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Embracing a Möbius strip metaphor and a critical reflection framework to explore personal barriers to service-learning

Amy L. Kenworthy [a,*], Brent Snider [b], Sue Cronshaw [c], Peggy L. Hedges [b], Long Le [d], Fahd Jamil [e]

[a] Bond University, University Drive, Robina, Queensland, 4226, Australia
[b] Haskayne School of Business, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 1N4, Canada
[c] Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, LiverpooL, L3 5UG, UK
[d] Santa Clara University, Leavey School of Business, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara, CA, 95053, USA
[e] University of California Irvine, 510 E Peltason Dr., Irvine, CA, 92697, USA

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ABSTRACT

Over the past thirty years, community engagement has increasingly become an important pedagogical tool for higher education practitioners. One of the most frequently utilized ways of embedding this into course design is through a practice called service-learning which provides students with opportunities to explore, engage, and contribute to the communities of which they are a part. Although service-learning projects and programs have the potential to respond to society's most pressing needs, for some educators, this promise may be hindered by perceived personal and institutional barriers. To explore these barriers, our research group engaged in collaborative ethnography over a two-year period to nurture a space of collaboration, insight, and vulnerability. We explored two macro level categories of barriers – personal and institutional – before identifying four sub-themes within the personal category: life balance, reputational risk, cancel culture, and student reality. Our findings contribute to theory by demonstrating how the use of a Möbius strip metaphor, when viewed through four critically reflective lenses, helps educators to explore and understand the "wholeness" of the intertwining relationships between our perceived internal and external barriers to service-learning engagement.

> "There are so many intersecting tensions I am experiencing right now – the world is becoming increasingly fractured and there is so much conflict, fear, and hate. It is such an important time to have our students engage with, explore, and seek to understand what is happening around them – to be motivated by, included within, and feel like they are agents of change who hold responsibility for addressing those things. On the other side, there are enormous pressures on us as well as institutional barriers and personal vulnerabilities that we're experiencing. Sometimes it becomes overwhelming and seemingly impossible to do the things we know are right." *(group member reflection)*

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: akenwort@bond.edu.au (A.L. Kenworthy), brent.snider@haskayne.ucalgary.ca (B. Snider), s.cronshaw@ljmu.ac.uk (S. Cronshaw), hedges@ucalgary.ca (P.L. Hedges), lle@sdu.edu (L. Le), dba16fj@mail.wbs.ac.uk (F. Jamil).

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1. Introduction

Teaching approaches in the higher education sector have evolved, influenced by factors such as increasing global competitiveness (Harrison et al., 2020), digitization (Selkrig et al., 2024), sustainability (Shapiro Beigh, 2025), disconnection (Kenworthy et al., 2025), and crisis (e.g., natural disasters, financial, health) which include those stemming from entrenched geopolitical conflict and war (Hadad, 2025). Taken together, these complex and intertwined issues which influence our teaching and learning environments necessitate shifts towards engaging students in "deepened and widened understandings" of their environments and (re)shaping our higher education institutions into "spaces of conflict, where teaching is intertwined with local and global struggles" (Kester & Misiaszek, 2025, p. 277-278).

As tertiary educators, we are confronted with a growing pressure within our higher educational institutions to simultaneously meet externally-imposed research and teaching standards, increase student engagement and retention (Donald & Ford, 2022), and fulfil an intensifying directive to not only recognize our own organic "interconnectedness" to the cultures, natural environments, and economies of which our institutions are a part (Özkan & Şahin, 2024), but also to prepare our students to be equally aware as many of them transition into professions within sustainable and responsible organizational environments (Beddewela et al., 2021). When these pressures collide, which we argue they already have, educators should be encouraged to move away from traditional teaching approaches towards innovative and creative pedagogical methodologies (Putri et al., 2023) with the aim of developing more "inclusive, hopeful, and humane social imaginaries" for student learning in higher education settings (Starkey & Tempest, 2025, p. 1).

For many educators working in institutions of higher education, especially those of us in schools of business, there represents a long overdue shift towards integrating "reflexive approaches that compel students to encounter their own privilege" and "address inequalities" through "pedagogies of discomfort" and "decolonial reflexivity" (Kumar et al., 2024, p. 383). As part of this shift, and to address some of the aforementioned challenges, service-learning has increasingly become an important approach for teaching, research, and learning in higher education (Perrotti, 2024). Over the course of the past three decades, service-learning projects and programs have "become increasingly popular" in schools of business (Fougère et al., 2020, p. 795) as a "high-impact experiential learning method" often used by management educators (Kanar & Bouckenooghe, 2025, p. 225) in response to the civic engagement movement. This shift towards service-learning is designed to address a broad range of public, community, democratic, socio-cultural, economic, political, environmental, and ethical issues (Compare et al., 2022).

1.1. What is service-learning?

Within higher education, community engagement programs are typically defined broadly as inclusive of community-based learning and research projects, (community) service-learning activities, university-community educational agency shared programs, and community-based training initiatives (Strier, 2014). The benefit of using a broad definition is that it allows for inclusion of partnership activities both embedded within the curriculum (e.g., service-learning) and taking place outside of the curriculum (e.g., community-based training initiatives that do not include students connecting their engagement to course content) (Schiff et al., 2023). However, when focusing specifically on course-based projects and programs, especially those in the management education domain, the term "service-learning" is frequently used (Leigh & Kenworthy, 2018) as a way to demarcate it as "a modern pedagogic approach involving students in solving real-life community problems … providing a broader framework for experiential learning with a focus on nonprofit or voluntary organizations" (Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025, p. 160).

When designed with intentionality, reciprocity, and community partners as co-creators, there are numerous benefits of service-learning projects grounded in harnessing the potential to expand students' learning through engagement with, and understanding of, community issues (Willness et al., 2023). Service-learning projects also provide opportunities to enhance campus and community collaboration and information exchange, leverage institutional resources and capabilities, and create best practices to address global grand challenges, which include pressing societal and environmental issues (Bowers, 2017).

As with any organizational-level initiative, there are institutional challenges involved in the process of designing and embedding service-learning projects and programs within a university culture (Lucko, 2024; Willness et al., 2023). Counter claims against service-learning position its institutional emergence across numerous universities as exaggerated rhetoric rather than thoughtfully and strategically entrenched programs with collaboratively, constructively, and regularly assessed outcomes grounded in research evidence (Bloomgarden, 2017). This appears to be a particularly prevalent issue for business schools in their search to develop capacities to engage in process driven, rather than output focused, value co-creation (Thomas & Ambrosini, 2021) and their need to move beyond self-interest toward a framework within which they "enhance community voice and empowerment, and (to) achieve reciprocity" (Willness et al., 2023, p. 124). Within higher education schools of business, these expectations are often pragmatically tied to institutional obligations as United Nations' Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) signatories and the associated pressure to demonstrate responsible actions and measurable outcomes regarding intertwined United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives for institutional accrediting bodies (Ambrosini et al., 2024). Notedly, while service-learning programs have the potential to address these institutional expectations and respond to society's most pressing needs, this promise is often stunted by the highly complex and contextual nature of their design (Andrade et al., 2022), as well as the persistent tensions and conflicts inherent to real-world partnering (Bowers, 2017; Fougère et al., 2020).

