

Gonzaga University

The Repository of Gonzaga University

Sociology & Criminology Faculty Research

Sociology & Criminology

2023

What is an Authentic Relationship?

Joseph B. Johnston

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.gonzaga.edu/soccrimschol>



Part of the [Criminology Commons](#)

What Is an Authentic Relationship?¹

Joseph B. Johnston
Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Sociology & Criminology
Gonzaga University
johnstonj@gonzaga.edu

Abstract

There is perhaps nothing more hopeful in the world than to attempt to develop a truly meaningful relationship with another human being. The formation of authentic relationships can be powerful for many reasons including contributing to the formation of collective movements and social change. But, what does an authentic relationship look like in an inherently time-limited community-engaged learning (CEL) experience? I utilize the case of a CEL class, rooted in some of the aims of the Jesuit Justice Circle (experience, understanding, imagination), which offers the opportunity for college students to enjoy early morning walks to school with youth.² I analyze student data from their relationship development journals and semester-long writing assignments to describe patterns in their development of relationships with fellow classmates and community members. In so doing, I offer an initial descriptive account of what the critical CEL aspirational concept of authentic relationships looks like “on the ground.”

Introduction

There is perhaps nothing more imaginative and hopeful than genuine connection and deep relationship development between human beings. Developing relationships—particularly across difference within community-engaged experiences—allows participants to imagine a more just social world by hopefully taking up the challenge “to create relationships that neither ignore the realities of social inequality in our society nor attempt to artificially homogenize all people in the service-learning experience.”³ Authentic relationship development is at the heart of Jesuit education, Ignatian pedagogy, and Catholic social teaching. Jesuit education is dedicated to *cura personalis*, which allows for the possibility of people sharing their full personhood with each other in the pursuit of authentic connection within the context of the “specific needs of the place where the school is located, and the people it serves.”⁴ Ignatian pedagogy is deeply concerned with instructors finding out who students really are and engaging students on personal and emotional levels.⁵ Catholic social teaching emphasizes that individuals are social beings that grow in community with others and that the collective pursuits of the common good and social justice are necessary rights and duties.⁶

In the realm of community-engaged learning (CEL), authentic relationships are a central tenet

of Tania Mitchell’s aspirational critical community-engagement model.⁷ This framework has been foundational to instructors’ and students’ efforts to enter into partnerships that are more explicitly focused on social justice for more than a decade. The three tenets (reducing power differentials, social change orientation, developing authentic relationships) are closely linked to the first three steps proposed in The Justice Circle for attempting to inculcate justice as a quality that students embody in their day to day lives.⁸ Instructors must provide opportunities for students to *experience* injustice through intentional accompaniment of community members whose lives are impacted by structural injustice. Students must come to *understand* (in)justice by uncovering and analyzing the causes and conditions which lead to (in)justice. Perhaps most importantly, students must be given the time, space, and support to *imagine* how a more just world is possible because injustice is never inevitable. The critical CEL and Jesuit Circle frameworks connect closely to Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J.’s aspirational call: “The Congregation committed the Society to the promotion of justice as a concrete, radical but proportionate response to the unjustly suffering world. Fostering the virtue of justice in people was not enough. Only a substantive justice can bring about the kinds of structural and attitudinal changes that are needed.”⁹

And, yet, we need more dedicated analyses fleshing out what student attempts at realizing these imaginative and hopeful aspirational concepts actually look like in the real world. As a starting point, this article asks a deceptively-simple question: What is an authentic relationship?

Definitions can only take us so far, particularly in the realm of experiential learning. Existing conceptual parameters for authentic relationships often guide instructors and students away from what *not* to do—don't engage in "transactional" behaviors, don't employ "thin" engagement, etc. Dialectical opposite ideas are provided as what should be aspired towards—engage "thickly" and, of course, "authentically."¹⁰ The existing scholarly literature on authentic relationships in CEL settings focuses on the question of whether relationship development should be a key priority of community-engaged learning partnerships. Scholarship astutely notes why instructors and students should be thoughtful and intentional in deciding whether relationship development between students and community members should be a goal because relationships take a great deal of time, labor, and energy—particularly if students will only be working with the community partners for a short period of time.¹¹

Understanding the goals and needs of the community and if/how relationship development should be prioritized is key. But, extant scholarship does not offer insights into what the range of attempts to develop authentic relationship look like in CEL experiences for those community-based partnerships where it is a central goal.

Foundational sociological conceptualizations of social network and social tie formations provide insight into what kinds of human relationships might count as authentic—if people spend more *time* together, if their interactions are more *emotionally intensive*, and if individuals expect *reciprocal service* from the other person.¹² What does "authentic" actually mean and descriptively "look like" in inherently-time-limited CEL experiences as students attempt to be companions with community members: "to walk with individuals and communities that are vulnerable, excluded, marginalized, and humanly impoverished?"¹³

Does relationship building look different between different dyads in the CEL partnership (community members, community partners, college students, instructors)? What are the strategies that college students employ to work towards developing authentic relationships—are they always utilizing "thick" engagement or are there moments where "thin" engagement actually demonstrates a deeper level of authenticity in the relationship?

To dig into these questions, I utilize the case of a CEL class, with a community program/partnership which provides the structure for relationships to develop: the Walking School Bus (WSB). The WSB offers the opportunity for college students to enjoy early morning walks to school with elementary school youth—learning about the neighborhoods through the eyes of the youth—and contributes to increased attendance and timeliness to school through the development of community. There is no official curriculum/content for the program. Instead, the goal is simply to enjoy a walk in the morning and breakfast thereafter at school and develop community in the process.

The college students enrolled in the sociology of education course take part in the WSB at the same elementary school, and the course material is built around the CEL experiences. As I detail below, the CEL partnership, course material, and activities are all explicitly focused on developing authentic relationships throughout the course. This gives students the opportunity to fulfill the first three steps of the Justice Circle framework to *experience* through their CEL placement, *understand* through course content and critical application—providing tangible hope for how/why the world does not need to be unjust—and *imagine* a more just, hopeful world in the process.¹⁴ And, yet, it is only a semester-long class. Winter weather limits the WSB program to six weeks (at most) for which the enrolled students volunteer three days a week for less than two hours a day. What might we reasonably call "authenticity" given these time constraints? What does the continuum of attempts at authenticity look like? And what are the strategies students utilize in the pursuit of authentic relationships?

