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From Theory to Action: Integrating Project Management as a Pedagogical Framework for High-Impact Service-Learning in Large, Diverse Classes

Correy Retzloff

Abstract
Higher education constantly seeks pedagogies bridging theory and practice while cultivating civic responsibility. This study analyzes the MANA Service-Learning Project, a novel approach integrating "project management" theory into "organizational behavior" (OB) courses. Through structured phases, students apply OB concepts to real community needs. Over 4 years, this model engaged over 330 students, yielding over 2,200 volunteer hours and mobilizing more than $11,000 in resources for community partners. Drawing on course evaluations, student reflections, and partner feedback, the project demonstrated high student satisfaction with instructional clarity and engagement, while also highlighting significant gains in student learning, skills, and civic identity. A transparent, human-validated, AI-assisted thematic analysis supported qualitative integration across the entire cohort. This replicable framework, ideal for large classes and diverse first-generation/working student populations, enhances academic rigor, ensures tangible community benefits, and fosters impactful engaged scholarships.

Keywords: *civic engagement, experiential learning, higher education, project management, service-learning*

De la teoría a la acción: Integración de la gestión de proyectos como marco pedagógico para el aprendizaje y servicio de alto impacto en clases numerosas y diversas

Correy Retzloff

Resumen
La educación superior busca constantemente pedagogías que vinculen la teoría con la práctica y que fomenten la responsabilidad cívica. Este estudio analiza el proyecto de aprendizaje y servicio MANA, un enfoque innovador que integra la teoría de gestión de proyectos en cursos de comportamiento organizacional (OB) (por sus siglas en inlgés). A través de fases estructuradas, los estudiantes aplicaron conceptos de OB para atender necesidades reales de la comunidad. A lo largo de cuatro años, este modelo ha involucrado a más de 330 estudiantes, generando más de 2.200 horas de voluntariado y movilizando más de 11.000 dólares en recursos para los socios comunitarios. En base a evaluaciones de los cursos, reflexiones de los estudiantes y la retroalimentación de los socios comunitarios, el proyecto demostró un alto nivel de satisfacción estudiantil en cuanto a la claridad de la instrucción y el grado de participación; asimismo, resaltó avances significativos en el aprendizaje, las competencias y la identidad cívica de los estudiantes. Un análisis temático —transparente, validado por humanos y asistido por inteligencia artificial— permitió integrar los datos cualitativos de todo el grupo. Este marco de trabajo, que resulta replicable e idóneo para clases numerosas y poblaciones estudiantiles diversas —incluyendo estudiantes de primera generación y aquellos que estudian y trabajan—, refuerza el rigor académico, garantiza beneficios tangibles para los socios comunitarios y promueve una labor académica comprometida y de impacto.

Palabras clave: *participación cívica, aprendizaje experiencial, educación superior, gestión de proyectos, aprendizaje y servicio*

*Editors' Note: Translation provided by **Karla Díaz***
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Introduction

Higher education faces a persistent challenge: effectively bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application, while simultaneously nurturing civic responsibility. "Service-learning" (SL) is a powerful tool for this, yet scaling it for large courses while maintaining rigor and community impact remains difficult. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2025) broadly defines community engagement (CE) as a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources between higher education and communities in the context of reciprocity. Despite this ideal, inherent challenges arise when smaller, often underfunded, community organizations partner with large academic institutions, even with assumed reciprocity (Levkoe et al., 2023). For example, Welch (2016, 2019) argues that poorly constructed partnerships actually do more harm than good. This has spurred calls for "community-oriented approaches" prioritizing tangible benefits for partners (Butcher et al., 2011; Cronley et al., 2015; Levkoe et al., 2023; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Our model directly addresses these critiques by providing a structured "project management" (PM) framework that ensures projects are genuinely community first and focused on delivering quantifiable benefits.

This study presents the MANA "Service-Learning" Project, a pedagogical model refined over 4 years in organizational behavior (OB) courses. It integrates PM theory to engage students in real-world community service. This multiphase project has engaged over 330 students (Spring 2022–Spring 2025), contributing over 2,200 volunteer hours and mobilizing more than $11,000 in resources for local nonprofits.

The University of Texas at Arlington and its 42,000-student body provided the laboratory of context. Its diverse student body includes approximately 31% Hispanic, 31% White, 15% Black, and 13% Asian students, with 8% international students. Notably, nearly 60% of undergraduates are first generation (UTA News Center, 2024), and many are working professionals balancing employment alongside their studies (only 22.15% ages 18–21 years). This demographic context makes structured PM particularly vital—it honors students' real-world experience while providing the clear operational framework working learners need.

