A Window Into Community-Engaged Writing:

Three Student CEW Reflections

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Abstract

In our changing educational environment, understanding the way students experience community-engaged writing pedagogy has become more important than ever. Following a semester-long qualitative study examining the reflective writing of students and conducting interviews with those students about their experiences, three students were invited to elaborate on their experiences with a critical community-engaged writing and oral communication course. This article will detail the course, discuss the role of emotion in community-engaged writing pedagogy, and share the experiences of

these three students. Each student will discuss their experience with critical community-engaged writing, focusing on the impact, both positive and negative, of working in a group community-engaged writing and oral communication project and on the impact, both positive and negative, of previous life experiences and worldviews on community-engagement.

Critical community-engaged writing can provide students with outstanding applied writing opportunities, ways to connect with their communities, and opportunities to recognize and understand systems of power within those communities. Critical community-engaged writing can also provide students with the complex experience of working in groups on a high-stakes project, the emotion of challenging long-held beliefs, and the eye-opening experience of recognizing and confronting privilege. Decades of research have helped scholars understand how community-engaged writing programs can be implemented effectively, but how do students experience critical community-engaged writing? How do students experience being asked to examine community-based systems of power through writing? What challenges do they face during that experience?

Understanding the student perspective is always important, but it is particularly vital now that critical education as a whole is facing a major challenge in the United States. Legislatures across the country are telling students that they have a legal right to not feel discomfort in the classroom. As of July 2022, fifteen states, including the one Deb teaches in, have passed legislation limiting the teaching of "divisive" concepts surrounding race, gender, and sexuality from kindergarten to university, and many more states have introduced such legislation (PEN America 2022). So far, the battle has mainly focused on the use of Critical Race Theory, although the legislation rarely uses that terminology, partly

because Critical Race Theory is a scholarly discipline that is frequently misrepresented and misunderstood. Conservatives have succeeded in "portray[ing] critical race theory and invocations of systemic racism as a gauntlet thrown down to accuse white Americans of being individually racist. Republicans accuse the left of trying to indoctrinate children with the belief that the United States is inherently wicked" (Gabriel and Goldstein 2021). The debate and subsequent legislation have had a chilling effect on classrooms across the country (Flaherty 2021). The choice to engage in any form of critical education and to have students examine and address questions of systemic inequality has become exponentially more complex in this environment.

And yet, the very fact that this debate is occurring indicates the great need for critical education. As Walter Shaub, the former director of the United States Office of Government Ethics, Tweeted in response to this debate, "When forgetting is mandatory, remembering is essential" (@waltshaub 2021). Simply put, attempts to remove discussions of systemic inequality from the classroom create the exigence for more critical education.

In order to better understand student experiences, Deb studied the writing and reflections of fourteen students in two sections of a community-engaged first-year integrated writing and communication course she was teaching at a mid-sized midwestern university. In addition, she analyzed interview data from seven of those students. At the end of the study, Deb invited three participating students to join in developing this article detailing their experiences with critical community-engaged writing in order to further understand their experiences and to share them with a larger audience. Our goal is to help community-engaged writing instructors to better understand the impact of course design on student experience. We will begin by detailing the course Avery,

Jasmyne, and Nathan took and Deb taught in the 2021-22 academic year to provide important context on their experience. We will then examine critical community-engaged writing scholarship with a particular focus on the role of emotion in composition and communication education. Finally, Avery, Jasmyne, and Nathan will tell their own stories of critical community-engaged writing, focusing on the impacts, both positive and negative, of working in a group community-engaged writing and oral communication project and on the impacts, both positive and negative, of previous life experiences and worldviews on community-engagement.

Feminist Methodology and Participant Agency

It is important to understand that feminist methodology frames the course design and implementation as well as the study data analysis. It was also embraced in the development of this article. By rejecting the idea of the universal, feminist methodology makes space for situated knowledge as a location of study, thus frequently leading feminist researchers to partner with participants as much as possible to expand learning for all involved (Kirsch 1999). Understanding a participant's standpoint, the way they are positioned in the world, and how that position impacts their experience has value in the development of knowledge (Addison 2010; Naples and Gurr 2014; Ryan 2011). Valuing situated knowledge also positions the research participant as someone with agency. This agency "requires, at the very least, an empathetic stance toward research participants or, further, opportunities for research participants to participate directly in the construction of knowledge" (Addison 2010, 140). Recognizing research participants as having agency and providing valuable perspective to the research supports the core tenets of critical community-engaged

writing by echoing the concept of reciprocity, further ensuring the methodology fits the research subject. Seeing all participants as having agency and authority in their own experience also helps to challenge epistemic privilege, or the valuing of some voices over others (Naples and Gurr 2014, 21). Epistemic privilege can often be seen in pedagogical research, which sees researchers/scholars as knowledge producers, teachers as knowledge receivers, and students as mere subjects (Ray 1993, 9). Feminist methodology challenges that hierarchy by arguing that teachers can also be researchers and students can produce valuable knowledge as research partners, as we will demonstrate with this article.