After providing more detail about the CEL-course partnership, I analyzed data from students enrolled in a sociology of education class during the spring 2023 semester. I inductively coded the relationship development journals and other semester assignments looking for patterns. The patterns I detail below—within the backdrop of the specific goals/practices of the CEL course—are an initial investigation of what the aspirational and hopeful concept of authentic relationships looks like on the ground.

Description of Case

The spring 2023 sociology of education course was focused on providing students a sociological analysis of the K-12 public education system in the United States, with a particular focus on social inequities. The content of the course was dedicated to (a) students learning about how/why the U.S. educational system is stratified between states, school districts, schools, and within schools, and at the same time (b) the transformational possibilities schools provide each and every day. Students investigated the causes and consequences of stratification in U.S. schools and the policy efforts that have been (or could be) attempted to support the common good.

Throughout the course, developing authentic relationships was a central, explicit goal. During the first half of the semester, the class was focused on intentional relationship development between students in the class through small groups and one-on-one conversations. Right at the beginning of the semester, students were placed into groups of four. In those groups of four, they were tasked with having three one-on-one “relational conversations”—one with each other group member—over the first couple weeks of the semester.

The basis for the relational conversations came from the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which has fostered and developed community organizers for over eighty years in the United States.¹⁵ For the IAF, relational conversations are a central tool for collectively organizing people from lots of different walks of life into social justice pursuits through in-depth conversations focused on (a) key relationships, (b) key drives/interests, (c) key institutions, and (d) key

moments in the individuals’ lives. The conversations are an opportunity for mutual discovery and shared vulnerability as a pair of individuals are joyfully lost conversing together as much as possible about *each other* rather than about *stuff* in the world. The conversations begin with one person saying, as warmly as possible: “Tell me about yourself.”

At the beginning of the spring 2023 semester, students were introduced to relational conversations and had the opportunity to reflect on their own key relationships, drives/interests, institutions, and moments. Then, students paired up with one initial person in their group and spent time doing a trial run of the beginning of a relational meeting in class (ten minutes). After listening in to conversations over those ten minutes, I reaffirmed some important things for them to remember as they try to engage in the relational chats. Afterwards, pairs of students found times to meet up outside the classroom time to converse for at least thirty more minutes.

After their conversations, they were assigned to complete an entry in their relationship development journal. The prompt for each of their first three relational conversations was: “What would you like to remember from your first relational conversation? Describe details, feelings, moments and/or thoughts that came up during or after your chat.” Additionally, in the classroom, the groups of four were provided time to share their thoughts and feelings coming out of their conversation with the other group members before partnering up with their respective second and third group members for additional relational conversations.

Alongside the relational conversations, the structure of the class time was focused on dialogue and reflection within the groups of four—thereby utilizing Ignatian pedagogy’s focus on providing students the opportunity to immerse themselves in the material emotionally and personally and connecting their learning to their own lived experiences.¹⁶ I spent as little time as possible on lecture/content delivery and instead had students converse and share out about the assigned readings, do in-class activities, and/or spend time sharing and working on the first portion of their scaffolded, semester-long writing

assignment focusing on (a) thick description of their home(s), neighborhood(s), and schools growing up and (b) using course content to analyze their schooling experiences through the nested structures of state-level differences, school districts, between schools, and/or within schools themselves.

As the midway point of the semester approached (and the weather turned toward springtime), we spent more time in class preparing for the beginning of the WSB community-engaged portion of the class by reading portions of a book focused on how students should engage in CEL placements, reading tips from past WSB route-leaders, learning more background about the neighborhood and school we were working with, and ironing out logistical issues.¹⁷ Additionally, students were placed into their second group of four for the semester, with three new peers. Students completed three additional relational conversations and three additional corresponding entries in their relationship development journal.

Once the WSB began, each student participated in the program three mornings a week for four total weeks. On those mornings, students arrived at the university pickup location at 6:45 am and rode over by van(s) to the elementary school. At the elementary school, each student put on a bright yellow or orange safety vest, gathered other gear for the route (flags, attendance sheets, maps, first-aid kits, etc.) and grouped together into one of the three routes led by a “route-leader.” The route-leaders were three different students in the class that opted in to walking five days a week as paid employees of the school district (for liability reasons) and served as point people on the route. Each route commenced around 7:00 am with students walking out to the furthest stop on the route and snaking back through the neighborhood picking up elementary school youth before arriving back at the school around 8:00 am. At 8:00 am, the college student volunteers enjoyed sitting with the youth from their route (and many other elementary schoolers not part of the WSB) as the youth ate breakfast. Then, at 8:25 am, the elementary schoolers headed off to their classrooms to begin the school day, and the college students piled back into the vans to drive back to the university.

The van rides, the time on WSB routes, and the time in the breakfast room all provided opportunities for relationship development between college students, between elementary school youth, and between college students and elementary school youth. Back in the classroom, a large part of class time was dedicated to understanding their experiences through processing thoughts and emotions from the WSB, reflecting on what the WSB time meant, and applying their experiences to course content and/or their own biographical experiences.¹⁸

Their groups of four provided an opportunity to learn through both similarity and difference as each group member (often) walked a different combination of three days of the week, they walked on the same or different WSB route, they connected with youth in different ways, and they spent time sitting in similar and/or different locations in the breakfast room. Time to reflect and connect with their groups was important for thinking through what they experienced and how to make sense of what they experienced through additional assignments for the class.

For instance, each student was tasked with writing “fieldnotes” each time they participated in the WSB focusing on (a) descriptive observations about what they saw, heard, and/or experienced on the WSB and (b) thinking about how what they observed mattered and how their observations connect to course content and/or their lived experiences. In their groups, students had opportunities to share highlights and conundrums from what they wrote about in their fieldnotes. Then they utilized their fieldnotes to write the second part of their semester-long writing assignment in which they (a) descriptively detailed their WSB route, neighborhood, and school, (b) identified initial, tentative “findings” of patterns or compelling individual occurrences of particular assets of the youth/community, neighborhood conditions, what kids wore, youth interactional styles, or more, connecting those findings to course content, and (c) they completed a final reflection answering an array of questions about the semester including reflecting on whether/how they believed they had built authentic relationships during the course of the semester.

