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# The Promise of Public Dialogue in Service-Learning Courses

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This article explores the collaborative experience of a university professor and the coordinator of a local hate crimes project as we developed and taught a service-learning course on public dialogue. We begin by describing dialogic communication and suggest that it can be integrated into other forms of public discourse, such as deliberation and advocacy, in order to enrich them. We then describe our course and analyze data we gathered during the semester to assess how the course affected our students. Our analysis suggests that although we missed some opportunities to optimize our students' learning, the course successfully prepared them to plan and facilitate public dialogues on diversity issues, and motivated most of them to become more engaged with their community as democratic citizens and promoters of social justice. We end with lessons learned and ideas for future research and practice.

Racial tensions at a predominantly white high school received national attention and evoked local debate when students put up posters on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The posters endorsed a white student born in South Africa to receive the school's Distinguished African American Student Award. Our own students' conversations with high school youth from across the city during the first weeks of the semester touched on this local debate. What does it mean to be



an African American? What was the purpose of the award? Should a white student be eligible to receive it? What did the students who put up the posters intend to accomplish? How should the school's administration respond? The conversations confirmed the significance of diversity as a concern for young people and provided impetus to our students as they initiated a service-learning project in our course on public dialogue.

We were encouraged to develop our public dialogue course by the National Communication Association's Communicating Common Ground (CCG) service-learning partnership with the Southern Poverty Law Center, Campus Compact, and the American Association for Higher Education. CCG calls upon university faculty and students across the United States to form service-learning partnerships with community agencies and schools in order to foster diversity and oppose hate and prejudice through teaching in the communication discipline. Shereen is a professor of communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Patrick was then the coordinator of the Omaha Hate Crimes Project. Together we developed and co-taught a course, Group Facilitation and Public Dialogue, in which students learned to understand and facilitate public dialogue on sensitive issues of diversity.

In this paper, we reflect on our service-learning partnership and use our course as a case study to examine how our students' experiences in the course impacted them. We were particularly interested in how the course might affect our students' commitment to become democratically engaged citizens who are committed to social justice, two widely shared goals for service-learning in higher education (Ehrlich; Gelmon, Holland, Discol, Spring, and Kerrigan; Hollander and Hartley; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz). The literature on dialogic communication and the teaching experiences of other authors (Artz; Coogan; Cooper and Fretz; Higgins, Long, and Flower; Poulous)

suggested that integrating public dialogue into our service-learning course could help our class reach these important goals.

**Forms of Public Discourse**

Public discourse is intentional and addresses issues relevant to community problems or needs. It encompasses anything from formal town meetings used in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England (Box *Citizen* 151) to facilitated processes such as Study Circles (Study Circles Resource Center), Hope in the Cities (Corcoran and Greisdorf), the Public Conversations Project (Chasin, Herzig, Roth, Chasin, Becker, and Stains), or the Public Dialogue Consortium (Pearce and Pearce "The Public"). It also includes the less formal "everyday talk" (Mansbridge) in the neighborhood coffee shop or late-night discussion among university students. Public discourse essentially gives "voice to community concerns" (Spano 6).

The three approaches to public discourse that framed our course are dialogic communication, democratic deliberation, and advocacy. While the three approaches can be understood as independent and unique, we propose that one of the approaches, dialogic communication, enriches the other two and should serve as a foundation for them in both theory and practice.

**Dialogic Communication**

The aim of dialogic communication is not to express oneself as much as it is to listen to "the otherness of the other" in order to enter more fully into the other's life-world (Deetz and Simpson 143). With philosophical foundations in phenomenology, this perspective draws on Martin Buber's (*Between*) position that "humanness is ontologically an interpersonal phenomenon" (Stewart 197). Buber conceives of dialogue as a way of communicating and relating that involves distinctive qualities: *presence*, or "being genuine and fully engaged"; *openness*, or "accepting the genuine being of the other" who differs from oneself; *mutuality*, wherein all participants are "present and open" and what is



happening "between people" matters most; *emergence*, where "process and outcomes of dialogue are not predetermined"; and *voice*, meaning that all participants' voices co-exist (Black 32-33). In Buber's terms (*I and Thou*), dialogue transforms individuals and relationships because it involves relating and responding to the other as "Thou" rather than as "It" (Pearce and Pearce, "Taking" 46).

Communication scholars describe dialogic communication as involving the experience of tension (Pearce and Pearce "Taking;" Stewart and Zediker). As Karen Zediker and John Stewart write, "moments of dialogue emerge most often when the people involved maintain one primary tension – the one between *letting the other happen to me while holding my own ground*" [italics in original] (587). Letting the other happen to me is the difficult process that allows who the other person is, with his or her differences from you, "to touch, connect with, and influence you" (587). Holding my ground is the more familiar posture of saying "exactly what's on your mind" (588) and "being able to articulate and stand up for what one wants or believes" (589). Staying in this tension is at the heart of dialogic communication.