Course Design

This study took place at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), a mid-sized, comprehensive, Midwest university. The university is a predominantly white institution (PWI) located in a small urban community within a rural state. Avery, Jasmyne, and Nathan participated in a course called Cornerstone that was taught by Deb in the 2021-22 academic year. Cornerstone is a year-long first-year cohort class that combines the content of the university's required first-year writing and oral communication courses. As an integrated communication course, Cornerstone has a strong rhetorical focus and emphasizes writing, reading, public speaking, group dynamics, interpersonal communication, and critical thinking. The fact that Cornerstone is a year-long course combining the content of two required courses gives it a unique student makeup. In our state, first-year writing and oral communication are two of the most accessible dual-enrollment courses offered in high schools. For that reason, they are two of the courses students often cover through transfer credit. If a student has transfer credit for either or both courses when they enroll at UNI, they are not eligible to take

Cornerstone. This is why 47% of the students enrolling in Cornerstone in the fall semester of 2021 did not transfer in any college credit when they enrolled at UNI, compared to a much lower 20% of the full first-year class of students (Moser 2022). Of the students who did transfer in credit, Cornerstone students brought fewer credits than the rest of the first-year cohort—11.27 compared to 19.63. There are other differences between the Cornerstone cohort and the general first-year class. The Cornerstone cohort is more racially diverse than the general first-year population at UNI, although the population is still overwhelmingly white. Students of color make up 15.1% of the Cornerstone population and 11.5% of the general first-year population. The Cornerstone population has slightly more first-generation students (38.4%) than the general population (36.2%) and a slightly lower high school GPA, 3.45, compared to 3.62. Cornerstone students are more likely to come from out of state, with a non-resident population of 14.9% compared to a non-resident general first-year student population of 9.1% (Moser 2022). While a classroom isn't a collection of statistics, we do think this data is helpful in describing the environment in which Avery, Jasmyne, and Nathan were experiencing community-engaged writing.

The course community partners were the community volunteer center and the university's Office of Community Engagement, the two entities that coordinate all service-learning and community-engagement efforts at the university. After much discussion with the community partners, we decided to use a "writing for" model (Deans 2000) where the students would research community issues being addressed by other community-engagement partnerships across the university and work in groups to write and record a series of podcasts highlighting both the issues being addressed and the work done by those partnerships to address them. Our partners wanted to create such a podcast for years but lacked the necessary

staffing, so we felt the project would be highly beneficial in advancing both the course objectives and the needs of our partner organizations. While the students did not have a direct service requirement with the partner organizations, they spent significant time researching their assigned organization and the issues it addresses and interviewing staff, volunteers, and/or clients. In addition, the community partners worked with the student groups to help them understand their goals for the project and the potential audience for the podcast.

Study Context

Because we have already argued that standpoint matters in this study, each author wanted to introduce themselves to better situate our experiences. The students will introduce themselves in their writing later in the article. Deb began teaching at this university in 2012 and has been teaching Cornerstone since 2014. Demographically, Deb fits the model of many university composition instructors: white, cis-het, late-40s, middle class, able-bodied, and contingent. She has used community-engaged pedagogy intermittently in Cornerstone classes with progressively increasing levels of critical education mixed in. Working with first-year students at a PWI, many of whom come from rural communities and small towns, provides a challenge for critical education. Many of these students have never been asked to ponder questions of systemic racism, sexism, heterosexism, or ableism. Using a critical approach to community-engaged writing in the classroom asks them to do just that. As a white instructor who is frequently described by students as having strong "mom vibes," thus conforming to traditional gender roles, Deb has found she typically has enough privilege to ask students to engage in critical education during past classes.

Then came HF 802, which was signed into law in Iowa on June 8, 2021. HF 802 is a piece of "divisive concepts" legislation targeting k-12 instruction but with some vaguely worded language incorporating colleges and universities as well. After passage, university attorneys provided guidance to faculty on the impact of HF 802, but the law is, of yet, untested. Deb felt like she was able to proceed with the plans for the course without much fear of violating the statute, but with no precedent, she couldn't be entirely sure. Even if the course didn't violate the statute, the passage of HF 802 still had the potential to have an incredible impact on the course. Students were likely to be walking into class having snippets of news about the law, both accurate and fictitious. Descriptions of HF 802 ranged from claiming teachers couldn't do anything that made you feel guilty for your race or sex to claiming teachers couldn't discuss race at all. There was the potential for the focus of the project to shift off the podcast and onto student discomfort.

Critical Literacy in Community–Engaged Writing

Cornerstone is a unique class in that it integrates all forms of communication—written, oral, group, non-verbal—we study it all. Because of that diversity, the course is heavily focused on rhetorical choices and the importance and impact of language. For Deb, this focus on language in an integrated communication course made it a logical choice to place the community-engaged writing project within a critical literacy frame. It also provided some protection from HF802 since langauge was a core course component. A critical literacy focus within community-engaged writing can introduce students to the connections between language and power and help them develop the skills necessary to identify, critique, and dismantle oppressive power structures in their communities.

