Imagination Practices and Community-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT Informed by my experiences in prison/university co-learning projects, this essay centres two community-based learning practices worth cultivating. First, what can happen when all participants truly prioritize what it means to build community as they address their shared project, co-discovering new ways of being and doing together, listening receptively and speaking authentically? How can project facilitators step beyond prescribed roles embedded in the charity paradigm of service-learning to invite and support egalitarian community and equity-driven decision-making from a project's inception and development, through its unfolding and its assessment? Second, the sheer fact of a project taking place in the marginal place between two contexts gives all participants—students, faculty, community participants and hosts—the opportunity for meta-reflection on the institutional logics that construct and constrain our perspectives so acutely. What can we do, by way of project-conception and pedagogy, to open up those insights? The vantage that "the space between" provides can bring fresh understanding of the systemic forces at work in the lives of the community participants. And the university's assumptions about itself and its place in the world can also suddenly appear strange and new, objects of scrutiny for students and community members both.

KEYWORDS community-based learning, pedagogy, prison education

Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.
-Frederic Jameson

In the years since Jameson's 2003 article in *The New Left Review,* it has grown increasingly easy to imagine the end of us, the end of life on earth—not just thinkable, but oddly familiar, entering the popular conversation in unprecedented ways as we confront environmental catastrophes; ever-starker wealth inequity; a brutal rise in white supremacy; talk of nuclear war; proliferating hunger, drought, and disease.

And the irony of Jameson's comment steps in: while getting "used" to the end of viable life on planet earth, it can still feel keenly uneasy to invoke the end of capitalism, almost intolerably "unrealistic," intellectually or practically suspect. What are the reasons for this imaginative paucity? Why is it so intensely hard to hang on with conviction to the possibility of radical change? Naomi Klein (2014) is among those who insist that the sustained imagination we'd need to make radical transformation possible is being blocked—and by the same forces that sustain injustice and endanger the planet. Unblocking that imagination may be the most crucial

thing that needs doing, which Robin D.G. Kelley has been reminding us re racial liberation and capitalism since 2003.[1] What role can community-based learning praxis play in creating conditions that might deepen mental, ethical, and creative agility, the capacity for collective imaginative work?

It is hard to create touch-points between the big picture alarums, as above, and our day-to-day work without seeming delusional about the impact of the educator's role, but that's what I'd like to do in this brief reflection on community-based learning as a site for imagination-building practices.[2] Speaking from the standpoint of prison abolitionist and prison educator, Mauricio Najarro (2015) remarked at a University of Montreal workshop ("Teaching Theological and Religious Studies Inside Prison Walls") that he asks himself two questions as he creates a syllabus, questions that can work as useful guideposts for community-based learning practitioners as well: "How will it help students in the short term? But also, how will it help make profound social transformation more likely?"

With this second question as a guide, I'd like to look here at two elements in community-based learning endeavors that, when prioritized, can help to unblock and make more muscular the collective imaginations of students, community participants, and faculty involved in community-based learning projects, namely, **participants' relationships with each other and with the institutional and social contexts being straddled.** In what ways can we step loose from the conventions that structure our interactions, conventions that privilege status quo power relations and foreclose on the possibility for transformation? Quoting Sara Ahmed, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) would maintain that "[e]ducators are called upon to play a central role in constructing the conditions for a different kind of encounter . . . that 'might affect *where we might yet be going*'" (p. 42, 52, italics original). This mandate can shape our approaches to community-based learning.

There is a profound merit in choosing to pay primary attention to the nature and quality of interpersonal dynamics and interactions across the span of an entire community-based learning project. Moving between institutional realities, each predicated on sometimes starkly contrasting principles and priorities, students may be encouraged to embrace and explore the peculiarly illuminated views that their shifting standpoint offers up. And *all* participants in a community-based learning project can bring their own wisdom to bear as they notice and reflect on the interplay between large systemic forces and day-to-day micro-dynamics that will surely show up as they address their shared work. This is politically vital work, especially when it comes bundled with the opportunity for engaged debriefing and meta-reflection, both shared and solitary. No matter how righteous a community-based learning project may be on paper, if people are interacting with one another in ways that inadvertently replicate relations of privilege and oppression, that cause hurt or mask hurt, that are driven by unquestioned power

[1] See Kelley on Black imagination and change, for instance in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2003), or in the powerful video footage from a 2016 conference in Los Angeles, *Abolition and the Radical Imagination* (Critical Resistance and the Los Angeles Poverty Department).