Relatedly, the students in the course also completed two more entries (their seventh and eighth entries overall) in their relationship development journal. Each entry asked the students to identify one person (youth at the elementary school, community members in the neighborhood/staff at the school, other students in the class, a route-leader(s), etc.) that they had come to know more deeply over the course of the semester. Then, they were tasked with reflecting on: (a) describing how the relationship had developed and what made the development possible, (b) reflecting on whether they had prioritized “thick”—proactively looking for ways to engage people in conversation, particularly to learn more about them—or “thin”—limiting communication to necessary service-focused topics—engagement (or both) and how and why, and (c) whether they would describe the relationship(s) as authentic and why or why not.¹⁹ Students were asked to complete the entries halfway through their time on the WSB and at the end of their time on the WSB.

I joined the WSB as a volunteer two days a week during the four-week period and rotated between the three different routes over that time. I checked-in with the students, route-leaders, and our school liaisons during those mornings and attempted to build my own relationships with elementary schoolers, student volunteers, and route-leaders. The route-leaders, an AmeriCorps member from our university’s Center for Community Engagement who walked each day on the WSB, and I also met up as a group twice for longer lunches to talk about how the routes were developing, learn from each other, process through any barriers or difficult issues/moments that were arising, and purposively think about if/how relationships were developing on their respective routes. I did all of this in the spirit of attempting to model keen interest and shared humanity for the students, central to the aspirational ideas of Ignatian pedagogy for instructors to be keenly aware of not only *what* instructors teach but *how* they model their behavior and enthusiasm in all their moments with students.²⁰

Methods

As an initial step in detailing what attempts at the imaginative and hopeful idea of authentic relationships look like “on the ground” in a CEL course, I inductively analyzed two student assignments from the spring 2023 sociology of education class of twenty-four students.²¹ Building authentic relationships, particularly through and across differences, are hopeful because they transgress the established structures of inequality in our society that often contribute to relationships not developing in the first place and/or those relationships only being based in “domination and subordination.”²² Such relationships are imaginative because each shared moment in the process of developing a relationship provides the opportunity to “analyze power, build coalitions, and develop empathy.”²³

First, I analyze the students’ relationship development journal in which in each student completed eight entries over the course of the semester. The first six entries allow for an analysis of student reflections on their six relational conversations with classmates. In the analysis below, I describe patterns from those entries. Additionally, the seventh and eighth entries provide data on *who* the students decided to write about (youth at the elementary school, a peer, a route-leader, etc.), *what* made the development of the relationship possible, *what* kinds of tactics the students used to develop the relationship, and *whether* they feel the relationship they described was authentic and *why*. Second, I analyze the “reflection on our semester” portion of the semester-long writing assignment, specifically the question: “One of the goals of this semester was to try to build authentic relationships. Do you feel like that happened for you? Why or why not? It’s absolutely okay if not!”²⁴

The class consisted of mostly juniors and seniors (80%), almost all the students were female-identifying (88%), and 36% of the students identified as students of color. Many students were sociology majors (44%), but psychology; community, language, and culture; environmental studies; business; and international studies majors were also represented in the class. The class took place at a Jesuit university in the western part of

the United States with about five thousand undergraduate students.

Analysis

Relational Conversations

Each student in the class was tasked with completing reflective journal entries after each of their relational conversations with six distinct peers over the course of the semester. The relational conversations, based on best practices employed by community organizers, provided students a model for how to (attempt to) engage in thick, immersive conversations with peers in hopes of building authentic connections. The entries asked students to describe “details, feelings, moments and/or thoughts that came up during or after your chat.”

Overall, 96% of all the entries completed by the students in the spring 2023 sociology of education course identified specific ways in which students made authentic connections through the relational conversations. Students also described how/why the connections that they formed mattered. Students regularly reported feelings of comfort, assuredness, relationality, relaxation (sometimes after initial anxiety), and a sense of community coming out of their relational conversations.²⁵ For instance, students offered:

“I noticed I felt relaxed. I truly cared and listened to what [they] had to say. I think that the idea of stopping for a moment in time and immersing oneself in genuine conversation with another is rare these days...For once I wasn't trying to think of the next thing to say, and instead just pay attention and let the conversation flow naturally.”

“I am always pleasantly surprised with how easy these conversations feel. I always get kind of nervous before relational conversations because I don't know what to talk about and I always feel like it is going to be awkward, but by the end of the conversation I am reminded of how pleasant it is to sit down with someone I have never met before and get to know them. Even though I forget it sometimes, I love making connections with

people and learning about what makes them the person they are.”

There were an array of subareas/topics that seemed to induce the feelings that students described. Two key themes were shared identities and/or biographical experiences with peers and shared drives/interests. For instance, students described:

“Our background is somewhat similar because of our Hispanic roots and hearing her talk about her roots was very heart-warming! It reminded me of the way I talk about my family and all that it entails...We talked for a very long time, around an hour and even more, I did not even notice because we were having a really good time. We also shared some pictures of our dogs and had conversations on how our houses looked like... Oh! And even stranger coincidence, turns out she is living *in the exact same room* that I was living in during sophomore year...It made me look forward to the next relational conversation.”

“I found that it was very easy to talk with her and we connected on how we both struggle at times to find community at [the university], which is something difficult for us to talk about because I believe a core attribute of [the university] is the community. I see many people around me with large groups of friends and people that are ‘their people,’ I have struggled to find this in college as well. While I am sad to know that Callen also feels this way at times, it was comforting to know I am not the only one...[They are] good at asking questions and getting others to open about themselves. It was easy to tell her things that I normally do not share with people because she is such a good listener and does not reflect any judgment.”