Foundational in the field of critical literacy, Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire argues all education is political because education teaches students to use language, and language is directly connected to power (Freire 1983). Ignoring the culture, history, and context of a student's life ensures failure in educating that student. Students are not empty bank accounts ready to have education deposited into them (Freire 1983). All elements of a student's upbringing and community experience impact their use and understanding of language and should be considered in pedagogical design so the student is surrounded by language they can access (Freire 1983).

Critical literacy further argues it is vital to teach students the connection between language and power so they can develop the skills necessary to recognize and dismantle oppressive power structures in their communities (Bishop 2014; A. Luke 2012; Shor 1999). This is why the idea of neutrality in education is one of the most dangerous myths critical literacy scholars seek to dismantle. As Shor (1999) asks, "In the war of words, can language and literacy be innocent? Can education be neutral?" (5). More recently, composition scholar Asao Inoue (2020) ties these core critical literacy concepts to the reading and writing habits students develop over time. He argues, "to read is to make judgments about language...Our habits of language afford us the ability to make judgments from and with language. These habits come from particular places, structured into our lives and material conditions in dialectical fashion" (Inoue 2020, 135). In other words, "good writing" is not a neutral or universal concept; it is intricately tied to systems of power within a community that reward the language of the powerful and denigrate the language of the marginalized. This is why critical literacy is so foundational to critical community-engaged writing; when language is taught as a neutral structure, then the power systems embedded within it are never questioned or challenged. Neutrality supports the powerful.

When community-engaged writing is designed from a critical perspective, it can help students learn to understand, value, and recognize the many forms of knowledge and wisdom and the variety of perspectives represented in the community in which they live (Verjee and Butterwick 2014). Much like Freire (1983) teaches that students come to the classroom with valuable knowledge and experiences, critical community-engaged writing teaches students and instructors that community members contribute valuable knowledge and experience to academic discussions and that valuable and important discussions are happening outside the academy. One of the main identifiers of a critical community-engaged writing program instead of a non-critical one is a commitment to reciprocity (Jacoby 2015). Even with this commitment to reciprocity, instructors working with marginalized community partners must be ever-vigilant to ensure that marginalized voices remain in the forefront and underrepresented groups are engaged in all conversations (Delano-Oriaran, Penick-Parks, and Fondrie 2018; Verjee and Butterwick 2014). Critical community-engaged writing also helps keep instructors and students from slipping into a savior mentality that reinforces stereotypes and sees community engagement as charity (Casterllón and Pérez-Torres 2018; Eyler and Giles 1999; Gilbride-Brown 2011; Terrance, Watkins, and Jimmerson 2018), which is especially important for critical community-engaged writing programs at PWIs. This is one of the reasons the field has been shifting from service-learning to community-engaged terminology. Service terminology implies a power dynamic of students who have and community members who have not. Community-engaged terminology implies connection, reciprocity, and equality (Phelps-Hillen 2017). It also recognizes that students may be part of the communities they are engaged with, potentially having much to teach fellow students and the instructor about power and privilege (Casterllón and Pérez-Torres 2018; Oling-Sisay 2018; Stenberg and

Whealy 2009). Reciprocity helps community voices be centered, heard, and valued in critical community-engaged writing partnerships, much the same way critical literacy asks for marginalized voices to be centered, heard, and valued.

One challenge with teaching critical literacy in a writing course is the disconnect between theory and practice (Bishop 2014). It is easy to remain in a theoretical realm rather than acknowledging the direct impact power has on students, especially marginalized students. As author and cultural activist Cheríe Moraga (2015) points out, "The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression" (24). Oppression is simultaneously systemic and individual, theoretical and embodied. Only teaching students to recognize oppression and systemic power in the abstract ignores the direct embodied impact of that oppression on students and decreases their agency to change it. This is another reason critical literacy and community-engaged writing work so well together. Students learn critical theory to help them understand systems of power in the abstract and then work within the community to better understand the impact of systems of power on individual and collective community levels.

The Impact of Emotion in Critical Community-Engaged Writing

If we look at the literature, it's not surprising that the critical literacy frame used for the community-engaged writing project added some challenges, especially when working with first-year students at a predominantly white university in a rural state that just passed "divisive concepts" legislation. Engaging with the community critically and navigating contextual writing can be confusing and challenging for students. In fact, one of the strongest critiques of

