)

This student took strides to create an independent study and was open to new ideas to continue her growth as a SLAM and help others learn about the opportunity.



### *Recognizing Growth*

Each SLAM also reflected on the growth they saw in themselves and in their students in their reflections. This growth looked different across students, but overall highlighted a shift in worldview, and an undertaking of a transformative learning experience. This SLAM reflected on how helpful *Socially Responsible Leadership* was for her growth, of having a community of SLAMs to learn with helped navigate this new role and increased her learning.

With that being said, I learned a lot throughout the semester. Starting from establishing mentoring philosophies and finding out ways to resolve conflicts between students, professors, community partners and all in between, I could develop mentally throughout this semester... Ultimately, I can say this program changed my viewpoints on many things and equipped me with skills that I wouldn't have had otherwise (S2).

This same student also shared the relational approach she took with her students, and how providing grace in times of crisis can help those relationships grow: "As a mentor, I learned I want to approach relationships with students by sharing my experiences, creating a safe environment where it's okay to fail and going through struggles together." Another SLAM reflected on how being out of her comfort zone helped her grow, leading to a better understanding of herself.

I took the CAS 302 class to challenge myself and to get out of my comfort zone. To be in a position where I have to guide students my age and not feel intrigued by it is impossible... I had to lead by example so the students would take it seriously as well. This experience definitely made me a better leader and allowed me to know where my flaws are.

Finally, S3 reflected on the critical growth that her student mentees engaged in over the semester, by better understanding power structures in society; and how her own learning developed alongside her mentees as well:

Over time, it was more apparent to me that the students "got it," to understand not only their influence, but the overall influences of the power structures that exist within society and how they adversely affect certain groups.... I'm so glad that I got to take part in this program and see the changes in the students, as well as the changes in myself as well.

This again highlighted the value of bidirectional learning, and that through engaging in critical reflection with student mentees, the student mentors also experience growth. This quote highlights how this student engaged in a critical transformation – by better understanding how power structures in our society hurt marginalized groups.

Domain 3 demonstrated that SLAMs developed mastery over their roles as student mentors. They not only mentored their students in service learning but also served as a bridge between students, faculty, and community partners. Through serving as a student mentor, SLAMs engaged in a transformative learning experience that shifted their worldview, how they saw themselves, and their growth in the role.

## **DISCUSSION**

A qualitative analysis of critical reflections from SLAMs revealed how a multi-tiered service-learning mentoring program set the stage for student mentors to engage in a transformative learning experience. As expected, specific experiential indicators highlighted how this transformative learning develops. The tenets of service learning created an environment where SLAMs engaged in constant disorienting dilemmas, while being encouraged to take a critical look at their previously held assumptions about the world. These disorienting dilemmas, combined with a scaffolded program, put students in a mentoring role and encouraged them to engage in more action-based leadership and take an active role in the service work.

While engaging in deep, structured reflection throughout the process, SLAMs reevaluated their assumptions and participation in their world. This program, infused with tenets of critical feminist mentoring—authentic relationships, bidirectional learning, and recognition of power hierarchies (Arczynski & Morrow, 2017)—further strengthened an environment for student mentors to engage in a transformative learning process. This builds on previous research that demonstrates how service learning has a positive impact on student learning (Grenier et al., 2021; Harkins 2017; Harkins et al., 2018; Harkins et al., 2020), adding to this body of literature that service-learning mentoring can develop transformative learning outcomes.

The unexpected shift of events with the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how this level of transformative learning only increased during a time of crisis. SLAMs moved, in real time, from discussing inequalities in an abstract sense to experiencing them as they navigated problems presented by the COVID-19 pandemic with community partners, students, and faculty. SLAMs managed the fatigue, anxiety, and overwhelm that grappled the nation in the early days of the pandemic, leaning into the support of their service-learning community.