“I talked with Charlotte who is an absolutely lovely human. We talked about such a wide range of topics, from personal stories and experiences with family and growing up/who we were before we got to [college] and our plans/stresses/excitements of post-grad life. We talked about some fun topics that seemed light but led to deeper conversations and

connections that revealed more about who we are (music taste, favorite memories, interests/hobbies, if we've been in love before). I loved this conversation. It felt very easy, like we could talk about simple things that would easily lead into deeper topics that felt comfortable to discuss."

Some students also emphasized the social network connections that were established through their relational conversations either by learning of how there was a shared connection between the peer and themselves or by being introduced/connecting with other students before/after/during their relational conversations. For instance, a student noted, "Before we even got the chance to talk alone, he introduced me to like 5 of his friends, and was hyping me up to them so much!!! It was so kind, he has a special ability to forge connections not only between himself and others but also between his peers."

Other students highlighted how their relational conversation partner provided important mentorship/guidance on some portion of their life, especially regarding future-worries:

"It was surprisingly easy to talk to a new person about my anxieties regarding the future. I definitely want to remember that as college students, we're all kind of in the same boat. We all have to worry about school, work, and our futures, and it would do us a lot of good to talk to others about these things instead of keeping them to ourselves. [They were] a big help today for me, and I really hope I could do the same for her."

Students pointed out particularly noteworthy interactive traits in their relational conversation partners that they aspired towards. For instance, a student noted: "[We] connected on many levels and shared a lot of joy while also being able to be vulnerable with each other. I think that this was the most vulnerable conversation I've had through these relational chats, and I credit that to Silvie and her skills of being a very intentional listener."

Finally, many students took a step back in their journal entries to reflect more globally on how/why the relational conversations mattered for the class overall. The central theme for these

students was how the relational conversations shaped the development of community during the semester:

"I always enjoy getting to know new people, and our new journal groups are a great opportunity to build new relationships with the people we see in class and on the WSB every day. Without being assigned to do this, I don't think I would have had the same opportunities to make new friends and build new connections with the people I spend time with every single day."

"Something that I remember with all my relational conversations is the 'breakthrough' moment. This is the moment that both people instinctually transition the conversation from surface-level to relational. It's always fun when this moment happens because I know we've done the relational conversation correctly. Regardless of what we're talking about, there's always a moment where the beginning awkwardness of the conversation becomes more natural and easygoing. Relating this concept to our entire class, everyone having these moments means that across the board our class has probably gotten to know each other in ways other classes have not. Now that our original groups are mingling, these close relationships are becoming a matrix of sorts, and I think that's pretty neat."

Furthermore, students contrasted their experiences in the class with other classes they had taken previously and/or were in during the spring 2023 semester as a way of illuminating how the relational conversations mattered for their experiences:

"I have been enjoying these conversations because I feel often in these types of situations, professors have a certain level of academic speaking we are supposed to take part in. Often the conversations feel more about completing the task instead of getting to just be present and talk. I have found it refreshing to just get to sit and talk about random and sometimes stupid things, but I have found that I feel more connected to the class and my classmates because of these... I have found that I feel more connected to this

class and that we are focused on community rather than how much information we can jam into 50 minutes. While we are still learning, it feels much more fun to be in class and I find that I don't check my watch, which is something that tends to happen in other classes I take."

"Fun, quirky, seemingly small details about a person are what make up their identity beyond the point of introduction. I can say with confidence that I don't know such specifics about my neighbors in my other classes. But now, I feel like this entire class has bonded in a particular way that our environment is more welcoming than in most other classrooms. Even if I don't know someone across the room, the standard has been set that we talk to each other in this class."

"We also talked about something that doesn't end to amaze us, which is that we actually talk and if we see each other outside of class, we do say hello. We talked about how sometimes we are in the same classes with a lot of other people, and we might even talk inside the class, but then outside of class we don't acknowledge each other, as if we were

strangers. This has happened to both of us! I thought that this is how it usually goes for some (most) of my classes. I'm glad it is different for this class and that I was able to make some new connections!"

Connections to Peers, Route-Leaders, Youth, and/or Community Members

Halfway through their time on the WSB, the students were asked to complete their seventh entry in their relationship development journal in which they responded to the following prompt: "Think about your community-engaged learning experience so far and identify one or more person (youth at the elementary school, community members in the neighborhood or at the school, other students in our class, route-leaders, etc.) you've come to know more deeply this semester. a. Describe how your relationship has developed. What's made the development possible? b. Have you prioritized 'thick' or 'thin' (or both) engagement in the relationship(s) you've identified? Describe how and why. c. Would you describe your relationship(s) as authentic? Why or why not?"

Table 1. Connections to Peers, Route-Leaders, Youth, and/or Community Members

Midway point of WSB								
	Who?				Engagement style			Authentic?
	peer	youth	route-leader	community member	thin	both/combo	thick	
N	6	10	6	0	5	13	4	15
percentage	27%	45%	27%	0%	23%	59%	18%	68%
End of WSB								
	Who?				Engagement style			Authentic?
	peer	youth	route-leader	community member	thin	both/combo	thick	
N	5	13	2	1	6	7	8	16
percentage	24%	62%	10%	5%	29%	33%	38%	76%

Table 1 summarizes the overall patterns from the seventh and eighth student journal entries, which shared the identical prompt. At both the midway point (45%) and end (62%) of the WSB students opted into describing how they had deepened their connection to elementary school youth most frequently. Students provided details about the character of their relationships with the youth on

the WSB route and in the breakfast room at the elementary school. For instance:

"While I have only attended three mornings of walking so far, I can already recognize a connection with Alex. He and I happened to walk by each other for part of the walk during my first day, which allowed us time to talk

about any and everything. During this time, I asked him about his family—if he had siblings, if he was close to them, if he had any pets, etc. He shared with me that he has a handful of siblings, listing off all his brothers, sisters, and one non-binary sibling. I wasn't expecting Alex to say this—I'm not sure my brothers around his age would even know what that means. This was the first time I noticed how thoughtful and perceptive he is. Another important part of this conversation, which I believe opened the door to a better understanding of each other, is when I told him I also have half siblings. I technically have five half siblings, even though I consider all of them full siblings, which I told Alex, and he shared the same sentiment. When I told him about my situation and how I could understand where he was coming from, there was a split second where he looked at me, surprised by what I said. . . I learned that he is an avid joke teller, he loves cats and dogs, practices a witty sense of humor, and has a curious mind. Once we arrived at [the school], I went to sit down in an empty spot at one of the tables, not near anyone but I figured kids would find their way in. Once he grabbed his food, Alex immediately came and sat next to me. I did feel pretty cool that he chose to sit by me and continue our conversation."