In working to explore this tension, we engaged in a collaborative autoethnographic process of reflexively sharing about the barriers we experienced, both personal and institutional, as we explored our interests in, and hopes for, embedding service-learning within our courses. One of our first discoveries was that our overarching interests in this area, and our hopes for contribution to our students, institutions, communities, and the larger literature on this topic, were directly tied to our personal commitment to the growing

expectation for higher education institutions to address the grand challenges of our time (Colombo, 2023; Fan & Cunliffe, 2023). We realized that we wanted to engage with service-learning because of forces which were coming from both inside and outside of us, yet our perceived barriers were holding us back.

1.2. Exploring barriers to service-learning

Our research extends the recent work of Kelly and Given (2024) in their study exploring the challenges found within higher educational institutions related to community engagement practices. They identified four main issues: (1) institutional support for community engagement varied considerably, even when institutional rhetoric was strong, (2) participants experienced institutional support policies as inconsistent and difficult to locate, (3) institutional reward schemes fueled competition and discouraged collaboration, and (4) there were significant concerns raised by participants about time invested in developing community engaged projects as taking away from the creation of traditional outputs which would be measured in tenure applications and promotion reviews. In their call for future research, the authors encourage further qualitative investigations of academics' lived experiences with participant samples outside of humanities and social sciences "encompassing different institutions, countries, and disciplines" to "guide a more nuanced understanding of CE (community engagement) across academe" (p.455). Stated simply, the authors called for further research, which is both comprehensive in nature and different from their own in terms of participant sample, aimed at exploring the variety of perceived barriers perceived by educators who are interested in embedding service-learning into their courses.

2. Research question and our story

We respond to this call, and the gap in the literature from which it stems, by sharing the results of a two-year qualitative study aimed at exploring our reflections regarding the perceived barriers, both personal and institutional, we view as standing in the way of each of us embedding service-learning into our courses. More specifically we ask, *"how do the personal and institutional barriers perceived by management educators' who are interested in utilizing service-learning in their courses relate to each other?"*

To achieve this aim, we engaged in collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to iteratively and inductively explore our ongoing reflections as six business school educators working within higher educational institutions in four different countries (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, United States). Initially we considered the theoretical work of Parker Palmer (1997, 2004) and Paulo Freire (1985, 1998) – both of whom are scholars from non-business disciplines who are cited frequently as seminal contributors to both the theoretical and practical design of service-learning (Deans, 1999; Hall, 2005; Hoffman & Scott, 1999; Nathanson, 2009). Their thinking helped us to move beyond a pragmatic perspective on service-learning development in which knowledge is simply "connected to" experience and individuals are simply "connected to" community (Deans, 1999). Drawing upon their work, we embraced a shift toward an intimate and relational approach in which we were not only exploring our inner landscapes through reflective self-awareness but also considering the pressures we felt from the environments around us. We acknowledged that our individual and collective aims were to not only identify, but also dismantle and ideally transform, the barriers we were confronting. Coming from a variety of educational ecosystems and couched in strikingly different personal histories, we shared an overarching aim grounded in an awareness that we cared for our students, our communities, and the world around us, and that was what drove our desires to design projects which would both enhance student learning and, ideally, contribute to increased solidarity and a democratic citizenry (Tronto, 2015).

As we continued our work, one of our members was fortunate in securing an opportunity to have a personal conversation with Palmer related to our research. During the discussion, which was focused on his 1997 book *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer shared a metaphor which our group found powerful as a tool for conceptualizing and understanding the intersecting barriers we were experiencing. In the interview, Palmer described the Möbius strip as a tool for exploring an interweaving of our inner and outer lives. Using this metaphor, we began to consider the interrelationships of both the personal (inner) versus organizational (outer) barriers we perceived to embedding service-learning in our courses. Having engaged in that work with the Möbius strip driving the framing of our data generation, exploration, and analysis, we began the process of sharing our work "publicly" with others who were not members of our intimate and private six-person group (i.e., the "I/we" of our research); these were others whom we welcomed as the public face of the "they" (i.e., people we shared our insights with) (Dyer et al., 2024). Through that process we were nudged, with care and thoughtfulness, to connect our reflections to something deeper. Once again, we were driven by the excitement of learning and continued discussion as we explored additional frameworks. Following extensive searching, reading, and group discussion, we embraced Stephen Brookfield's (2017) four lenses of being a critically reflective educator to further understand the journeys we were on, both individually and collectively. In our next section, we describe how Palmer's and Brookfield's theoretical conceptualizations sit together as the foundation for our research.

3. Conceptual framework and theoretical grounding: brookfield and palmer

As noted earlier, our group had engaged with Palmer's powerful metaphor and its meaning with respect to our reflections about the tensions we had been experiencing between our inner lives (i.e., "internal") and outer environments (i.e., "external"), however we still had unanswered questions. Following feedback on an earlier draft of this manuscript, our search for a robust theoretical framework through which we could explore and understand our thoughts drew us to Stephen Brookfield's (1995; 2017) writings on being a critically reflective educator. We describe Brookfield's framework, Palmer's metaphor, and their intersecting contributions to our research below.

3.1. Brookfield's critically reflexive framework and its intersections with service-learning

Brookfield (2017) recognized that all teaching could be traced back to an educator's ideology. In his seminal book on being a critically reflective educator, he concluded that educators make decisions regarding their teaching in ways which "reflect the interests and agendas of specific people in specific situations" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 40). He believed the way we teach is connected to who we are. For many educators who are interested in service-learning, "who we are" is a key motivator in our desire to create opportunities for students to partner with, learn from, and contribute to their communities (Kumar et al., 2024; Mitchell, 2008). In support of this, Brookfield (2017) refers to the work of Mezirow (1991) to employ critical theory as the foundation for his assertion that education should "prompt social and political change, often of a revolutionary nature" (p.7). Extending this, he stated that "critical theory and its contemporary educational applications such as critical pedagogy are grounded in an activist desire to fight oppression, injustice, and bigotry and create a fairer, more compassionate world" (p.10).

To help educators explore and understand their roles, Brookfield (2017) describes four lenses of critical reflection – personal experience (the autobiographical), the students' eyes, the colleague's perceptions, and theoretical literature.

3.1.1. Personal experience

Personal experience involves using an autobiographical lens. This takes place when educators reflect on their own values, motivations, and histories as both teachers and learners. As Brookfield (2017) shares, "personal experiences of learning are intertwined with teaching practice" and "many of the tensions and dilemmas" we surface idiosyncratically, help us not only understand ourselves and connect with others more powerfully (p.74). In the context of service-learning, this type of introspection may help educators surface a deeply felt commitment to community engagement and social justice, clarifying why service-learning matters personally and pedagogically. It may also bring into focus the emotional strain caused by institutional barriers such as forced engagement with this pedagogy, limited funding, lack of administrative support, strict timetables, or rigid curriculum structures. Recognizing these inner conflicts encourages educators to honor their aspirations while genuinely confronting the realities of their environment.

3.1.2. Students' eyes

Brookfield (2017) contends that "the most important pedagogic knowledge we teachers need to do good work is an awareness, week in, week out, of how our students are experiencing learning" (p.67). He encourages reflection using the students' eyes, or to consider things from a student's perspective. Using this lens, educators are challenged to consider how service-learning could enhance or complicate student learning. For example, will students be enthusiastic about real-world engagement or, conversely, might they resist what they perceive as extra work? Understanding "what's going on in students' heads" (p.68) will help educators design service-learning experiences that are both meaningful and manageable, building bridges which take students "from where they are now to a new destination" (p.68) in terms of their learning.