The *Initial Learning* (Domain 1) identified how SLAMs engaged in this early role of transformative learning when faced with these disorienting dilemmas and negotiated new actions and roles as they navigated them. SLAMs in this stage of transformative learning identified personal insecurities they harbored as they transitioned into this new role, particularly as they tackled a peer leadership position with their student mentors while attempting to build new relationships with faculty members and community partners. SLAMs navigated the logistical challenges associated with getting a service-learning program started from a more distant point of view, such that SLAMs were onlookers commenting on the challenges students and community partners were having.

As SLAMs transitioned into the *Learning Through Exploring* (Domain 2), their reflections shifted from a distant point of view to joining in the fray, tackling the messy problems that service learning brought about and how their identity served as a bridge within service-learning work. In this intermediary phase of transformative learning, SLAMs began setting goals for service-learning work. They settled into their role as a bridge between faculty, community partner members, and student mentees. Here, SLAMs transitioned from identifying problems associated with service learning to exploring ways to solve these problems. SLAMs focused on fostering connections between themselves and their service-learning students and building connections in the classroom among peers and with community partners.

Finally, in *Lifelong Learning*, the third domain of transformative learning, there was a shift from exploring how to solve a problem to SLAMs engaging in their service-learning roles, more notably related to collaboration with faculty, leading reflections, and coordinating logistics related to a transition to remote learning. As SLAMs collaborated on structuring a service-learning course presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning, SLAMs took on a more substantial role in organizing with both the faculty and the community partner. In such, SLAMs managed the transition well while they continued to engage in deeper levels of learning.

Reflexivity, or critical reflection, was a major pillar throughout SLAMs experience in service-learning mentoring and aided their transformative learning. Both individually and in community (i.e., group reflections in training course and service-learning classes), SLAMs grappled with tenets of critical service learning (Mitchell, 2008), including mutually beneficial partnerships, a social change orientation, and power redistribution. SLAMs translated a more critical pedagogy for their mentees, supporting faculty in facilitating group discussions rather than a more traditional lecture format. Our findings support previous research on how critical reflection fosters transformative learning (Carrington & Selva, 2010).

SLAMs reflected not only on planned and completed tasks, but also further examined interpersonal relationships between themselves, faculty members, community partners, and students. In line with prior research, our study revealed the significance of relationships in the process of perspective transformation (Taylor & Snyder, 2012) as trusting relationships between parties allow for individuals to question discussions and share information achieving mutual and consensual understanding (Taylor, 2007). This builds on our previous research that demonstrates the significance of relationships in service learning, including relationships with faculty members and community partners (Grenier et al., 2021; Harkins et al., 2020; Shea et al., 2023).

The structure of the multi-tiered feminist mentoring program helped contribute to deepening relationships and change-of-perspective through transformative learning for mentors. SLAMs not only engaged in equalizing power dynamics in a traditional mentoring relationship through bidirectional learning from their mentees, but also did the same with their faculty mentors. Our findings support previous research that the values of time, shared experiential activities, interrelationships of critical reflection with affective learning, and value-laden course content support transformative learning (Taylor & Snyder 2012). By allowing SLAMs more time to engage in service learning, deeper connections and critical transformation occurred. Infusing time with value-laden content, strong interpersonal relationships, and consistent critical reflexivity allowed students in leadership mentoring positions to engage in critical transformative learning.

While a robust qualitative study, there were limitations to the study design that prevented us from having a full scope of the impact of a tiered service-learning mentoring program for all participants. First, our sample size was small, limiting the number of perspectives available. Examining impacts of service-learning mentoring for mentees was beyond the scope of this study, but included in others (see Shea et al., 2023). However, we did not examine faculty members and community partner perceptions, who played a major role in SLAM transformative learning and mentee civic attitudes.

COVID-19 is a public health crisis that impacted society at every level. While higher education was left spinning, many non-profit and community organizations were also impacted greatly, and working diligently to keep their doors open. During this crisis, student mentors collaborated with faculty and community partners in real time, taking intentional steps to strengthen the university-community partnership and facilitate positive change. Through this collaboration, student mentors experienced a transformation in their belief systems, skills set, and intention to engage in future action to continue supporting positive, measurable impact in higher education and community settings.

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