Risky Epistemology: Connecting with Others and Dissonance in Community-Based Research

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Connecting with others and experiences of dissonance are two factors identified as central to transformative learning in engaged teaching and research (Kiely, 2005). At the same time, these ways of knowing are unpredictable and come with the risk of actually disrupting rather than enhancing learning. This article reports the findings of a mixed method ethnographic study exploring the impact of connecting with others and experiences of dissonance on students' learning in four undergraduate research methods courses with conflict-oriented community-based research (CBR) projects as the primary pedagogy. The article considers the implications of the findings for crafting the role of the professor and the pedagogy of conflict-oriented CBR courses in ways likely to minimize students' experiences of alienating dissonance and enhance learning for students with diverse political perspectives.

At the public presentation of students' community-based research (CBR) on local police accountability, a member of our research methods class taped her mouth shut, telling a fellow student that she had been silenced by the project. Later that evening, the student, *sans* tape, warmly greeted a member of the audience, who I later learned was a local conservative blogger. He observed in his blog the following day, "It is unfortunate that a college would encourage and provide a platform for pseudo-research of this type in order to assist parties with a political bias and a grudge against police" (Guarino, 2010).

At that point in my teaching career, I knew well the power of CBR courses to evoke deep learning. I had taught several similar courses and witnessed profound changes in students' perspectives on the community issues we studied, newfound confidence in their thinking, and enhanced sense of agency from having an impact on these issues. My longstanding relationship with the community partner with which we conducted the police accountability research had offered a solid foundation for two other CBR projects with classes in earlier semesters, each building on the themes and findings from the prior project, and according to the organization, contributing in important ways to their mission and goals.

However, the incident of the student taping her mouth brought to a head some concerns that had been brewing for me around partnering with an organization engaged in what Stoecker (2010) has called "conflict-oriented" social change. For many students, being immersed in the community to study politically-charged issues provided the "disorienting dilemma" described by Mezirow (2000) that triggers trans-

formative learning. Ultimately, though, some students' dissonant experiences evoked by the community partnerships made it difficult for them to fully engage the research. In retrospect, I realized that the incident with the student who taped her mouth served as my own disorienting dilemma, compelling me to better understand students' experiences of the CBR courses I had taught, particularly their experiences of connected knowing and dissonance.

Connecting with others and experiences of dissonance are two factors identified as central to transformative learning in engaged teaching and research (Kiely, 2005). At the same time, as I experienced in my teaching, these ways of knowing are unpredictable and come with the risk of potentially disrupting rather than enhancing learning. Thus, the question arises, under what conditions do connecting with others and experiences of dissonance facilitate learning and under what conditions are they likely to interfere with it? Why do some disorienting dilemmas trigger a transformation in perspective, while others do not? How can faculty assume their role and authority in CBR courses in a way that engages students with a variety of political perspectives in transformative learning?

This article reports the findings of a mixed method ethnographic study exploring the impact of connecting with others and experiences of dissonance on students' learning in four undergraduate research methods courses with CBR projects as the primary pedagogy. In each project, the entire class served as the research team under my guidance, and conducted participatory action research with a community partner engaged in a conflict-oriented approach to

addressing a local issue (Stoecker, 2003, 2010). That is, partners' initiatives challenged existing power arrangements by engaging people excluded from decision-making in their communities, and helping them to construct knowledge to take action to address issues affecting their lives. The primary aim of the study was to better understand students' experiences of learning in conflict-oriented CBR so as to strengthen the pedagogy associated with these kinds of educational experiences.

Community-Based Research for Conflict-Oriented Social Change

The four courses included in this study, which I taught in Spring 2008, Spring 2009, Fall 2010, and Spring 2012, fit the model of CBR outlined by Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, and Donahue, (2003); each consisted of "collaborative, change-oriented research that engages faculty members, students, and community members in projects that address a community-identified need" (p. 5). The community partner for the first three projects was an organization I knew through earlier collaborations on social change campaigns, while students chose the partner for the fourth project. Members and staff of the community partners developed the research questions, and collaborated with students and me at every stage of the research process. At the end of each project, we presented themes from the studies at community meetings open to the public where participants interpreted the significance of the themes for their efforts to address the issue at hand. Community partners drew on findings from the projects to enhance their work toward social change in their communities.

An explanation of the conflict-oriented nature of the CBR projects helps to shed light on the projects in this study and why they were more likely than other types of CBR both to lead to social change and to create dissonance for students. Stoecker (2010) distinguishes between two forms of conflict-oriented social change, *action* and *participation*. In the action model, CBR is part of a social change campaign crafted by a community organization (Stoecker, 2005, pp. 66-72). The participation model of social change involves "transforming the social structures controlling who produces knowledge, who influences public knowledge, and who controls the knowledge production process" (2010, p. 8). A particular social change initiative may be characterized as one or the other model, or indeed, both of them. Three of the CBR projects in the study were part of social change campaigns, and thus reflect the action model; all four projects supported partners' efforts to engage community members in the generation of new public knowledge about issues they faced, in

keeping with the participation model. Both models call into question existing power arrangements, and as such, tend not only to generate conflict in communities but also dissonance for students in that the changes are likely to challenge students' perspectives, values, and priorities, as well as those of their families, friends, and co-workers. This conflict-oriented approach to CBR is congruent with the mission and goals of the Community and Justice Studies major at Guilford College, the administrative home for the CBR courses.