3.1.3. Colleagues' perceptions

As Brookfield aptly shares, "the presence of critical friends is at the heart of the critically reflexive process" (p.70). Through communication and collaboration, educators can build solidarity, gain practical insights, and uncover alternative strategies for navigating institutional hurdles. Talking to peers who have run service-learning projects within similar institutional, social, and political conditions can reveal useful structures and processes, approaches to framing the project and navigating partnerships with community members, time management tools, creative workarounds, or coalition-building tactics. Conversations with colleagues helps us to "check, verify, or reframe the assumptions" we bring to our own analysis of our teaching (p.71).

3.1.4. (Engaging with) theoretical literature

This lens, as Brookfield (2017) notes, is "the hardest sell" for educators because so many of us feel that we either do not have the time or that there is little in the extant theoretical literature which will contribute to how we teach (p.77). Yet, as he evocatively describes, "reading theory can sometimes feel like coming home. You stumble on a piece of work that puts into cogent words something you've felt but been unable to articulate" which becomes "wonderfully affirming" (p.77). For educators interested in service-learning, reading theory allows for an exploration of how their personal motivations and perceived challenges fit within broader discourses on power, pedagogy, and institutional change. This can often legitimize frustrations and offer language and conceptual tools to address current challenges and for systemic transformation.

3.2. Palmer's möbius strip metaphor

For Palmer (1997; personal communication February 10, 2025), educators' inner landscapes and self-awareness (our inner selves) are essential as part of the process of learning how to listen and dialogue with others (our outer environments) including students, institutional colleagues and administrators, and community partners, with the aim of not only dismantling, but also transforming, personal fears and institutional barriers to enhance democratic education and contribute to a democratic citizenry. We chose to embed the work of Palmer into our reflective processes because it requires a shift toward an intimate and relational, complex, and dialectical approach embedded within a context of wholeness and connectedness. In his ideation, he draws upon the metaphor of a Möbius strip in that it is "a geometric form in which the inside and the outside keep co-creating each other as they flow into each other. In the final analysis, there is no inside and outside, only one side which is constantly being co-created." As he shared:

> Here I am in the world. I have feelings, thoughts, and spiritual convictions and in the act of doing I help co-create at least a little part of the world, and then the world takes a look at that and it throws stuff back at me … I have to figure out how to process that in a way that is life giving for me. Because the world is now co-creating me, and every moment of exchange between the inner and outer, we have choices to make. What am I going to put into the world that helps create what's out there and how am I going to deal with what the world tosses back my way? (Palmer, personal communication February 10, 2025).

His approach requires us to have an awareness of the enmeshed intertwining of our inner and outer selves. To assist the reader, we share an image we created to represent Palmer's Möbius strip metaphor (see Fig. 1) of a single strip of paper with a half (180°) twist before the ends are joined resulting in "a continuous loop in which each side of the figure blends into the other to create one continuous plane" (Ross et al., 2022, p. 14).

3.3. *Brookfield's framework and Palmer's möbius strip metaphor*

Brookfield's (2017) four lenses provided a valuable framework for us to engage in the practice of "trying to identify, and check, the assumptions that inform our actions as teachers" (p.23). This was particularly important for our research because a central tension in service-learning arises from the interwoven desire to teach in ways we believe showcase morality, ethics, sustainability, civic responsibility, community engagement, and global citizenry, (Palmer's 'inner') while the realities of working within managerialist and neoliberal academic environments (Palmer's 'outer') constrain and influence our choices.

As we describe below, our process initially highlighted the inner and outer tensions that each participant perceived when considering or conducting service-learning projects. The commonality of the outer or external tensions (i.e., lack of institutional recognition and support) were soon overshadowed by the revelation of the inner tensions (i.e., personal fears and trepidation). When external challenges presented themselves, each of us had to make choices, and when each of us made choices, it would impact other external elements of our personal and professional lives. By drawing on Brookfield's (2017) four lenses as a framework for reflection we secured a mechanism through which we could more clearly explore the various tensions we were experiencing. We were fortunate that our discussions in which we considered Palmer's "inner" and "outer" had helped us create a place in which our continued reflecting was not seen as a private activity, rather, it had become a connective, dialogical, and, at times, political act (Dyer et al., 2024).

4. Methodology

We began our journey at the Research in Management Learning and Education (RMLE) Unconference in Banff, Canada in June 2023. The organic, egalitarian, and unrestrained format of the Unconference encouraged vulnerability from within each of the members of our group, creating a psychologically safe space from our first reflection and discussion session. Initially our conversation focused on the institutional barriers we faced as we considered designing new, or extending existing, service-learning projects in our courses. By the end of the Unconference, the conversation had shifted to include a discussion of our personal fears and vulnerabilities related to working with service-learning.

We left the Unconference having expressed a shared sense of heightened freedom through a newfound connectedness with others. We felt that we were no longer alone in our struggles, facing personal barriers no others within the walls of our institutions had voiced. We had begun a purposeful journey of vulnerability along a path of reflection and interpretation (Garbati & Rothschild, 2016), individually and collectively examining the phenomenon of personal and institutional barriers faced throughout the process of designing and implementing service-learning projects. Before leaving the Unconference, we decided to follow the methodological approach shared in Jones and colleagues' (2023) research on concealment in higher education; we would engage in collaborative autoethnography (CAE) to continue exploring where our sharing and discovery would take us. We chose CAE because it is a multivocal methodology drawing upon an ideological and constructivist ontology which allows participants to self-observe and share personal reflections while encouraging the sharing of others' reflections with the goal of creating collective insight and agency (Belkhir et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2023). Through our use of CAE, we were provided with an opportunity to engage with our phenomenon of inquiry

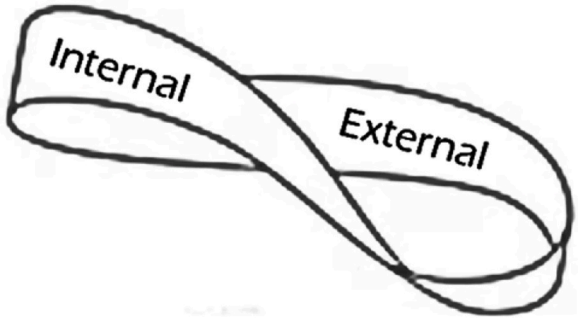

Fig. 1. Möbius strip visual of inner and outer selves.

through "narrative expressions of life experiences" (Denzin, 2017, p. 8).

As we continued along our journey, we considered our diverse positionalities. Although we are all employed as academics in business schools within English speaking countries, we represent five different universities, both public and private, large and small, located in four different countries (Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States), with tenure levels ranging from a new faculty member who just finished their Ph.D. and secured their first full time appointment to a full professor who is at the end of their career. We come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (Entrepreneurship, Finance, Marketing, Organizational Behavior, Operations and Supply Chain Management) and teach courses and engage in research in business school institutional innovation and management education. We have a variety of industry backgrounds, and a significant range of exposure to, and past experience with, using service-learning (two of our members have never used it before and two others have been working in this space for between 15 and 30 years). It is these positional differences that provide our research with the potential for wide applicability of our findings for management educators who teach across core, elective, and interdisciplinary-designed courses, at varying tenure levels, within both private and public sector tertiary institutions, and across numerous content areas.

