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Promoting Interracial Interactions Through Service-Learning Pedagogy

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Abstract

In this essay the author travels through an experience that impels connecting community problems to service-learning pedagogy in order to foster meaningful race relations. It draws from theoretical work on critical pedagogy, critical service-learning pedagogy, intergroup contact theory, and interracial friendships. These theories provide strategies that coalesce to promote race relations, and support an integrated theory and practice that give students an orientation to addressing social problems. This assumption is explored through a service-learning project that allowed culturally and racially diverse students to respond to a community problem expressed by East African refugees residing in a midwest U.S. community. The students partnered to engage in dialogue to chart ways to improve interracial interactions in two local public high schools.
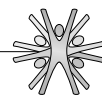
KEY TERMS: service-learning pedagogy, race relations, intercultural/interracial interactions, knowledge, refugees

Introduction

"How *can you help us? We want our children to go to school to get an education, not to* fight".

As I thought about how to respond, Amina[1] retorted "*you know you can do something, tell us how." "* I *am not sure what I can do right away but I will* think *about it and let you know,"* I responded with some hesitation.

This conversation occurred during an informal visit with my female friends who are refugees from the Sudan and Somalia, and now living in a predominantly white community in the upper mid-western region of the United States. The focus of this essay is a discussion about the context in which I was asked for help, and how my

response to this interaction led to a decision to use service-learning pedagogy as a tool to address racial relations in the now "shared" community. The essay is framed around the questions: 1) How is service-learning (or more generally a community–based project) itself an intercultural/interracial concept and interaction? 2) How does it heighten community issues and at the same time offer means to resolve issues identified? 3) How does it create a learning environment that engages students to develop knowledge that is community-based and geared towards raising critical consciousness about community issues?

My thesis begins with the questions posed by the women mentioned earlier. In my view, they are culturally and racially marked questions and as such my response should serve to explicate ways to address racial issues in the community. In this essay, I seek to make an argument for a pedagogy that addresses community issues by utilizing diverse community members as collective producers of knowledge. The knowledge that is generated through this pedagogy focuses on offering mutual insights to understanding ideologies of race and cultural differences for purposes of promoting race relations and community-building. First, I theorize the cultural context of the stated problem, and then build on it to argue for a pedagogy that engages students to generate and apply knowledge that empowers them to address racial issues in their community. Second, I draw from theoretical perspectives that explain ways to engage racially and culturally diverse people, as theorized by Orbe & Harris (2000) and Allport (1958). The argument developed shows that the integration of these perspectives with critical pedagogy and service-learning pedagogy can present a theoretical formation relevant to promoting race interactions.

The Setting

It was summer of 2006 when my help was sought by East African refugee women to keep their children (high school students) focused on school and not school yard and cafeteria fights. The prolonged conversations about the challenges facing the refugee children and the entire community often took place when I visited Atatia at her rented townhouse located in a residential area predominantly resided by refugees from Somalia and the Sudan. This particular visit when my help was sought was not unusual. I had been visiting with Atatia and her neighbors since I accepted a professorial job in a local state university in 2005. I was particularly close to Atatia because I had known her longer than the other women. My visits to her house were frequent because my son and Atatia's two sons love to play soccer with other African kids in the neighborhood. Additionally, the Boys and Girls Club is down the street from this residential area, where the refugee children get the opportunity to interact with other culturally and racially diverse students.

> '*How can you help us? We want our children to go to school to get an education,
> not to* fight.'

The question posed by Amina and the accompanying statement allows one to see the embedded racial and cultural nuances evident in her words. The racial makeup of the community where the women live explains the basis of their concerns. The rapid change in the racial composition of the community was the issue about which the local refugees and white community felt most concern. For the women, it was the reality of living in a racialized community where—in addition to racial identity—their cultural, national and religious identities were unwelcome.