Barnett Pearce and Kimberly Pearce ("Taking"; Combining") emphasize the power of listening to open up opportunities to create dialogue. Dialogic communication involves unique rules that "enable people to speak so that others can and will listen, and to listen so that others can and will speak" (Pearce & Pearce "Combining" 162). While it is easy to listen to those with whom you agree, in dialogic listening you are "sculpting mutual meaning" with those with whom you do not necessarily agree (Stewart and Logan 220). Dialogue involves suspending disbelief, continuing to listen, and asking open-ended questions to promote understanding of divergent viewpoints (Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw). It involves striving for empathic understanding of the other person's perspective, focusing on how that perspective makes sense in the context of the person's experience. This process is particularly important when participants in dialogue

have different worldviews, or different ways of knowing and styles of speaking (Pearce and Littlejohn). Dialogue can be used to talk about such differences explicitly so they can be demystified (Burkhalter et al.; Pearce and Littlejohn).

**Democratic Deliberation**

James Fishkin defines deliberative democracy as "face-to-face discussion by which participants conscientiously raise and respond to competing arguments so as to arrive at considered judgments about the solutions to public problems" (223). This deliberation takes place in a variety of ways. The key is that in this model, "good" citizens are civically engaged in informed and considered judgment, rather than in uniformed or manipulated decision-making. Democratic deliberation is ideally an egalitarian process in which participants all have enough time to talk, listen to each other with care and consideration, and thoroughly weigh information and ideas (Burkhalter et al.).

A distinction is often made between dialogue and deliberation. Whereas dialogue seeks understanding of the various viewpoints of those involved, deliberation is said to seek a concrete decision as a result of the process (National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation; Pearce and Pearce "The Public"). Some authors describe dialogue and deliberation as so different and inconsistent that they must be practiced separately lest the beneficial qualities of each be destroyed (Yankelovich). Other authors view it as appropriate for deliberators to transform their process to dialogue whenever they discover that their differences stem from "divergent ways of speaking and knowing" (Burkhalter et al. 418).

We suggest that integrating dialogic communication into all deliberation can be beneficial because it enriches deliberative processes. Dialogue promotes good deliberative decisions because it ensures that participants try to truly understand what the other is saying. Dialogue encourages participants to listen to all voices with full



attention and respect (Box "Pragmatic") and to accept information from one another, even when they disagree. Because of this, dialogue can prevent deliberation from devolving into competitive argumentation, which can reify the positions held by participants.

Josina Makau and Debian Marty contrast competitive argumentation with cooperative argumentation in the ideal deliberative community. Cooperative argumentation depends on the ability and willingness of participants to adopt the virtues of dialogic communication, such as equity and reciprocity. It requires an "ethic of interdependence" which summons participants to view those with whom they disagree as "resources rather than rivals" (88). This ethic differs from the normal view of rivals in a deliberative setting, in which moral conflict can provoke diatribe and escalate to violence (Pearce and Littlejohn). The dialogic principles of cooperative argumentation make decision making better because they open up "opportunities for deepened understanding, reflection about, and refinement of our perspectives" (Makau and Marty 69).

A dialogue-infused approach to democratic deliberation is exemplified by service-learning projects in the field of composition. For example, David Cooper and Eric Fretz describe a long-term service-learning writing project that is grounded in democratic principles and a public work model. These scholars recount an assignment in which students led groups of young people in discussions about race and youth problems and ways to resolve them using a Study Circle format involving deliberation, negotiation, and dialogue.

**Advocacy**

The approach to public discourse that we include under the broad heading of advocacy is grounded philosophically in critical theory and emphasizes themes of social justice. One commonality among theorists in this approach is that they examine public discourse through a lens conscious of power dynamics. They attach prime importance to

ensuring that unprivileged voices are heard, not just to promote good decision making but because it is socially and morally right.

Kendall Phillips joins other critical theory scholars in critiquing the Habermasian view that the public sphere is an impartial, rational, open space for public deliberation. Phillips argues that this rationalistic perspective obscures the diversity within and between communities and subjugates the interests and values of some members while privileging those of others. When community decisions about appropriate action must be made, those who dissent are pressured to adopt the consensus of the mainstream or are marginalized if they will not or cannot endorse it. As Phillips writes, dissention should instead be viewed positively as "a symbolic resource" which may promote "appreciation for the diversification in contemporary society" (245). What theorists call for in the advocacy approach is a more inclusive mode for public discourse. "The critical theory model envisions discourse as a technique of opening the public agenda to a broad group of citizens to counter governing elites' self-interested control" (Box "Critical" 12).