4.1. Data collection and analysis

Our goal was to dig deeply into our personal experiences to "go further" than simply questioning others' claims to critically explore our fallibility and circularity as we co-created shared constructions of our situated experiences (Cunliffe, 2003). We understood that we were exploring thoughts and ideas we had not verbalized prior to our discussions but were excited about sharing with others because of the safe and nurturing space we had created (Dyer et al., 2024). We agreed to move forward with a three-phase approach to our research. Following Jones and colleagues (2023) application of CAE, we began our next steps by engaging in "slow" (i.e., when we were inspired to share rather than having a rigid schedule for sharing) email communications in which we updated each other on our thoughts and experiences related to service-learning development. Second, we employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, grounded in our own interpretations of experience, in which we had five rounds of iterative and reflexive story writing over the course of 1.5 years (Tekeste et al., 2025). Our stories emerged from variations of the following prompts: (a) why we wanted to engage (or were engaging) in service-learning and what we were doing in terms of actions related to that work, (b) the environmental, institutional, and collegial supports, lack of support, and changes in support that we were experiencing within our institutions, and (c) the fears and barriers we perceived which were blocking or hindering our progress. Third, we ran multiple full-group video conference calls (which took place at irregular intervals ranging from weekly through monthly and lasted from between 1.5 and 2.5 h) as we engaged in a process of continuously and generatively questioning, exploring, and producing connections across our stories (Dyer et al., 2024).

The data we examine here are drawn from three sources: (1) notes taken from each of the group discussions across the one and a half days during the Unconference, (2) our stories and reflections as guided by the prompts above, and (3) transcriptions from each of the full group's online meetings, complemented with related content drawn from our email exchanges. In the end, our data consisted of 153 emails, 23 individual stories and reflections (we were flexible with this stage given the complexities and challenges of life, and as a result of weaving in and out of our meetings, some members completed three or four of the five rounds), and twenty-nine 1.5–2 h online video meetings with the members of our group.

The first step in the development of our thematic coding process was to have the entire group read through our reflections and transcripts to identify emergent themes using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This ensured that our process was "collaborative and reflexive, aiming to achieve richer interpretations of meaning, rather than attempting to achieve consensus of meaning" – as such it was flexible, organic, and evolving (Byrne, 2022, p. 1393). During each discussion, we acknowledged that we were sharing deeply personal fears and damaging institutional pressures and processes that we had not voiced before, as illustrated by this reflection, "*I have never shared these things with anyone … both because I was scared about institutional retribution and because I thought I was alone in experiencing them*" (group member). We talked about safety and discovering a place in which there were others with whom we could confide and feel "seen", as expressed in the following, "*When I'm in meetings at work, I have learned to tune out because it's not safe to share anything 'real' in terms of struggles related to our teaching. Where I work, people speak to hear their own voices, not to engage in empathetic or generative listening and then responding. It is so demoralizing, even though I'm physically there, I am no longer there in spirit or engagement*" (group member).

Perhaps because of the nature of our online discussions, which we viewed as "*a refreshingly nurturing and safe space in what I have found to be a very isolating profession as an educator*" (group member), we found it very easy to begin the process of deductively exploring our data using Palmer's metaphor. Using the Möbius Strip as the framework for exploration of "internally" and "externally" focused reflections, we engaged in a process of clustering the extracted comments we each viewed as highlighting the two superordinate thematic categories: (1) personal and (2) institutional.

With our overarching two-category thematic clustering, we wanted to explore our experiences further. Our next step was to deductively re-examine our data using Brookfield's (2017) four lenses as a guide. Using the four lenses as facilitative and generative, rather than restrictive and finite, we were encouraged to reflect upon, and openly discuss, questions we had not fully explored in our earlier storying and vulnerable sharing. For each of us, integrating Brookfield's (2017) students' eyes and colleagues' perceptions lenses surfaced reflections about barriers to service-learning we had not yet considered. We were fully experiencing what it meant to be critically reflective educators (Brookfield, 2017).

One of the strengths of engaging with a slow approach to CAE was that we were open to, once again, reflexively generating more data (Dyer et al., 2024). We recognized that there is no such thing as fully reaching data saturation in this type of work, and we embraced our journey as an ongoing, emerging, and creative search for "patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 9). Working together, we discussed our reflections during a subsequent 1.5-day RMLE Unconference which

marked the two-year anniversary of our group's beginning. We also had five follow-up 1–2 h online video calls in which we iteratively expanded, refined, and produced new themes. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) direction that "theme frequency counts should be avoided … because reflexive thematic analysis does not equate frequency with importance" (p.20), we did not quantify our qualitative data. We have, however, tried to share the depth of our data through illustrative excerpts and carefully curated narrative snapshots to convey meaning.

5. Findings

For purposes of anonymity, given the fact that we are writing about sensitive topics including institutional barriers together with perceived personal fears and vulnerabilities, and in line with the institutional human research ethics approval we secured prior to beginning this work, we refer to ourselves as P1-P6 throughout.

5.1. Institutional barriers (theme 1)

Our first theme relates to the tensions we experienced with respect to our institutions' claims regarding commitments to actively working to address global issues and our simultaneous perceived lack of institutional support for faculty who are interested in using service-learning. We reflected on the continuous pressures we experienced from ourselves and those within our communities related to the escalating need for educators to work with community partners to adopt multiple, long-term, and collaborative approaches to address societal issues and injustices. We also noted the shared signals that the higher education institutions were sending (e.g., becoming PRME signatories, reporting on the targeting of UN SDGs) attempting to show they are addressing both global grand challenges as well as local, regional, and national challenges. It was, however, evident to the members of our research group, that for many business schools the external signals that are sent out are not in alignment with the internal barriers experienced (e.g., lack of recognition, training, support, and engagement). As one of our members shared, "*Institutionally, we are a PRME signatory. We have tick boxes on our teaching and research performance paperwork which include the SDGs and how we are addressing them. We should absolutely be doing more community engagement, but there are no systems in place to encourage or* support *it*" (P1).

For many of us, the institutions in which we work espouse commitment to responsible management education, yet the performative and managerialist metric-driven systems that we find ourselves working within (Jones et al., 2023) neither recognize the additional time and resource commitments required to run service-learning effectively nor provide support for their development (Kelly & Given; 2024). This impacts tenure and promotion decisions. A depressing reality check about the institutional barriers we categorized in this theme was shared by one of our members in our last reflection session: *I was in a session last week in which educators from my institution were talking about their service-learning experiences and, to a person, they all said that educators would be crazy to do it. The time it takes to do it well is at least twice what it takes to teach using traditional teaching methods and our institution doesn't recognize any of the additional work educators have to invest in it. They also said that even though they knew their students learned more, given the lack of support, they were definitely not doing it again themselves. I was shocked and very disheartened.* (P2).