It all began when Somali immigrants fleeing civil war in Somalia started settling in the region in early 2000. The 5,000 Somali refugees who live in this community account for about seven percent of the community's 68,000 residents. It is estimated that the local school district has an enrollment of about 9,000 students: 79 percent White, non-Hispanic, 12 percent Black, non-Hispanic, four percent Asian, four percent Hispanic, and one percent American Indian (The St. Cloud Independent School District web site: www.isd742.com). The evident demographic changes in this community that was culturally homogeneous until about a decade ago is what evoked interracial conflicts between Somali and European American high school students. The causes of violent racial and prejudiced acts were the stark religious and cultural differences between the students. At the same time, lack of knowledge about each other further isolated the students. Overall, the seemingly disruption of what the local residents were "used to" became a matter of concern to all who shared the community.[2]

Even though the issues facing this midwest community are not new to most communities in the United States, they took a new dimension in the context of the refugee women's cultural backgrounds. The manner in which the problem was enacted and resolution sought reflects aspects of African communication patterns that the women still maintain in their new (American) cultural environment. As noted earlier, the women and I would talk about challenges of cultural adaptation in informal settings. In Africa, communication is almost entirely through the interpersonal mode carried out in dyads, small groups (e.g. family members, neighbors, and friends) and large groups such as village meetings or the marketplace (Moemeka, 1996). These settings not only provide forums for discussing community affairs but they also induce communal participation in finding solutions to community problems.

Contextualizing *'we need your help'*

The context in which my help was sought deserves a brief explanation in order to justify my involvement in the solution to the identified community problem and the
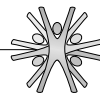
decision to use service-learning pedagogy to promote meaningful interracial interactions in the community. Amina's request for help was culturally enacted. Taking note of how she used the pronoun 'we' reveals cultural values, attitudes and expectations informed by the philosophical foundation of African culture. Additionally, it is reflective of the basic principles of African culture that underscore interactions among community members and how community problems are handled. Moemeka (1996) observed that "community as unit takes precedence over its members. The desires, wants, and needs of the individual members of the community are not, as it might seem, subjugated to those of the community; rather they are merged with community needs in a holistic attempt aimed at ensuring effective prioritization" (p. 202). African cultural values that define self-concept, relational orientations, status, respect, and community belongingness in part explain why the women chose to seek my help.

My status in the community as a teacher is mostly understood through interpretive lenses of the African cultural values that also define how I am expected to respond to these cultural expectations. The cultural expectations placed on a teacher reveal that it is difficult to demarcate their role inside and outside the classroom. Generally, a teacher is revered in the African culture as a community leader, wise person, responsible, and at the service of the community[3]. Teachers are perceived as custodians of knowledge, and as such are expected to play a greater role in socializing members of society. Specifically, a teacher is entrusted by society to "sharpen" the minds of the youth, socialize, and give them guidance as they grow to become responsible members of society. Similarly, the teacher is expected to offer solutions to societal problems because they have or rather are assumed to have the "knowledge" to do so. The knowledge they possess is perceived to be communal, and intended to serve the interests of the community. The teacher serves the community in both formal and informal educational settings.

'You know you can do something, tell us how?'

As noted at the beginning of this essay, my response to Amina was not forthright. I should explain why I was hesitant to respond, yet the women were forthright with what they wanted me to do. It is important to mention that I was aware of the cultural meaning assigned to their request, despite the fact that an immediate response was not given. My hesitation to respond directly about what I could do was tempered by an unspoken response that lingered in my mind at the time:

> I do not have the answer to what you are asking me to do right now. I wish you could know that this place is not like back home where teachers have a lot of power to make things happen. In addition, you just don't know how racism complicates things. And, I am also new around here just like you.

My hesitancy to respond directly to the women is explained in part by my position as an insider-outsider in the two worlds I inhabit as an African and 'Americanized African' in the United States. On one hand, I am an insider to the African way of life and on the other hand, I am both an insider and outsider to the American way of life. As an insider, I understand my obligations as an intercultural communication professor and a member of different communities where I have lived during my nine-year stay in the United States. I understand the need to engage in efforts geared at promoting interracial and intercultural relations between diverse cultures. Specifically, I recognize the need to productively use my academic training and personal intercultural experiences to build bridges across cultures.

This being the case, there are moments however when I feel like an outsider to the American society. One of those moments as mentioned earlier, was my inability to respond immediately to the women. This is a fact that sometimes slows down my efforts to fully fulfill expected community obligations. For example, I am well aware of the challenge of unlearning prejudiced and racist attitudes and behaviors that characterize this new place that has become our "home." I was not born and raised in the United States and it is painful to fathom what it means to be born, raised, live, and die in a racialized society. I can barely handle the "heat" in the fourteen years I have voluntarily lived outside of my country of birth, Kenya. It's hard for me to fathom what it is like for those whose choice to live in the United States, a racialized society, was not ever really their choice. Rather, the "choice" was involuntary; this is the case for many African Americans whose ancestors were brought here. And, this involuntary choice now falls upon refugees from war-torn countries.

