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Spring 2018

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Jacobs, Megan and Walsh-Dilley, Marygold, "Cultivating Empathy: Lessons from an Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Course" (2018). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 572. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/572>

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Cultivating Empathy: Lessons from an Interdisciplinary Service-Learning Course

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In “Thinking Critically, Acting Justly,” Naomi Yavneh Klos suggests that the key questions for honors education and social justice are first “how to engage our highest-ability and most motivated students in questions of justice” and second “how honors can be a place of access, equity, and excellence in higher education.” These goals are both important and complementary; achieving the latter helps achieve the former. Honors education creates a fruitful space for inclusion where the knowledge and experience of diverse students develop skills oriented toward justice for the whole community. Making honors a place of access and equity prompts deeper engagement in questions of justice for all. Particularly in its emphasis on interdisciplinary and experiential learning, honors education creates, as Yavneh Klos writes, opportunities to “develop an understanding of the world in its complexities [and to] listen and engage [across difference].” Honors also prompts students to learn from the intersections of experience, recognize assumptions based in

privilege, and challenge the notion that justice is about helping distant others. Through these practices, honors education is particularly well-positioned to cultivate empathy, a necessary foundation of social justice education.

We base our conclusions about building empathy in honors education on our experience team-teaching an experiential, interdisciplinary course focused on mass incarceration in the University of New Mexico Honors College. Titled “Locked Up: Incarceration in Question,” the two-semester course integrated methodologies and approaches from sociology and art, fostering interdisciplinary inquiry into the historic roots and contemporary practices of incarceration. The aim of the class was to cultivate empathetic and engaged citizens, both caring about the world around them and prepared to create change in their communities. During the fall semester, students examined mass incarceration as a civil rights issue and explored how art allows us to both construct meaning and communicate knowledge about injustice. This class prepared students for service learning projects during the spring semester, when student groups worked with community partners to provide requested services. During the activities of both semesters, students came to destabilize the false dichotomy between themselves—often relatively privileged students in their state’s flagship university—and individuals directly impacted by the injustices of the carceral apparatus. Students found such complexities also mirrored in their own lives.

The course applied “depth of field” as a metaphor for addressing the concept of incarceration personally or universally. We started with a shallow depth of field by looking at the example of one voice, one person’s experience of incarceration, in reading the poet Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir, *A Place to Stand*. The memoir recalls Baca’s childhood poverty and neglect, his subsequent involvement in drug trafficking, his time in prison, and the freedom he found through literacy and poetry. We hosted Mr. Baca, a native of New Mexico, in our class, where he spoke candidly about the critical role that poetry played in coping with his own incarceration and maintaining a sense of his own identity. This initial text and interaction laid the groundwork for what we hoped to do in the class: examine mass incarceration as a sociological problem and civil rights issue through the lens of the fine arts.

As the class progressed, our scope grew wider and wider. Throughout the course, we asked students to complete weekly blog observations regarding the class readings, discussions, and visiting scholars. These observations served two purposes: 1) to provide a platform for student reflection, a hallmark of service learning that was a key component of the spring portion of

the course, and 2) to chart real-time observations of the students and hold them accountable for completing the work of the class. These words from one student, Kaitlin, following Jimmy Santiago Baca's visit embody the depth and thoughtfulness of these reflections:

As I listened to Mr. Baca share stories of others who hold his same history, I quickly realized that the greatest problem plaguing the prison system in the United States is the absence of empathy. We are quick to place judgment and slow to listen. Therefore, we rapidly seek punishment inside our prisons and ignore the blaring need for rehabilitation. Incarcerated persons are quickly stripped of their humanity and only seen for their crimes. Past actions swiftly transform into future identities. If an individual is constantly labeled as a "convict" and placed in an environment that "tortures and lobotomizes the soul" it will slowly leak into one's own perception of selfhood.

Affording students the opportunity to engage firsthand with scholars and artists of diverse backgrounds can foster these kinds of deep analytical and personal reflections, the kinds of seismic shifts that we sought to provide for our students throughout the course.