This study details the MANA "Service-Learning" Project's design, its theoretical foundations, and empirical evidence of its impact from student reflections, course evaluations, and partner feedback. We aim to answer two key research questions:

1. How does the PM framework influence students' application of OB theories in real-world contexts?
2. What challenges and opportunities exist for replicating this model in large-enrollment courses, particularly with a predominantly first-generation and working student population?

We argue this model offers a scalable and effective approach for fostering impactful engaged scholarship in large, diverse student populations.

Theoretical Framework

Our pedagogy is rooted in interconnected theories: experiential learning theory, SL (with critical evolution) theory, OB theory, and PM theory.

Experiential Learning Theory

The project aligns with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984): concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Our four phases—research, planning, execution, and reflection—directly map to this cycle. The research phase begins with concrete experience. Planning involves conceptualization and observation. Execution is active experimentation. The reflection phase demands synthesis, linking experience to abstract concepts. PM provides a structured scaffold for this integrative, reflective process, ensuring that the experience is not just service but a bounded, academically rigorous endeavor.

SL Theory

Our SL model builds on established best practices (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Welch, 2016, 2019) while addressing critiques of traditional models. Derreth (2024) argues that these models are often client based and transactional, inadvertently serving institutional narratives or enhancing student marketability, sometimes becoming the "kind face of the neoliberal university." This can foster a "business exchange" where students act as "experts" in isolation (Derreth, 2024). Our project's intentional design and pedagogical framework directly address these critiques.

In contrast, our project is a form of critical service-learning (CSL), which prioritizes social change, authentic relationships, and power redistribution (Derreth, 2024; Mitchell, 2008). Our pedagogical framework directly counters transactional dynamics by reframing PM tools not merely as technical efficiency mechanisms but as operational safeguards for CSL principles. Unstructured SL frequently imposes administrative burdens on underfunded community organizations when student teams lack execution discipline. By requiring formal planning documents such as scope statements, work breakdown structures (WBS), and risk mitigation logs codesigned alongside community partners, the PM framework elevates the nonprofit partner from a passive recipient to a primary project sponsor. This structure empowers partners to define strict operational boundaries, reject student scope creep, and demand quantifiable reciprocity, ensuring that project execution directly serves the community partner's self-identified priorities rather than student academic convenience.

Welch (2019) suggests that community-engaged teaching and learning must be carefully created with consideration for context, materials, design, impact, and purpose to create reciprocal partnerships. Our pedagogy intentionally challenges students to integrate personal values and emotional commitment with managerial theory, thereby "bridging the head and the heart." By requiring students to conduct in-depth research on community needs, engage in close collaboration with partners, and reflect theoretically, we move beyond a sole focus on technical skills. Central to our design is the emphasis on fostering genuine partnerships and advocating for a "community-first ethos" (Butcher et al., 2011; Levkoe et al., 2023).

Moreover, we strengthen this approach by integrating the concept of "kinship," which emphasizes building "multiple good relations" and practicing collective and critical care. This includes modeling empathy and reciprocity by treating the nonprofit as a partner rather than a subject of study, fostering true collaboration to cocreate solutions alongside the community (Chikkatur & Rombalski, 2025).

Our structured approach is especially important for our student population, which consists largely of first-generation undergraduates and working professionals. Our model recognizes the distinct experiential capital—including workplace resilience, practical problem-solving skills, and deep community ties that these students bring to the classroom. However, working professionals and first-generation undergraduates also navigate severe time restraints, competing employment obligations, and high expectations for immediate career relevance. Integrating structured PM tools addresses these specific student needs by replacing ambiguous, open-ended service hours with bounded, milestone-driven deliverables. By linking managerial theory to tangible community impact, the PM scaffold validates students' professional experiences while providing clear, efficient structures that honor their time constraints and accelerate their professional development.

OB Theory

The MANA Service-Learning Project serves as a living laboratory for applying core OB theories. The complex nature of community projects demands that students apply concepts like team dynamics, leadership, communication, motivation, decision-making, and conflict resolution. For instance, students must navigate Tuckman's five stages of team development (Tuckman, 1965) as they form, storm, norm, perform, and adjourn. Leadership and trait theories become tangible as students delegate tasks and manage project oversight. Communication and negotiation skills are tested as they interact with community partners and within teams. The reflection phase specifically asks students to analyze their experiences through the lens of these OB theories, transforming abstract classroom concepts into actionable understanding. This integration deepens disciplinary knowledge, directly addressing Research Question 1.

PM Theory

Our pedagogy's distinctive underpinning is the explicit integration of PM theory. We leverage its structured, phased approach suggested in the Project Management Institute's PMBOK Guide (2021) to guide student initiatives. The project life cycle (initiation, planning, execution, monitoring, closing) provides a systematic road map. The integration of PM doctrine explicitly addresses the "how" of achieving project success, equipping students with practical skills like risk management, contingency planning, and stakeholder engagement (Harrin, 2024).