critical community-engaged writing is that making power visible doesn't eradicate it or its effects (Ellsworth 1992; Stenberg 2013). Simply introducing students to the idea of power in a community does not necessarily change anything; rather, as bell hooks (2003) points out, exposure to new people, ideas, and ways of life can threaten the values and understanding of the world students bring with them to college (132). Exposure to unjust circumstances and confronting our role in creating and maintaining such circumstances can easily lead to feelings of blame and guilt and the desire to either assign or deflect fault (I. M. Young 2013). Refusing to make space for the emotion created by such a threat does not make the emotion go away; rather, most people will fight hard to reject or deflect such feelings (Gunaratana 2011, 4). Such deflection can lead to the fixity of belief and stereotype reinforcement that is occasionally seen in critical community-engaged courses. Matias (2016) builds on this idea by arguing students can't possibly be expected to engage in racial justice work if they are unable to feel and recognize the emotions that rise in that work, understand where those emotions come from, and have the strength to discuss such difficult issues (3). hooks (1994) argues emotion is an integral part of every learning environment, whether a teacher chooses to recognize it or not. For that reason, she argues, educators must understand, address, and embrace emotion and vulnerability, both for themselves and their students, to create an environment where learning can occur (hooks 1994, 21). While hooks is not discussing critical community-engaged writing in her work, her social-justice approach to pedagogy highlights many of the same issues critical community-engaged writing instructors face with their students. A learning environment where students examine and confront systemic power will be a learning environment where emotion and vulnerability are present and, as hooks argues, must be addressed, regardless of the specifics of what the students are studying.

Avery, Jasmyne, and Nathan reported three areas where emotions impacted their experiences: putting previous life experiences into a new context, recognizing privilege, and working with groups. These areas represented the findings of the larger study in which they were participants. The emotions reported were not always negative. There were students who felt denial, confusion, and frustration, but students also reported feeling proud, excited, and energized by their work. Positive or negative, the students still reported feeling emotions that needed to be processed and acknowledged.

As Wenger (2015) points out, writing pedagogy traditionally teaches that "thoughts exist unchained to bodies" (85). The problem with this separation is that emotion often manifests in the body. Think of stage fright. Sweaty palms, shaking hands, nausea, light-headedness—these are all physical manifestations of fear. Your body perceives a large audience as a bear attack and responds by preparing you to fight, freeze, or flee. The same can happen when the body perceives an attack on beliefs and values (Ellsworth 1992; Giroux 2011; hooks 1994; Micciche 2007). As we begin to critically reflect on our difference and embodiment, as we empathetically engage with the stories of others and open our minds to the motives and experiences behind those stories, we often find our power and privilege challenged. Such challenges can be risky for students and teachers because challenges can often feel like loss, and loss can be painful and difficult (Waite 2017, 47). Critical community-engaged concepts or having to confront a group problem can become a bear, and the body responds accordingly. Confronting long-standing beliefs can feel physically icky. Having to tell a classmate that their work is heading in the wrong direction can, too. Humans will go to great lengths to avoid feeling icky.

For example, the idea that group projects can be infuriating will hardly shock anyone who has ever included a group project in their course, but it is still important to examine the impact of group work on student emotions because frustration, anger, and concern are all emotions that impact students and the project. Students need to be able to process emotions generated by working in a group if they are going to learn how to function effectively within that group. The challenge is that students report critical community-engaged writing group projects taking on a higher level of importance (D. D. Young and Morgan 2020), raising the stakes for the group. Students in Deb's Cornerstone class frequently cited the fact that they were writing for a university and community partner as the reason the project was more "real." In short, people other than the instructor were going to listen to the final podcasts. They were creating work to put out into the public sphere, and for some students, that increased both the value of what they were creating and the pressure that the work be of high quality. However, as often happens in groups, not all students shared that viewpoint, and conflicts erupted.

As a field, composition has a history of avoiding recognizing emotion as anything other than a method of persuasion, making it difficult for traditional composition pedagogy to support students in and through their confusion. Rooted in Western rhetoric and the teachings of Aristotle, composition and oral communication pedagogy has traditionally seen emotion as performative and audience-based—simply a tool for persuasion (Blankenship 2019; Micciche 2007). New Criticism and its accompanying drive to see composition as a science serve to further link composition with the rational and sever it from emotion (Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt 1993; Stenberg 2013). Additionally, the feminized status of emotion and the masculinized status of reason (Micciche 2007, 16) mean emotional arguments are often classified as "rants" or irrational

arguments that are inappropriate for academic discourse (Stenberg 2005, 256). Engaging with critical literacy has forced composition teachers to acknowledge emotion as an embodied experience, not just a performative rhetorical tool. We need to recognize the role of emotion and embodied learning in pedagogy is even more vital in composition classrooms that embrace community-engaged writing as students begin to recognize and confront community power structures and their roles in upholding and maintaining them.

Student Experiences with Critical Community-Engaged Writing

In order to better understand the impact of critical community-engaged writing and the emotions it can raise, Deb asked three students to further expand on their experiences by participating in this article. Jasmyne begins by discussing her experience with the community-engaged writing issue her group was addressing and the impact it had on her experience with the project. Avery then talks about the challenges she faced working with a group and the impact experiencing new perspectives had on the beliefs she was raised with and that were still held by her family and her community. Finally, Nathan discusses his experience working with a Black business alliance and how that experience impacted his understanding of his own privilege. Detailed examination of their experiences presented from their own perspective will provide important insight for community-engaged writing instructors.