A critical theory perspective further recognizes advocacy as a mode of communication that can foment change in the conditions that produce social ills such as poverty, homelessness, and racism (Artz; Pollock). Mark Pollock suggests that teaching advocacy skills to students in argumentation courses helps to prepare them "not only to identify communicative dimensions of social injustice but also to take action to rectify such injustice" (112). When students participating in Pollock's service-learning projects applied what they were learning to important community issues, they discovered the power of advocacy to bring about change.

However, advocacy as a mode of public communication can be enriched by incorporating principles of dialogue. In the absence of dialogic principles, advocacy is likely to result in competitive argumentation (Makau and Marty), escalation of contestation between



differentially empowered groups (Frasier 83), diatribe in dealing with moral conflicts (Pearce and Littlejohn), and seeing conscious conspiracies of elite control when they may not be present. In contrast, dialogic communication in the service of advocacy involves human engagement across lines of difference, with a full consciousness of the power dynamics and with a commitment to participate in social change efforts in partnership with members of oppressed social groups.

Examples of a dialogue-infused advocacy can be seen in the service learning literature. Lee Artz, for example, uses critical ethnography as an approach to service-learning and relies on dialogue between students and community members to move toward an emancipating social justice agenda and away from a service-as-charity mindset. In similar work, David Coogan describes how his middle-class students engaged in civic dialogue and "rhetorical activism" by interviewing working class African Americans about their lives, researching the neighborhood history, creating a magazine which presented the residents' stories, reacting to the residents' responses to the students' work, and reflecting on the overall experience. Coogan describes how this dialogic approach differs from a conventional approach to advocacy, which takes an adversarial stance.

In summary, dialogic communication is a kind of discourse that opens up opportunities for people who differ to create genuine relationships and a deeper understanding of one another's experiences and perspectives. Public dialogue is valuable discourse in its own right, and integrating dialogic principles into public deliberation and advocacy can make these forms of discourse more robust and productive.

**Case Study**

We studied our service-learning course, Group Facilitation and Public Dialogue, to see how integrating public dialogue into the course would influence our students. We begin here by describing and critiquing our service-learning partnership and course design. We then

examine the impact of our course on students' commitment to become democratically engaged citizens who are committed to social justice.

**Service-Learning Partnership**

The campus-community partnership for our course was initiated with a telephone call. Shereen had read in the newspaper about Patrick's anti-hate activities in the community and called him to discuss the possibility of forming a Communicating Common Ground service-learning partnership between the School of Communication and the Hate Crimes Project. We explored the exciting possibilities and how service learning activities integrating public dialogue could both strengthen the community and benefit each of us. As the project took shape, the idea that we would co-develop and co-teach the course became clear. We designed the syllabus, obtained financial support for Patrick as a co-instructor, recruited students, and taught the class sessions together as equal partners. Our weekly meetings and more frequent reflective conversations throughout the semester were a powerful source of learning for us both. We repeatedly took this learning and looped it back to strengthen our teaching and our partnership.

Overall, we believe our collaboration illustrates well the features of an authentic democratic service-learning partnership outlined by Barbara Jacoby. Jacoby writes that "*genuine democratic* partnerships" are crucial to the sustenance of a healthy democracy [italics in original] (9). Such partnerships have features of collaboration, reciprocity, equality, shared vision and responsibility, mutual respect, trust, and mutual benefit (Jacoby). These features parallel the relational qualities of holding your ground and letting the other happen to you (Zediker and Stewart) that are manifest in dialogic communication.

**Course Description and Critique**

Consistent with the GGC initiative and the mission of the Hate Crimes Project, [1] our course focused on facilitating public dialogue on issues



of diversity, opposing hate, and building alliances across lines of difference among youth. The need for dialogue on issues of diversity in our city was corroborated by local leaders of community groups and organizations, such as the Anti-Defamation League, Chicano Awareness Center, National Conference for Community and Justice, and Citizens for Equal Protection.[2] The course was designed for variable topics, so that in subsequent semesters the service-learning project could address different community issues.

The approach to public discourse emphasized in our course was dialogic communication, with roots in the work of Buber (*Between* and *I and Thou*) and in the writing and practice of scholars such as Stewart and Zediker and Pearce and Pearce ("Combining"). From this perspective, dialogue is "a tensional, ethical practice" that is "context-bound, relational, emergent, and momentary" (Stewart and Zediker 231). Through readings and class activities, students learned that dialogic communication has potential to foster teaching and learning (Stewart and Zediker), recreate argument as a collaborative encounter (Makau and Marty), transcend moral conflict (Pearce & Littlejohn), and encourage advocacy for social justice or "a democratic, humane society" (Artz 248).