The PM framework serves crucially as the mechanism through which students are compelled to apply and internalize OB theories, directly addressing Research Question 1. This integration is structured across the entire project life cycle. In the planning phase, the mandatory creation of PM deliverables forces students to confront core OB concepts: They must apply goal setting theory when identifying specific tasks, leverage team development theory to assign roles based on strengths, and utilize organizational contingency theory to proactively plan mitigation for potential team conflicts or communication breakdowns. Moving into the execution phase, which is managed via the formal project plan, real-world stressors like missed deadlines or partner changes inevitably arise. These challenges provide an authentic context for students to practice and test concepts like conflict resolution, leadership and trait theories (through delegation and peer motivation), and supportive communication with external stakeholders. Finally, the closure phase solidifies learning through mandated PM closing activities, where the reflection phase and peer evaluations facilitate a critical review of team effectiveness using OB frameworks such as Tuckman's Stages of Team Development and Self-Determination Theory analysis, connecting the concrete experience back to abstract classroom concepts.

By framing SL within this paradigm, students gain transferable professional skills alongside civic engagement, learning to manage complex tasks and achieving objectives. This structured approach helps manage logistical difficulties common in large-scale SL, a key aspect of Research Question 2.

Project Design and Implementation

The MANA Service-Learning Project is a cornerstone of the Contemporary Management Challenges classes, a required undergraduate OB course typically enrolling 35–70 students per section. The course environment at The University of Texas at Arlington consists of nearly 60% first-generation students, along with a large number of working students who bring diverse professional experiences. This project design specifically caters to this demographic by emphasizing real-world, hands-on applications and the development of marketable professional skills, making academic learning directly relevant to students' career aspirations. The College of Business's mission—to provide a transformative educational experience that is accessible to a diverse student population and prepares them to become business leaders—is directly reflected in this project.

The overarching project goal is to provide a service that communicates the university's values and improves the surrounding community. Specific project outcomes are designed to enhance classroom learning, promote team and professional development, cultivate civic responsibility, improve the surrounding community, foster constituent support, and develop adaptive leadership skills.

Teams of 4–5 students are assigned alphabetically by the instructor, fostering diverse collaboration. This intentional strategy creates varied team compositions, mirroring diverse professional environments and encouraging interaction among individuals who might not otherwise connect. No direct financial investment is required from the course; teams creatively leverage nonmonetary assets. The project, documented for graded presentations, unfolds in four phases:

> Phase 1: Research (initiation and scoping): Students select a "values-aligning" nonprofit partner from the university's vetted database, identify stakeholders, conduct interviews, and define the project scope. To establish mutual reciprocity from the outset, student teams must conduct structured scoping interviews with nonprofit leaders to cocreate project objectives, establishing clear operational boundaries and partner sign-off before planning begins.

Phase 2: Planning (detailed planning): Teams develop and present their feasibility study, including a problem definition, proposed solution, target beneficiaries, resource assessment, risk analysis, timeline, and measurement of success. This involves WBS and detailed scheduling. To ensure project success, instructors must provide honest feedback, sometimes reducing project scope.

Phase 3: Execution (implementation and monitoring): Teams execute their plan, documenting progress, tracking milestones, and obtaining community testimonials while applying OB theories to delegation and problem-solving. To support unique team challenges, dedicated coaching time must be established.

Phase 4: Reflection (project closure and lessons learned): Students deliver the project, write a three-page reflection paper, apply at least two course theories, and complete peer evaluations, serving as a project postmortem and answering the "so what" for the project.

Methodology for Assessing Impact

To evaluate the MANA Service-Learning Project's effectiveness, we employed a mixed-methods approach, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data collected over four academic years.

- **Participants/context:** Our study participants included students enrolled in MANA OB courses (Spring 2022–Spring 2025) at UTA. Class sizes ranged from 35–70 students per section, yielding a total cohort of 330 students across over 100 project teams.
- **Data sources:**
  - Student reflection papers and course artifacts: Primary qualitative data were captured across the entire student cohort (n = 330). To balance corpus-wide breadth with rigorous qualitative depth, data analysis operated on two complementary levels. First, the complete textual corpus of student submissions—including project proposals, feasibility studies, update memos, reflection papers, and open-ended course evaluations—was absorbed for thematic mapping. Second, to conduct intensive line-by-line qualitative analysis, a stratified random sample of five full-length reflection papers per course section (n = 40) was selected for manual deep coding using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework.
  - Instructor observations/field notes: Systematic observations of team dynamics, coaching sessions, and lab interactions recorded throughout each semester.
  - Community partner feedback/testimonials: Formal and informal feedback on project impact and partnership quality. All collected testimonials were used.
  - Student course evaluations: Both qualitative (open-ended comments) and quantitative data (scaled items) from anonymous end-of-semester course evaluations downloaded from the university's Canvas database.
- **Data analysis approach:** Qualitative data across all sources (reflections, project artifacts, testimonials, and course comments) were analyzed using a hybrid human–AI thematic integration method. To process the large volume of student textual data efficiently without sacrificing qualitative nuance, thematic categorization was facilitated using a custom Python script interfacing with the large language model (LLM).