Jasmyne Harrison: Learning from Experience

The biggest project that we were required to do in our Cornerstone class was the community engagement podcast. Deb explained the whole idea about how we were going to split up into groups, be assigned a topic on community engagement, do research, and create a podcast. As a freshman in college, this huge project seemed daunting. Before then, I had never done a project that big or elaborate, and I had especially not done so with a classroom full of strangers. It was not until groups and topics were assigned that I gained a little more confidence in the project. My group seemed friendly and I had some background experience with our topic that both helped and hurt me when collaborating with my teammates. Through dedication and a lot of working together, my group produced satisfying results.

The group of people I worked with during this project dulled some of the stress that the project was giving me. Because the community engagement project had so many different parts that needed quality care and attention, I felt overwhelmed with trying to get everything done in one semester. I have heard and experienced collaborative horror stories in the past; however, my group for this project made a plan and stuck to it. We collectively decided that no one would lead and that we would break up the research and the interviews in order to evenly spread out the work. Our topic was UNI's partnership with the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance and volunteerism in college students. Half of the group researched statistics of volunteerism in college students, and the other half looked up the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance. After researching, everyone came together to share the information they collected as well as present a speech on their findings in front of the whole class.

With everyone communicating and doing their designated work, our group ended up creating a supportive environment. Every member was asking questions and putting in their own thoughts and ideas. We would even have bonding moments, like laughing over the thought of interviewing singer and rapper PitBull or griping over how long it was taking to receive an email back from the people we were relying on interviewing. Not all groups are able to work well together or even have fun from time to time, but I think my group did just fine.

Although my group had solid teamwork, an inward battle of my own started impacting the project. During my time in college, I had been participating in a student-led social justice dance group called The MOVEment. We not only danced but we also had fun as a group, informing others on racial literacy and raising awareness of issues on racism and discrimination, which are two topics I, myself, struggle with as a biracial student in a PWI. We planned activities that would give back to our communities, like packing food for hungry children or teaching new routines at open practices to anyone willing to hear what we had to say. Because I have previous experience with college volunteerism and am passionate about giving back to minority communities, I rationalized in my own head that I knew more than the others in my group. Because I had this previous experience, I had plenty of knowledge that I wanted to share. I would often find myself struggling to wait my turn. I tried not to interrupt anyone, but I would sometimes find it hard to focus on what others were saying when I constantly had input as well. My group did not seem bothered by me, but I knew inside that I was battling with whether constantly sharing my experience came off as arrogant or knowledgeable. I was the only biracial student there, so I already stuck out, and although I was taught through my experience in The MOVEment to speak up and be heard, I still could not help wanting to fit in. Since I was being hard on myself and

thought I was being too prideful, I would remind myself that other people have useful information to give as well since they did their own extensive research.

As we got further into the project, I started realizing that each group member had a different view of our topic since each person researched a different category. Everyone's different puzzle pieces strengthened our podcast puzzle which was slowly starting to take its shape. In witnessing this firsthand, I suppressed what I thought was my excessive pride in having previous experience and embraced the different experiences and viewpoints that my teammates had.

Reflecting back on the project, I should have been *more* proud of my differences and the experiences I was able to share. Research allows people to learn more about a topic that they might not have previous knowledge of, but research and experience are not the same. In my experience, having been previously involved in a given topic is more valuable than just being able to recite what you found online or in a book. For example, having been a college student who had related to and given back to the community before, I was able to help write more in-depth interview questions. Alongside the basic questions, like explaining what the nonprofit organization was, we were able to ask questions about how other students felt when giving back, and I could relate to those responses, having given back to the community myself.

Experience can find itself getting overshadowed by research. I did my own research for this project and sometimes what I would find in my research did not line up with my own experiences. For example, when researching the benefits of volunteering, a big chunk of my sources discussed benefits like resume building or feeling a sense of accomplishment for giving back to the

community. However, when I did my volunteer work as part of the student organization I was in, I volunteered not only for benefits like resume building or ego-boosting that my research discussed, but also because the topics we raise awareness about needed to be addressed. We have helped spread awareness of big issues like the importance of creating an environment that allows diversity to thrive on campus by creating our showcase based around our beliefs or spending hours packing food for school kids in need in order to combat food insecurity and spread awareness about the issue. Although the benefits I found in my research did apply during these experiences, they did not elaborate more on volunteering simply because there is a need for volunteers. The MOVEment treats volunteering as more of a call to action. It is necessary to volunteer our time to issues that need to be addressed, otherwise change cannot happen. That is something that I discovered for myself solely because of my experience volunteering in a social justice organization. I felt this particular discovery from my experience did not fit in with the rest of the research, so I did not share it, and it was not addressed in the podcast. I was again scared of sounding arrogant or being too different. If I would have shared that information, we could have had a completely different point of view and even a solid counter-argument about benefits not being the only reason to volunteer. I continued to contribute my knowledge in other ways that were less contradictory to our research. With my previous experience in talking about sensitive topics, I was able to read over the script and make sure that it was worded in an appropriate way. I was also more motivated to do the project in the first place because I was already so passionate about doing what is right and giving back to my community since the organization I am in had already been doing that throughout the semester.