We identified four main learning objectives for students in the course: to understand issues of diversity, especially race relations, that are important to our community; to be able to apply knowledge and ethics of dialogue theory and practice in public dialogue situations; to develop competencies as facilitators of group dialogue; and to be able to plan, publicize, and facilitate a dialogue on diversity for community members. Instructional materials and activities included readings, lectures, classroom visits by community members, in-class facilitation and dialogue exercises, homework and other out-of-class activities, and writing assignments. The last several weeks of the semester were devoted to planning, preparing for, publicizing, performing, and then reflecting upon the dialogue event. Students wrote a series of

reflection papers about their service-learning activities, connecting their experiences to course concepts, theories, ethical principles, skills, and abilities. As advised in the service-learning literature (Howard), students received credit for learning (as demonstrated in reflection papers) rather than for their service.

Each week, classroom activities were designed to teach students to engage in, reflect on, and facilitate dialogues on issues of diversity. For example, early in the semester we provided groups of students with a set of open-ended questions focusing on their families' racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds; the attitudes of their parents and grandparents toward people from different groups; and their own positive and negative experiences with people who are from a different group than their own. The students were instructed to share their experiences and perspectives and listen with the goal of understanding each other. They later described this dialogue as a defining moment in the course when they felt connected to one another, inspired to learn more about public dialogue, and energized to engage in the service-learning project. In debriefing the dialogue experience, however, the students realized that some of them had spoken more than others and that not everyone had enjoyed the same opportunity to share their views and experiences. This realization led to discussion of the importance of establishing ground rules for dialogue and the ways a facilitator can enrich the communication and learning that occurs. We discussed how rules mutually developed by participants and a trained facilitator can foster practices that promote dialogic communication.

Although we were not familiar with Linda Flower's work on "intercultural inquiry" at the time we taught our course, the dialogues that our students engaged in and facilitated can be compared to this process. Flower describes intercultural inquiry as "a literate action defined by the open-eyed, against-the-odds, self-conscious attempt to engage in collaborative acts of meaning making that are mutually transformative" (186). She describes how students in her rhetoric



courses interacted with community partners and used "differences of race, class, culture, or discourse that are available to them to understand shared questions" (186). In intercultural inquiry, participants "frame open-ended questions as a community, elicit their multiple – often conflicting – perspectives, and put those perspectives into generative dialogue that promotes change" (Higgins, Long, and Flower 11). Some of the techniques for intercultural inquiry include seeking "the story behind the story," drawing out and considering "rival hypotheses," and examining options and outcomes from different perspectives.

The dialogues in our class were similar to intercultural inquiry in that they solicited differing perspectives and experiences, encouraged deep listening and open communication across boundaries, and fostered creation of shared meaning. However, the structure of the dialogues was not identical. One of the ways our dialogues differed from intercultural inquiry is that we emphasized the dialogue group's development of shared ground rules and the role of the facilitator to foster dialogic communication. We drew from Sam Kaner's guidebook on facilitation to provide our students with specific techniques for facilitating dialogue skillfully. Kaner focuses on group decision-making but his approach is grounded in dialogic values of "full participation," "mutual understanding," "inclusive solutions," and "shared responsibility" (24). He introduces facilitation techniques designed to help communicators listen to each other and speak openly from their own perspectives, such as asking open-ended questions, "drawing people out," and fostering "suspended judgment."

Not surprisingly, we experienced moments of tension at various stages of our partnership. For example, in designing the course we disagreed about which of the course goals warranted more of the precious class time that was available. Patrick had extensive professional experience as a group facilitator of dialogue on issues of diversity. For him it was paramount that a substantial portion of the course be devoted to developing students' skills as proactive facilitators of dialogue.

Unskilled facilitators of dialogue on diversity can do damage to a community, increasing stress and conflict among members of different groups. On the other hand, Shereen had more familiarity with the academic literature on dialogic communication. For her it was crucial that students develop a foundation of theoretical knowledge with which to reflect upon and learn from their experience as participants in and facilitators of dialogue on diversity. Our challenge was to meet these objectives (and others) within the confines of a fifteen-week semester. Ultimately, through letting the other happen to us while holding our own ground, we developed activities and assignments that addressed our concerns and integrated our strengths in knowledge and skill. For example, we designed opportunities for students to develop their skills by facilitating in-class dialogues on theoretical issues in the reading, and students were required to demonstrate knowledge of dialogue theory as they critiqued their own facilitation skills.