  The AI-assisted analytical workflow followed a structured, three-step protocol to ensure analytical rigor:

  1. Preparation and upload: All raw student submissions, project artifacts, and qualitative evaluation comments were anonymized and uploaded as standardized text files into the LLM platform environment.
  2. Prompting architecture and categorization: The custom Python script executed prompts instructing the model to parse textual excerpts; identify explicit applications of OB theories (e.g., team dynamics, leadership, conflict, motivation); categorize instances of PM tool usage (e.g., WBS, risk planning); and extract expressions of civic identity growth.

3. Human validation and quality audit: To guard against automated misclassification, context loss, or AI "hallucinations," a strict human-in-the-loop verification audit was conducted. The primary researcher manually cross-examined over 50% of the raw qualitative quotes assigned to each AI-generated thematic cluster against the original student documents. Any misattributed or ambiguous excerpts were manually re-coded or excluded, establishing high qualitative validity and ensuring that the final themes authentically reflected student experiences.

- **Ethical considerations:** This study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical research standards. The research involved a secondary analysis of de-identified educational records, student project artifacts, and administrative course evaluations for routine educational research. All student names, individual identification numbers, and specific team designations were fully removed prior to data incorporation and qualitative coding to ensure participant privacy and data confidentiality.

Findings/Observed Impacts

Our findings provide robust evidence addressing both research questions, illustrating how the PM framework influences the application of OB theories and highlighting the challenges and opportunities for replicating this model, particularly within a large, diverse student population.

Tangible Community Impact and Partner Engagement

Over four academic years, the project engaged over 330 students, yielding significant contributions:

- **Collective resource mobilization:** Students contributed over 2,200 volunteer hours and mobilized over $11,000 for partners.
- **Diverse project outcomes:** Over 100 unique projects addressed various needs:
  - Health: Carter Blood Center (Spring 2022) secured 70 units of blood.
  - Awareness: Serenity Hospice Care (Fall 2022) saw social media redevelopment and increased outreach.
  - Direct support: Cards for Cubs (Spring 2023) received 27,000 cards beyond goal. Mission Arlington (Spring 2023, 2025), Arlington Charities, Tarrant County Food Bank, Dallas Immigration, and Prairie Paws Animal Shelter (Spring 2025) were supported.
  - Strategic marketing: Communities in Schools (Fall 2024) received a marketing brochure; For Love & Art (Fall 2024) received a scholarship for student efforts.
- **Direct partner feedback:** The Director of Mission Arlington praised students (Spring 2023):

  > What a blessing it must be to work with UTA students every day. . . . They had done their research, and knew what they were talking about; 2) They were organized. . . . 3) They were practical. . . . 4) They had an effective communication style. . . . 5) They left me with a copy of their presentation, some options for future training, and an invitation to communicate with them if I had any other questions . . . they spoke in first person plural, as if they were part of Mission Arlington's team. . . . Working with each of the student teams has been a blessing.

This feedback highlights how the project's structured approach translates to valued professional outcomes for partners, reflecting the Carnegie Foundations' mutually beneficial exchange (Levkoe et al., 2023).

Enhanced Application of OB Theories and Skill Development (Addressing Research Question 1)

Qualitative data from student reflection papers, analyzed with AI-assisted thematic integration, consistently revealed profound impacts on student learning, skill development, and personal growth, directly linking to the explicit application of course theories. The PM framework served as a critical scaffold, directly influencing students' ability to apply OB theories in real-world contexts.

Goal Setting and Motivation

Students frequently applied SMART goals, demonstrating how effective project planning directly impacted their motivation. As one student articulated, "Setting specific and achievable goals at the planning stage made our team motivated to see them through." This aligns with recent findings that clear team goals are a key enabler of superior team performance and motivate concentrated effort and persistence (Tyulkubayeva et al., 2025).

Self-Determination and Persistence

The project cultivated self-determination, particularly when teams faced setbacks. As one student reflected, "It was much harder to help the community partner than we thought, we just had to keep trying to reach our end result." PM's goal-oriented nature provided a clear path for students to channel this persistence, reinforcing principles from self-determination theory that show how fostering workplace conditions where employees feel supported in their autonomy leads to greater persistence, effort, and engagement (Manganelli et al., 2018).