Some of the principles identified as key to successful campus-community partnerships in CBR—partners "share a worldview, agree about goals and strategies, and have mutual trust and respect" (Strand et al., 2003, p. 8)—proved difficult to realize fully in these CBR projects focused on conflict-oriented social change. While most of the students, as they came to know our community partners and learned about their lives, perspectives, and struggles, developed trust and understanding, and in many cases, changes in their frames of reference about the community issue under study in the respective CBR project, a small number of students remained distant from our partners and experienced little change in their perspective on the issues. Gaining a better understanding of what prevented these latter students from developing relationships with partners and altering their perspectives is central to this study.

It is important to highlight the two goals of the CBR courses: for students to learn how to do CBR, and to conduct research that would help community partners to accomplish their missions. As such, the intent was not to change students' values or perspectives on issues, but for them to learn how to do CBR. However, the second goal involved a dilemma—how to engage students in conducting research that will advance a project with which they may disagree in fundamental ways. Therefore, this article also considers the pros and cons of different pedagogical responses to this dilemma that would enable students with a range of perspectives on the partner and issue to participate and potentially experience transformative learning.

Disorienting Dilemmas and Transformative Learning

Kiely's (2005) Transformational Service-Learning Process Model offers a useful vehicle for exploring students' learning in the CBR courses in this study. Although CBR differs from service-learning in its emphasis on research, the two forms of engaged teaching are sufficiently similar for Kiely's application of transformative learning theory to be relevant to this inquiry.

Kiely's framework draws heavily on Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning. Mezirow defines this type of learning as "the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives)—sets of assumptions and expectations—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 26). The trigger for this transformation typically is a *disorienting dilemma*, an event or experience that cannot be understood or resolved by a person's existing frame of reference. The non-sequential learning processes that follow the disorienting dilemma are:

> 2) self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame, 3) a critical assessment of assumptions, 4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared, 5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions, 6) planning a course of action, 7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, 8) provisional trying of new roles, 9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and 10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (2006, p. 22)

Over the past several years, scholars have critiqued and expanded upon Mezirow's theory of transformative learning in several key areas (Baumgartner, 2012). The theory has been broadened beyond its early emphasis on the rational mode of knowing to include affective, intuitive, and imaginative modes; consideration of the impact of personal, socio-cultural, and historical contexts on the process of transformative learning; and the dialectical relationship between personal transformation and social change (Baumgartner; Taylor, 2009). Recent iterations of the theory also include a focus on a "holistic orientation" to teaching concerned with educating the whole person, for example, through the creation of community, and use of expressive activities such as storytelling and cooperative inquiry, and developing trusting and meaningful relationships with students (Taylor).

The theory continues to be contested, as evidenced by Newman's (2012) argument that transformative learning does not qualify as an identifiable phenomenon, and that the notion should be replaced with "good learning." His radical challenge to the theory evoked some useful clarifications of it from other scholars, but the consensus appears to be that the theory is valid and helpful to educators (Cranton & Kasl, 2012; Dirkx, 2012). Indeed, the publication of the *Handbook of Transformative Learning* (Taylor, Cranton, & Associates, 2012), with contributions from 42 scholars, attests to the vibrancy of the theory.

In that volume, Kasl and Yorks (2012) offer a help-ful distinction between learning and transformative learning. They distinguish between learning, which involves "a change in cognitive habit of mind," and transformative learning, which "is a change in *habit of being*—a holistic relationship to one's world experienced through coherence among one's multiple ways of knowing" (p. 507). The "disorienting dilemma" also remains a defining characteristic of transformative learning. As Newman (2012) describes the dilemma, it is "a disruptive event that can trigger a rational reappraisal. The unexamined and accepted are rendered explicit. We see things for the first time—about ourselves and the world around us—and we set about addressing the things we do not like" (p. 209). As for the future of the theory, Baumgartner (2012) identifies the need to continue exploring the effects of various contexts, power, relationships, and the intersection between emotions and critical reflection in the process of transformative learning.

Kiely's (2005) application of Mezirow's framework to service-learning includes some consideration of the impact on transformative learning of context, the role of emotions, and relationships, although the effect of power on such learning is not part of the model. The empirical foundation of Kiely's model is a longitudinal case study of participants' learning in a study abroad service-learning program in Nicaragua. His analysis of students' learning in the study yielded five themes that comprise his model: contextual border crossing, dissonance, personalizing, processing, and connecting (p. 8). The two themes of central relevance to the current study are connecting and dissonance.

Connecting is "learning to affectively understand and empathize through relationships with community members, peers, and faculty. It is learning through nonreflective modes such as sensing, sharing, feeling, caring, participating, relating, listening, comforting, empathizing, intuiting, and doing" (Kiely, 2005, p. 8). Kiely's theme of connecting is close to the concept of connected knowing articulated by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1996). In connected knowing, one tries to "enter into the other person's perspective, adopting their frame of mind, trying to see the world through their eyes" (Belenky & Stanton, 2000, p. 87). This epistemology involves active listening and "embraces personal experiences, feelings, and narrative over abstract conceptualization" (p. 89). Both connecting and connected knowing are used as conceptual lenses in the current study.

Dissonance refers to "incongruence between participants' prior frame of reference and aspects of the contextual factors that shape the service-learning experience" (Kiely, 2005, p. 8). Kiely identifies types of dissonance, including, "historical, environmental, physical, economic, political, cultural, spiritual,

social, communicative, and technological" (p. 11). He distinguishes low intensity dissonance, such as challenges with communicating in another language, from high intensity dissonance, such as encountering extreme poverty. Kiely hypothesizes that high intensity dissonance, because of the emotional turmoil and confusion it causes, leads individuals to rethink existing knowledge and assumptions, and triggers ongoing learning and action. Such ongoing learning occurs because the intensely dissonant experiences become part of students' frame of reference and thus continue to shape their transformative learning and action. Kiely further asserts that high intensity dissonance of a political, economic, historical, or social nature "is the start of students' transformational learning process, a repositioning process in which they begin to rethink their political assumptions, spending habits, loyalties, and global position on the map of power and wealth" (p. 12).