Our students' public dialogue on diversity near the end of the semester was a culminating event of the course. We made the conscious decision to put the students in charge of developing a focus and format for the dialogue that would meet community needs. To assist the students with this assignment, we invited leaders of community groups and organizations that work closely with the Hate Crimes Project into our classroom to engage in dialogue with our students about "the state of diversity" in our city. We also brought to class several high school youth from across the city to share their perspectives on being citizens in a diverse community. Pairs of our students took turns co-facilitating dialogue among the youth using a "fish bowl" format, with the rest of the class listening and providing feedback. This activity was an opportunity to not only hone facilitation skills, but to hear from often silenced but key community stakeholders, local area youth, about diversity, citizenship, and social justice.

Our class divided into working groups to plan the youth dialogue. Each group developed proposals and shared them with the class for



discussion and feedback. One group spent hours developing and refining the wording of several open-ended questions and organizing them to invite genuine dialogue. Another group planned the welcoming and warm-up activities that would help to build trust, and designed a closing session to elicit reflection and a focus on action. Other groups focused on inviting and recruiting participants to participate, publicity and media relations, and event logistics such as name tags, furniture arrangement, refreshments, and treats and prizes for the youth.

The youth dialogue on diversity itself was a learning experience characterized by both excitement and disappointment. We were impressed by the demonstrations of leadership as our students finalized and executed their plans, collaborated to get things done on time, supported each other, and dealt with the unexpected. A moment of disappointment occurred when we all realized that only 35 of the 90 youth who were expected to attend were actually present to participate in the dialogue. Instead of the ten groups of nine that our co-facilitation teams were prepared to facilitate, we had five groups of seven youth ready to take part in dialogue. We turned to our back-up plan. Our co-facilitation teams doubled up, collapsed their agendas, and shared the facilitation tasks beautifully. This experience was a lesson not just in the importance of expecting the unexpected but also in the extent to which community members must be integrally involved in planning any event that is purportedly being held "for" them. The relatively low turnout of youth told us that more likely than not, we had not sufficiently engaged with the community in planning the dialogue's goals and agenda.

As we reflected further on the youth dialogue and our course as a whole, we realized that we had missed important opportunities to foster community engagement. Specifically, our service-learning project did not require our students to go regularly into the community and interact with community members on their own turf. During the final month of the semester, the students visited high schools across the city to

recruit youth to participate in the dialogue, interacted with the media to publicize the event, and contacted area businesses to solicit treats and prizes for the youth. However, we did not require our students to meet with members of the community outside of class on a regular basis. Instead, we always taught the class on campus, guest speakers from the community came to us, even the youth dialogue on diversity was held in the student center on the university campus. In addition, asking our students to adopt facilitator and observer roles when the high school youth visited our classroom earlier in the semester prevented our students from engaging in dialogue *with* the youth. In some respects, then, our students' dialogues fell short of the ideals of intercultural inquiry, which Flower describes as "a collaborative inquiry *with* others into shared, mutually significant questions" (189). We suspect that these decisions reduced our students' ability to civically engage and develop genuine democratic campus-community partnerships over time. Consequently, our students' understanding of community needs relevant to the dialogue on diversity they planned and facilitated probably did not reach its potential.

Our students' limited interaction with community members outside of the classroom mirrored Shereen's community engagement. Although our extraordinary campus-community partnership as co-instructors strengthened our experience of equality and collaboration, and even though Patrick's presence in the classroom was a constant manifestation of the campus-community connection, these things also enabled Shereen, with few exceptions,[3] to remain on campus throughout the semester instead of venturing physically into the community. We believe this distance from the community at the faculty level carried over to impact our students. As Bachen argues, faculty who do not move out of the classroom and into the community miss out on community-based learning themselves and thus forfeit opportunities to help students connect such learning to the subject matter of the course.



On the other hand, we recognized that the students in our class were themselves members of the community they wished to serve. We were fortunate to have considerable diversity among our students in terms of national origin, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political belief, age, and socio-economic status. Our in-class dialogues on subjects such as white privilege, affirmative action, and sexual harassment were richer because of our students' varied standpoints and voices. These dialogues reminded us that in many ways the campus-community divide can be less evident for a metropolitan university and the community of which it is a part. Our students were most certainly *of* the community, not just engaging *with* it. Feedback from our students suggests that many of them became inspired by these in-class dialogues to engage in public discourse on diversity issues.

