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Informed Faith and Reason: A Perspective on Learning Community Pedagogy

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Abstract

The curriculum of each learning community at Duquesne University is integrated around a shared theme. The integrated classes equip students to articulate their biases in reference to the theme. The residual effect of the thematic communities is a byproduct of pedagogy informed by theory and embodied in service. The learning communities at Duquesne invite students into an intellectual community guided by questions, not answers, where their perspectives are valued. In this perspective, I outline three theoretical frameworks – constructive hermeneutic, faith and reason, and the Duquesne mission – that informed my own pedagogy in Duquesne's *Justitia* learning community.

In an earlier issue of *Learning Communities Research and Practice*, my colleague and I conceptualized the first-year learning communities at Duquesne University as worldviews that stay with students long after they leave (McDowell Marinchak & DeIuliis, 2013). At Duquesne, each community revolves around a theme, such as truth, justice, or reason, and the curriculum of each community is integrated around that theme. We argued that the theme defines the boundaries of a developing worldview that grounds the participation of students in public discourse. The focus of that article was how the community themes formed frames of reference for students to articulate their biases. Instructors within each community must not only integrate the courses of each community, but also bridge interdisciplinary boundaries in a way that freshmen can understand. Pedagogical responses to this challenge must be informed by theory and embodied in service. They must assume that openness and engagement with difference leads to learning and that learning is co-created by students and teachers and performed in a mutuality of concern. Theory taught in the community classroom should be lived, and action should be informed by theory and reflection. In this perspective, I outline three theoretical frameworks that informed my own pedagogical responses to these challenges during the two years I taught within Duquesne University's *Justitia* learning community.

Duquesne University Learning Communities

Each freshman student in Duquesne University's McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts is placed in one of nine first-year learning communities. Each community is organized around a theme reflected by a Latin name.[1] The *Amor* community represents love, passion, and desire (Duquesne University, 2014a). The *Fides* community represents trust, faith, and belief (Duquesne University, 2014b). The *Justitia* (formerly *Judicium*) community represents justice, rightness, and equity (Duquesne University, 2014c). Students choose communities based on their stated interests. Students interested in art, religion, or literature choose *Amor*. Students interested in philosophy, global perspectives, and international relations choose *Fides*. Students interested in law, politics, and criminal justice choose *Justitia*. The communities allow students to form study groups and develop relationships with faculty members. The integrated curriculum helps students to make connections among classes and encourages faculty to bridge disciplinary boundaries. Students take four classes together in the Fall semester and one or two classes together in the Spring semester of their freshman year. The courses are integrated around the community

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[1] Descriptions and student feedback for each learning community and can be found at the following link: http://www.duq.edu/academics/schools/liberal-arts/for-undergraduate-students/learning-communities.

theme. In the Fall semester, students in *Justitia* take Public Speaking, Basic Philosophical Questions, and Introduction to Criminal Justice, as well as a Research and Information Skills course common to all communities. In the Spring semester, students reconvene for one class together, Philosophical Ethics.

Students in *Justitia* also complete a semester-long service project at a neighboring jail, where they engage questions of truth and justice alongside inmates. During the Fall 2012 and Fall 2013 semesters, the service-learning project was embedded in the Basic Philosophical Questions and Introduction to Criminal Justice classes, taught by other instructors in the community. Both students and inmates worked to substantiate claims of public evidence by engaging the complexity of truth and justice. Students applied their knowledge of criminal justice (Introduction to Criminal Justice) to philosophical and rhetorical contexts (Basic Philosophical Questions and Public Speaking) and philosophical perspectives, (Philosophical Ethics). Students also learned how to develop and situate ideas (Basic Philosophical Questions/Philosophical Ethics), research evidence for their arguments (Research and Information Skills), and present their work in a public context (Public Speaking). The feedback from both students and inmates regarding this integrated assignment was positive, and the students' grades improved from the contextual reinforcement (Duquesne University, 2014c). I now outline three theoretical frameworks—constructive hermeneutic, faith and reason, and the Duquesne mission—that informed my pedagogy in the *Justitia* learning community.

Constructive Hermeneutic

First, my pedagogy was guided by a constructive hermeneutic, as articulated by Ronald C. Arnett and Annette Holba in their 2012 book, *An Overture to Philosophy of Communication: The Carrier of Meaning*. As opposed to a *de*constructive hermeneutic, which calls for substitutive change, a constructive hermeneutic engages and learns from difference through additive insight. The constructive hermeneutic is an interpretive bridge between theory and practice. From this perspective, theory opens possibilities for understanding practice as the "why" behind the "how" of human communication. Theory and practice constitute a joint marketplace of ideas, where examination of the familiar and engagement with difference leads to truth (Arnett & Holba, 2012). The *Justitia* community was very diverse, with students from many racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most students were either very vocal or very apprehensive about discussing issues of truth and justice.

Working from different perspectives, the other instructors and I assisted students with locating and organizing evidence for their truth claims and mentored students through the process of writing academic papers. In both cases,

the instructors had to convey complex material in an understandable way. As a result, students learned the difference between emotivism and informed public discourse and became fluent in the products and processes of academic research (Duquesne University, 2014c). Students were encouraged to ask questions about issues that were unclear or inapplicable to their experience. The *Justitia* community was a genuine encounter with alterity that gave students insight into a world engaged only via novel and film.

With this in mind, I began and ended each class session with a question, such as, What is the relationship between culture and communication? Students carried the question with them during the week and, sometimes involuntarily, sometimes not, came to answer the question in practice before addressing the question in theory in the classroom. One student responded to my question with a question of her own, informed by a particular experience of superficial communication during the week: "Can you look at culture as being focused on our verb-like existential existence while communication is nothing more than the noun that is presented as a result of the action?" The learning communities at Duquesne teach students to look for the "why" behind the "how" of human communication, where existential meaning moves into everyday life.