Kiely (2005) also points to the need for researchers to explore how contextual factors—such as program characteristics, historical relationships, personal biographies, and structural dimensions—affect the type, intensity, and duration of dissonance and the type of learning that results—an exploration also central to the current study.

The Community Partners and CBR Projects

Greensboro, North Carolina, the setting for the four CBR projects, has a long history of racial segregation and inequality (Patterson, 2011). Most African-American and Latino residents live on the east side of the city, while the west side is largely populated by whites (Fain, 2013). One statistic graphically portrays the economic inequality: according to Census Bureau data, between 2000 and 2009, the median annual household income for white Greensboro residents increased $5,300, while for African-Americans it increased by only $11 (Patterson, 2011). The city's history reflects significant racial strife, including the 1979 killing by Klansmen and Neo-Nazis of five anti-Klan demonstrators and their acquittal by two all-white juries (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, n.d.), and more recently, the legal suit brought against the city of Greensboro in 2009 by 39 African-American police officers for discrimination (Lehmert, 2009). At the same time, Greensboro has a rich history of social change efforts to address racial injustice. For example, four North Carolina A&T University students began the Sit-In movement on February 1, 1961 at the downtown Woolworth's department store; and the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the United States was held in Greensboro in 2005 to address the 1979 tragedy at the anti-Klan rally (Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Project, 2006;

Jovanovic, 2012).

Greensboro's history of racial and class segregation has left a legacy of deep divisions between African-Americans and whites regarding social and economic issues in the city. The adult students from Greensboro in the CBR courses brought these differences with them into our class discussions and implementation of the research, resulting in many heated debates about the issues addressed in the projects. The traditional-age college students in the CBR courses, on the other hand, typically from other cities and parts of the country, often related the issues to similar problems in their hometowns, but generally did not have the same emotional investment in their perspectives as did the Greensboro adult students.

The community partner for the first three CBR projects in the study—conducted in 2008, 2009, and 2010—was a local non-profit organization whose mission is ". . . to foster and model a spirit of community based on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of a Beloved Community." This mission involves envisioning and working toward "social and economic relations that affirm and realize the equality, dignity, worth and potential of every person" (Beloved Community Center, n.d.).

The research question the organization identified for each course project was in support of an organizing campaign. The first project supported a campaign to develop stronger relationships between African-Americans and Latinos in central North Carolina, given their shared interests in improving conditions and wages for low-income workers and holding police accountable for respectful and fair treatment for members of both groups. Students prepared for entering the community to do the research in a gradual process; they read about the group and its mission, met with its leaders and members in the classroom to discuss the project, and met with them at their Center on the east side of Greensboro. Students learned to conduct interviews by reading about the process, observing me role-play an interview, and then doing role-plays with each other and receiving feedback on them. Following this training, students interviewed African-Americans and Latinos about their perceptions of each other, and their thoughts about the organization's initiative to develop an alliance between them. At the community meeting where students presented the themes that emerged from the research, Latino, African-American, and white residents interpreted the themes and their significance for their efforts to develop relationships and an alliance with each other. The research helped to create the foundation for the organization's gathering of over 200 people in October 2008 at a Major Black/Brown Conference. This meeting explored the interconnectedness of the cultures and struggles

within African-American and Latino communities as well as strengthened relationships between members of the two groups. After our research, I was invited to serve on the planning committee for the conference, and some students from the course attended and volunteered at the event.

The issues for the second and third projects with this organization flowed organically from the first. Through their closer relations with Latino communities in North Carolina, the organization came to know and support the head of the state chapter of the street organization, the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation (ALKQN) in his call for peace among local gangs and street organizations. As an outgrowth of their relationship with this leader, the organization developed the *Paradigm Shift* initiative, aimed at changing the public's perceptions of young people in gangs so that they are embraced as potential resources for peaceful and safe communities, and supported in their efforts to find employment, rather than as groups to be targeted for surveillance and arrest by state and federal laws. The second research project in the study supported this organizing campaign. To prepare for their work in the community, students did a literature review about gangs and street organizations, including the ALKQN, and met with leaders and members of the community organization on campus, and at the organization's offices. They followed the same protocol for learning to interview as in the first project. Students then interviewed local residents about their perceptions of gangs and street organizations, the laws affecting them, and their thoughts about the organization's *Paradigm Shift* initiative.

Students presented the themes from our research at a community meeting at the end of the semester, and participants discussed their significance for the *Paradigm Shift* initiative. One of the key issues that emerged from the discussion at the community meeting became the subject of the next CBR project in partnership with this community partner, police accountability.

The partner's focus on police accountability grew out of longstanding concerns with the Greensboro Police Department's treatment of people of color in the city. To address these concerns and others that emerged during their collaboration with the leader and members of the ALKQN, the organization began a campaign to call for a Citizens Review Board with subpoena power to hold police accountable. In support of this campaign, our CBR project involved students interviewing Greensboro residents from different races, ethnicities, and neighborhoods about their perceptions of the police and their thoughts about the organization's campaign for a Citizens Review Board. Before beginning the interviews, students read about the community organization and the cur-

rent project, did a literature review on topics relevant to the study, and met with organization leaders and members in the classroom and in the community. Most students in the class attended a community meeting on police accountability at a local African American church where leaders recognized them and expressed strong appreciation for their research.