The varied experiences among diverse groups of people in the community informed how I was going to respond to Amina's question. I decided to use my classroom and the community to collectively seek solutions to the identified community need. It was not possible to singly act on the problem because it was not only a personal issue but also one that was rooted in the fabric of the society and therefore required a response that was community-centered in effort and interests. The community, including high school and university students, local high schools and university administrators, community leaders and parents needed to collaborate in generating what Christine Cress (2006) calls responsive knowledge to address identified community needs.

Laura Finley's (2004) work on transforming violence candidly identifies the classroom as the place to start the transformation. She observes that "if we wish to transform our world into a more peaceful place, including all that the notion of positive peace entails, it seems as though one logical place to start is the classroom" (Finley, 2004, p. 2). My vision to seek a community-based response to Amina's question was realized once I made the decision to use my classroom and my positionality as a professor
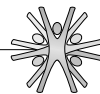
(in addition to being a community member) as the catalyst for change. It is then that service-learning pedagogy became the apparent choice to facilitate the process of generating knowledge pertaining to how to address voiced community concerns. The choice for this pedagogical practice is justified by the recognition that "improving our communities now and in the future is dependent upon providing the leadership to give students the knowledge, skills, and experiences that are less self-referenced and more community referenced" (Astin & Astin, 2000, cited in Cress, 2006, p. 5).
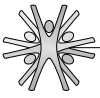
Defining Service-Learning

The operational definition of service-learning is informed by the work of Eyler & Giles (1999), who define it as a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others to achieve real objectives for the community, and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. According to Cress (2006), the goal of service-learning is to develop civically minded students who possess analytical problem-solving abilities and self-identity as community change agents as a direct consequence of their community-based learning experience.

In communication studies, the value of service-learning cannot be underestimated. The National Communication Association (NCA) has taken a leading role in bringing to the forefront the critical link between service-learning, student learning, development of civic responsibility and contribution of diversity to a strong democracy.[4] In the last decade, NCA has "embarked on a comprehensive effort to create a more engaged communication discipline: fostering research and teaching addressing the most pressing public problems at the dawn of the 21st century" (NCA). This commitment is based on the premise that "service-learning is an effective method for enhancing student learning and civic responsibility." In their book, *Service-Learning in Communication Studies: a Handbook,* Isaacson, Dorries & Brown (2001) assert that service-learning is an educational opportunity that allows students to promote more effective service to their communities through communication skills acquired in the classroom. Furthermore, "serving the community enriches students' understanding of how communication principles operate in the real world and offers opportunity to compare perspectives of common experiences" (p. i).

Service-Learning Pedagogy in Promoting Race Relations: Theoretical Foundations

This section responds to the question: How does service-learning pedagogy enhance learners' understanding of the methods they may use to promote race relations in American communities? Fundamentally, I am advancing the case for service-learning as a means to produce community-based knowledge to address community issues such as race tensions among racially and culturally diverse high school students. The decision to

use service-learning pedagogy was purposely done to address an historical and political problem. Such a response gives the process of seeking a solution to the problem at hand a political character. This character is exemplified in theoretical approaches used to produce a pedagogical and ideological formation that defines what is to be done, how, and for what purpose. In turn, this approach helps students define their understanding as well as analyze and act on the problem identified. In this regard, service-learning is able to induce action that produces knowledge that is responsive to the problem.

Theoretical foundation that brings service-learning to the forefront in addressing racial problems draws its meaning from the field of critical pedagogy and from theoretical perspectives that explain ways to connect and develop meaningful relationships among diverse racial groups. Daigre's (2000) work on critical service-learning pedagogy cites Biesta (1998), who argues that "critical pedagogies are in one way or another committed to the imperative of transforming the larger social order in the interest of justice, equality, democracy, and human freedom" (p. 499). Similarly, Giroux (1998) observes that this practice allows for opportunities to address social problems where students understand what it means to exercise rights and responsibilities as critical citizens actively engaged in forms of social learning that expand human capacities for compassion, empathy, and solidarity (Giroux, cited in Torres, 1998). Overall, it would seem that critical pedagogy presents the process of learning as one that involves the participation of both the student and teacher and acknowledges their diverse lived experiences in the production of new knowledge (See Denzin, 2006; Freire, 2001; Giroux, 1998).