We created projects that merged sociology and art, such as an infographic project in which students gathered data from academic journals, analyzed it, and created an infographic, using aesthetics of design such as hierarchy, proximity, unity, color, and typography. Students developed a thesis statement that was forged from their research and generated a design to represent it visually. We intentionally constructed opportunities for students to think in an interdisciplinary manner as a means to put a face on the quantitative research about mass incarceration, thereby cultivating empathy. One must dig deep and consider varying points of view in trying to visually represent quantitative research on issues related to incarceration: the cycle of violence, race and drug convictions, or the relationship between mental illness and incarceration. (See Figure 1 for an example of a student infographic from this project.)

By pairing sociological readings with creative art works, we fostered opportunities to bridge the universal and personal, opening a window for students to share how their own experiences mapped onto what they were learning in the class. This interdisciplinary interaction created opportunities for intersectional engagement, which emerged spontaneously. We studied the artwork of and hosted a workshop with the award-winning photographer Richard Ross, whose work explores the efficacy and ethics of the treatment of

American juveniles in detention centers. His books *Juvenile in Justice* and *Girls in Justice*, explore the intersection of photography and sociological research as not only a powerful “catalyst for change” but a model of interdisciplinarity for our students. Ross’s work served as a springboard for an interdisciplinary

FIGURE 1. AN EXAMPLE OF A STUDENT INFOGRAPHIC



project in which students interviewed and photographed someone involved in the criminal justice system using sociological and artistic methods, providing a platform for students to share personal experiences. Students exhibited a diptych pairing a quotation from the interview with a photographic portrait. During the critique of this project, two diptychs viscerally stood out, opening a window into the intimate lives of class members; they were the work of two students who had familial experiences with incarceration that the class, including the instructors, had been unaware of. Joshua's image (Figure 2) simulated his personal experience of growing up with an incarcerated father.

The close-up photograph of a father holding his child's hand, as if during visitation hours, illustrated the strain of having an incarcerated family member. Ruby's diptych depicted family members clutching one another with a quotation (Figure 3) that contextualized the strain on their family as their father was incarcerated. The quotation goes on to explain how the absence of their father led to a search for familial closeness, including the interviewee's decision to have her own children at a young age. This quotation echoes and makes tangible the scholarship we read about the destructive effects of incarceration on children and families (Comfort; Goffman).

The images and reflections led to a recognition of the intersections of privilege and exclusion within our own classroom, breaking down what Yavneh

FIGURE 2. THE IMAGE FROM JOSHUA'S DIPTYCH



Klos calls the “false dichotomy between ‘high ability’ and ‘high need’ that is based on an assumption that all highly engaged and creative students come from affluent backgrounds.” This theme emerged as a key point throughout the class: the distinction between “us” (as elite college students) and “them” (individuals caught up in the criminal justice system) was not nearly as stark as some students or professors would have presumed.

In preparation for the spring service learning projects and prompted by the techniques emphasized in “Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Whiteness” by Tania D. Mitchell and colleagues, the class worked together to examine our privilege in relation to the populations we would be serving. These experiences prompted us to “interrupt the patterns and privileges of whiteness that too often are normalized in service learning” (Mitchell et al. 1) and to continue our critical reflection about the distribution of privilege and oppression within our classroom. Activities in class brought these ideas into clearer focus. Adapted from exercises by Brenda J. Allen at the University of Colorado-Denver and Thomas E. Walker at the University of Denver, the

FIGURE 3. THE QUOTATION FROM RUBY'S DIPTYCH

It was so sad seeing my baby sister trying to touch him through the glass [during visitation hours]. [She] took off her shoe and she had her little feet in the window, and my dad got close and said “fushi” like if her foot stinked but he couldn’t actually smell it . . . and [she] started laughing and laughing because she thought he was actually smelling her feet. My dad wanted to start crying, he said, “I wish I could hug her” . . . it took him almost a year to actually hold her, like he was so desesperado to actually hold his daughter, like he’s just been seeing her grow up through a window.