[2] "Community-based learning" is the term selected here over "critical service-learning," simply to retain awareness about the freighted history behind the term service-learning.

dynamics, then what has happened, exactly?[3] By contrast, what would the consequences be, should faculty, students, university coordinators, community group staff and members aspire to genuine presence with one another, to listening receptively, connecting head and heart, and exploring what it means to acknowledge the ways that we are connected? This essay is a call for people doing community-based learning work (instructors, community participants, students, and staff) to develop and encourage intentional meta-reflection practices that can render visible our own engagement with structural inequities, unsettle our presumptions, and allow interpersonal and institutional dynamics as we experience them to serve as teachings.

I have been deploying the first-person plural—implicitly invoking a "we" based on a posited solidarity of purpose. "We" cannot be presumed. Nor should it be despaired of out of hand, emerging as it does from actions, practices, experiences, and recognition of the mutuality and intertwined concerns that exist between perhaps radically different players. To imagine "the community" and "the university" as stable, distinct binaries between which the engaged student will ferry "needs" and "knowledge" is misguided. At the same time, to over-homogenize an easy "we" in the name of an unexamined solidarity is to commit a kind of neo-Lockean move—to declare a "universalized humanity" that has, oxymoronically, exclusion as its precondition and its work in the world.

The most important work, point, and gains of paying attention to interpersonal dynamics as one sets up and engages in community-based learning may be to build a solidarity that is rooted in what Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) describes as "incommensurable interdependency" (p. 46). People are situated differently and occupy profoundly non-conflatable positions. We are students from different class backgrounds; tenured or sessional faculty and staff experiencing the university in drastically different ways; volunteer and paid community organization staff with varying relationships to "the front line" and the administration; members of "the served community" experiencing varying constraints on our autonomy, etcetera. We love differently, live in different bodies, experience gender differently. We are white settlers and visitors, Indigenous people, Black, Brown, and Asian diasporic people. We are located differently in power, privilege, in culture, in life experiences. The insights accessible to us and the sort of knowledge we value also vary accordingly. We *are* in this together, but the radical differences between us, constructed in part by oppression, are deeply instructive and to be approached with respect, as teachers.

Much of my own work in this field is with Walls to Bridges, a co-learning rather than a service-learning project, discussed elsewhere in this volume. Thus, some of the points made here will have to be transposed to other community-based learning contexts to be usable, but I think that the translation works. Walls to Bridges is a Canadian prison education/community engagement program that I helped to found.[4] Walls to Bridges brings incarcerated or paroled students together with university- or college-based students as peers and classmates in for-credit postsecondary courses. In its inspiration and first incarnation it was linked to the U.S.-

[3] Recommended reading: Gregoire and Ying Yess (2007).

[4] See Brenner, this issue, and Harris, this issue.

based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program with which it still bears much in common, but Walls to Bridges then went on to become an autonomous program, with discreet priorities, principles, practices, and policies that emerge out of the Canadian context and respond to it.[5] Coordinated by Shoshana Pollack, the national training body, the Walls to Bridges Collective, and a robust local program are home-based in Kitchener, Ontario, at the Grand Valley Institution for Women and Wilfrid Laurier University's Faculty of Social Work, but practitioners working in multiple academic disciplines are using the model around the country. Classes are held in prison or jail—and sometimes at halfway houses, community sites, or on university or college campuses. With the discovery and building of trustworthy relationships and the development of critical awareness as two of its key goals, the Walls to Bridges model is grounded in dialogue; collaboration; meta-reflection; experiential, whole-self learning; anti-racist and feminist analysis and practices; and respectful engagement with Indigenous pedagogy and Indigenous teachers and learners.[6]