In completing the community engagement project, I did not at first expect to learn as much as I did. I was excited to learn more about volunteerism among college students, and I knew there was more to learn despite already having experience in the matter. However, I did not expect to realize that being different from the rest of your group is a valuable asset or to learn more about the value of having previous experience with a topic. I also learned more about the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance, an organization provided on campus that allows students the opportunity to give back to their community. Finally, I learned more about how to collaborate with others and use my own strengths to strengthen the team and our project. I was able to try and be less hard on myself and instead recognized that my strength of having previous knowledge and having a unique point of view helps the team. I was a valuable asset with experiences that none of my peers had, and the other group members were valuable with their extensive research as well. In being able to recognize the great assets that each member possessed and how satisfying our end product was, I am able to apply this to future group projects. Having more experience with a subject can be equally if not more valued than extensive research on that same subject. The community engagement project opened my eyes to how collaborative projects can produce great results when everyone works together and when personal experience and research find ways to collaborate instead of competing against each other and when we let our differences shine instead of succumbing to that human instinct of "fitting in."

Avery Tiernan: Learning Through Change and Challenge

Group projects are not something that I enjoy. While they have their benefits and will be helpful in my future, I do not enjoy them. Most

of the time, group projects are deemed to fail based on the group dynamics. In this community engagement project, our group contained three very different individuals. My group took a primary focus on how the education system is centered around white English speakers and how it affects the lives of non-native English speakers. I focused my research mainly on the variety of different immigration statuses in the US and their meaning. One member researched the ways the education system is centered around native-English speakers, and the final member focused on how community members are directly impacted by this issue in our area.

Our group originally began with five members. We planned for each group member to have their own focus in regard to our project. This would help our group stay focused and not have much overlap. Two of our group members ended up withdrawing from Cornerstone, which resulted in the remaining group members pulling extra weight and working together to research the missing pieces. This awkwardness and tension between the group, going from five down to three, caused a lot of problems each day. These emotions and feelings were caused by the remaining members not knowing others had dropped the class. We found out a few weeks before we began to finalize our project. Until then, we werehoping those teammates were working on their pieces of the puzzle. We felt rushed and upset that they did not let us know. I feel if we would have known sooner, our group project could have gone much smoother.

I am a very introverted person and felt my opinions were belittled at times. On the other hand, my group mates were very extroverted and voiced their opinions loud and clear. I feel my group wasted much of our class time because we were three very different people. This group was not focused on the overall success of the project. We

spent many class periods discussing minor details that had little contribution to the overall success of the project. At one point, I sat in the library during class for over an hour listening to my group members debate whether we should credit someone who assisted us as a "scribe." Personally, I had no feelings either way. I simply wanted a decision to be made, and one was not being made. It was extremely frustrating for me. This happened multiple times during this project. As I was working on my part of the project I would get pulled as a "middleman" to decide what should be done to resolve the small problem that my group mates spent over half of the class stressing about.

Not only did we fail at communicating verbally in person, we failed to communicate outside of class as well. Most of our communication outside of class was virtual. We were students in this class during fall of 2021. As many know, the education system was greatly affected by the global pandemic that affected everyone around the world. We still struggled as a result of this global change. As a way to make things easier for everyone involved, we decided to communicate virtually. To fit all of our schedules, we made a document of the times we would all be available to meet in person. I took charge and tried to set up many meeting times with our group since I felt we wasted a lot of time in class. This was a failed effort. While we could all work on our own separate pieces individually, I wanted to work with the group so our project sounded good and flowed together. I would communicate with the group, but never get a response from them. There were multiple instances where I would send an email or text message to my group members asking them to look over something of mine or remind them of deadlines, and I would receive crickets in return. I questioned how we could be successful without being able to communicate with each other.

Having three very different individuals working toward the success of our project was an interesting challenge, to say the least. Communication truly can make or break a project. We did complete the project, but I believe it could have been better if small details were not overlooked as often as they were and we communicated better as a team. To claim our project a success would be an overstatement. While we met the requirements and turned in an end product, it was not the best or the most perfect podcast. Talking about difficult topics is hard, especially when you're combining three different views of thinking.