**Impact of the Course on Students**

We collected both quantitative and qualitative data from our students to assess how their experiences in the course affected them. Quantitative data were gathered by distributing a self-report questionnaire at the first and last class meetings of the semester. Our twenty-two students completed the pre-course version of the questionnaire and 19 students completed the post-course version. (Two students dropped the class mid-semester and a third was absent for the post-course assessment.) Both versions asked students to mark their degree of agreement or disagreement with each of 13 statements using a five-point Likert scale (see Table 1).

The 13 self-report questionnaire items focused on the students' knowledge, skills, experiences, attitudes, and intentions regarding public dialogue, civic engagement, and social justice. We grouped the questions into three outcome areas for analysis, including students' perceptions of their competence as planners and facilitators of public dialogue events (items 1-4 and 8), understanding of dialogue theory (items 5-7), and readiness to engage with the community on issues of diversity (items 9-13). We used the latter items (9-13) to assess

the extent to which our course fostered a commitment to the service-learning goals of engaged democratic citizenship and social justice. These items included: (a) I am comfortable communicating with people who are different from me, (b) I am biased against certain groups of people who are different from me, (c) I am confident that I can be an ally to people who are from different communities than mine, (d) I am familiar with the organizations that work on diversity issues in our community, (e) I am motivated to make a positive difference in my community on issues of diversity.

Qualitative data were also gathered by asking students to respond to five open-ended questions at the end of the course. These questions were included on the post-course version of the questionnaire and elicited students' reflections on how the course may have encouraged them to become more democratically engage citizens and committed to social justice. These responses provided a deeper look from the students' perspective at the ways in which the course affected them. The open-ended questions are listed in Table 2.

Because our sample of 19 students was too small to enable legitimate factor analysis of the data (Tabachnick and Fidell 379), we examined the items separately. Paired samples *t*-tests were used to compare the pre-course to post-course means for each item. As shown in Table 1, the course appears to have significantly increased the students' perceptions of their competence (knowledge and skill) as facilitators of dialogue, mastery of dialogue theory, and ability to plan and organize a public dialogue event.

The results in Table 1 also show limited increases in students' readiness to engage with the community on issues of diversity. By the end of the course, students reported significantly more familiarity with local organizations that work on diversity issues. Moreover, students showed non-significant increases in their perceptions of their comfort when communicating across lines of difference, ability to be an ally to



people from different communities, and motivation to make a positive difference in the community on diversity issues. Interestingly, by the end of the course students' showed a nonsignificant *increase* in their perceptions of their own biases against certain groups of people who differed from them. As our analysis of the qualitative data will suggest, this increase appears to reflect our students' growth in self-awareness rather than an actual increase in bias. The quantitative findings provide some limited evidence, then, that our course encouraged engaged democratic citizenship and commitment to social justice.

**Table 1. Pre-Course and Post-Course Means, Standard Deviations, and Paired Samples T-Tests for Items Measuring Impact on Students**

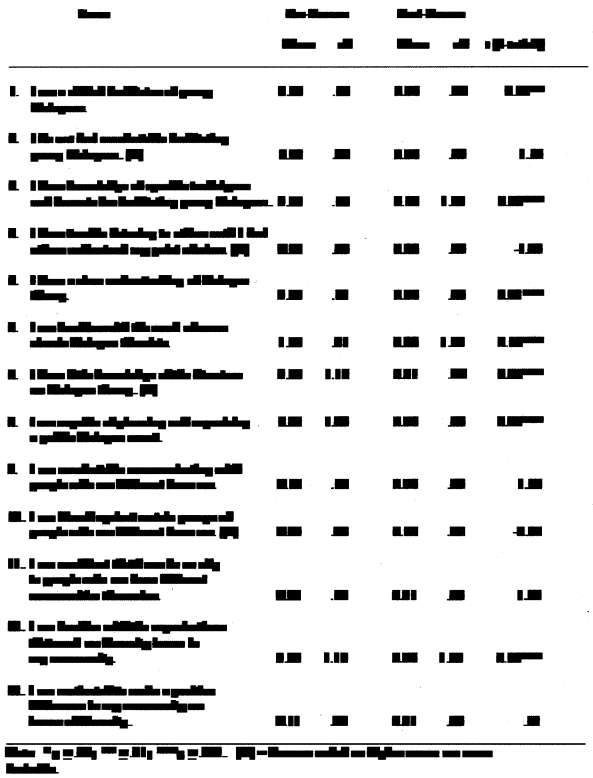

**Table 2. Post-Course Open-Ended Questions**

1. List two things you learned in this course.

2. As a result of being in this course, identify at least one way in which you will work to make a difference in the civic life of our community. If you are not motivated to do so, please explain why not.

3. As a result of being in this course, are you more motivated to participate in public and community decision making? If so, how will you take part? If not, why not?

