Listening and Learning from Community Voices: Considering Co-Learning

By Sean L. Rhiney

"Locked us out. That is what happened!" The statement was a neighborhood resident's account of how gentrification had methodically bounced her family from neighborhood to neighborhood. The undergraduates listening intently shook or lowered their heads. After some reflective silence, they began awkwardly, but respectfully, asking their questions.

Gentrification was a concept they understood conceptually from our readings and lectures, but nothing animated the powerlessness a community can feel more than this lived experience. The woman's vulnerable testimony provided insight into how systems of inequality and the uneven distribution of power—and not necessarily the poor choices of individuals—might increase evictions.

Scholarly research shows that when community experiences and voices are integrated into a course, the learning is more authentic and personal. When preparing students for service and immersive learning in the community, we acknowledge these outcomes and invoke our Jesuit charisms by inviting students to listen and learn from their community companions along the way. Discomfort from the resulting dialogue or disorientation from an immersion in new places can further open a willing participant to a deeper understanding of systemic injustice and the transformative potential of these curricular experiences.

Even before 2020 when Black, brown, and white communities across the country mobilized in solidarity and protest, there was growing student interest at Xavier in the foundations of

community organizing and opportunities to apply activist skills in communities where inequity remains entrenched. This interest prompted the Eigel Center for Community Engaged Learning's faculty director and me to propose a course on community organizing that paired historical and contemporary organizing strategies with citizen voices and an immersion in community. Coincidentally, one of our valued non-profit partners, Community Matters, inquired about community organizing training for their resident leaders. Collaborating with this Cincinnati-based nonprofit, we formed a cohort of undergraduates and passionate community leaders as students in the course.

Luckily, we were not the first to contemplate the creation of a co-learning course that joined students and community members on a university campus. So-called side-by-side courses are a popular and growing offering at many universities and colleges, with some schools linking certification, academic credit or even degree options for non-traditional community participants. Inside-out programs are an immersive and intensive twist on co-learning, permitting students to travel into a prison to learn in tandem with their incarcerated classmates. Considering the potential pedagogical approaches with our collaborative community nonprofit partner, it was

suggested that we hold the class in their neighborhood about 20 minutes from our own campus.

Locating the class in the community accomplished complementary goals: It promoted ease of access for interested community leaders who were landlocked by limited bus routes across town, and provided our undergraduates a recurring opportunity to be in community each week. The course offered all participants an interdisciplinary examination of historical and contemporary strategies used by community organizers, while focusing on issues of class, race, ethnicity, and gender in organizing. Because of the intersectional scope of organizing, faculty in history, political science, communication, social work, and public policy guided students. Fourteen undergraduates enrolled in this pilot course and shared the classroom with four resident leaders.

Among the community classmates was a neighborhood council president who shared an equal passion for expanding an organizing mindset within her community.

Class sessions explored origins and examples of asset-based community development, coalition building, media engagement, and specific organizing strategies. Students attended a community council meeting chaired by their classmate, completed a community-wide asset inventory with feedback from other resident leaders, researched and presented issue briefs on potential organizing topics, and met with stakeholders and allies to become more versed in community culture.

The final class projects were planned in tandem with community voices, and designed for implementa-

Xavier students went into a community to learn from its residents about their concerns about gentrification.

tion by neighborhood leaders and volunteers with the support of our partner, Community Matters. The issues that informed the projects were discussed and voted on by all participants and designed to organize around real time community concerns: the loss of affordable housing and growing concerns about gentrification, educating property owners on lead abatement, and devising a plan to better leverage the political power that often escapes more marginalized communities.

Though the semester and project plans ended up truncated by the pandemic, students learned to recognize their community classmates as diverse subject matter experts—the subject being the neighborhood and their informed and impactful perspectives. Moreover, community classmates expressed great interest in the students' double majors and asked often about

where their career paths might take them. Our course was imperfect—the logistics and design for a course taught by five faculty and based entirely in the community adds to the growing number of logistical decisions community engaged faculty and staff already experience—but the concept of this co-learning pilot revealed a world of possibilities.

Tania Mitchell, a noted service-learning scholar, says critical community-based learning should interrogate systems and structures of inequality, question the distribution of power, and seek to develop authentic relationships among students, faculty, and community partners. Part of this relationship building can be realized by courses that integrate community voices not just as representatives of a place, time, demographic, or experience, but as co-learners side-by-side with our traditional students.

This experience honors the Jesuit charism to seek solidarity and kinship not just through time or place-based service experiences, but also through authentic, ongoing relationship building. Further, it recognizes knowledge originating from community equally with the diverse knowledge and energy emanating from our very own institutions, offering an equitable distribution of power that elevates traditional models of community engaged learning.

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