"She came and sat down with me on my first day, and every day since then, she has come to sit with me without fail. She always sits on my right side and for the first two days, she said nothing, just had the largest smile I have ever seen. At first, I was frustrated, because I would ask questions of her, and she would just giggle. I was frustrated more in the idea that I thought I was doing something wrong and that is why she didn't want to talk to me. She was enduring, and without fail, she always comes to sit on my right side. Finally, one day, she started talking to me when I asked some of the other kids some questions, and she finally started talking. I was elated in this moment because she clearly felt comfortable enough to talk. From this point on, she without fail comes to me with her big smile and giggles. I think eventually figuring out that she was going to start talking to me when she felt comfortable enough was what allowed

this development to happen, and she enjoyed the first couple of days being able to just sit and smile at me. Now, whenever I leave the breakfast room, she gives me a hug and says she is going to miss me. I thoroughly enjoy our relationship."

In both the seventh and eighth journal entries, around a quarter of students described their deepening relationships with peers from the class. For some, they wrote about peers that they had come closer to through relational conversations and time in the classroom, sometimes deepened by time on the same route on the WSB. For others, they wrote about peers that they hadn't spent time interacting with until their time on the WSB:

"Someone who I've been able to develop a much deeper relationship with in our class is Nicole. And honestly this is all because of you Joe! We started getting close after our relational chat earlier in the semester, because we found that we have similar viewpoints on our futures and so now I just update her on all the big things going on. And since we started the WSB she's been on my route every day that she comes. We've tag teamed conversations with kiddos and helped each other out on the route. We always play eye spy together and when there's no kids around us, we always sneak in a 'how are you' or 'how was ___.' She's phenomenal with all of the kids and I always try to give her praise for the game ideas and conversation starters she comes up with!"

"One person I have developed a relationship with is Danielle. Going into the walking school bus, I did not know Danielle very well as we were never in the same group, so we never did any relational chats. However, as we are on the same route, we have gotten to spend time talking on the walking school bus. On our route, we do not have a lot of children which means the first 40 minutes of our walk are typically just us [volunteers], chatting and getting to know each other more. At first, I was a little disappointed that we did not have more children or as much time with the kids on our route. But now, I see how this

can actually be a gift as it allows me to get to know other route-leaders better.”

About a quarter of students opted into writing about a route-leader at the midway point of the WSB, but this fell to about 10% by the end of the WSB, as more and more students chose to write about youth instead:

“I want to talk about Sam! I’m lucky enough to be on the [same] route with her and I’ve appreciated every second of it. She’s such a genuine person and so easy to talk to that building a relationship with her has been really easy. She’s such an inspiration to me and the ease that she has with helping/supporting kids is genuinely something I look up to. She has such a contagious laugh and makes you look on the bright side of things. Since we started on this route, she’s been such a role model not just to the kiddos on our route but also to all of us volunteers. She always knows the exact right thing to say no matter the situation and I hope she knows how much we all value and appreciate her!”

“I think this semester I’ve really gotten to know Natalie super deeply. She is the route-leader for my route at the WSB, in my relational chat groups in class, and is in another one of my classes this semester. Our relationship has developed since last semester actually, when we were in the same group for a faith-based retreat in November, and we got to share things about our personal lives and beliefs with one another. I had never met her before, but it was a super unique experience to be able to share more deeply about myself with others that didn’t know me as well, and Natalie was a super supportive force in that group. Since then, we’ve had two classes together—this one and our other one this semester—and didn’t interact much at the beginning of the semester, mostly because we didn’t sit super close to each other in either class. However, since being in our relational chat group together and starting the WSB, I have gotten to know her even better, and have loved talking to her more often. This development has been possible largely because of this class, which is amazing because we get to talk in the vans, on our

route, and in class and have so much more in common to talk about. She has such a positive and wise outlook on life that it just makes each conversation so enjoyable, and she actually cares about my life and experiences, which is so genuine and kind.”

At the midway point of the WSB, students mostly used a combination of “thick” and “thin” engagement (59%) in how they contributed to developing the relationships with the people they described. In fact, more students used solely “thin” engagement (23%) than only “thick” engagement (18%) at that point. By the end of the WSB, however, this pattern flipped where the most common engagement strategy was “thick” (38%) with a combination of “thick and thin” (33%) and “thin” (29%) not far behind.

Students using a combination of strategies detailed why they found that combination most useful and in what times and circumstances they utilized some forms of engagement over others:

“One person I have gotten to know is Beckie, a third grader on my route. Beckie and I were able to chat a bit in the past routes but it wasn’t until today that I felt she really began to open up. All last week I noticed that she was often very tired and quiet. Because many other students on our route are more talkative, I noticed that she often got left out of the conversation or wasn’t paid as much attention to. Today, I wanted to make a conscious effort to reach out to her and learn more about her. In this way, I used thick engagement to ask her questions and try and get her to engage. Once we began to talk more and she opened up, the engagement was more thin, letting her take the lead on the conversation and discuss what she wanted to. The development of the relationship was made possible by finding common ground, allowing us to converse about things we both found interesting. We especially bonded over our shared love of animals. Beckie talked about how she grew up near a farm and loved being able to spend time with the cows, chickens, and goats. She also talked about how she and her brother would spend time exploring the forest and befriending deer. This really resonated with me as I worked on

a farm for two years during high school and similarly loved being able to spend time with animals. I also love spending time outside and exploring and think it is so special that Beckie shares that love despite growing technology use.”