5.2. Personal barriers (theme 2)

As educators, being vulnerable can be incredibly challenging (Mangione & Norton, 2020) as can be sharing our fears and anxieties (Dyer et al., 2024). Engaging in this type of CAE-based storytelling, reflecting, and shared journeying work was new for many of our members, as reflected here:

> "Talking about service-learning with this group is exposing how many vulnerabilities I actually have related to them. On the one hand, I am so excited about the prospect of getting students to tangibly see how they can positively address community issues while developing a more informed and engaged view of the world. Yet, on the other hand, I have so many fears of service-learning that I am truly scared about trying it. In the end though, I don't want to finish my career with my fears winning out." (P5)

As we briefly described above, for a majority of the authors on this paper, our engagement in this research exposed us to a space and place we had not experienced before – one that is reflective of Jackson's (2018) view that academic vulnerability is critical to learning. As we collaborated, we began to recognize how rare this feeling was and that to engage in this level of personal honesty, exposing our fears and vulnerabilities, there had to be a culture of transparency, trust, and support that we were not experiencing within our own institutional environments. As one of our members shared, "*I have never experienced this type of closeness and openness before. This is what I always imagined academia would be like – sharing vulnerably, learning, respecting,* supporting*, and encouraging each other, all-the-while pushing ourselves to create something new and different, to positively shape the ways in which we teach and research. I love this group and everything we are doing*" (P4). Another shared, "*I get so excited about our meetings. Being together with this group feels like home*" (P3).

We named this second theme "personal" because the four subthemes we found nested within it each related to barriers to service-learning that stemmed from our personal fears and anxieties: finding balance, reputational risk, student reality, and cancel culture.

5.2.1. Finding balance

Many of us struggle to find balance in our lives even without the additional demands of running service-learning projects in our courses, as can be seen in this example:

> *I still have fears such as potential burnout down the road and my work and family life balance (i.e. my kids think I put others ahead of them, which I often do, especially when I'm running service-learning projects). I know I can find a way to do these projects well, and take care of everyone in them, without having them compromise the other parts of my life, it just hasn't happened yet.* (P2)

Another of our members summarized the tension every member experienced in terms of the internal drive we all felt, to create the highest levels of learning possible for our students – learning that is grounded in the realities of the world around us – the messy, chaotic, often volatile and uncertain spaces and places in which we live:

> There are stresses and issues and chaos factors that come into play. If you're not comfortable with the chaos and the uncertainty that comes with service-learning, then it's definitely not a good teaching tool for you to use. Because, with all of the incredible life lessons about what is actually going on in the world comes all the messiness and hard work. Using service-learning is much harder than teaching a normal class. The payoff can be massive in terms of student learning but so is the reality of the workload. (P3)

5.2.2. Reputational risk

This personal barrier subtheme encompassed fears about the risks associated with running service-learning projects for the educators themselves, the academic institution, as well as the students, community partners, and larger community of which all stakeholders are a part. We see this illustrated in the reflection shared here:

> *I fear I would likely uncover even bigger problems for the organization's community beyond the scope of what my students were tasked with. Even though we may have 'solved' one problem for the organization, it may pale in comparison to other problems that were uncovered leading to an overall feeling of disappointment after all that effort. And in the end, my students would feel like failures, I would feel like a failure, and the university administrative team may also be upset because I made us all look bad – like the work we were doing was incomplete.* (P5)

5.2.3. Student reality

This subtheme is tied to the changing nature of the pressures that our students say they are experiencing (e.g., getting high grades, achieving awards, securing high paying jobs, demonstrating excellence, balancing cost of living and cost of degree program debt pressures; caring for family members; commuting costs and time; fears about being able to remain in country for those who are international students) as they relate to students' interests in community-based learning within their classes. We know students see service-learning as taking extra time and involving more work that most traditional classroom-based approaches require; those are both true. Couched within the other tensions they are living with, and viewed through the students' eyes lens, we see the simultaneous and intersecting pressures our students are living with in the following reflection:

> I worry that given the intense pressure students feel related to achieving high grades, they will not be interested in a project that is more time-consuming and complex which will make it riskier, in their minds, than a report or essay in terms of grades. Another big risk is that if the service-learning project is not done well, it may actually end up reinforcing students' negative biases about community issues or turning them off to community engagement altogether. (P4)

5.2.4. Cancel culture

Cancel culture refers to publicly shaming those who are perceived to exhibit offensive, politically incorrect, or harmful behavior with a goal of ending an individual's career or prominence (Henderson, 2020; Bouvier & Machin, 2021). When this occurs in academia, universities may respond with panicked damage control instead of considered reforms (Clark, 2020). A survey of 1491 faculty at four-year colleges and universities in the United States (Honeycutt et al., 2023), found that 52 % of faculty were worried about losing their jobs or reputation because someone misunderstands something they have said or done, takes it out of context, or posts something from their past online. For management educators wanting to reduce their risk of being 'canceled', they may have a significant amount of additional learning to do. In a recent commentary on this topic, Zembylas (2023) critiqued existing 'cancel culture' teacher education programs which emphasize critical thinking, media literacy, debate, and free speech as being insufficient, and consequently calling for educators to also pay attention to structural issues of race, racism, and injustice. For many of the members in our group, the genuine anxiety of potentially being 'canceled' while participating in a service-learning project was at the forefront of their personal reflections:

> Barriers and risks also stem from the fast changing socially acceptable terminology/ lexicon and the 'cancel culture' social media environment. When teaching today, I feel an enormous pressure because I know there is a much higher risk of unintentionally saying something someone may deem "unacceptable." This is especially true within a service-learning environment given all of the unknowns it inevitably raises. A social media firestorm could ensue, risking both my personal reputation and, potentially, my employment (P5)

5.3. Reframing institutional barriers as contextual lenses for personal barriers

As we discussed our findings, there was one more insight which was experienced as cathartic by many of our members, which we

kept coming back to in our conversations and reflections. It was the idea that the institutional barriers we identified were not a category that sat discretely next to those we identified as our personal barriers, rather, the institutional barriers were contextual lenses through which we could more clearly understand our personal barriers. This challenged our initial analysis, which was a two-category 'inner' and 'outer' Möbius strip-inspired set of findings, yet we understood that the developmental process of looking more deeply using Brookfield's (2017) lenses – particularly those of students' eyes and colleagues' perceptions – transformed the way we viewed our categories. We realized that although our personal barriers existed independently in our minds, they were much more complex and included relational and situational elements involving many more "others" than we originally considered. For our members, one of the most significant 'others' was our institutions. The idea that we were exposing barriers stemming from our institutions became another lens, but not a lens which sat alongside Brookfield's lenses, rather, a lens that situated everything else (i.e., our personal/autobiographical selves, our colleagues, our students). As such, the institutional barriers we were sharing could be best understood as contextual elements through which we consider our fears and vulnerabilities. Here are examples of ways in which we experienced this contextualization.

5.3.1. Life balance

Institutional policies and processes essentially result in service-learning work being 'in addition to' rather than wholly, or even partially, counted as a substitute for research requirements. Integrating service-learning projects into our courses requires significantly more time than traditional course delivery, which means if we were to choose to embed service-learning in our courses, we must also be prepared to further stretch our already tensioned and tenuous work-life balances. And we knew, some of us from personal experience, that this exhaustion-inducing 'stretching' would cost us both personally (e.g., time away from family) and professionally (e.g., less time for research and scholarship). While it would, ideally, result in personal satisfaction, it would also hinder us in ways that could potentially damage our tenure or promotion. For each of us in different ways, yet particularly saliently and tied to enormous risk for those without tenure in our group, we were already stretched to almost breaking points. There was no fuel left in our figurative personal and professional 'tanks.'