I think it is especially difficult for me to talk about difficult topics as I grew up in a mostly white, rural, farming community which has definitely resulted in a mostly conservative way of thinking growing up. Leaving home for college made me realize that this conservative way of thinking is not the only one in the world. Growing up, I did not feel comfortable talking about my feelings towards certain topics around certain members of my community, even my own family members. Boiling topics of debate in my small rural community are the presidential candidates, being pro-choice or pro-life, Republican or Democratic, the rising costs of goods around the world, political views, and more. As I became more and more aware of the world and my beliefs after events such as Black Lives Matter protests and the storming of the US Capitol, I realized that most people in my community are set in their views. Many of these individuals are not willing to accept change or even respect others' opinions. I believe that everyone has the right to their own opinion and we should respect that everyone has differing opinions. At times in my community or presence on social media, I can see who is not willing to accept others' beliefs and ideas.

So I began researching the topic of immigration having just left a community where many people see immigration as a bad thing.

They see immigrants coming to America to begin a new life and escape from the bad in their country as a bad thing. As I researched, questions I had been thinking about, questions that pushed back against the ideas I was raised with, began to find answers. Immigration is not bad. There are many different reasons one chooses to immigrate to a new country, and so I focused mainly on those reasons in our community engagement project. There is a general stereotype around immigration, that unfortunately I believed in and grew up believing in that stereotype because I never knew any different. Many people in my white, rural community believe that all immigrants enter the country illegally. That is not the case. Many immigrants take action to enter a new country by receiving a visa or fleeing their country as a refugee.

Taking the time to research on my own and being willing to talk about something that at one point would have made me uncomfortable, taught me that it is okay to have different opinions. Immigration was a topic that I had very little prior knowledge in; however, through my research, I found that the ideas and beliefs I held growing up are far from true. I knew immigration happens in many ways, and I had an idea of what went on when one chose to immigrate to a new state or country, but I knew very little about the impact it can have on one's life.

Growing up as a white individual in a white, rural farm community, I struggled coming to terms with the ideas and information I had recently learned through this project. Realizing that the general stereotype of immigration is wrong raised a lot of questions and feelings inside me. Some of these questions were surrounded by the beliefs I was raised with, and others were directed at many family members. I questioned how someone can be okay without knowing how immigration could be good for someone. I questioned why immigration is such a "bad thing" to many people. Throughout

my research, I found difficulty being able to speak on such strong and important topics. I did not want people to see me as any different than what they already knew. I feared judgment from others. I struggled to talk about something I am now educated on, for fear of belittlement. The world today is completely different from the world that many of my community members and family members grew up in. Unfortunately, there are many people stuck in the same mindset they grew up in, making it extremely difficult for them to accept change or new opinions.

Realizing and talking about this new and difficult topic taught me that there is not one way of thinking around the world. I became more aware of things going on around the world, instead of overlooking them. I educated myself on topics going on in the world, such as Black Lives Matter protests, having the right to choose, and immigration. I tried to make myself knowledgeable about topics that I had very little knowledge of and felt comfortable speaking about them to those whose beliefs were set in stone. I became interested in the world surrounding me and the problems immigrants and people of color deal with and suffer from each and every day. I now feel comfortable speaking out about difficult topics such as immigration. It is important for the world to see each and every side to a story. One thing that I have taken away from this project is that there is more than one way of thinking. I speak out about what I have learned to those who struggle to accept others' beliefs and try to help them see from a different perspective. It is important to be able to speak about things that make us feel uncomfortable. We, as a society, have to accept this and choose to respect that others may not have the same views or opinions as us. We become better people when we respect others.

This project has taught me a lot about myself but also how important it is to be able to work effectively as a group. I found that

it is not that hard to educate yourself on important topics that you care about. I realized shortly after beginning this project that all resources you could ever need are at the tip of your finger. Society has come so far in the last 10 years, and technology is a huge part of that. If you want to educate yourself, make a Google search. In less than a minute, Google will show you thousands of websites and resources that you have access to. It is important to advocate for your feelings and opinions in everyday life. As a society, we need to do better about respecting others' opinions and realizing that some people have been raised with different views than you have. Having a difference in opinion or perspective opens your eyes to the world in a different way that may not have been there before. Working in a group with very different individuals teaches you that it is difficult to meet everyone's needs in one way. You have to work together to better the overall success of the project. Group projects and talking about hard topics are both very difficult tasks, but you have to be willing and accepting to change.

Nathan Behrends: Learning About Privilege

As I entered my first semester of college, I was lucky enough to find a group of friends who had the same interests, values, and beliefs that I have. That's all you can hope for at a start a new educational experience. We hung out. We laughed. We got to know each other. These were people who mostly grew up like me, in a similar environment; however, we all had small differences and experiences that made each of us unique and get along. Even with this early group of friends, I learned a lot of stuff, such as what our personal beliefs were about topics and how we all grew up in middle-class families and had a small group of high school friends that we always hung out with. Looking back, there were some things that I realized that I had been sheltered from being in a tight-

knit community in a Des Moines suburb, and being a five-minute drive from the schools I attended. Later on, as I learned more about my new friends, I did a lot of reflecting on my own experiences, how they differ, and how they were the same. For example, despite our different locations, we had a lot more in common than we realized. We all grew up in small communities, went to college, and had to adjust to seeing a lot of differences from what we were all used to. This reflection helped me realize I can connect with others from different backgrounds, education levels, and personality traits.