“I think in Yolanda and I’s relationship I try to prioritize both ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ engagement. Towards the beginning of the WSB, I really prioritized thin engagement, as I mentioned earlier, asking her pretty surface level questions about herself. I didn’t want to push her too far too early in our friendship and ask her something she wasn’t comfortable sharing. However, as we spent more time together, she began to share different parts of her life with me without me even asking. This is when we began to dive into thicker engagement. She shared with me how her family gets food stamps, and that they need to buy ‘real food’ instead of snacks first so that they can be responsible. I’ve also been able to notice when she feels tired or maybe sad in the mornings, because she gets much quieter and tends to want to walk by herself. Thus, I think in this way I’ve been able to prioritize both thick and thin engagement depending on Yolanda’s attitude and mood that day.”

For students describing how they used only “thick” engagement strategies, they described specific reasons why they felt so deeply connected to the other person. For instance:

“I think what has made our development possible has been the fact that I have put extra effort into making her feel like I am someone she can trust, and someone who cares about her safety and well-being. She is a very sweet, caring little girl and I think I have made her feel appreciated, recognized, and validated. By checking in with her and asking her questions every day during breakfast, we have prioritized thick engagement in our relationship. I feel so glad that she finds me as a safe space to talk about what she is facing at home, because I want to be able to guarantee her safety and wellbeing as best as possible.”

“Tiana is so easygoing and friendly that talking to her has never been scary to me. So,

building a thick relationship has come relatively easy. I ask her questions about school and ask her for advice on what I should do in the coming years. We’ve talked about my family, relationship, most things that I would consider relatively thick. She talks about her job and studying abroad next year! And while not all of our conversations are super deep, I do know that if I needed someone to talk to or give me advice, Tiana wouldn’t turn me away.”

Conversely, in relaying how/why they utilized solely “thin” engagement students documented how the timing of the WSB, the uniqueness of interacting with elementary school youth, and concerns about making sure to keep things positive were all influential:

“I believe Kim and I have only ever engaged in thin engagement because we have not spent much time truly getting to know one another. While I could tell you about her favorite colors, what types of games she likes to play and the animals she likes, I do not know anything about her home life or what she experiences on a daily basis. I found this to be the case with many of the preschoolers whom I engage with, they are happy to be eating their breakfast and talking about all the silly questions I have for them.”

“I’ve prioritized mostly ‘thin’ engagement with Tom for a few reasons. First, it’s usually 7 AM when I get to talk to him, and no one’s in the mood to dig into deeper-level topics at that hour. Second, ‘thin’ engagement is more of what’s called for on the WSB. We’re there to have fun and bring joy to the kids as we drop them off at school. It would be a real downer if any of us talked about anything too serious. Plus, us volunteers want to have fun and make the WSB enjoyable for ourselves, too. I’ve found that ‘thinner’ conversation allows for lighter, happier discussions. For instance, I learned that Tom hosted four [prospective students] last weekend. I thought that one was a challenge, let alone four. It was neat getting to learn about someone else’s college experience, and it was made possible through more lighthearted engagement.”

Finally, most of the students described their relationships with the people they opted into writing about as authentic at the midway point (68%) and end (76%) of the WSB. In describing why they viewed the connections as authentic, students dug into reasons for why they felt they had achieved the aspirational idea of authenticity:

“Even though I prioritized thin engagement I truly believe our relationship was quite authentic. I just feel like I did not hide or lie about how I felt or what I was interested in. This often looked like me saying ‘Damian, I am very frustrated right now because...’ and ‘please listen because I love you and want to keep you safe’ (when he wanted to hang out in the middle of the road). On the flip side of this, I feel like he was very honest with me when he did not hide how difficult a morning he was having.”

“I would say that our relationship is authentic, originally, we were just placed in the same group and kind of were forced to talk to each other. But now that we aren’t in the same group, and we don’t have to be on the same route it’s meaningful that we’ve still kept the same relationship. We’ve grown close enough to talk about our romantic relationships, platonic relationships, and family. These are topics I would only really feel comfortable talking to someone about if I thought that we had a real authentic relationship.”

“I would definitely describe our relationship as authentic. I think when we talk about our lives or experience with one another we really listen and care about what the other person is talking about, which again, is rare in simple classmate relationships. But Nadia always has a follow up question or a word of advice to give, and I try to do the same, which I think really builds on the authenticity of our relationship. I think we’re also able to talk about the deeper things in life or problems within society and get each other’s perspective on those things which builds authenticity in our relationship because we’re able to get at how each other thinks. I’m super thankful to have built such an authentic and deep relationship with Nadia and I’m grateful for

the role of this class in helpful this relationship build.”

For the students that wrote about how they did not believe that the relationships they described were authentic, they often pointed to issues of time, age gaps, and/or that the connection felt somewhere between authentic and not:

“I find this question tough. I feel that I am trying to be as genuine and authentic as I can with Kyle. I am not trying to create a false narrative, but since the age gap is so large, I feel that it can come off as inauthentic. I think with more time, our relationship can become more authentic, but for the time being, I would say somewhere in the middle.”

“I would describe our relationship now as semi-authentic. When we started WSB, it wasn’t. We were both closer to other people and there wasn’t any big opportunity to form an authentic relationship. After Tuesday, I would say my relationship with Emma has shifted to semi-authentic. Are we best friends now? No. Will we go to [a meal] again before the year is over? Also, probably no. But that I was able to go beyond surface-level conversation with Emma, there’s an unspoken understanding that we just know more about each other now. It’s nice to know that you’ve made connections with people in your classes and that those people are around on campus even if you don’t see or talk to them every day.”

Authentic Connections Overall?