5.3.2. Reputational risk

Several of the members of our group shared about the risks of utilizing service-learning within academic environments in which their colleagues hold perceptions of service-learning specifically, and teaching innovation more generally, as a waste of time – something which detracts from resources which should be allocated toward the 'true academic work' of research. This type of branding and negative stereotyping was viewed as impacting our members' reputations amongst such colleagues, an especially troubling situation given that those colleagues are often in positions of power in which they not only allocate scarce resources amongst academics but also sit on promotion and tenure committees.

5.3.3. Student reality

Institutional policies which position service-learning courses as having equal workloads to more traditional classroom-based courses signal to students that their expectations should be equivalent in terms of time and other resource investments required. For those of us who had run service-learning courses before, we knew this was not the case. Such rigid and myopic institutional course

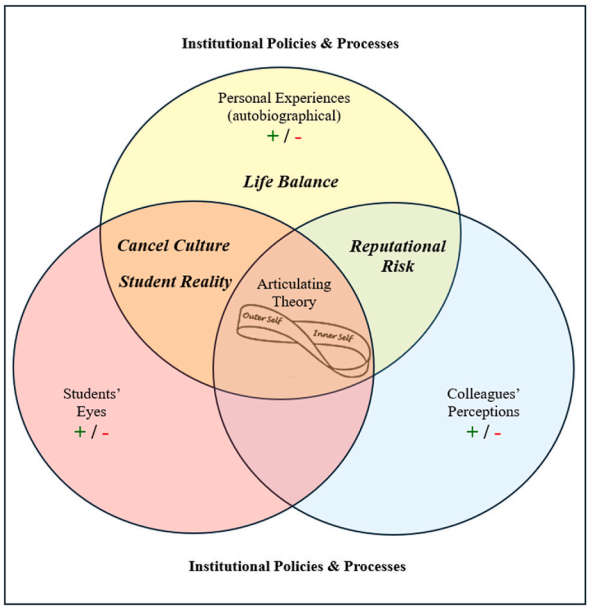

Fig. 2. Educators' perceived barriers to service-learning implementation.

valuation policies signal to students that the additional effort required for service-learning may not be worth their time in terms of the benefits accrued versus the costs invested. This amplifies the probability that either students will not be prepared to 'go the extra mile' and engage in the increased workload required for service-learning or they may simply choose traditional courses over potential service-learning opportunities because they have finite resources (e.g., extra time and energy) to give and little to no recognition of the investments required for high-quality reciprocally-designed and learning-focused community engagement.

5.3.4. Cancel culture

For educators who are interested in working with community organizations who support at-risk populations, as many services do, there is an enormous amount of background knowledge and skill development that must take place prior to engagement with the community members. For those institutions of higher education without strong support systems in place, which, ideally, include training for educators in terms of community needs and respectful partnership-oriented practices, there can be too much to learn on one's own. Educators who acknowledge how little they know, who are appropriately humble (Hannah, 2025) about the expertise of community partners leaders, recognize that the learning required may be more than they have time to do effectively. Thus, without institutionally-led and clearly recognized environmental and cultural awareness training for faculty who are considering using service-learning (situations which some of the members of our group were in) personal fears of cancel culture risks (i.e., doing something wrong unintentionally) overrode personal values which drove interest in service-learning implementation.

Fig. 2 illustrates the model we created to help readers visualize the relationships we identified between our reflections on the barriers we experienced to service-learning implementation through our work with the Möbius strip metaphor and Brookfield's four lenses.

Following our insights above, we would like to share how our progressively developmental reflections sit within Brookfield's four lenses. Below, we share curated excerpts in each of the four lens categories.

5.4. Sample excerpts from reflections using Brookfield's framework

Through the process of reframing our initial service-learning barriers via Brookfield's framework here are reflections categorized by three of the four lenses to provide a more nuanced understanding of their composition. The lens which we did not find applicable to individual quotes because we saw it as helping us to shape our overarching insights is the "articulating theory" lens; as such, we discuss this lens in our discussion and conclusions section. Here, we present Table 1 which includes selections for the "personal experience" lens, Table 2 has excerpts sitting within the "students' eyes" lens, and Table 3 shares comments which we viewed as sitting within the "colleagues' perceptions" lens.

6. Discussion and conclusion

As we traveled this journey of discovery together, we were pushed to interpret our findings in terms of the conceptual frameworks we selected. We believe our journey has resulted in numerous contributions, not only for us, but also for other educators considering extending themselves through service-learning application within restrictive neoliberal institutional environments. Our first insight was how powerfully Palmer's Möbius strip metaphor helped us to 'dig deeply' into an examination and exploration of the complexities of our thoughts and experiences. It was both freeing and enlightening to consider how our lived experiences exist within a structure where one continuous surface twists capturing the dynamic and inseparable relationship between personal aspirations and fears and the systemic constraint of our higher education institutions.

Our second contribution, which we experienced as another conceptual breakthrough, was the significance of Brookfield's (2017) four lenses for our exploration and understanding. Each of the four themes of barriers we identified from our reflections were embedded within the personal experience lens – with many of them understood more thoroughly through the additional

Table 1
Personal experience lens.

I am not actively doing service-learning in my courses. I believe in it. I am passionate about it. I fully support the integration of it into the curriculum (and think we HAVE to be doing it in our institutions of higher learning), but I know that I don't have the capacity to do it well now, so I'm not doing it at all. I want to, but I know I can't. (P3)
As a faculty member who is trying to do everything – publish, teach well, engage in service, network, be seen as active and contributory – I think engaging in service-learning might push me over the edge into a space where I can't keep everything balanced. As it is now, with traditional teaching methods, I am barely keeping all of the parts of my life 'balanced' (they really aren't, work overwhelms everything already, and I know that adding this in, no matter how much I want to, will only make things worse). (P2)
I am conflicted over workload, research is what you get recognized, acknowledged, and promoted for. There is no accolade attached to community engagement, the motivation is purely the need to have a positive impact in our community. (P4)
Earlier in my career, there were fewer institutional barriers, at least that I perceived. I was active and engaged, running service-learning every semester with students who were highly present in the community. Today, it feels impossible to get these projects running because of paralyzing managerialist institutional pressures and their associated organizational, logistical, and legal constraints. (P3)
Relative to traditional classroom teaching, service-learning comes with an increased risk of exposure to disturbing situations, potentially impacting my mental health. In the safe classroom environment, I rarely see anything disturbing that will keep me up at night. (P5)
You may be an expert in a particular area, but not necessarily able to take what it is that you know and put it into a community setting without a significant amount of work. That translates into a lot of risk for me. (P1)

Table 2
Students' eyes lens.