Of the three CBR projects with this community partner, this project proved to be the most controversial and divisive among students and in the broader community, evidenced by the student who taped her mouth and the blogger's post criticizing the effort. About halfway through the project, a high level official in the police department wrote to a top administrator at the college where I work asking that the research be stopped. The administrator responded that such research into public institutions could be valuable, and that the college did not censor faculty's academic work. [I have described this incident and reflected on its significance for academic freedom and engaged teaching and research elsewhere (Giles, 2012)].

The project continued and was completed successfully amidst these controversies. The community organization drew on findings from the research to develop their strategies for educating local communities about Citizens Review Boards (CRBs) and engaging support for the creation of one in Greensboro. Following the project, several students and I participated in the community partner's efforts to create and gather signatures for a petition for the CRB. The organization continues to share the results of the research project in public meetings, including at a City Council meeting, as part of their efforts to initiate a Citizens Review Board.

After reflecting on the challenges created by the choice of community partner and research topic in the CBR project on police accountability, I decided to include students in the decision-making about the community partner we would work with the next time I taught the course, in Spring 2012. Before the semester started, I offered students a choice of four different organizations (including the first community partner) with which they could conduct a CBR project, all of which involved a social change effort. Students chose to partner with a day shelter for people experiencing homelessness whose mission is to "assist people who are homeless, recently homeless or facing homelessness reconnect with their own lives and with the community at large" (Interactive Resource Center,, n.d.). One of the organization's core tenets is that the voices and insights of their guests drive decision-making about the programs and services offered by the shelter.

In keeping with their vision, the organization asked the class to conduct a community-based needs assessment of gaps in shelter and housing in

Greensboro, the solutions and strategies used by people to find shelter and housing given these gaps, and the strengths and resilience embedded in their solutions. The sample consisted of people experiencing homelessness, those recently homeless, and those precariously housed. In preparation for entering the community, the director of the shelter came to our class to give an overview of the organization's mission and the topic of the study. Then students and I met and spent time with guests and staff at the shelter on several occasions, to talk about the overall research question, the interview questions, and to deepen our understanding of the lives of people experiencing homelessness. As in the earlier projects, students conducted a literature review on topics relevant to the study, and learned interviewing skills by observing and participating in interview role-plays.

Students presented the themes that emerged from the research at a public meeting attended by many people who had participated in the study, current and former city council members, activists, and residents. Small groups, followed by a plenary, discussed the implications of the findings for the shelter's efforts to create more options for shelter and housing. A staff member at the organization reported afterwards that the research offered legitimacy to solutions grounded in the insights and experiences of people who are homeless, helping to counter the policy recommendations of experts who often lack knowledge of the actual needs and priorities of people facing these circumstances.

Although political controversy did not arise in this iteration of the CBR course, students did experience dissonance. Some students were disturbed and unnerved by direct contact with people experiencing homelessness, especially children in this situation. For the first time in my teaching of CBR, I had to address the issue of some students fabricating interviews, which may have resulted in part from these students' efforts to avoid the discomfort they felt when interacting with people experiencing homelessness.

Method

I drew on a mixed method ethnographic approach for the study of the four CBR projects and courses, based in part on the method described by Polin and Keene (2010) for assessing service-learning through the use of multiple forms of qualitative data. They suggest combining participant observation, analysis of critical incidents, and other narrative sources to evaluate students' learning. I have drawn on this kind of ethnographic data, as well as quantitative data from an online survey of former students in the four courses based on the Community-Based Research Course Survey (Lichtenstein, Thorme, Cutforth, & Tombari, 2011), with additional items with narrative prompts. To protect students' confidentiality, a research associate from another university administered the online survey, and removed identifying information from the data before sharing it with me. She also assisted with data analysis. Ethnographic data included the author's and teaching assistants' participant observation notes, students' written evaluations and reflections taken from course assignments and class discussions, and community partners' reflections from feedback sessions. The constant comparison method was used to analyze the qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The narrative data were read and re-read to identify key emerging themes. Concept and data-driven coding were used to identify the prevalence of each category of response. Descriptive statistics and ANOVA's were used for students' responses to the quantitative part of the surveys. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Guilford College.

Lichtenstein and colleagues developed the Community-Based Research Course Survey (2011) to assess student learning outcomes of CBR. They identified five CBR outcome constructs—*academic skills*, *educational experience*, *civic engagement*, *professional skills*, and *personal growth*—based on individual interviews and focus groups of 70 undergraduates and faculty at six colleges and universities across the United States. They then conducted an online pilot of the survey, administering it to 192 students who had taken CBR courses at 15 colleges and universities. Factor analyses of the constructs yielded strong statistical reliability. Using data from the pilot survey, the authors revised the instrument to strengthen its validity and reliability, resulting in an instrument with 19 construct items, to which they added four experimental items assessing the extent to which participation in CBR enhanced students' understanding of local and social issues.

With the authors' permission, I added several open-ended items at the end of the survey drawing on Butterfield and colleagues' (2009) Enhanced Critical Incident Technique, asking students to identify three or four critical incidents they experienced in the courses, and to reflect on the meaning of these experiences for their learning. We administered a pilot of the survey to three students who had taken the research methods course with another instructor, and drew on their feedback to shorten the survey and clarify the language in some of the items. The resulting survey instrument included 37 multiple choice and Likert items, 13 narrative prompts for short descriptions of students' experiences in the courses, and six multiple choice demographic items. The survey took an average of 30 minutes to complete.