In the closing reflective portion of the students’ semester-long writing assignments, they were asked to describe why or why not they believed that they had built authentic relationships in general during the course of the semester. Nearly 90% of the students replied affirmatively and detailed why in a few distinct ways. One rationale for knowing that the relationships they detailed were authentic was how emotional they felt when presented with saying “goodbye”:

“I met [the youth] pretty late into Walking School Bus, and he wasn’t even on one of the routes. I enjoyed my time talking to him in the

mornings, and he quickly became a part of my routine. But when it came down to the last day with him, something came over me. I was so caught off guard by him telling me he was moving because I thought I had so much more time with him. When I found out I didn't I got super emotional. I hate saying goodbye. The fact that I struggled so hard to say goodbye shows me that I really authentically cared for that kid. Even writing this I'm getting emotional at the fact that our short time together is over. Another relationship that I'm really sad is coming to a close is with August. I wish I had more time with her because she is one of my most genuine friends and she has been since the first time that we talked. I was not only lucky to meet her in my group, but also have her on my route. One of my favorite memories that I will never forget is when it was just her and I one Monday morning, and we literally had 40 minutes to talk just the two of us. We were the given the space and time to exist together and chat freely. I took this one video of her smelling the flower on a tree and added it to my folder where I keep the memories I never want to forget. I will remember these relationships, and the ones not mentioned here, forever because of the impact they have had on me."

"Through the WSB I was able to meet such wonderful, joyous, little humans who are just big sweethearts. And I do believe that our relationships are authentic, we were able to have both surface-level and deep conversations learning about one another and remembering things about each other. And I will absolutely not forget walking April to class with Bianca on the second to last day where during our hug goodbye, April hugged us both at the same time saying that she didn't want to let go and that she'll miss us so much. I literally almost cried and tried so hard to hold my tears in. It was in this moment that I felt that our impact was real and special, and this I will forever cherish."

Other students cited their knowledge of specific, intimate details about others as explanation for why they knew that the relationships were authentic:

"I will end with a quote from my field notes that summarizes the emotions and the blessings I have received from this program. Halfway through the day, I smell the oranges on the tips of my fingers and I think of Sasha and the breakfast room. I think of the little hands that hold oranges larger than life, the little hands that give high fives and do 'breakfast room dances,' the little hands that do so many things each day that I do not see! The little hands that play in the yard with scooters, skates, soccer balls, and ring tosses. The tiny hands that are trusted into my hands, much larger than theirs. I think how lucky I am to be the one to open the [children's] oranges. I do not want to wave sad goodbyes to these tiny, precious hands, or to [the school], to the breakfast room, and especially to Sasha."

"I didn't realize how much just the act of walking to school is so special in making relationships. It offers a chance for conversation, sharing stories, and discussing various topics. The absence of distractions like electronic devices allows for meaningful interactions and the development of a stronger bond. Sometimes, we would whip out the occasional phone to listen to Imagine Dragons, but we would never let the technology be a vehicle for connection. And for a kid like Brandon, this was a big deal. He loved to talk about video games, phones, TVs and iPads...He would play this 20 questions game, where we would try to think of what he was thinking about, and more often than not he was something like a 'Samsung phone version 5', or some obscure piece of technology. Outside of school, Brandon seemed to live online. It offered him, I think, a sort of escape. Hearing from his mom that he was being relentlessly bullied—she explained to me one day that he found solace online. She didn't elaborate why, but I think the internet for these kids gives them a place where they can be in control, where they are powerful. But it made me so incredibly happy to see him bond with kids in real life. Have conversations not on a headset. I think that the WSB gave him an opportunity where he felt heard, seen and just good...feelings he had been craving. I will never ever forget our

last day, where we saw him on the corner wearing his red sweatshirt while the other kids and volunteers chanted his name. I think the real world became momentarily, a little more bearable on those morning walks.”

Many college students relayed that they knew that they had built connections because of the sense of community and comfort that they felt through all the time that they had spent together in and/or outside the classroom:

“The fact that we spent so much time connecting with each other in small groups, in relational conversations, and in the van on the way to Walking School Bus, enhanced my learning experience in a major way. Every day, I felt comfortable expressing emotion, being vulnerable, and sharing about myself with others in this class simply because I felt like I knew these people, and I trusted them enough to be myself around them. To me, this class has demonstrated the difference that building meaningful relationships with peers can have in a college class.”

“We went from strangers who didn’t know what we had in common or what to talk about to friends who were able to talk about our morning/route at almost any time of day. This was so much more beneficial than everyone completing a different CEL placement, as the sense of community and fellowship couldn’t have grown throughout this class. Thus, I was definitely able to build authentic relationships throughout the semester through relational conversations and spending time with classmates on the WSB routes and breakfast room. I genuinely feel closer with my classmates after this class and could talk to them about most things in my life—and I know they would be there to support me.”

The couple of students that didn’t believe that they had built authentic relationships over the course of the semester highlighted the age disparity between themselves and the WSB youth and the limited amount of time on the WSB as key reasons preventing them from forming the aspirational forms of connection:

“Do I believe that I created meaningful and transformative relationships? Absolutely. But personally, I do not feel that I created authentic relationships. I believe this statement because of many factors, such as age. Since many of these children I walked with are quite young, I often had to be a fun, but firm force to protect their physical safety. Also because of how young they were, I obviously couldn’t be my fullest and truest self, which wasn’t wrong the wrong choice. I think my relationship to the children I spent the most time with was incredibly meaningful to me, and hopefully them, but I don’t feel that it fits the requirements of my definition of authentic.”

Conclusion

In the preceding analysis I provide an initial descriptive account of students’ reflective thoughts as they aspired toward authenticity during a semester long CEL class—a goal foundational to Jesuit education, Ignatian pedagogy, and Catholic social teaching. The relational conversations were an important foundation for the semester to experience and practice thick engagement. Almost every student was able to recount specific ways they built authentic connections during their six chats. Students recounted key emotions (comfort, relaxation), they detailed what thematic areas were important (shared identities, biographical experiences, and drives/interests), and wrote eloquently about how the conversations mattered for building a distinctive sense of community in the class.

When given the opportunity to write about particular youth, peers, route-leaders and/or community members, students opted into writing about youth most frequently at the midway point and end of the WSB. The analysis provides rich student descriptions of key details that led to the development of the relationships between the students and youth, as well as other dyads.