The Walls to Bridges Collective came into being in January 2012 in the wake of a Social Work course on Diversity, Marginalization and Oppression taught by Professor Shoshana Pollack at Grand Valley Institution for Women. The Collective is a group of people who have taken or taught at least one course, some incarcerated, some now released, and some not incarcerated. Now with both a Grand Valley and a Toronto circle, the Collective engages in a variety of public education and advocacy efforts. It also develops and offers five-day trainings in the Walls to Bridges model to interested faculty from Canada and beyond. We are dedicated to examining and trying to move beyond hierarchies of power and privilege; these can fall along multiple axes, and include the inequities and blind spots of the helper-helpee model that too often define service-learning and community-engaged learning practice. This is clumsy, humbling work that requires foregrounding the voices of those of us with lived experience of criminalization and confronting carceral trauma, and that doesn't wrap up neatly, but always starts and starts again.

Being together in a good way, especially between people who do not normally speak together and with people who are often silenced, includes creating frames that challenge us to identify, reflect upon, confound, and, as possible, step beyond the confines of positions that have been determined by colonial, hierarchical conditions: "A is the teacher." "B is the recipient of aid." "C is the giving student." "D is the expert."[7] This requires a conscious and conscientious movement beyond the prescribed roles embedded in the charity paradigm of service-learning. In this context, Tania Mitchell's (2008) tremendously useful overview of community-based learning's primary lessons bears careful study.

How does a community-based learning project change shape if its coordinators really make **the *how* of being together** a key component of the entire project? I will consider here how

[5] See Davis and Roswell (2013); Pollack (2016); Freitas, McAuley, and Kish (2014); and Fayter (2016).

[6] Profound thanks to Kathy Absolon, Gale Cyr, Giselle Dias, the late Larry Morrissette, and Priscilla Settee, among others.

[7] "Being together in a good way": I am grateful for some things I learned about this from Kathy Absolon, David Blacksmith, Pauline Shirt, and Lee Maracle.

project facilitators might strengthen their commitment to egalitarian relations, equity-driven goal-setting and decision-making, deep listening and authentic sharing, and critical reflection on power relations—from a project's inception and development, through its unfolding and its assessment. People engaged in this work can readily recognize the many ways of losing or failing to establish connection in community-based learning—sometimes even before and beyond the arena of the actual shared project. Here are a few:

- the community organization feels like they are using scant time or staff resources on training students who will only be with them for a few hours and the short term;
- the faculty person is "coordinating" the students' time away from campus only pro forma (signature provision) because s/he is not paid for this work or it feels beyond his or her bailiwick;
- community members are cast only as charity-recipients or objects of scrutiny rather than *people with rights* as well as vital knowledge and strength;
- for the busy student, the whole endeavour feels "voluntary" and thus slips to lowest priority;
- involved faculty and community organization partners operate with drastically different ideas of what constitutes valuable knowledge and useful "deliverables";
- time frames and priorities of students and faculty are structured by the top-down, evaluation and reward-based system in which they work—often irrelevant and even harmfully counter to the community organization's priorities;[8]
- the agency or organization staff or community members and the student(s) are not understanding each other and/or accidentally alienating one another (e.g., a zealous student feels pity or a conviction that s/he knows all the questions and has all the answers; or doesn't get the prevailing etiquette around time management or beginning and ending a meeting; or is received with frustration when she uses the sort of language s/he has been rewarded for at school).

At a University of Toronto critical community-based-learning workshop, Tania Mitchell (2015) described a community-based learning project that spurred profound connections and unsettled power and privilege dynamics while bringing about useful work in the world (Centre for Community Partnerships keynote address). Working through the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University, she and Kathleen Coll had helped to coordinate a three-year project that included multiple community-engaged learning courses where students committed to assisting the Domestic Workers' Alliance (DWA) as they sought to get the California Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights put into law. Thus, the project was neither defined by nor contained within the duration of a single semester, nor were its outcomes guaranteed. Members of the DWA received training from university and Alliance sources that allowed them to serve as co-facilitators and teachers. Some days the most useful role for students to play was to themselves babysit the DWA members' kids so the members could attend legislative hearings where their Bill was being considered: experiential learning in de-hierarchy that challenges and re-establishes the definition of academically meaningful community engagement work.

