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Link to *Complex Communities* curriculum: <https://sites.google.com/mccanntech.org/complexcommunities/home?authuser=1>

**Capstone Reflection**

For the past three years, I wondered what project I would choose to end my Masters program with. One day on a run, I had this idea to gauge levels of school spirit among different schools from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, and also thought of making a short film. The school spirit idea was quickly dashed when COVID turned us into reluctant recluses, and the name ‘short film’ is deceptively sweet, as I know that it can take sometimes hours just to edit 2 minutes of footage. I looked beyond what I could not do in the immediate, and formed a project that could be used in the future tense and that resonated with my passion for having students learn through experiences.

This thread led me to examine what was already published regarding Service Learning, and to browse some current models. I learned quickly that ideas like **contact theory** are widely contested among scholars, as it can lead to greater knowledge of different groups, sure, but also promote further prejudice among individuals. I would be lying if I said that I did not have a mini panic attack in April when realizing my project promoted contact theory without mentioning any of its hang ups uncovered in scholarship. Thankfully, this allowed me to lean more heavily into the ideas of **reciprocal relationships** and **asset based discourse**, which addressed these hang ups with opportunities for students to connect more meaningfully with their communities, and more long term, to avoid a deficit based view ofmtheir neighborhoods.

I enjoyed crafting journal prompts for students to engage with during the experience. I believe students should never check their brains at the door, and a dose of critical thinking can be helpful in many contexts. Why not give students a chance to grapple with their long held ideas, be challenged by differences in culture they have not yet experienced, and let the supervising teacher know if they are having either the time of their life, or an excruciating one? I decided to counter any possible inherent prejudice with a framework that has students questioning it before it rears it head. Importantly, students are not left alone to process these ideas - they can readily contact their instructor and use the space provided to them to speak as needed.

I feel like this project is the culmination of a process I have been experiencing through my entire graduate program: the process of questioning myself in different contexts. Instead of keeping my students within homogenous experiences and lesson plans, why not expand their worldview in a relevant and productive manner? Why are there certain neighborhoods in North Adams that I have never bothered to walk through and learn about? Don’t I have students who call these streets home? I am glad to look at this project and see that there is evidence and scholarship to propel this idea forward: that Service Learning still has much to offer students. It just requires some 21st century updates to make sure that every student can feel like they belong in the classroom. This is easier to do when the classroom and lecture hall is recognized as an extension of the local community; the community not being viewed from inside the gates of a university, but met in the corner markets and parks and church halls that fill the contexts of those who live here.