The research associate for the project emailed surveys to 54 out of the 58 students who completed the

courses and for whom we had valid email addresses. Twenty-one students responded to the survey, yielding a 39% response rate, which is above average for online surveys (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The sample included mostly women (66.7%), with a few men (19%), and three participants with data missing on gender. Most students who responded to the surveys were African-American (52.4%), with one-third Caucasian (33.3%), and three respondents missing data on race/ethnicity. A majority of the participants identified as being middle class (33.3%) and lower middle class (28.6%), with a smaller portion in the upper (4.8%), upper middle (9.5%), and lower (9.5%) socioeconomic groups. Three respondents were missing data on social class. These demographics are similar to those of the entire group of students in the courses.

Findings

The story of the findings from the study is rich and complex. I begin its telling by comparing students' descriptions of the four CBR courses in the study sample with students' descriptions of the CBR courses in the national sample for the pilot CBR Course Survey. A portrait of students' overall experience of learning in the course from the quantitative portion of the survey and course evaluations then sets the stage for a recounting of the themes related to connected knowing and dissonance that emerged in the ethnographic portion of the study.

As compared with the national sample of 192 students describing CBR courses from colleges and universities across the country, the 21 students from the study sample reported a much higher level of engagement with community partners. Table 1, comparing CBR activities from the national sample with those from the sample in this study, shows that 91% of students in the study sample attended meetings with partners as compared to 42% in the national sample, and 95% of students in the current sample reported findings to community partners, in contrast with only 5% of students in the national sample. The other statistics comparing the two samples reflect a higher level of contact with partners as well as a greater incidence of reporting findings from the studies to policy-makers and at conferences.

Students' overall experience of learning in the four CBR courses was quite positive.[1] Ninety percent of those who took the online survey reported that they had a positive experience of the course, 10% felt "mixed", and none responded that their experience had been mostly negative. All of the respondents to the survey reported a positive experience of the community partner, and their sense that the project was useful to the partner. Students' end of semester course evaluations also assessed the courses favorably, with means for the overall average of the evaluation items above the college average for all courses. However, the course evaluations of a few individuals were quite negative. The absence of such negative evaluations in the online survey suggests that these students chose not to participate in it.

A majority of students felt that they significantly increased their knowledge of local and social issues (mean of 3.5 on a 4 point Likert scale, where 1 = "not at all," 2 = "minimally," 3 = "moderately," and 4 = "extensively."). The survey constructs with the highest means were civic engagement (3.22) and academic skills (3.14); the highest item mean within the latter construct was for improving research skills (3.48). Students also had a strong sense that they increased their understanding of others who are not like them (3.62).

On the other hand, students had lower means on items related to acquiring a deeper understanding of themselves (2.71) and on an item asking whether their level of interaction with faculty increased during the research (2.9). Mirroring two key themes in the literature on CBR (Lichtenstein, Thorme, Cutforth, & Tombari, 2011; Stocking & Cutforth, 2006), students also expressed concern that there was not sufficient time to do the project (33%) and that there was a lack of clarity around project tasks (24%). ANOVA's comparing subgroups by gender, race, and socioeconomic status showed no significant differences between the groups on the learning

Table 1

CBR Activity in a National Sample and the Study Sample

CBR Activity	National Sample	Study Sample
Research Problem/Issue	76%	100%
Attend Meetings with Community Partners	42%	91%
Interaction with Community Members/Partners Outside of Meetings	---	71%
Participation in Community-Based Program/Project	21%	95%
Report Findings in Class (orally, in writing, or via technological media)	58%	100%
Report Findings to Community Partners	5%	95%
Report Findings to Policy-Makers	19%	38%
Present Findings at Conferences	16%	48%

outcomes or on the items assessing the nature and quality of their experiences in the courses.

Connecting with Others and Connected Knowing

The narrative portion of the survey and the ethnographic data in the study offer substantial evidence for the importance of connecting with others and connected knowing in students' transformative learning. A clear theme emerged that students' relationships with community members changed their perceptions of people and the issues under study. Fifteen participants made comments in this vein. Referring to her experience in the project on building bonds between African-Americans and Latinos, a student wrote:

> . . . I had received most of my information about Hispanics from news media and hearsay. None of my experiences with other nationalities came from personal knowledge. This research project gave me the opportunity to interact with Hispanics, and get to know them for myself as common everyday people like myself.

Along similar lines, a student who participated in the study in partnership with the day shelter for people who are homeless observed: "Homeless people crushed my previous biases about homeless people in general. I felt guilty at first for previously thinking these thoughts, but then I felt great that I had an experience that helped to change them."

A clear theme also emerged suggesting that the relationships students developed with fellow classmates through the projects significantly impacted their transformative learning as well. As one student noted, "the first critical incident that impacted my overall experience was meeting and interacting with persons in my class and research group," and another wrote, that "working with a diverse team" was critical to her learning. For the most part, the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity among students was valued as a useful resource for the projects. However, at times, divergent perspectives created conflict that required a significant amount of class time to work through. As one student reflected in her journal, "I can tell there were some mixed feelings about how we were going to approach the topic of police accountability. I believe some students are concerned that this topic is too broad, and about their own biased attitudes regarding the subject . . . "

Another prominent theme reflecting the value students placed on connecting with others was that they desired relationships with a broader range of people to better understand the issues we were studying. Six participants voiced this concern. Regarding the *Paradigm Shift* project, one student wrote that she would have liked to "get more information from older Hispanics, and hear what their thoughts were on the situation concerning gangs," while another noted, "I wish we had more people from law enforcement and community government officials. I would have liked to have had more interaction with gang members, more background on the individual members who were always in the news. And yet another student wanted "a wider severity range of homeless people" in our sample for the study with the day shelter.

These requests for interactions with people from a broader variety of backgrounds than in our samples suggest that students understood the value of connecting with others, and felt that knowledge of our topic would be enriched by expanding the circle of connections.