Taking this project as an inspiration, as we approach the design and implementation of a community-based learning project with the *how* of being together as a central priority, we

[8] See Dewar and Isaac (1998).

can adhere to project design principles elucidated by Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donohue (2003), Isaac and Dewar (1998), among others.[9] Guiding questions might include:

- How and to what extent can the initial project design be a shared community endeavour?[10]
- Can training and orientation be a shared and sustained endeavour, one that includes building a foundation for mutual trust and future communication? This might include curricular expansion, opportunities for faculty trainings, and/or a course offering before or after the community engagement, ideally one that invites community participants and university student participants to teach and learn together.
- Can co-learning amongst equals be an incorporated element, even when it isn't central to the project (challenging the status differentials between "students" and "non-students")?
- Whose ethics? If the work includes research, are the organization's as well as the university's ethics review processes and standards being considered?[11]
- "Deliverables": Are the desired outputs on the part of the student being determined by both the community partner and the participating faculty? How are they of use and to whom? Who "owns" them? Does the student set goals? In what ways do community members play a role in determining a project's agenda?
- Assessment: How is a student's "success" evaluated and marked? And will there be a collective, participatory process for project assessment? Truly extending control over the evaluation process so community participants are key players means developing an expanded understanding of what "success" looks like and requires, with impacts beyond the individual project. This is urgent ethically, politically, and pedagogically.
- What's next? What planning exists beyond the duration of the course-based programming? How will relationships be sustained, project goals be furthered, visions be pursued, and change be manifested once the term, or the year, is over?[12]

These project-structure concerns can be pivotal for productive and egalitarian engagement, but there are additional ways to pay attention to interpersonal relations as the project is actually unfolding. Though community-based learning projects can take so many different forms, there may be ways to incorporate "formal" elements that augment the informal moments of connection that matter so much, to allow a deepening of relationship between community-based and campus-based participants. University and community coordinators can consider how meetings, both small and large, are approached over the lifetime of the project—this can include presenting tobacco or other observances of respect; icebreakers; opening and closing check-ins at meetings; shared development of group commitments or terms of engagement; shared meals, music, and fun; closing ceremonies. How are participants—students, organization

[9] See also Willis, Peresie, Waldref, and Stockmann (2003).

[10] For a powerfully effective instance of shared project design, see Buhler, Settee, and Van Styvendale (2014).

[11] Well-handled by Gregoire and Yess (2007).

[12] For example, a single Walls to Bridges course may be truly valuable as a stand-alone experience, but, especially for the incarcerated student, that value is limited in the face of structural oppression and stigma; what are some ways this value can endure or be built upon, rather than morphing into one more "over-promise"? All these approaches are in place or being explored by those in the W2B network: offering multiple courses at one institution; ensuring academic advising for students getting out; alumni involvement in Walls to Bridges Collective work or in participatory action research projects; building scholarship funds for Walls to Bridges students who proceed with their studies; offering classes on the outside for students on parole and university-based students.

staff, community members, faculty, community-based learning coordinators—actually treating each other? When are they meeting face to face (if at all), and on whose turf? What conscious intentions frame encounters in spaces that are familiar to some, strange to others? What formal or informal conventions are determining the nature of the interactions? Unthinkingly, people can play out prescribed roles and relationships, sometimes unintentionally harming themselves or others. Perhaps this happens even more often when people are moving into challenging spaces and across divides, without being offered the chance to develop tools for connection and communication together.