Both critical theory and service-learning have been rigorously theorized and contested. For example, Bruce Herzberg (cited in Daigre, 2000) expresses doubts that questions about social justice issues are raised by service-learning/community service. On the other hand, critical pedagogy is faulted for lacking examples of concrete practice (Cuban and Hayes, 1997 cited in Daigre, 2000). Notwithstanding the contention, Daigre's (2000) research on the intersection of service-learning and critical pedagogy reveals that "some grounding in critical pedagogy can provide students with an ideological framework that encourages their analysis of social problems to move individual or personal explanations to more systemic criteria" (p. 2).

The Service-Learning Project

The service-learning project developed was intended to mirror Eric Daigre's perspective. It was designed to engage university and high school students in a problem-solving approach that would empower them to generate knowledge from their shared experiences, and utilize that knowledge to promote healthy race relations amongst themselves and others. The project also offered space to move from the micro level
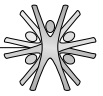
(individual/personal) to consider ramifications of these interracial challenges on a macro level (systemic criteria) as expressed by Eric Daigre. For example, the experiences of the Somali and Sudanese refugee students allowed participating students (notably American students) to gain a greater understanding of how issues of conflict and war, national insecurity, forced migration, poor governance, and global economic inequalities impact those in the U.S and elsewhere in the world. In all, the students were able to see the value of joining hands to denounce all forms of injustices and inequalities in the world in general and in their immediate communities in particular.

Service-learning combines theoretical perspectives that explain ways to connect and improve relations among racially diverse groups. The basis of Allport's (1958) contact theory and the Orbe and Harris, (2000) work on interracial friendships inform interracial relational phenomenon. The premise of contact theory is only contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in changed attitudes (Hansell, 2000). On the other hand, Orbe and Harris (2000) see the function of interracial interactions as the ability to challenge interactants to reflect internally on stereotypical beliefs about racially different others with whom they have had little or no contact. This phenomenon is conceptualized in a view of contact theory that is based on the premise that prejudice may be reduced by increased interactions—under optimal conditions—with racially diverse groups in the pursuit of common goals.

The decision to incorporate service-learning pedagogy into my teaching and scholarship was apt in two important ways. First, service-learning brings together perspectives that validate theories that provide a better understanding of how interactions between people of diverse racial memberships can foster positive race relations. Additionally, its application generates and brings together knowledge that allows students as community members and change agents to learn to respond to community-based problems.

I redesigned one of my intercultural communication courses—*Problems in Intercultural Communication*—to incorporate service-learning pedagogy. The intent was to allow university and high school students to develop a consciousness about community problems and how to manage them by participating in organized learning activities. Service-learning sessions were organized to allow university students the opportunity to combine knowledge acquired in the classroom and knowledge emerging from their interactions with high school students, in order to chart new approaches for addressing race relations in the local high schools. A partnership between my university and the local school district resulted in a project modeled on the NCA's "*Communicating Common Ground*" (National Communication Association). The project became the platform where racially and culturally diverse students could dialogue about issues that kept them apart as
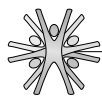
well as what could bring them together. Since Spring 2007, the project's focus remains on improving racial and intercultural understanding between diverse students in our local high schools. The project has made it possible for 115 young people to gain relevant knowledge and skills about (1) creating a climate of acceptance; (2) knowing how to constructively respond to cultural differences; and (3) incorporating the thinking of students as well as staff and professors in this endeavor so they become engaged citizens who can lead the local community in becoming an accepting racially and culturally diverse community.[5]

Service-learning pedagogy allowed dialogue to occur among the students in ways envisioned by Ellis and Moaz (2006). They propose that

> Dialogue is a search for deep differences and shared concerns. It asks participants to inquire genuinely about the other person and [to] avoid premature judgment, debate, and questions designed to expose flaws (p. 232).