Maybe I wouldn’t have gotten pregnant so young [if her father was not away] . . . when I met him [father of her children] I felt that I was actually going to have the family I always wanted.

—E.S., Age 23

privilege beads exercise created an experiential way to recognize the intersection of one's privilege and oppression. Placards with statements about aspects of one's identity—such as sexuality, ability, gender, race, and religion—were placed around the room next to a bowl of multicolored beads. The statements ranged in scope from “I can assume that I will easily have physical access to any building” to “I can look at the mainstream media and find people of my race represented fairly and in a wide range of roles.” Students were instructed to read the statements and, if they could answer yes, they would place a bead in their bowl and later, if they wanted, string them into a necklace. The experience yielded a process in which students had to consider their own experiences of privilege and oppression. The multicolored beads lent privacy to each of the students; others in the class knew that their fellow students had some form of privilege but not the specific nature of that privilege. After concluding the exercise, students collaboratively discussed the process, and an organic conversation arose in which students felt empowered to share aspects of their identities with their peers. A turning point in the class, this discussion led to mutual trust and a willingness to share personal experiences that related to social justice and that became a tool to extend student education and create empathy.

The class focused on service learning as means for students to extend the academic work they did in the fall through projects to assist at-risk youth in partnership with Outcomes, Inc. and Desert Hills. Outcomes, Inc. is a New Mexico-based, nonprofit organization that provides professional guidance and support to individuals and families. The Conflict Resolution Division assists juveniles who are in the justice system as a result of violence and/or conflict. Honors students, under supervision of Outcomes, Inc. staff, created curricula and taught students in the program's Alternative to Violence Program. Desert Hills is a residential treatment center that provides behavioral and mental health care for children, adolescents, and their families. Two groups of honors students taught classes at Desert Hills: one group developed curricula drawing on Baca's *Feeding the Roots* to engage and empower students through poetry and the performing arts; the other group worked with youth, over a span of eight weeks, to create a zine comprising their poetry and photographic works. Student service-learners developed a greater understanding of the criminal justice system but more importantly developed a deep recognition of the institutional and structural apparatus that shuttles some students to college and others into the criminal justice system.

Their emergent empathy extended into students' final interdisciplinary projects, which again coupled sociological research with creative output. One successful project was a photographic installation, *What Makes Them So Different?*, which indiscriminately coupled public mug shots of incarcerated youth with visually similar images of college students. The student artist, drawing from her service learning experiences, began to break down the "us" versus "them" mentality; her artist's statement indicated that the work was "intended to bring light [to] the similarities and differences between college students and incarcerated youth," a sentiment that captures the transformational nature of the class. A key part of the lessons learned in the course was the recognition of the complexities regarding who ends up incarcerated. People, especially youth, become ensnared in the criminal justice system often for reasons outside their control, including class, race, and family background (Cannon et al.). The creative projects demonstrated that students developed the skills to grapple with these issues in both conceptual and physical ways, and the public display of artworks expanded the lessons to the broader community.

The interdisciplinarity and experiential focus of the honors classroom creates unique opportunities to develop empathy across difference. Diversity in the classroom furthers these opportunities, opening space for peer-based learning that destabilizes dichotomies. Our experience teaching this class showed the deep learning that can come about through Yavneh Klos's two pillars of honors education: social justice education and inclusion. We also saw that these goals are synergistic: in order to do the former, we must commit to the latter.

NOTE

As required by the Institutional Review Board at the University of New Mexico, student names have been changed or excluded. An emergent tension of interdisciplinary work is that social science research requires institutional review for ethical reasons while working with human subjects whereas the fine arts do not. Although we wanted to give students credit for their creative work, the requirements of institutional review for human subjects prevented us from doing so. We would nevertheless like to acknowledge the profound creative contributions made by the three student-artists mentioned here as well as the rest of the students in the class.

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