Team Development (Tuckman's Stages)

Reflections explicitly referenced Tuckman's stages (forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning), showing how the phased PM provided a natural context for team evolution. The East Recreation Center Group noted, "Seeing the development in our group made the class discussion more realistic." This demonstrates how project managers can apply knowledge of these phases to handle team challenges and advance team happiness, productivity, and success throughout a project life cycle (Wood, 2024).

Negotiation and Conflict Resolution

Students applied negotiation and conflict resolution theory to real-world project issues, such as securing donation locations. The Pawsitive Impact Group shared a unique challenge, stating, "We didn't realize how hard it would be to get authorization to ask stores for donations. We couldn't even stand outside most of their stores." These instances highlight the practical application of conflict management skills, which are essential for maintaining team cohesion and enhancing project efficiency (Harrin, 2024).

Analytical Problem-Solving and Adaptability

Students consistently emphasized developing strong analytical problem-solving skills and adaptability. A Mission Arlington Group reflected, "Things do not go as planned. Adaptability was particularly important because some challenges needed a quick solution, so we had to act effectively on our feet when collecting donations." PM's iterative nature inherently fostered these adaptive capabilities, aligning with the increasing demand for project managers to be flexible, deploy critical thinking, and use professional judgment in dynamic environments (Chiner, 2024).

Communication and Collaboration

Effective communication emerged as a critical lesson from every reflection. The Noggin Educational Foundation Group emphasized, "The biggest takeaway from this project was everyone needed to be on the same page and know what the next steps were." Supportive communication theory proved crucial for team cohesion, especially within diverse, alphabetically assigned teams, echoing OB theoretical insights that effective communication is vital for managing diverse work groups, overcoming obstacles, and ensuring clear information flow between stakeholders and project teams (Al Harrasi, 2025).

Leadership Development

Students readily took ownership, with the PM structure providing clear opportunities for leadership roles. One Bass Hall Group member highlighted appreciating how other teammates looked to them for support.

This supports recent OB and PM literature that emphasizes the importance of self-leadership, employee empowerment, and a shift toward more distributed, collaborative, and networked leadership models in dynamic project environments (Al Harrasi, 2025; Project Management Institute, 2021).

Real-World Application and Career Readiness

Students viewed the project as an opportunity to experience teamwork, planning, and execution in preparation for their future careers. One student even mentioned in their course evaluation, "The 'service-learning' project was the best thing I have done in my college career." A few notable outcomes were that a student receiving a summer internship offer from their SL partner, United Rock, and one receiving full-time employment at the For Love & Art Foundation, highlighting the direct career benefits of the project. These experiences align with essential "power skills" for effective project performance, such as adaptability, critical thinking, communication, resilience, creativity, emotional intelligence, and leadership (Wood, 2024). Additionally, the project creates a "cubist space" where diverse perspectives are valued. This environment fosters plurality and reciprocity in knowledge creation, allowing students to embrace both roles of "knower" and "learner" (Lawton-Sticklor et al., 2025).

Effectiveness in Large-Class Settings and Opportunities/Challenges for Replication (Addressing Research Question 2)

The PM framework proved highly effective in managing and scaling SL for large-enrollment courses, while also highlighting specific opportunities and challenges inherent in this model, particularly with a predominantly first-generation and working student population.

Opportunities for Replication in Large Classes

Consistent success across multiple large sections demonstrates the scalability and robustness of the PM framework for "SL." The clear phased structure and defined deliverables, combined with the instructor's oversight (e.g., coaching teams through unique challenges), help overcome common logistical hurdles for large classes, providing a clear road map adaptable across diverse projects and partners. The alphabetical team assignment further facilitates diverse collaboration within large classes, exposing students to varied backgrounds and perspectives from the outset.

Opportunities with First-Generation and Working Students

The student body—largely working and first generation—brings resilience, practical experience, and a deep understanding of community needs that significantly enrich SL outcomes. For instance, one team shared, "We chose to partner with the Tarrant Women's Shelter because one of our teammates once stayed there as a child." This level of lived experience brings an authentic perspective to societal challenges, fostering a deep personal commitment to project success. Furthermore, hands-on application resonates strongly with students focused on marketable career skills. As one participant noted, "The most helpful part for me was actually doing the project because it provided a real-world scenario for being a project manager. . . . I think this hands-on experience helped me learn the most." This outcome directly challenges critiques that traditional SL emphasizes technical skill development over "collaborative social problem-solving" (Derreth, 2024). Instead, structured project deliverables honor working students' time while transforming their real-world insights into academic self-efficacy.