There's so much disconnection in our world. Students are living on their phones - they do not have the same capacity to connect as they used to decades ago. And yet it's our responsibility to help them look out into the world and begin to process what's happening in it. It's an important time to be connecting people together because there's so much division, hate, and fracturing in our world. (P3)
I just had an alumna visit my class and talk about how her service-learning experiences working with issues related to homelessness and urban poverty transformed the trajectory of her career as a finance major. She really inspired my current students to look beyond the fixed boundaries of what they thought they might do with their developing skills. She is modelling a path forward with social justice issues at its core. (P2)
Given the high expectations and reputational risk for myself and my school with service-learning, I fear the apathy I see with some students already will only be magnified and some of them won't give 'what it takes', and then it will be left to me, likely last minute, to fill the gap to avoid embarrassment and at least maintain our institutional reputation. (P5)
I also have fears about being 'out of touch'. The ever-shifting, unwritten rules of what is socially acceptable are not clear to me and the challenge of navigating the behaviors and language of a different generation is daunting. So when I try to instigate an initiative like this, I worry about how I will be perceived by my students and the community and how genuine they will all consider me to be. (P4)
My 'lived experience' has very little connection to the vast majority of organizations and communities involved in service-learning. While this generates a learning opportunity for me, it also generates a 'lack of authenticity' fear for my involvement, exposing me to high levels of skepticism and questioning of my lack of expertise which would not occur in my classroom. (P5)
Regardless of whether students want us to or not, promoting discussions around areas of division is an important part of our jobs now. The world has become so divided and so fear-focused that it is morally and ethically our responsibility to engage students in discussions that are uncomfortable yet create opportunities for them to learn about each other and begin to bridge their differences. (P3)

Table 3
Colleagues' perceptions lens.

Our group is a 'safe space to share' so we started opening up about our vulnerabilities related to service-learning that we would not feel as comfortable sharing with colleagues at our own business schools. (P5)
Individually, faculty fears might be the biggest barrier/problem for service-learning, but collectively, faculty might also be the catalyst in how to navigate, journey, and thrive in the interrelatedness of conflict and collaboration. (P2)
Having faculty working as a team of specialists would provide students with a model of how complex problems need to be tackled. This approach however would be even more resource intensive, and given the track record on faculty cohesion I have seen, it would likely be nearly impossible to achieve. (P1)
The commitment is there, but the practice is not. There are no institutional support mechanisms for service-learning at my university. (P3)
I often worry about how to establish credibility among colleagues, and given the risks of engaging in UCP work which is not seen as "legitimate" by many of my colleagues, I fear I would not be seen as doing what I'm supposed to be doing. (P6)
Through hard work, I have become a successful academic which has resulted in what I feel is a relatively high external reputation. It is much riskier to dive into the murky waters of service-learning where I could not look like an expert and fail to meet high expectations. (P5)
It's about the tension between my internal capability and my reputational risk. I know I can do things, but my struggles with service-learning stem from a combination of my innate fear of doing it and the fact that I have not run projects like that before. (P6)

contextualization of perceived institutional barriers. As educators, it was the personal experience lens which helped us surface our hopes for student learning, agency, and engagement in terms of the numerous positive outcomes of community-engaged learning. And yet, these personal convictions inevitably intersected with external barriers including institutional inertia, lack of resources, various student expectations, demands, and availabilities, colleagues' experiences, and other pressures faced including rigid and aggressive requirements for research outputs. Here, the intersection of Brookfield's lenses, with the Möbius strip sitting at our cores, exposed how systemic and intertwined institutional forces have the potential to extinguish personal intentions.

Third, as we explored Palmer's (2004) work, we discovered his call for educators to deeply explore the nuances of one's "inner" values and motivations as they sit within an intertwined space of "external" institutional pressures and challenges. He argues that we all have the ability to cross the threshold and enact behaviors which allow us to position ourselves to bridge the "tragic gap" between where we are (i.e., the reality of the supports and challenges we face every day) and where we would like to be (i.e., engaging in a process of taking 'hopeful' steps forward into the place we would like to be). Using his terminology, we found ourselves becoming increasingly attuned to the process of "holding oneself" within a space of learning – a process he ties to a non-credal and non-denominational concept of spirituality which encompasses the ways in which individuals "respond to the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than one's own ego" (personal communication February 10, 2025). As such, our findings extend the work of Williams and Allen (2014), who called for further investigations on "specific teaching methods" used by educators with "varying levels of concern and reservations" regarding the role of spirituality in higher education generally, and business schools specifically (p.302). We also add to the growing literature on calls to embed spirituality within management education-based discussions of workplace wellbeing, work-life balance, and meaning-making (Allen et al., 2018).

Fourth, we extend support for authors who describe CAE as a "transformative" and "empowering" methodology (e.g., Karalis Noel et al., 2023). For most of our members, the process of engaging in CAE to facilitate an embracing of our own transformative potential for sharing experiences and demonstrating a level of care, respect, and understanding of each other, was something that they had never experienced before in a higher education setting. Our work supports that of Shahzad and colleagues (2024) in their finding that collaborative sharing of knowledge is tied to psychological safety within work environments. For us, we had become part of each other's Möbius strips, not only as colleagues who were sharing deeply felt, and held, perceptions (Brookfield, 2017), but as valued others who had been welcomed into each other's lives as respected friends and confidants.

Finally, the four themes of barriers we experienced – life balance, reputational risk, cancel culture, and student reality – add to the work of Kelly and Given (2024) who not only called for more qualitative work exploring the barriers educators' experience when trying

to embed service-learning in their courses, but also encouraged examinations taking place within a variety of countries and outside of humanities and social sciences disciplines. As their results were primarily focused on barriers stemming from institutional inertia, our work extends their findings to expose complex and deeply felt personal barriers as well as those tied to educators' perceptions of both students and colleagues.

6.1. Unexpected insights

The concepts of Palmer's Möbius strip and Brookfield's four lenses allowed us to explore our feelings and experiences of service-learning, but in doing so, we also exposed unexpected insights that were only possible over a long period of iterative cycles of individual and group reflection. We recognized that after two years of collaborative journeying together, push became pull, and we moved from sharing the barriers which were pushing us away from service learning, to, over time, inspiring each other and feeling a stronger pull towards it than we had initially shared. We also recognized the power of vulnerability and the subsequent connectedness we felt from exposing our inner emotions and fears. Prior to the first Unconference, many of our members had not experienced other academics being so honest about their concerns and anxieties; particularly in groups with such a range of tenure levels and associated institutional power as we had in ours. For us, the realization both that we viewed each other as equal partners who were focused on learning, equally and generatively, from one another, and that we were not alone in terms of the things we were concealing from others in our workplaces, was a profound recognition of the power of group connection (Dyer et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2023). We recognized that vulnerability requires courage, and the ease with which we exposed our vulnerabilities was testament to the trust we felt with each other. It was our trust which enabled us to authentically reflect with each other using Brookfield's fourth lens tied to the value of engaging with theoretical literature. The theoretical concepts we drew upon of being a courageous teacher, empathetically listening to others, and being authentic and vulnerable with our reflections supported our process of CAE. It was the theory we considered, both individually and collectively, which further helped us to explore and understand our insights within the psychologically safe space we created together.