The university students were to use knowledge they gained from the course content and combine it with knowledge generated through service-learning dialogue sessions to analyze, make meaning of racial tension in the community, and address the problem through application of the knowledge and skills learned. Knowledge acquisition was made possible through prolonged (semester long) interactions between my students, high school students, educators and invited community leaders participating in the project as guest speakers and/or observers. Among the fifty-five participating high school students, 90 percent were minority students and 10 percent Caucasian. Members of my class were 70 percent Caucasian and 30 percent minority students. The eleven (11) professionals who served as guest speakers included one African American, two Hispanics, one Asian American, and seven Caucasians all drawn from diverse professional backgrounds. They were employees of local city government, non-profit organizations and the state university.

In the spirit of learning to serve and serving to learn, students enriched their experiences as participants in community issues through well-planned and coordinated group dialogue sessions. Six sessions were structured to generate knowledge about the following topics: (1) Building community; (2) Recognizing problems in interracial/intercultural settings and crafting a new narrative; (3) Intercultural communication skills & non-violent communication principles; (4) Becoming an ally; (5) Bridging differences & managing intercultural conflicts effectively; and (6) Feeling part of my community and another community. Through dialogue they were able to express themselves, share experiences, and acknowledge similarities and differences among them. Together they engaged in meaningful exchanges that allowed them to chart new paths toward peaceful co-existence in their communities.
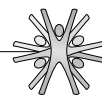
Promoting Positive Interracial Interactions through Service-Learning Pedagogy

The viability of service-learning pedagogy in promoting race relations is evident in how the pedagogy became an avenue for students to interact, dialogue, and discover avenues to acquire interracial understanding. The ability to act for desired change was informed by knowledge created during service-learning group dialogue sessions. The students documented what they learned together–with and from each other—in the form of journal entries, reflection writing assignments, and a feedback survey administered at the end of the 2007 and 2008 Spring semesters. Excerpts from students' responses are highlighted in the following pages to demonstrate the ways that service-learning pedagogy promotes interracial interactions. The excerpts from students' writing assignments contain demographic data while those without this background information were extracted from anonymous feedback surveys. The themes emerging from students' responses were used to explain two foundations through which service-learning promotes race relations: service-learning opens avenues to create knowledge relevant to promoting racial relations; and service-learning involves generating and applying community-based knowledge that responds to identified community needs.

1) *Service-learning opens avenues to create knowledge relevant to promoting racial relations.*

In the effort to integrate theory and practice, service-learning allows students to learn more about themselves and the community in which they live and serve. Students learn about differences, how to voice what they learn from and with each other, plan to act on what they learn, and begin to see themselves in new roles as leaders and people willing to make a difference in their communities. Responses about the benefits of service-learning pedagogy indicated that students' interactions generated a better understanding of racial tensions in the community and ways to improve the situation. They genuinely inquired about each other and by so doing, identified their personal cultural differences and similarities. At the same time, they learned to voice their shared concerns and seek common goals about improving racial relations in the community. The numerous benefits credited to service-learning pedagogy are illustrated by students' responses highlighted in the following excerpts.

High school students' responses to a question about what they had learned about communicating with people from different racial and cultural backgrounds revealed the following:

> All people struggle with different issues. I learned how to talk to people from different cultures and also that there are people in the world who care. (Somali female student)

> I think it is really good to communicate with different people so that you can learn more. … how to open my mind to different people and things. (Caucasian female student)

> I learned that if some people do not understand my culture then it is my job to make fellow students and teachers understand so that they will know where I am from. (Somali female student)

> Misunderstandings happen a lot. We need to be more accepting, open minded … jumping into conclusions is also a big problem. (Caucasian female student)

While these responses about what students learned may not be new to many of us and the students themselves, their significance lies in the context of the students' participation in the project. Their participation in activities that actualize the realization to do things differently reveals the positive outcome of being in direct contact with groups of people from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, for a portion of the university students who participated, the actual practical application of theories enhanced academic learning through experiential understanding of the objectives set for the project and the course. The experiential knowledge gained was expressed in the following excerpts:

> Hands-on experience and application of concepts learned in class was made possible in a meaningful way.

> I was able to give face to interracial conflicts in a way I would have never known had I not interacted with the high school kids especially those who experienced these conflicts on a daily basis.

> It made intercultural conflicts and racial tensions that affect others more personal.

> It helped me to see a different perspective on things.