This model empowers students by recognizing their existing real-world knowledge and offering structured pathways for professional application. It also prepares them for a changing workplace, including the emergence of Generation Z, new work models (such as hybrid arrangements), and evolving technologies like AI (Chiner, 2024). Furthermore, by valuing knowledge produced by youth, the project shifts away from being a "benevolent" space where youth participation seems beneficial only to them. Instead, it creates a reciprocal environment that fosters personal growth and learning for adults as well (Lawton-Sticklor et al., 2025).

Challenges for Replication

The challenges of replication are as follows:

1. Team dynamics management: While the PM framework provides tools (e.g., peer evaluations), managing group dynamics, including "social loafing" and conflicting schedules, remains a consistent challenge in large teams. Student comments sometimes reflected this: "I do not agree with group projects. I do not think they are fair, because we are each in charge of paying our own tuition and our grade should not be put in jeopardy because of other people. That is my only complaint with this class." and "I think smaller groups might make it easier to complete the project. . . . 5 students makes coordinating aspects of the project a little more challenging due to everyone's schedule." Explicit mechanisms and instructor intervention are necessary to mitigate these issues, especially in alphabetically assigned, diverse teams where preexisting relationships are not a factor. The course directly addresses social loafing with a clear policy allowing a "fired" individual to be required to complete the entire group project as an individual submission, emphasizing accountability and promoting early communication within groups. Poor communication, a lack of stakeholder engagement, and insufficient resources are identified as key disablers of project performance (Wood, 2024), underscoring the importance of the project's focus on these areas.
2. Initial partnering flexibility: Some teams faced initial setbacks with community partners, for example, Tender Heart Hospice Group specifically discussed their difficulties securing support locations. Replicating the model requires instructors to build flexibility and contingency plans for partner selection and logistical approvals, which can be time-consuming. On rare occasions, partners will cancel their project support midsemester, adding additional challenges. The experience of one student team, whose digital product for a community partner faced unexpected challenges and delays, explained, "We've been slowly making progress. . . . The mobile version and Gallery feature have presented some unexpected challenges," highlighting that real-world projects can be messy and require adaptability beyond initial planning. This underscores the importance of the problem-solving and adaptability skills fostered by the project. This highlights the importance of robust risk and contingency management, a core PM skill (Harrin, 2024).
3. Consistent promotion (for specific events): Promotional planning was a common issue; a Prairie Paws Team commented, "One major issue we encountered in this project was the lack of promotion for the food drive, which ultimately resulted in low attendance. We did not anticipate the challenges involved in obtaining permission to hold the food drive at UTA." Achieving successful outcomes requires thorough research, careful planning for external communications, and strict compliance with institutional policies. This phase aligns with the critical tradition of program planning theory (PPT), which views planning as a social process that involves negotiating power and interests to create social change, rather than simply following a linear set of steps (Price et al., 2025).
4. Dedicated class time for problem-solving: A crucial lesson learned throughout the project's evolution was the importance of dedicating specific class time to discuss project challenges and provide real-time feedback. It became clear that each project and team faces unique obstacles that must be addressed promptly to navigate unforeseen difficulties and ensure student success. This approach emphasizes the need for effective leadership that fosters open communication, trust, and collaboration. Additionally, having a well-defined project plan with clear milestones and regular progress reviews is essential (Wood, 2024). Furthermore, this experience underscores the value of intentional reflection on "planning orientations," which can enhance community–academic partnership practices. It is important to recognize that the details of planning work are integral to partnership practice in action and cannot be reduced merely to logistics (Price et al., 2025).

Supportive Pedagogical Environment and Instructor Effectiveness (Supported by Course Evaluations)

Beyond the direct community outcomes of the "SL" projects, end-of-semester course evaluations offer critical empirical evidence regarding course design and instructional scaffolding. Complex, real-world experiential projects in large-enrollment courses often introduce significant student anxiety and team friction, which can negatively impact student course evaluations. However, quantitative evaluation data across multiple semesters demonstrate that structuring experiential learning within a clear PM framework—supported by high instructor availability (mean 4.75/5.00) and explicit expectations (mean 4.75/5.00)—mitigates student friction and maintains high instructional satisfaction. Key metrics from course evaluations, with scores based on a 5-point scale where 5 = *strongly agree* and 1 = *strongly disagree*, consistently demonstrate the instructor's performance:

- Clear objectives and expectations (Mean 4.75): The instructor clearly defined and explained course objectives, project milestones, and evaluation rubrics.
- Instructor preparation (Mean 4.81): Structured lab activities and project guidance were consistently prepared to scaffold student team execution.
- Encouragement of active learning (Mean 4.79): Students were empowered to take an active, self-directed role in managing their community partnerships.