4. As a result of being in this course, do you feel more motivated to partner with others in the community to create a more just society? If so, how? If not, why not?

5. As a result of being in this course, do you feel more capable of participating in genuine dialogue with others who differ from you? If so, how has this course helped you in developing skills as a participant in dialogue? If not, what would have helped you?

The qualitative data provide more insight about how teaching our students to facilitate public dialogue might have fostered the service-learning goals. We transcribed our students' responses to the five open-ended questions and read the responses repeatedly to identify themes. Twelve of the 19 students indicated that the course had indeed motivated them to become more engaged in the civic life of our community, to participate in public and community decision making, and to work with others in the community to create a more just society, particularly on issues of racial diversity. The other seven students expressed a lack of motivation toward civic engagement, explaining that they were too busy to become involved in their community or felt detached from community concerns and decisions.



The students' responses conveyed confidence in dialogue as a meaningful form of democratic participation and a powerful agent of change. As stated by one student, "Dialogue benefits communities and the democratic process (more so than debate)." Another student commented, "Democracy is so well and alive in this country it is inspirational. Dialogue is key to change and each of us possesses the power within to provoke change."

When asked specifically how they intend to make a difference in the civic life of our community, students shared action plans on interpersonal and community levels. On the interpersonal level, students said they planned to share what they had learned about diversity with friends, family, and coworkers; to interact personally with people of different races; and to use their dialogue skills interpersonally to break down diversity barriers. On the level of community engagement, students expressed the intent to volunteer their time to organizations that do work on diversity, conduct research to improve race relations in the community, and form and participate in diversity dialogues and forums.

The students also said the course motivated them to participate in public and community decision making, especially on diversity issues. A few students had already taken such action by the end of the course. One student told us, "[a]s a result of this class, I am participating in a diversity committee in charge of promoting and celebrating differences at work. That's a beginning." Another student indicated that "I led 3 dialogues this semester [on multicultural issues] as a result from this class and plan to do more next year." Other students expressed an intent to join or take leadership positions on decision-making committees, to participate in community forums, and to initiate dialogue events on diversity issues. As expressed by one student, "I am more motivated to participate in decision making because I can help accomplish the goals we set by not being biased." Another student shared, "I would

like to join or even start some committees through schools to help with diversity issues."

The primary reason students identified for their increased motivation to become involved in public decision making on diversity issues was their improved ability to be a skilled, informed, and open participant in it. Students cited their improved skills in dialogic communication, expanded awareness of diversity issues, greater understanding of the perspectives of others, and more astute awareness of their own biases as primary reasons for their increased motivation. One student said the course inspired "greater self-awareness about my opinions, biases, and beliefs. I believe in fairness and equity and want to be open to dialogue with others." Another student wrote, "I got to see others' perspectives on different issues. By learning different techniques and knowledge I feel I can bring something to the dialogue."

When asked about their motivation to create a more just society, students again conveyed an intent to take action. Some students said they planned to join existing groups and committees that are currently working for social justice. As one student eloquently wrote, "Racism and injustice exist, and I realize that change will happen but only so long as people like us are willing to effect change and invest a great deal of time. I'm partnering with the various cultural and ethnic-specific groups on and off-campus to discuss ways in which we as people of color can effect change." Other students said they intended to raise awareness of diversity issues by holding dialogue events, promoting enhanced media coverage of diversity issues, and encouraging people of all backgrounds to vote.

Overall, our qualitative data suggest that the large majority of our students experienced a positive impact from the course. The course activities they described as helpful included reading about dialogue theory and diversity issues, developing dialogic communication skills, participating in dialogues on diversity with their classmates



and community guests, developing skills as group facilitators, and planning and facilitating a public dialogue on diversity for high school youth from across the metropolitan area. These experiences appear to have motivated most of our students to become more engaged with their community as democratic citizens and more inspired to making a positive difference in promoting social justice.

**Conclusion**

Like the students in our course, we are students of service learning who can learn and grow from reflecting on our experience. Our analysis forced us to confront the ways in which we failed as well as succeeded to fulfill the promise of public dialogue, to motivate our students to become engaged citizens, and to foster their commitment to social justice.

More case studies and rigorously designed evaluations of service-learning courses focusing on public dialogue are needed so we can begin to gain a broader understanding of their potential impact. Our course dealt specifically with diversity issues and incorporated interpretive and critical theory perspectives, and our class was composed of an unusually diverse group of students for our campus. We believe these factors enriched our course but their co-occurrence prevents us from knowing which contributed most to our students' expressed motivation toward engaged democratic citizenship and social justice. In other words, is preparing students to facilitate dialogue and to engage in genuine dialogue with others enough to inspire them toward the service-learning goals? Or must a course also focus specifically on diversity issues such as racial inequality? Would our outcome have been dramatically different if a critical theory perspective had been omitted from the course or if our students had all been U.S. natives, middle-class, and white? Additional case study research is needed to pull apart these issues and assess the scope of dialogue's potential to foster service-learning goals.