6.2. Practical implications and policy recommendations

For many of us who work in business schools, there has been a shift toward having individual performance measured by external metrics driven by accreditation requirements and systems designed to monitor accomplishments through peer surveillance (Shattock, 2017). These systems, when combined with other pressures including precarious labor, overwork, attacks upon educational values, and constrained academic freedoms can reduce academics' resilience, leaving them less inclined to take perceived risks (Ferris, 2021). Related to this shift, today's higher education has been described as an environment in which educators experience toxic leadership (Klahn Acuña & Male, 2024), confusion and disruption (Knights & Clarke, 2014), feelings of inadequacy and isolation (Dyer et al., 2024), symbolic violence (Ratle et al., 2020), and pervasive mental health issues related to work (Heffernan, 2023). As a result, for many educators in business schools, the outcome of these pressures is a concealment of our true feelings as well as the barriers and tensions we experience on a day-to-day level (Jones et al., 2023). In these environments, expressing vulnerability can lead to exploitation by others, making it extremely difficult for educators to be honest about their experiences and feelings (Hibbert et al., 2022). Increased service-learning in management education therefore requires more than confronting long-standing institutional barriers; educators' perceived personal barriers also need to be addressed. There is a need for safer, more empathetic institutional environments given the growing concerns around mental health, burnout, and instrumentalization of pedagogy in academia (Edwards et al., 2021; Segarra & Williams, 2025).

While our list is not comprehensive, our recommendations for institutional administrators both include and extend those made by others. With numerous calls to increase a focus on, and support for, educators' health and wellness, why not increase funding to include events which are designed to be generative and collaborative, particularly when they are focused on pedagogical innovation and collaboration with colleagues from around the world (e.g., the RMLE Unconference; the Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society Conferences; the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE))? Another recommendation focused on intra-institutional development is for administrators to encourage cross-faculty partnerships through grants and course releases for partnership and program design. This could enhance the potential for sharing the workload of service-learning, increasing students' understanding of interdisciplinary intersections, and de-mystifying involved procedures. For example, business and management educators working with social work educators could design projects which stem from social work students' placements, projects could encourage student teams working together to address identified community partner needs through an organizational or entrepreneurial lens. As understanding the scope and needs of community organizations is crucial to service-learning success, having administrators who actively invest their time by joining meetings which are taking place between educators and interested community partners will not only help them understand the complexity of the work involved but also send a strong signal about the perceived value of such initiatives. Further, that type of engagement and connection could help institutional administrators see the value in supporting the training or funding requests of educators who engage in service-learning. This, in turn, would provide clarity for all involved, which would help to manage expectations and potentially reduce associated reputational risk and cancel culture fears.

Business school administrators could reframe their engagement with PRME and SDGs beyond performative commitments to develop strategies that seek out alignment with the local communities in with they are geographically positioned. In addition, formal recognition of service-learning and community engagement as part of the institution's mission, strategic goals, and accreditation standards would signal top-down commitment. Lastly, institutional policies that formally recognize the importance and value of

service-learning in promotion and tenure applications would act as incentives for those educators who believe engaging with service-learning will compromise their promotion potential. Administrators should also consider implementing teaching load adjustments, or formal recognition of the added time commitment of service-learning courses, in faculty workload models.

6.3. Future research

As with any idiographic qualitative study using a small sample, our findings are subject to limitations in generalizability and may not be transferable to other individuals or educational environments, particularly those which differ significantly in terms of institutional or cultural characteristics. However, we hope that our research will inspire additional investigations into three primary areas. First, we encourage researchers to further explore the benefits of using the Möbius strip metaphor for educators who are struggling with any type of perceived tensions or barriers related to their work. We fundamentally believe that it was this metaphor which aided in our foundational understanding of the ways in which our personal barriers were intimately tied to our institutional environments – that one could only be fully understood within the context of the other. Second, we hope that our research will inspire studies with larger samples of educators drawn from a variety of tertiary institutional structures (e.g., public and private, large and small, college and university, secular and religious). We think it would be particularly interesting to explore management educators' perceived barriers in institutions with explicit, and potentially longstanding, community engagement and service-oriented missions versus those without such missions. We suggest this noting that, for example, in 1842 the University of Notre Dame was founded with a mission to "create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice" (Barrett, 2021). Finally, although we have identified a few ways in which educators and administrators can work to address barriers to service-learning implementation, we encourage future research which identifies institutional programs and policies which have successfully supported educators in ways which encourage generative rather than extractive integration of service-learning projects into their courses.

6.4. Conclusion

External tensions and barriers to service learning such as time constraints, academic pressures, institutional disincentives, or lack of recognition, are not experienced in isolation. Instead, they are internalized alongside our personal values, aspirations, fears, and ideals. As such, overcoming service-learning barriers is not simply about removing external constraints; it requires a reflexive approach to pedagogy which acknowledges and addresses this complex internal-external continuum. Our research question, "How do the personal and institutional barriers perceived by management educators' who are interested in utilizing service-learning in their courses relate to each other?" was explored through the surfacing of conversations that are rarely shared publicly in academic settings. These were the personal, often vulnerable, reflections of management educators, contextualized by institutional structures and policies.

Our research highlights that the barriers to adopting service-learning are not simply logistical or administrative, they are also personal, encompassing perceived lack of legitimacy, pedagogical uncertainty, time scarcity, and fears of professional devaluation. The value of our research lies in its exposure of these layered barriers, many of which remain hidden beneath the surface of traditional academic discourse. As we identify them, we make them actionable.

Additionally, our methodological approach extends and supports current literature that argues that CAE is transformative and valuable, centering lived experience as legitimate data (e.g., Dyer et al., 2024). This method of collective reflection fosters empathy and growth; it transforms understanding and can help shift cultural and academic discourse. Here, we demonstrate how collective narratives can inspire vulnerable reflection and commitment to learning and growing as part of the process of enacting change.

Prior to our collaboration, we had allowed ourselves to be stifled by forces we saw as externally imposed. Through this research, we began to conceptualize external forces as intimately tied to our internal journeys. This led to our exploring the ways in which we could navigate our responses to perceived external barriers by drawing upon our inner values and motivations. Palmer (personal communication February 10, 2025) reflected on the potential for this type of shift:

> I think the challenge in any problematic situation is to say, "Have we really looked carefully at what is within us, by way of gifts, experiences, skills, talents, and resources that we might access to deploy on this problem? And have we really looked between us about the kinds of relationships we might build that could continue to advance whatever it is we are trying to do, and evoke the gifts, skills, and talents of more and more people to build something over time together? I deeply believe that what we need is here, and it is found in two places. One is within us and the other is between us.
>
> "Within and between" – three words that unlocked the generative potential of our Möbius strips. It is with a not-so "hidden wholeness" and "the courage to teach" (each of those phrases is drawn, respectively, from Palmer's 2004; 1998 book titles), as well as a felt connection and inspiration for engaging in service-learning that we share our collaborative journey with you.

Our research not only identifies tensions tied to service-learning engagement, but also demonstrates that, despite these tensions, engaging in critical and collaborative reflection has the potential to engender action which reduces our tragic gaps. Here, we share a final reflection from one of our group members which we believe fully embodies this process: *"At times I have thought about pivoting away from doing service and community-based activities, because either I don't see enough tangible results and outcomes or I may never acquire enough social and political capital to make the changes I want to see. But through deep reflection and discernment, and engagement with each of you, I have learned to say "hang in there," "embrace it all," and "it's a life skill" standing in the mess. And in so doing, my life is filled with more light, hope, and promise of profound truth." (P2).*

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amy L. Kenworthy: Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Brent Snider:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Sue Cronshaw:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Peggy L. Hedges:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Long Le:** Writing – original draft, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Fahd Jamil:** Data curation.

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