The manifestation of a service-learning project is evident in the way that these students became critical learners. Barnett (1997) characterizes students engaged in this type of meaning-making reflection as "critically connected beings" (as cited in Cress, 2006 para. 15). University students' responses to a question asking them to state some of the memorable moments of the experience revealed what they had observed and/or became aware of during their interactions. It was apparent that they were aware of what was happening in their surroundings, and paying attention to dynamics of the interactions created by this form of learning.
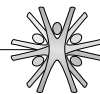
Watching the high school kids talk openly. The honesty of the students was amazing.

Guest speakers such as the Chief of Police, the local Major and the professors showed efforts needed to improve racial relations in the community.

The words used by students during the last session: "blessed," "honored," "diversity," "community," and "amazingly hopeful" were insightful to my learning.

Discussing prejudices and discrimination that have been thrust upon us was empowering.

When a high school student came up and told me she was really happy that we took the time to meet with them and that she waits for Wednesdays to meet us.

Observing the high school kids grow throughout the semester. I observed change in attitude among the students—that was huge for me.

These responses resonate with Halpern's (1996) observation that students become mindful of their interdependence with the community members when service-learning allows them to be more consciously aware of their actions and thought processes in the midst of application (Halpern, 1996 cited by Cress).

2) *Service-learning involves generating and applying community-based knowledge that responds to identified community needs.*

Students' involvement in the service-learning positioned them to generate and apply knowledge to the community issue at hand. The knowledge acquired from the course material and the service learning sessions allowed participants a greater understanding of their role in addressing an identified community need. Their first-hand experience of getting to hear each others' story generated community-based knowledge that empowered them to collectively act for the betterment of the community. Here, community-based knowledge refers to knowledge generated by the students from being in contact with each other while sharing and connecting their diverse experiences. The outcome is the critical awareness of the issues at hand and how to respond to them. This community-based knowledge registers students' critical consciousness of their role as citizens, and empowers them to enact positive change that benefits the community at large. What initially seemed unattainable is now realized once the link between learning to serve and serving to learn is brought into focus. This is an important feature of social learning that allows students to demystify the image of institutions of higher learning as "ivory towers." This awareness affirms what the students have learned by taking
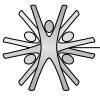
the concepts and ideas introduced in their university classroom to the community (local high schools) and bringing community-based knowledge back with them to their academic setting.

High school students identified knowledge and skills acquired to improve race interactions in their schools as experiential knowledge gained by participating in the project. Notably, the responses reveal individual awareness developed from a collective effort with others about ways to respond to racial and cultural differences.

> The session on intercultural conflict skills helped me to understand why people get into conflicts and also how to transform the conflicts.

> I now know communication skills and styles are needed to effectively talk about differences. It helps you understand those who are different from me.

> I learned to listen to what others have gone through. It helps to be more accepting of others and want to educate others so that they can be more accepting also.

> I will try to respect other people.

Generally, the responses heighten the understanding of communication skills needed to promote race relations among the students. Similarly, university students identified three components of meaningful communication across racial groups as indicated in sample excerpts below:

(a) *Knowledge and motivation to learn about the other*

> I always thought that the experiences I go through as an Ethiopian on this campus could never be understood by anybody and so I kept my feelings to myself. But after all the service-learning sessions, I came to understand that if we all are given a chance to be heard, then our differences and experiences can help us to promote intercultural/interracial relations in our schools. I also learned to appreciate and acknowledge our differences. We may all come from different backgrounds but if we sit down and get to know one another, using culturally sensitive communication skills then we are able to see more similarities than differences (Ethiopian female student).

> A recurring theme during the service-learning sessions was knowledge. It really was important to me to see the high school students value knowledge in ways that it can do for them particularly in intercultural conflict situations (Caucasian female student).
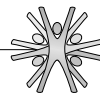
I now know that it takes a willingness to participate along with an understanding of the 'other' in order to bridge knowledge gaps that result into conflicts (Caucasian male student).

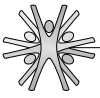(b) *Patience and willingness to embrace differences*

Communication is effective when you understand diverse cultural values and act appropriately. This occurs because of the willingness to adapt to differences. This was proven to me on the last day of the project. One of the African students in my group said how she appreciated me and another Caucasian group member for being in the group with them. We both provided a different perspective of our experiences. At the same time we were willing to hear and understand where they are coming from. This made me feel good as a person, to know that I am progressing and making a difference in society. (Caucasian male student).