Around this same time in a Cornerstone class, we were given an opportunity to work outside our designated classroom and get a sense of not only the community around us on campus, but the Cedar Valley community, too. The objective of this project was to do some research and do a podcast on a community organization. This was something that I was excited about but also interested in at the same time. I was fortunate enough to interview several members of the Cedar Valley Black Business Accelerator for the project. I was drawn to this organization because of some of the ideas brought to me by watching the TV program "Shark Tank." What interests me about this program is small businesses with big ideas want help with getting started, and this is exactly what this community organization is doing with Black businesses. With this project and opportunity, some of my fellow classmates and I researched this organization and what they were doing to help and serve the community. The number one thing that we found early in our research was that the Cedar Valley was named "the worst place for Black people to live in." (Webber 2018). We also learned this community-based organization provided help for small Black-owned businesses that were struggling with getting their ideas and businesses up and running.

I chose to look at the pandemic's effect on businesses to get a better understanding of how they might have been struggling to survive financially due to reduced business opportunities. With each member of the project team working on a different topic as part of the larger whole, we decided to interview someone very close to this organization and work with some of these businesses to help them succeed. In this instance we interviewed ReShonda Young. We asked Young about her experiences as a woman of color in the Cedar Valley area, and how she got to the financial position where she was able to open multiple successful businesses along the way. This goes back to what I was discussing earlier about meeting people and understanding different backgrounds, some of which I had not had exposure to before completing this project. With this project, I had to do something outside of my comfort zone and let go of preconceived biases. It's something that we as History majors have to deal with on a daily basis—to let go of past experiences and education and media bias. This was difficult for me because while watching and paying attention to the news, I noticed that the media was only paying attention to white businesses, so I had only gotten one side of the issue. With the idea of bias, I also had to rethink what I knew about Black businesses in general. I knew some information about how the pandemic affected businesses because I would see it every night on the news, but I didn't know a lot about the Black business side of it. Up until this point, I had never been exposed to that perspective, and I didn't see stories about it on the news. Going into this project I felt that I had a tougher time looking at different ideas and topics simply because I had the privilege of never being required to look at them before.

After all of this and even going into my second semester as a first-year student, I learned a couple of different things that I wish I had known before. The first idea was that in my somewhat small community, I was sheltered from a lot of things, such as dealing

with different kinds of struggles, those which I never had experienced before in my lifetime. This is because in my community the only conflict that I had to deal with was people not looking where they're driving and the ice on cars in the early mornings in the winter. The second idea that I took away from this project is that not everyone has the same experiences and beliefs that you have, and even though you might not have those experiences, you still have to understand how some of those experiences might shape a person. This idea is evident with religion, politics, race, sex, and some of the things that we have seen with all the different protests these past couple of years. I learned that some people want to fight with you and want to rile you up to get a reaction from you, and some people don't want to talk about it and accept that other people have different ideas. With this idea, I learned that I need to recognize my privilege and the holes in my knowledge and recognize that some people might not have been as privileged. The third and final idea I took away from this was the idea of being open to new ideas and new beliefs. If and when you meet someone with a different perspective and different experiences, be open to connecting with that person. You never know what you might find or what you might learn.

Conclusion

Our current legislative environment is telling students they should not have to feel discomfort while learning. Interestingly, the students involved in this study do not seem to have received that message. None of the students participating in the study and none of the three students co-authoring this article ever mentioned HF 802 or expressed any belief that the emotions they were feeling during their community-engaged writing experience were inappropriate for the classroom. This is important because

educators know that discomfort is often a feature of quality education, not a bug. Critical community-engaged writing courses specifically ask students to examine critical literacy concepts like the relationship between language and power and their place within that relationship, generating emotions and feelings that can be uncomfortable. Understanding how community-engaged writing course design can generate those emotions and how students experience them is vital for instructors using this powerful pedagogy. In this article, three students shared the stories of their experiences with community-engaged writing. Clearly, these three narratives are not indicative of all community-engaged writing students, but they are important, nonetheless. Through Jasmyne and Avery, we learn how the group dynamics often encountered in community-engaged writing projects can impact the student experience and the final product, both positively and negatively. Jasmyne teaches us how previous experience with an issue can impact the way a student engages with that issue. Avery describes the challenges students may face when asked to engage with perspectives that contradict the beliefs and worldviews they were raised with. Nathan talks of his experience confronting unconscious bias and privilege through his community-engaged writing project. While these specific experiences are unique to these three students, they are also exemplary of the experiences had by many other community-engaged writing students. By opening ourselves up to student narratives, instructors can learn a great deal about how students experience community-engaged writing and the emotions such writing can create. Such an understanding provides important insight that can help instructors strengthen their community-engaged writing course design in ways that will better support the student experience.

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