Dissonance

Several sources of dissonance of varying types and levels of intensity emerged from the analysis of the data.

Engaging in a new and challenging task. One key source was engaging in a challenging new task, such as interviewing strangers, identified by seven respondents. One student wrote, "interviewing homeless people was an activity out of my 'comfort zone' and something I had never done before; it was a very interesting experience and I learned a lot from it." Another observed, "I felt timid and lost in how to just approach a person and ask them to answer a bunch of intense questions to myself, a complete stranger." This type of dissonance fits within the "communicative" type of dissonance identified by Kiely (2005) and is of a relatively low intensity.

Witnessing the suffering of others. Another source of dissonance centered on students' distress at witnessing the suffering of others, identified by six respondents. In response to his experience of the Paradigm Shift study, a student reflected, "all in all, it was a sad situation to see young men and women trying to carve out a place in this world to live, only to find negative opposition from community members." A student who was part of the day shelter study recalled about the project, "it upset me because I know how my own mother is going through the same situation where she is temporarily homeless and she has my four year old brother." This source of dissonance can be considered social and economic in Kiely's (2005) schema, and of a relatively high intensity.

Disagreement with the perspective and values of the community partner. A source of dissonance with a high level of intensity as well as political in nature was students' disagreement with a community partner's perspective and values related to the issue under study, indicated by six participants. This source of dissonance is reflected in a student's statement about the project to strengthen bonds between African-Americans and Latinos. She wrote:

I'm surprised that the organization thought that relationships between African-Americans and Latinos needed to be addressed. Latinos do not try to foster relationships with African-Americans. There are far more important community issues that affect citizens in the community on which the organization could focus their efforts.

Interviews in this particular CBR project elicited some bruising comments about African-Americans by Latinos, which evoked high intensity dissonance for some African-American students in the class.

Another example of high intensity dissonance of a political type surfaced among a couple of students in the police accountability study who disagreed vehemently with the community partner's perspective. The most dramatic example of this source of dissonance was the student who taped her mouth at the community meeting to protest the project and her experience of feeling silenced by it. Expressing similar sentiments about the same project in a course evaluation, another student wrote, "let students choose the research. This one is awful . . . [We're] . . . being forced to rub up against a horrid communist group and the total biased content against the police."

Doubt about the value and impact of the CBR project. A last source of dissonance that emerged in the CBR projects was students' doubt about the value and impact of the project, identified by four respondents. Concerning the project on African-Americans and Latinos, a student shared:

> After we completed the project and presented our findings in April, there was a conference held in October to bring the two groups together and improve the dialogue in the communities. We were not even contacted or invited after we had worked on the research, so that was very disappointing and showed that the organization was unappreciative of the work we did.

Though some students from the course did participate in the October gathering, this student, and possibly others, did not feel appreciated for her efforts, or that she would be welcomed at the gathering.

Regarding the *Paradigm Shift* project, a student wrote,

> Even today, though, I wonder how much good the project really did. There are currently members of that same gang, including the leader, who now await trial on various federal offenses. Were they truthful with us about wanting peace in the community or was that just a way to deflect attention from their hidden agenda? I sincerely hope not, but I am asking myself these questions.

These responses reflect considerable ambivalence about the projects—both strong attachment to them and dissonance about whether the partner valued their work, as well as doubt about the impact of the project in light of recent troubling news about an ally in the research.

Students' Responses to Dissonance

Several themes concerning the ways students responded to sources of dissonance emerged from the data.

Seek information. One common response falls within what Kiely (2005) identifies as "instrumental learning," or learning that involves "controlling or manipulating the environment or other people" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8). In these responses to dissonance, students sought information to better understand and manage the concern they were struggling with, indicated by five respondents. For example, one student wrote that seeing a woman with two young sons who were homeless led her to "find out more information about parents and children who are homeless."

Plunge into the activity in order to learn. Another response was to plunge into the activity, trusting one will learn, indicated by seven participants. One student wrote, "interviewing taught me how to dive into a situation and to not be shy." Another observed, "the experience [of interviewing] made me comfortable talking to people I didn't have any previous contact with." Though these responses refer to dissonance of a relatively low intensity, and resulted in instrumental learning, some students drew on this strategy in response to deeply "disorienting dilemmas," and experienced a shift in their frames of reference, as in the case of this student who reflected in her journal:

> When I started in the class, I must admit that my own personal experiences clouded my thinking about using gangs as a positive resource simply because my perception was based on my own bad experiences. My attitude was drastically changed and the paradigm shift turned my thinking drastically on the possibilities of this initiative. Working with and getting to know [the ALKQN leader and members] helped me to see the potential in what the Paradigm Shift could do for our city.

After the course ended, this student pressed a local mainstream civic group of which she was a member to devote a meeting to discussing the Paradigm Shift initiative.

Withdraw from the source of dissonance and maintain one's pre-existing perspective. In sharp contrast to the above student's response to high intensity dissonance of a political nature, some students withdrew from the source of dissonance, becoming more deeply entrenched in their own existing frames of reference, a theme identified by four participants. One

student wrote about the African-American and Latino project, "I don't think that the research or findings have really improved relationships between African-Americans and Latinos. I do not believe that Latinos are interested in having or maintaining good relationships with African-Americans." Despite evidence from the project that some Latinos do indeed want better relationships with African Americans, this student maintained her pre-existing perspective that they do not.

Another example of a student responding to a disorienting dilemma by becoming more entrenched in her pre-existing frame of reference is the student who taped her mouth at the community meeting on police accountability. Earlier in the semester, this student was one of only a couple of students who did not attend the community meeting at a local black church that proved to be a turning point in many students' perspectives and feelings about the project. As such, she effectively withdrew from the source of dissonance. By the end of the semester, the student marshaled her resources to protest the perspective she found offensive, and defended her frame of reference by taping her mouth and allying with the blogger who shared her point of view.