Strikingly, thick engagement was the least used strategy by students in relationship building midway through the WSB. Most students used a combination of thick and thin, or simply only thin, early on. However, by the end of the WSB, purely


thick engagement was used by most students, with the other strategies close behind. As students thoughtfully described, there are an array of considerations that led them to use not simply thick engagement including the timing of the CEL placement, unique considerations when interacting with elementary school-aged children and the desire to keep interactions as joyful as possible. The student reflections uncover a nuanced understanding of the binary categories of thick vs. thin and authentic vs. transactional. They demonstrate that thin engagement often did not lead to transactional relationships and purely thick engagement sometimes did not lead to authentic relationships. These findings are important for thinking about how instructors guide students toward building relationships at different moments throughout the semester.

Most students believed the relationships they opted into writing about were authentic and provided instructive reasons for why. Similarly, the analysis details thoughtful explanations for why students believed the relationships they described were not authentic—thereby providing a thoughtful continuum of relationship possibilities between purely authentic and transactional. When asked to reflect on connections more generally throughout the course of the semester, almost all students believed they had formed authentic relationships. They detailed how their emotionally-rich responses to the end of the course, their knowledge of intimate details about others, and the overall feeling of community and comfort were all important indicators of authenticity.

This article provides previously undocumented descriptive accounts of one dimension of critical community-engagement: authentic relationships. In so doing, it fleshes out attempts at the aspirational idea of providing students steps towards justice through experiencing immersive learning through relationship development, understanding the world through course content, and imagining a more just and equitable world through critical reflection and application. Attempting to build authentic relationships through combinations of similarities and differences provides the experiential opportunity for students to tangibly imagine what a more connected, socially just world could look and feel

like. These experiential opportunities are vital for developing a social imagination because without imagining “social structures tend to appear more permanent and overdetermined than they in effect are.”²⁶ We need much more scholarship in this arena going forward. For instance, the data provided in this article come from a unique CEL site. How do student attempts at forming authentic relationships differ in interactions with other kinds of populations and different types of spaces? How do relationships comparatively develop and progress for students enrolled in introductory vs. intermediate vs. advanced kinds of courses?

Beyond authentic relationships, which, of course, are not the central focus of all CEL courses, we need detailed accounts of how students aspire toward the other two tenets of critical community-engagement: reducing power differentials and embodying a social change orientation.²⁷ Instructors who dedicate their CEL-based classes to one of these dimensions can provide important insights into how these aspirational ideas play out in the real world.²⁸ We also need accounts of how community members, students and instructors attempt to realize two or three of the critical community-engagement tenets in concert. How/why do tenets intersect in some moments, scenarios, or placements and not others?

There is so much possibility and hope in the realm of relationship-centered CEL because it provides the possibility for people to “bring the full resources of their combined humanity to the table and share them generously.”²⁹ Concentrating on learning more about how we attempt to put powerful social justice frameworks into practice helps us all to intentionally imagine how to contribute toward building a more just and equitable world, one relationship at a time. 

Endnotes

¹ I thank the elementary school youth and their families for inviting us into their neighborhood and teaching us each morning. I thank Sean Ahearn, Kathy Au, Lia Cunningham, Ariana Ford-Daily, Alyssa Gonzalez, McKenna Krey, Sarah Marr, Abigail Martin, Renne Richards, Liz Perez, Star Plaxton-Moore, and Randi Shaw for their unending dedication to the WSB program and/or exceptionally helpful feedback on initial drafts.

² Dan Hartnett, S.J., “The Justice Circle,” Ignatian Solidarity Network, accessed September 19, 2023, https://dev.ignatiansolidarity.net/immersion/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2012/08/hartnett_the_justice_circle.pdf.

³ Tania Mitchell, “Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models,” *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14, no. 2 (2008): 50.

⁴ “Characteristics of a Jesuit Education,” The Jesuit Institute, accessed September 19, 2023, <https://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Characteristics%20Abridged.pdf>.

⁵ “Ignatian Pedagogy,” Georgetown Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship, accessed September 18, 2023, <https://cndls.georgetown.edu/ignatian-pedagogy/>.

⁶ “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed September 19, 2023, <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching>; “Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach,” International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education, accessed October 16, 2023, https://www.sjweb.info/documents/education/pedagogy_en.pdf.

⁷ Mitchell, “Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning,” 50.

⁸ Hartnett, S.J., “The Justice Circle.”

⁹ Rev. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education, accessed September 19, 2023, <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/kolvenbach/>.

¹⁰ David M. Donahue and Star Plaxton-Moore, *The Student Companion to Community-Engaged Learning: What You Need to Know for Transformative Learning and Real Social Change* (Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2018), 59-61.

¹¹ Sarah Fouts, “When ‘Doing With’ Can Be Without: Employing Critical Service-Learning Strategies in Creating the ‘New Orleans Black Worker Organizing History’ Digital

Timeline,” *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (2020): 29-35.

¹² Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360.

¹³ “Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Society of Jesus, 2019-2029,” Jesuits Global, accessed September 21, 2023, https://www.jesuits.global/sj_files/2020/05/2019-06_19feb19_eng.pdf.

¹⁴ Hartnett, S.J., “The Justice Circle.”

¹⁵ “Industrial Areas Foundation,” Industrial Areas Foundation, accessed June 16, 2023, <https://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>.

¹⁶ Georgetown Center, “Ignatian Pedagogy.”

¹⁷ Donahue and Plaxton-Moore, *The Student Companion to Community-Engaged Learning*.

¹⁸ Hartnett, S.J., “The Justice Circle.”

¹⁹ Donahue and Plaxton-Moore, *The Student Companion to Community-Engaged Learning*.

²⁰ Georgetown Center, “Ignatian Pedagogy.”

²¹ Kristin Luker, *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mitchell, “Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning,” 50.

²² Patricia H. Collins, “Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 457-62.

²³ Mitchell, “Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning,” 50; Collins, “Toward a New Vision.”

²⁴ Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1994).

²⁵ All students names mentioned are pseudonyms.

²⁶ Hartnett, S.J., “The Justice Circle.”

²⁷ Sarah Fouts, “When ‘Doing With’ Can Be Without,” 29-38.

²⁸ Jason Wollschleger, Mark Killian and Kayla Prewitt, “Rethinking Service Learning: Reciprocity and Power Dynamics in Community Engagement,” *Journal of Community Engagement and Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (2020): 7-15.

²⁹ Rachel N. Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Blessings* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000).