(c) *Compassion and determination*

I could relate to some of the issues, which is why I shared my high school experiences and what made me a successful person. My ESL teacher Mrs. Olson (not her real name) became my guidance and mother-like figure to help me get through the issues I faced. My parents were not around. I lived with my aunt, who did not understand the problems experienced at school or the school system all together. Mrs. Olson understood everything and helped me better manage my situation by simply being there for me as a guide. She was compassionate and determined to help me. This is why I am in college today (Somali female student).

The responses are indicative of the fact that students worked together to create shared meaning between and among them. The course content and service-learning project helped to develop students' awareness about community issues and their role in addressing them. They were able to examine the issues from different perspectives and also reflect on their "shared" experiences. As a professor, I observed students' positive interactions and affirmed from their writings that the course content and service-learning sessions had served to support academic, civic and personal growth. I would also say that the service-learning praxis ignited students' consciousness to focus on ways to transform their circumstances. The learning process allowed students to reflect in ways that Huber-Warring (2006) affirms. She construes reflection as

substantial rethinking–guided, intended, informed–the kind of thinking that requires one to revisit deep wells of memory and personal experiences in order

to extract a clearer picture of personal meaning intended and the extrapolated meaning that readers (read learners) can subsequently take and apply to their own lives, circumstances and work with curriculum and instruction (p. 41).

An example to illustrate this 'substantial rethinking' is evident in the following excerpts by two university students' responses to how their views about intercultural/interracial conflicts had changed over the course of the semester:

> Throughout the semester, I learned (and also witnessed) that problems in intercultural and interracial communication can actually be an opportunity to bring people closer if those involved are willing to learn from one another. We talked together and learned to appreciate each other's efforts towards making a difference in our communities (Caucasian female student).

> I have changed from believing that I do not have a place in intercultural communication. Today, I understand that I play a valuable role in bridging communication between cultures and racial groups (Caucasian male student).

In view of these responses, perhaps a question one may ask is how this kind of students' learning was enhanced by the knowledge they created and applied from this experience? Weiley (2008) observed that active learning strengthens meaning. The meaning generated from students, learning activities allowed for the development of guiding principles for effective interactions with those different from them. These principles were delineated in high school students' responses about how they would apply knowledge learned from participating in the program in their personal life and at their schools. The words frequently recurring in the responses were: "treat others …," "understand," "not to….," "open-minded."

> I will treat other people with more respect.
>
> I will tell people not to treat others different because they are from a different race.
>
> I will try to understand where the other person is coming from.
>
> Getting to know more people; asking where they are from and what is their story. Hopefully, try to help other people understand how not to be judgmental and get to know new people also.
>
> Not to say stuff that will hurt other people's feelings. I will be nice to people.
>
> I will maintain an open mind to people of all cultures. I will make a conscious effort not to stereotype other people.
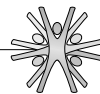
> I will get to know others and not just assume you know them by their religion.
>
> I will stay open-minded.
>
> I will think about what to say before saying it and be open about what other people are about.

Undoubtedly, these responses indicate significant milestones that become achievable when we do not ignore or totalize the experiences of others. Perhaps I would have found it easier to regard the question posed by Amina as not unusual; and by so doing unknowingly deny the students who participated in this project the opportunity to become the change we want to see in the world. As Orbe and Harris (2000) note, it is not until we examine ourselves and our relationships with others that we will begin to bridge the racial divide that continues to plague our interpersonal networks and society at large.

Lessons Learned

The issues that led to the initiation of this project are not new to American communities. Racism has inhibited, and continues to inhibit, meaningful interactions among diverse racial groups in America. Nevertheless, what is significant in engaging students in this type of learning is the transformation that occurs following their reflection upon themselves and community needs. Students came together to learn with and from each other. These interactions charted ways to improve race relations in our community. Students took responsibility to address the issue at hand. At no given time did students think they had no role to play in transforming their schools. The project gave them a sense of responsibility that connects personal, community and national obligations.

In this essay, I explained how service-learning pedagogy works to improve race relations by coalescing theoretical approaches and engaging students and community members. It creates learning sites where all involved parties learn to become learners and change agents. These interdependent roles work to minimize hierarchies and give a sense of responsibility that favors collective actions. Participants learn to respond to identified community needs collectively rather than seeing them as acts of a single player or a given group of people (e.g. people of color). Additionally, service-learning offers an opportunity for those students who may never know what it means to be racially discriminated against to learn about the reality from the experiences of their peers and to take action to transform it.