Discussion

The study's findings offer solid support for Kiely's (2005) assertions that connecting with others is central to transformative learning and that dissonance triggers such learning. However, they call into question his conclusion that *high intensity* dissonance catalyzes ongoing learning, suggesting instead that when the source of high intensity dissonance is a differing political perspective from that of a community partner, students may become even more entrenched in their existing perspectives. The findings also provide important insights about the role of the professor of conflict-oriented CBR courses in facilitating the learning of students with a broad range of political perspectives.

Students' overall positive experience of the courses, and their particular affirmation of interactions with community members and fellow students as enhancing their knowledge, offer solid evidence for the role of connecting and connected knowing in their learning. These findings are congruent with the emphasis in the literature on the important role of positive and productive relationships in transformative learning (Taylor, 2009).

Dissonance of a less intense nature—such as that stemming from engaging in a new and intimidating task—tended to result in instrumental learning, or increased competence at manipulating the environment in some way. This pattern of findings also affirms Kiely's (2005, p. 15) observations. Students'

extreme and varied responses to high intensity dissonance of a social or political nature suggest that at least in CBR not all high intensity dissonance yields transformative learning, contrary to Kiely's conclusion. In fact, high intensity dissonance may lead students to withdraw from reflective and critical discourse about the issue triggering the dissonance.

The findings suggest that students' responses to high intensity dissonance of a political or social nature may depend on their personal biographies, and the social and political views of their support networks. The student who responded to a disorienting dilemma in the project on gangs by changing her frame of reference had some empathy for young people of color who had chosen to join gangs from her own life experience, and had at least some support in her social and professional networks for her new frame of reference. In contrast, the student researcher in the police accountability study who taped her mouth had close associations with police officers, and little if any support in her social and professional networks for a radical change to her frame of reference. In addition, I had a close relationship with the student who changed her perspective on gangs; I had been her professor for other courses, and we had collaborated on an earlier research project. I did not have a prior relationship with the student who taped her mouth. These findings point to the impact of both context and relationships on transformative learning as posited in more recent iterations of transformative learning theory (Baumgartner, 2012, Taylor, 2009).

The limited time for structured reflection on students' *experiences of learning* in the course curriculum meant that they did not have a consistent place to critically reflect on the content, process, and premise (or the what, how, and why) of their learning, three key forms of reflection in the transformation of meaning perspectives (Taylor, 2009). Structured reflections of this nature might also have offered an opportunity to build closer relationships between students and myself, and in turn, helped to mitigate students' resistance to considering new perspectives.

Limitations of the Study

The principal limitation of the study is the possibility of non-response bias in the online survey. Students who experienced alienating dissonance as well as other significant dimensions of experience in the course may be missing from the sample. The inclusion of other sources of data helps to minimize the negative impact of this possible bias on the overall findings.

Additionally, small sample sizes from each of the four courses prevented separate analyses of students' experiences. Such analyses would have allowed comparing and contrasting students' experiences in the

different courses with their different research projects, which could have yielded more nuanced insights for improving the pedagogy of CBR courses.

Finally, the passage of time for students who took the earlier versions of the courses may have posed a challenge for recollecting their course experiences. In the future, the survey will be administered soon after each course ends.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings helped to clarify my own disorienting dilemma that led me to do this research, and to articulate the pros and cons of different resolutions for it. At its core, the dilemma concerns the role and authority of the professor in conflict-oriented CBR projects. Mezirow (2000) asserts that adult educators are "never neutral," and at the same time, that they "do not indoctrinate" (p. 30). What are the implications of this laudable standard for professors teaching conflict-oriented CBR projects? Should the professor have students choose the partner, to avoid the problem of students' potential opposition to the partner? This strategy is one option for resolving the dilemma of students withdrawing from learning because of a worldview that conflicts with that of the partner. It is the option I chose for the fourth CBR course in this study. Students selected a less politically controversial partner, the day shelter for people who are homeless; they undertook a valuable project for the partner, and learned a great deal about the issue and how to do CBR. There were not as many opportunities for disorienting dilemmas and transformative learning as with the community partner in the first three studies, but there certainly were some.

On the other hand, the option of having students choose the partner relinquishes a portion of the professor's authority in a way that risks diminishing both the potential for transformative student learning and the community social change aspect of CBR. Students are unlikely to choose a community partner with differing political values from their own, and are likely to come to agreement with each other on the least politically-oriented organization. Such a choice reduces the potential for transformative learning, and removes political contestation from the project, thereby limiting the possibilities for students to "articulate or critique the structural mechanisms that contribute to public problems" (Dostilio, Brackmann, Edwards, Harrison, Kliewer, & Clayton, 2012, p. 28). This option for resolving the dilemma also may interfere with the professor's development of longstanding relationships with particular community partners, relationships identified as an advantage for CBR by scholars and practitioners (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donahue, 2003).

A second option for a resolution to the dilemma is to allow students to opt out of the course if they have strong reservations about the partner. Students enrolled in the course would be contacted before the semester begins and informed about the partner and the nature of the project. They could then choose to drop the course and enroll in another section or take the course in a later semester. The primary advantage of this option is that students would not feel coerced into conducting research in support of an organization with a different political perspective and values from their own. The primary disadvantage of this alternative is that students would lose the opportunity for potentially transformative learning gained experientially through research with community members. Also, such students' voices and perspectives would be missing from discussions about the partner and project, perspectives that could allow the class to have a broader understanding of the issue under study and help to anticipate similar perspectives that they are likely to encounter in their interviews in the community.