Faith and Reason

Second, the binary of faith and reason guided my pedagogy as a metaphor for engagement with difference. In the Public Speaking basic course in the Department of Communication and Rhetorical Studies, students learn to articulate their biases from positions of faith and reason. In the two years I taught Public Speaking in the *Justitia* community, students read Pope John Paul II alongside René Descartes, and Thomas Merton alongside Friedrich Nietzsche,. By the end of the class, students came to learn how faith and reason together inform the narratives of science, business, education, and humanities and how religious faith can shape resolutions to social problems as a companion to critical analysis. Students were not asked to adopt either perspective, only to understand the narrative ground from which they speak as a complex interplay of the two. At the beginning of each semester, students were apprehensive about speaking in public and spoke only from received opinions. At the end of each semester, they embodied a shared spirit of service as informed participants in the public sphere (Duquesne University, 2014c).

During the Fall 2012 semester, President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney engaged in a series of contentious debates on prime-time television. Many of the students had strong allegiances toward one candidate or the other, but few were able to articulate with clarity the platforms of either. I divided the class into two groups, supporters of Governor Romney and supporters of President

Obama. All of the Romney supporters described themselves as conservative or, as one student said, "responsible." All of the Obama supporters described themselves as liberal or, as another said, "open-minded." With the Romney group on one side of the room and the Obama group on the other, I gave each group an assignment: the Romney supporters would speak for Obama, and the Obama supporters would speak for Romney. In a series of short speeches, both impromptu and planned, students did extensive research on their candidate to articulate his position and responded to questions from the opposite position, which was actually their own. With this exercise, the students learned that public speaking is much more than mere rhetoric. It is the heart of the informed public discourse on which democracy depends.

Faith and Reason Outside the Learning Community

Just as the learning community student experience cultivates a residual worldview, the experience of teaching in *Justitia* has informed my teaching of upper-level classes outside the community. The experience of teaching Public Speaking within a framework of faith and reason also extends to other binaries unrelated to faith and reason, such as qualitative and quantitative research methods. In a Communication Research Methods course taught during the Spring 2014 semester, I spent several weeks teaching quantitative, then qualitative methods. On the final day of class, I talked to the students about my own research on semiotic phenomenology as a communication research methodology. Semiotic phenomenology is an alternative to social scientific approaches to communication studies grounded in the work of Richard Lanigan and his interpreters. In three books, *Semiotic Phenomenology of Rhetoric* (1984), *Phenomenology of Communication* (1988), and *The Human Science of Communicology* (1992), as well as many articles and chapters, Lanigan combines the semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to measure the experience of human communication with methodological rigor.

Semiotic phenomenology measures communication by asking, first, *what* an experience of communication is, then *how* it has meaning, then *why* the meaning is manifest in the experience (Lanigan, 1988). To illustrate, I broke the class into groups of two and assigned each pair of students a communication phenomenon, such as their experience of online classes. Students then interviewed each other about their experiences and compared the transcripts, looking for words and phrases that infused the experience with meaning. In comparing narratives, students could see clearly their own biases. I then taught the intellectual roots of qualitative methods in the evolution of the word from orality to literacy, then qualitative methods in the *Physics* and *Rhetoric* of Aristotle, to show how

qualitative and quantitative methods themselves emerged out of biases for understanding the world. Both of these techniques stemmed from my learning community experience of teaching Public Speaking from the perspectives of faith and reason.

Duquesne Mission

Finally, the mission of Duquesne University informed my pedagogy. Duquesne University was founded by the Spiritans, a Roman Catholic religious congregation of 3,000 members that carries out its mission of evangelization in over 60 countries. The Spiritans build community by helping the poor, and welcoming those on the margins of society into a community of service and spirituality. As a follow-up to the Romney-Obama speeches, I spoke to my *Justitia* Public Speaking class about where their biases came from, using my own research on Tom McFeat's experimental communication research on human culture formation. In McFeat's (1974; 1979; 2002) method, ten participants invent the ending of an unfinished novel. One member of the original group is then replaced with a newcomer unfamiliar with the ending. The remaining groups then explain the ending to the newcomer.

By repeating this process until no original members remain, researchers can replicate how communication constitutes culture over time. To teach the *Justitia* students about relationships between communication and culture, I separated the class into two groups. Each group read a short story with the ending removed. One person from each group then switched places, and both groups explained the story to the newcomer. I then repeated this process until each group was the same as it started, except with a new story. After the exercise, we discussed the connections between communication and culture through the metaphors of clay and sculpture. Culture is raw clay, sculpted through communicative practices into the narratives, like the mission of Duquesne, that the students protect and promote by coming to class.

In response, one student commented, "I guess what I'm trying to say is…we do not exist as a thing, but rather we exist as an action that is ever changing. I molded the clay and as a result you have the sculpture, but without the sculpture you would never have known the clay existed." For me, this comment illustrates the importance of the learning community experience. The *Justitia* learning community offered me the opportunity to sculpt raw clay into mature speakers, equipped to articulate their biases in class and residually for the rest of their lives. The residual effect of the *Justitia* learning community is created through pedagogy informed by theory and embodied in service (McDowell Marinchak & DeIuliis, 2013). The learning communities challenge students to substantiate their claims as informed participants in public democracy; they challenge instructors to

integrate the raw clay of four courses into a coherent community theme, then communicate that theme in the language of their respective fields. Many of the outcomes of these pedagogical strategies for teaching in *Justitia* will become clearer as the students enter into professional life, armed with the residual worldview of the learning community (McDowell Marinchak & DeIuliis, 2013). Until then, the thematic learning communities at Duquesne University invite students into an intellectual community guided by questions, not answers, where their perspectives are valued.

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