As I reflect on my observation of students' growth and development from participating in the project, some lessons about the benefits of learning and acting together emerge.
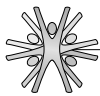
The project offered students a forum to share their experiences with the intent to create a community that recognizes and respects differences among its people. The learning experience motivated students to become proactive rather than reactive. In the three years of the project's existence, the proactive aspect of learning was evident in students' conversations that sought to create a new narrative about promoting racial relations in their community. Some questions that students raised at the start of the project were "Are we here because we do not get along?" and "Why should I be the one doing this when those who do the bad things do not bother to come to the program?" However, as the project developed I heard students' conversations evolve, where they would ask questions and offer solutions to minimize racial tensions in their schools. In their small group discussions, the dialogue focused on "What can we do together to get along?" and "This is what we can do." Learning and acting together for change became the focus of the students; embracing words and actions that seek and cherish acceptance, inclusion and belongingness.

My writing of this essay is from a vantage point of teacher-scholar whose teaching and scholarship is shaped by, and intersects with, every other dimension of my life as a mother, black/African woman, and a leader in my community. It is also the case that my spiritual, moral, and cultural convictions inform my desire to challenge different forms of injustice. Would I say that this essay is all about popularizing the practice of service-learning and exaggerating its value? No. The essay seeks to show how giving a thought and paying attention to one person's dilemma can offer others a chance to learn about things they would have otherwise never known. It is my hope that fellow educators will heed my call to perform ourselves in the classroom and the community. This performance involves combining the personal knowledge we possess as educators with theoretical knowledge we have acquired over the years, and continue to acquire, in order to challenge personal and systemic challenges of racism through education.

My personal experience coordinating this project brings texture to our understanding of the benefits of taking the classroom to the community and bringing the community to the classroom. This approach to learning allowed my students to explore issues of under-represented groups in our community. I do recognize that service-learning pedagogy is not a panacea to racial tension in America. Nonetheless, its transformative nature to learning cannot be underscored enough. As Angela Leonard (2004) notes, service-learning pedagogy inspires hope, promotes social justice, advocates agents of change, commitment to building community, and cultivating a universal recognition and respect.
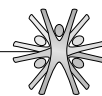
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In your view, do you think that Amina's concern/question about the school conflict is justified or does the response reflect her not being born and raised in the United States (e.g. her immigrant status)? Give reasons for your answer.

2. You may be familiar with racially-motivated fights in high schools or communities. If so, would the conflict resolution strategies featured in this chapter be reasonable and workable in situations that you have observed?

3. How does service-learning pedagogy promote interracial interactions?

4. If you think service-learning does not work well, or it works only to a certain extent, what pedagogical practices would you recommend that communication professors use to promote interracial/intercultural communication?

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[1] Names of actual women mentioned in this essay have been changed to assure confidentiality.

[2] The problems in the local schools began before I was a resident in the community. I got there when much of the violent acts had minimized. I relied on Somali students' anecdotal evidence of students who had experienced the violence first hand, and a prominent Somali elder with whom I had prolonged interactions and the mothers of these students. I also interviewed a European American mom who told me what her daughter used to tell her about the violence. My goal in getting involved in the 'problem' was to ensure that the gains achieved were sustained and that students had opportunity to acquire knowledge and life skills to build a community that is welcoming to all.

[3] Among African people, the notion of a teacher in the formal sense in which we all know is a product of colonialism and introduction of Christianity in Africa. Before coming into contact with missionaries and European colonizers, Africans practiced informal education. This is where respected community members and families were expected to be "teachers" in the community. The responsibility of socializing the young ones was placed in the hands of the community. This is true of the adage: it takes a village to raise a child. As Africans began to obtain education those who trained as teachers attained the status of a leader in society as governed by (in the words of Andrew Moemeka 1996) the sanctity of authority in traditional Africa societies. Moemeka says that the community expects of the leader no less than what the status and honor bestowed on him demand.

[4] Details on service-learning in communication studies can be found at the National Communication Association (NCA) website http://www.natcom.org/nca/Template2.asp?bid=268

[5] The 115 young people participating in the project include sixty (60) students enrolled in my class during Spring semester in 2007, 2008 and 55 high school students.

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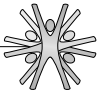
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