Whether in school, in prison, in an office, a health clinic, a field, or a sweat shop, even on holiday or in our homes, our roles and relationships are to some extent shaped and confined by constructs defined by capitalism's web of power and privilege, and often we are sunk in the institutional logic of whichever system most dominates our lives at that juncture. Much goes unexamined as we grapple with the urgencies of our day-to-day lives. I'd like to propose a second priority for community-based learning practitioners to embrace, in keeping with the long-term goal of making us all more ready and able for change. The sheer fact **that community-based learning projects take place in the marginal space between (at least) two institutional contexts** (e.g. the academy and the prison, or, say, a university and a senior care facility) allows all participants—students and faculty, community participants and community, non-profit or agency hosts—a very particular opportunity for reflection. Navigating between two contexts with often starkly differing priorities and protocols can feel like community-based learning's biggest logistical headache; at the same time, it also offers up a "neither-here-nor-there" vantage point from which to view the institutional logics that construct and constrain our perspectives so acutely.[13] In fact, because of the way power and privilege function more broadly, the working premises that undergird different social institutions can be at once consonant and contradictory, and as their founding assumptions and their regulatory fields converge and jostle, there is much to observe and reflect upon. To navigate "the space between" can bring fresh understanding of the systemic and institutional forces at work in the intimate and individual lives of the community participants. At the same time, the university's assumption about itself and its place in the world can also suddenly appear strange—delineated and newly available for scrutiny for students and community members both.

This deep opportunity often goes unplumbed or at least under-experienced by community, staff, faculty, and student participants in community-based learning projects. What can one do by way of project conception and pedagogy, to open up those insights for all participants? Perhaps brief readings and/or dialogue opportunities can be made available to both students and community participants that invite collective examination of the institutional and social forces that are most relevant to the endeavors being shared. Perhaps these suggestions should be proffered by community-organization participants.

Too, one can build not only journaling and brief reflection papers but also creative exploration into the work process, to foster meta-reflective practice. For its first few years, the

[13] See Bumiller (2013).

Walls to Bridges facilitator training included four days at the prison and one day at the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. Perhaps unsurprisingly, training days spent inside the prison can stir up strong reactions, learnings, and sometimes difficulties for training participants. Even this peripheral, short-lived, and relatively surface experience of prison is intense, as is the fact that as a training participant, one moves in and out of the carceral space, while some of one's trainers will be forced to stay confined. But on the "outside day," when sessions unfolded at the university, training participants confronted the fact of an absence, as some of their incarcerated trainers were in prison, and not on hand. And they hadn't moved to a "neutral" space but to another institutionally immersive environment, replete with its own logic and architecture of power. What do we know with our minds, hearts, spirits, and bodies, when we come with awareness to an institutional setting that we have grown inured to? At one training, on the day we'd left behind the prison environment and showed up in a university setting for the day, we asked people to begin the day in pairs, moving around the space, noticing together how it felt to move in ways or to parts of the room that they normally wouldn't in a university setting. They were asked to consider how power normally asserts itself in such a space and to share an activity that might otherwise seem unimaginable there. So, direct acknowledgement of institutional impacts on our experience can come most readily, sometimes, through creative engagement.

Perhaps the most "live" opportunity for this sort of analysis from the interstices opens up when we commit to **turning the elephants in the room into our teachers.** Writing about Inside-Out, Kristin Bumiller (2013) offers up one instance that could provide an occasion for subsequent reflection:

> Halfway through the semester, one of my inside students is reassigned from the full security section of the facility to "minimum." My outside students are not aware of this…change…, and as we leave the class, the inside student, fairly nonchalantly, walks beyond the usual corridor to which he has been confined and joins us in the "trap" [or sally port]. In their silence (and expression of puzzlement . . .), I see my outside students ponder: Who is watching? Should I "tell" on my classmate? Am I entrusted with the "security" role as an outsider? . . . Possibly, the inside student muses—why does walking into the trap create shock in the eyes of fellow students who just convincingly treated me as a peer? (p. 184)

Typically, such moments go unmarked because they are uncomfortable, and thereby the meaning they deliver—that outside students are implicated in the carceral endeavour—slides home and makes its effect without being challenged. But this is not inevitable. In this case, whether incarcerated and campus-based students would find it most productive to discuss this as a class or to reflect on it more privately in writing would vary depending on the details of the event and the relationships in the room—and it would be important that the facilitator might be able to read this right. But the chance to take note of what had transpired and consider how carceral conditions interacted with and to some extent undercut the aspirations of the course is there—in its very discomforts, a learning.