The consistently high average scores for all assessed instructional attributes highlight that the "SL" projects were more than just assignments. They were supported by a solid pedagogical framework that included clear guidance, careful preparation, effective communication, and a conscious effort to empower students as active participants in their learning experiences. This supportive environment is crucial for successfully applying PM principles and fostering leadership and civic responsibility among a large, diverse student body.

The high ratings for instructor effectiveness, particularly in areas such as communication and promoting active learning, play a significant role in creating positive team cultures. In these cultures, team members feel valued, supported, and motivated—essential factors for achieving superior project performance (Wood, 2024). Additionally, this environment supports the "joy" principle of the cubist framework, ensuring that collective learning is not only an intellectual experience but also one that is joyous and embodied (Lawton-Sticklor et al., 2025).

Discussion

Interpretation and Link to Theory

This process exemplifies the concept of praxis—the dialectic between theory and practice. The students' engagement with the PM framework moves beyond a mere application of skills; it is a reflective cycle of action and learning that deepens their understanding of OB concepts and their role as engaged citizens. Our findings strongly affirm the power of experiential learning, particularly when structured by a robust framework like PM. The deliberate design of the project's phases—research, planning, execution, and reflection—provides a clear structure for students to engage with Kolb's experimental learning cycle. This approach transforms abstract OB theories into concrete experiences and actionable insights, addressing the need for effective pedagogical strategies that move beyond passive learning.

Moreover, this model serves as a practical counterpoint to traditional critiques of SL. It illustrates how applying PM principles ensures that projects remain genuinely "community first" and relationship centered—rather than transactional or client based. By utilizing PM deliverables as protective scaffolds, student teams operate within community-defined boundaries, directly mitigating administrative burden and scope creep for partner organizations (Derreth, 2024; Levkoe et al., 2023). This structure transforms technical management tools into instruments of power redistribution, empowering nonprofit partners as true project sponsors rather than passive recipients. Paired with structured communication protocols—such as formal status reporting, transparent feedback loops, and clear expectation setting (Retzloff, 2023)—

students build authentic, trusting relationships with community partners. Ultimately, this approach resists the "neoliberal individualizing of structural problems" (Derreth, 2024) and aligns with "kinship" as a practice of critical, collective care, advancing a more nuanced model for nonextractive community–university partnerships (Chikkatur & Rombalski, 2025).

To reconcile the apparent tension between a strict team "dismissal" policy and a CSL ethos grounded in kinship and collective care (Chikkatur & Rombalski, 2025), the project incorporates a multitiered predismissal mediation protocol. Recognizing that conflict in diverse, randomly assigned teams is a natural component of Tuckman's "storming" stage, the instructor provides active scaffolding—including structured check-ins, peer feedback reviews, and guided conflict resolution sessions—to help teams restore functioning. Dismissal serves strictly as an operational mechanism of last resort. Within a kinship framework, true collective care extends beyond internal team harmony to encompass responsibility toward the community partner; allowing persistent "social loafing" to jeopardize a nonprofit deliverable exploits the partner's trust. Thus, predismissal mediation honors relational growth among students, while the dismissal safeguard protects community partners from administrative harm and operational disappointment.

Beyond navigating group friction, the rich qualitative data from student reflections detail their application of theories such as goal setting, self-determination, and Tuckman's team development. These reflections illustrate how the PM framework influenced their use of OB theories in real-world contexts (Research Question 1). For example, the structured planning phase required students to consider resource allocation (an OB concept) in a practical, project-oriented manner, making the theory tangible. Navigating real-world team conflicts during execution provided an authentic context for applying conflict resolution strategies. The consistent positive feedback from community partners, such as Mr. Jim Burgin of Mission Arlington, offers empirical validation of the project's adherence to principles of reciprocity and mutual benefit, which are cornerstones of effective community–campus engagement (Levkoe et al., 2023). The praise for student research, organization, practicality, and communication reflects the professional skills fostered by the PM framework.

Addressing the "So What" for Audience

Implications for Scholars/Researchers

This work contributes to the literature by demonstrating how PM theory serves as an effective pedagogical backbone for SL in large, diverse courses. To build on these findings, future research could explore the longitudinal impacts of this framework on the career trajectories and civic engagement of first-generation and working students or use comparative studies to isolate its specific effects against traditional models. Academics might also examine how specific OB theories apply across different project types. Methodologically, using AI for qualitative data synthesis offers a novel, rigorous way to efficiently extract recurring themes from large volumes of student reflections. Notably, this study represents the first application of the "cubist framework" in a business school setting; future inquiry could extend this lens to examine how youth-produced knowledge is valued within multigenerational SL spaces (Lawton-Sticklor et al., 2025). Finally, incorporating PPT would allow researchers to analyze broader "planning orientations," capturing the mindsets, interests, and contexts of all stakeholders rather than focusing solely on program administrators (Price et al., 2025).