Future research also should examine the immediate and long-term impact of public dialogue on the community members who participate and the community as a whole. Clearly, the high school youth who chose to participate in our students' facilitated dialogue answered the call to become democratic citizens engaged in the civic life of our community. At the end of the day, the youth shared personal statements with their dialogue groups, indicating one action they would take to oppose hate in our community. The youth also completed a post-dialogue questionnaire that included the statement, "I will take some action regarding diversity in my community because of today's dialogue." The group mean of 2.18 indicates that the youth on average "agreed" with the statement (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree), suggesting that the dialogue impacted their motivation to take positive action in their community. Unfortunately, two open-ended questions asking the youth more specifically about their action plans and their motivation to make a difference were inadvertently left off the post-dialogue questionnaire. Future case studies should solicit post-dialogue feedback from participants and obtain contact information to enable follow-up questions about actions actually taken.

The approach we used in teaching our course can be replicated in other courses to intervene in contentious community issues. For example, service-learning partnerships may be formed with relevant community agencies to address stereotyped perceptions of people in different racial, ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, sexual, and occupational groups. Topics such as prevention of violence, police-community relations, homophobia and sexual prejudice, and neighborhood segregation may be addressed in community dialogues through service-learning projects. Campus communities can also integrate principles of dialogue into students' co-curricular activities, drawing involvement from student organizations and community groups. Topics such as non-Muslim stereotypes of Muslims, tensions between African-born and American-born black students, distant relationships between white professors and students of color, and promoting diversity of membership in student



organizations have been addressed on our own campus using principles of dialogic communication described in this article.

We have several suggestions for ourselves as we look backward on lessons learned and forward to teaching future service-learning courses that integrate a dialogic communication approach to public discourse on diversity issues. We share these suggestions to end this article in hope that others might continue, in the spirit of service-learning pedagogy, to practice, reflect, then practice in ways that will build a strong civil society through engaged democratic citizenship and social justice.

• Balance assigned readings and course subject matter to address three major learning areas with relatively equal emphasis: (1) dialogue theory and practice, (2) diversity issues, and (3) facilitation skills.

• Choose off-campus sites for regular dialogue with community members where students and faculty will be exposed to the varied conditions in which community members live and work. Members of the community must be fully involved in all stages in the process of developing the purpose, focus, and issues of public dialogue(s).

• Introduce students to interpretive and critical theory perspectives on communication and diversity issues (issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.).

• Give students numerous opportunities to practice their facilitation skills and receive feedback to develop competence and confidence.

The Communicating Common Ground service-learning course that we developed will be taught again, made better by what we learned this time from teaching the course. Our campus-community partnership between the university's School of Communication and our city's Hate Crimes Project is an exciting prospect for continuing impact on the community.

## Endnotes

[1] The mission of the Hate Crimes Project is to help create a safe and welcoming community for all people in our community. Program activity focuses on law enforcement training, education in frequently targeted groups, and preventing hate through outreach to children and youth.

[2] Racial segregation is evident in our city's neighborhoods and this carries over into the schools, particularly since the recent cessation of integration busing. Some community leaders on issues of diversity describe our city as one in which, for historical reasons, it is difficult to have open and honest conversations about race and diversity.

[3] An exception to this is that the university partner contacted youth groups to recruit participants for our students' dialogue on diversity.

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## The Life of A Poem: Audre Lorde's "Litany for Survival" in Post-Lacrosse Durham

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"The Life of A Poem" is a poetic and critical reflection on the relationship between the University and institutionalized economic, physical and sexual violence by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a PhD candidate at Duke University, and a founding member of UBUNTU, an artistic and organizing community that emerged in Durham, NC during the Duke Lacrosse Scandal. In this article, Audre Lorde's "Litany for Survival" becomes a text of healing and a means through which to critically reframe community building and engaged scholarship.

### Preface

Black lesbian poet, warrior, mother, scholar, activist, designer Audre Lorde published one of her most remembered poems, "A Litany for Survival" in her most remembered collection, *The Black Unicorn,* in 1978. A year later, Lorde found herself writing "Need: A Chorale for Black Women's Voices," a poetic account of black women who did *not* survive, in response to the 12 murders of black women in Boston in the first three months of 1979. Barbara