In community-based learning projects configured differently than the co-learning model of Walls to Bridges, elephants will still show up and stand stolid in the living-room. Whether a student has it pointed out to him that he has unwittingly inspired mistrust, or an organisational administrator approaches his female staff in a way that the intern reads as harassment, or a faculty member consistently rejects the chance to visit a community site, painful moments will come as opportunities not to flee, but to stay in, to question and observe.

It is easy to slip into feeling that the project is "failing" or the students are "just not getting it" when people express resistance or negative affect. In fact, though, what happens along the way can be the stuff of that day's learning experience for participants, not a distraction. A community-based learning project can foster or block opportunities for all those involved to take note of their own responses and learn from them and thereby to attend to their own inner teachers. We can try to welcome discomfort, when it surfaces, something to be responded to with care, not steeled against or denied.[14] For faculty and project coordinators, this takes a lot of readiness to be honest with ourselves about what is coming up *for us* as we engage with the project and our part in the course or program. It also means being honest in a sensitive but direct way with the students and with non-campus-based participants about what we see and about the questions we need to ask in order to understand better what is unfolding. Can we name it, when there's a tension in the room? Who, amongst those involved with the project, may be prepared to offer the opportunity of a circle process around a tension that someone has named aloud?

Another urgent reason to keep the quality and tenor of relationships front and centre in community-based learning practice is the stark difference that exists between galvanized and paralytic anger at injustice. A community-based learning project may well mean that university- or college-based *and* community-based participants find themselves suddenly confronting social injustice and systemic violence in different and probing ways, with a sometimes breathtakingly raw depth of new insight. Let's turn again to Mauricio Najarro (2015), who writes from the context of prison education programming:

> Learning the truth of oppression often elicits a deep and debilitating rage. Anger, particularly in the form of self-righteous indignation, is a toxic fuel that poisons the communal atmosphere and corrodes the possibility of meaningful dialogue. Individuals both inside and outside prisons must transform their justified anger from self-righteous and corrosive indignation to orienting, productive, and enabling outrage.

I would like to suggest that fundamental to the transformation Najarro hopes for is the quality of the space for dialogue, *how* emotion and stories are welcomed and met, along the way. Quaker author and group facilitator Parker Palmer (2004) raises questions that are relevant here. As university-based students and community members interact in a community-based learning context, the challenge of listening with presence exposes itself. Palmer asks:

[14] Khuri (2004) has a useful essay on this topic.

> How can we understand another when instead of listening deeply, we rush to repair that person in order to escape further involvement? The sense of isolation and invisibility that marks so many lives . . . is due in part to a mode of "helping" that allows us to dismiss each other. When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. . . . But holding you that way takes time, energy, and patience. As the minutes tick by . . . I start feeling anxious, useless and foolish. (p. 117)

Faced with a full-on, nuanced glimpse at the lived experience of injustice and the larger systemic forces that contextualize and create such pain, the insupportable sense of being only "anxious, useless and foolish" can be rejected in favour of white-hot anger. The "self-righteous indignation" that Najarro describes can be, just as much as rushing in to fix or save, a coping mechanism, a place to run to. Absolutism's "foxholes" (as Palmer puts it) are an easier place to live than in the profound discomfort of staying, together, in the presence of stories that will require us to change, to stay connected, to connect, and to change ourselves and the encounters that help to create our sense of what's possible.

Alert, reflective, and cognizant in the spaces in between institutional contexts, engaging in practices that help us all show up as listeners, whole-self learners, community-makers, wisdom-sharers, hard-headed, warm-hearted analysts, ready to spill and spread our endeavors beyond the shape of a syllabus, semester, or a student roster, we become capable of imaginative interventions powerful enough to make profound change "realistic"…and real.

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