Implications for Teachers/Practitioners

The MANA Service-Learning Project provides a highly replicable and scalable model for designing rigorous and impactful "SL" experiences. Its structured phases, clear deliverables, and emphasis on both academic theory and practical application make it particularly well suited for large-enrollment courses engaging first-generation and working students, who benefit from bounded deliverables that respect their time constraints while building on their real-world experience (addressing Research Question 2). While challenges such as managing complex group dynamics and unforeseen logistical hurdles exist, the PM

framework offers concrete tools to tackle these issues—including structured predismissal mediation during the storming stage—making the model more feasible for implementation across institutions. The alphabetical team assignment is a straightforward yet effective strategy for fostering diverse group collaboration without relying on student self-selection. Additionally, dedicating class time to addressing project-related issues and providing ongoing feedback is crucial for supporting teams through real-world complexities, as our experience has shown.

Positive course evaluation data further demonstrate that it is possible to maintain high instructional quality while implementing a complex "SL" project. Educators can adapt this model to ensure student learning is deeply integrated with tangible community benefits, cultivating both professional competence and civic responsibility. By equipping students with essential PM skills, the project prepares them for future challenges, such as adapting to new workforce generations, evolving work modalities, and the impact of smart technology. This effort actively contributes to developing organized, efficient, and resilient individuals (Chiner, 2024; Harrin, 2024).

Practitioners should also consider the "kinship" framework to nurture shared goals, deepen understanding, and resist the gamification of community-building activities that do not yield material benefits for partners (Chikkatur & Rombalski, 2025). Providing explicit attention to and reflection on "planning orientations" can enhance professional development for service-learning and community engagement. This reflection helps practitioners recognize, examine, and modify their internalized approaches to program planning, ultimately fostering greater integrity, accountability, and authenticity in community–academic partnerships (Price et al., 2025).

Limitations

While this study provides compelling evidence, it is not without limitations. Our qualitative assessment relies primarily on a stratified random sample ($n = 40$) for manual deep coding alongside LLM corpus-wide thematic mapping ($n = 330$), supplemented by instructor field observations and community partner testimonials, rather than formal pre-/postintervention quantitative surveys measuring student learning gains. The generalizability of findings, while strong for a large, diverse urban university context, may vary for institutions with different student demographics or CE infrastructures.

Challenges inherent in group work, such as managing team development, conflicting schedules, or occasional unequal workload distribution, while addressed by project design (e.g., coaching, peer evaluations, "firing" policy), remain a complex aspect of collaborative learning, representing a key challenge for replication (Research Question 2). Finally, while utilizing AI for corpus-wide qualitative data synthesis offered significant analytical efficiency, it required strict human-in-the-loop audit protocols—specifically cross-examining over 50% of automated thematic assignments against original source documents—to ensure contextual accuracy and prevent algorithmic misattribution.

Future Research Directions

Previous research has highlighted several key areas, including longitudinal studies, comparative studies, and in-depth examinations of community partner impacts using metrics such as the community benefit survey (Gendle et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a need for specific research focusing on the unique learning pathways for first-generation and working students within this model. Building on our hybrid qualitative framework, future studies should employ pre–post quasi-experimental designs comparing project-based sections against non-SL control cohorts. Specifically, researchers should utilize validated psychometric tools such as the Civic engagement scale and the leadership efficacy index to quantitatively track individual learning gains across civic identity, collective efficacy, and leadership competencies over time. Further research is also warranted to formally evaluate and validate human-in-the-loop AI methodologies for qualitative analysis in large-scale educational datasets. Finally, scholars should investigate whether integrating PM scaffolds into other academic disciplines similarly functions as an operational safeguard that protects community partners from administrative burden and scope creep.

Conclusion

The "MANA Service-Learning Project" stands as a powerful example of how integrating PM theory into OB coursework can create a truly transformative educational experience. This pedagogy moves beyond traditional methods, providing students with unique opportunities to apply their knowledge, develop essential professional skills, and make tangible contributions to their communities. By framing technical PM tools and processes as operational safeguards for CSL, this model ensures that student learning directly aligns with authentic community-defined needs and power redistribution. Through structured project phases, explicit links to OB theories, and authentic community partnerships, the project fosters a profound sense of civic responsibility and prepares students to become impactful leaders. The consistently high mean average scores on course evaluations further attest to the quality of this pedagogical approach and the supportive learning environment provided. Ultimately, by bridging the gap between theory and practice, and by empowering students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are first generation and working, this project not only enhances academic understanding but also cultivates engaged, responsible, and impactful citizens and provides a clear, scalable road map for other scholars and educators to replicate high-impact CE.

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