A third option for resolving the dilemma evoked by partnering with a conflict-oriented community organization is crafting a teaching stance and pedagogy that can facilitate the engagement of students with diverse political perspectives in a process of transformative learning. The notion of the "midwife-teacher" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1996, as cited in Belenky & Stanton, 2000) offers a useful model for this resolution of the dilemma of the CBR professor's authority. In this model, educators respond to students as "active constructors of knowledge and work hard to draw out their best thinking. . . . Midwife-teachers help students deliver their words to the world, and they use their own knowledge to put the students into conversation with other voices—past and present—in the culture" (p. 92).

In this resolution of the dilemma of the professor's authority in conflict-oriented CBR, the professor models critical and connected knowing in the midst of an ideological battlefield—which is where conflict-oriented CBR courses are located. The professor makes her thinking about the dilemmas involved in teaching the course transparent, and invites students to join with her in finding resolutions. As such, she devotes time early in the semester to discussing key meta-cognitive aspects of learning in conflict-oriented CBR. The literature on threshold concepts and "troublesome knowledge" (Meyer & Land, 2006) offers useful strategies in this regard. A threshold concept is defined as "a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something" (p. 3), and can represent "troublesome knowledge," that is, knowledge that is counterintuitive or alien and causes one to move from familiar to unknown territory. Such concepts are considered to be fundamental to

thinking and practice in a field or discipline.

In conflict-oriented CBR, one potentially useful threshold concept is *positionality*, the concept that "knowledge of any topic is valid only as it acknowledges the knower's varying positions in any specific context, positions always defined by the enactments of the dynamics of gender, race, class, and other significant dimensions of societal domination" (Maher & Tetreault, 1996, p. 160). The professor can introduce this concept as a springboard for an exploration of the positionalities of students, the professor, and teaching assistant in relation to the community partner, and for discussion of the collective role that they want to occupy during the research. Will they play the role of *consultant*, *ally*, *critical supporter*, or some other role yet to be defined? And, what are the implications of their choice of role for the knowledge they will co-construct with the partner? Rather than explaining to students that we will take up the role of *critical supporter*, as I have in the past, I plan to facilitate a discussion of the pros and cons of each role, and we will decide together what role will best help us to accomplish our goals. This concept of positionality can also lead into a useful discussion of the concept of *neutrality*, including whether or not it is possible to be neutral. A consideration of the concept of *dissonance* and its relation to learning could assist students' metacognitive reflections on their own learning later in the course.

A related implication for practice from the findings is the need to create more opportunities for students to engage in focused reflection on their learning experiences in the course. Although 86% of students who took the survey reported that tasks requiring personal reflection were part of the course, they generally did not feel that they deepened their understanding of themselves. This seemingly contradictory data suggests that prompts eliciting students' reflections on their own thinking, emotions, and learning, that is, prompts of a metacognitive nature, would enhance students' learning.

The study's findings also highlight the importance of the relational and group dimensions of midwifing students through dissonant experiences in conflict-oriented CBR. Berger (2004) offers excellent advice on the relational aspect by identifying three central responsibilities of a transformative teacher to her students: to help them find the edge of their understanding; to be "good company" at the edge; and to help them to "build firm ground in a new place" (pp. 345-346). She describes the edge as a precarious and liminal space, where students (and I would add, faculty) may feel bewildered, uncertain, excited, and energized, and where some students "appreciate the opportunity to dance on the edge of their knowing; others seem reluctantly dragged there and scramble to get back to familiar ground" (p. 343). Being "good company" in large part means meeting students where they are and helping them to "puzzle through the place of confusion" (p. 347).

Creating a facilitating group climate in which students may come to see the professor and each other as good company also is key to helping students learn from dissonant experiences. It will be important for groups whose members have diverse and conflicting political perspectives to air and discuss the perspectives and assumptions underlying them. Percy (2004) identifies strategies from the literature that can be useful for engendering critical reflection such as concept mapping, autobiography, and raising and testing propositions, along with sharing guidelines to foster open and trusting discourse with the group. Kasl and York (2012) propose drawing on *presentational knowing*, "knowing that is intuitive and imaginal," and accessed through "expressive forms such as music, dance, mime, visual, or dramatic arts, story, and metaphor" (p. 504). They suggest that such knowing is "an intuitive grasp of significant patterns of lived experience," and helps people with diverse perspectives and life experiences to glimpse inside each other's phenomenological worlds and create a sense of group solidarity. Integrating these different modes of expression into conflict-oriented CBR courses could facilitate greater openness and understanding among students, faculty, and community partners with diverse political perspectives.

Having described this array of strategies aimed at keeping students with diverse political perspectives engaged in learning in conflict-oriented CBR courses, it is important to consider the possibility that none will be fruitful. A *sine qua non* of conflict-oriented CBR courses is their location in the field of power relations in their community. When a student is closely-identified with power-holders related to a project's social change initiative, she may choose to mobilize her power to try to undermine the project, as did the student who taped her mouth and greeted, and possibly invited, the conservative blogger to the presentation of the findings. A helpful guiding principle when a power move threatens the integrity of a CBR course is to ground any response in the accomplishment of the course goals, which will involve protecting the learning environment and completing the research with the community partner. Fostering the support of college administrators and colleagues for the CBR course and project will be crucial to accomplishing these goals.

The study's findings also indicate a need to find ways that students can sustain their connection to the projects, to see the impact of their work on the issue, clarify concerns about the outcome of the project, and become aware of avenues for continued involve-

ment. A listserv for students who participated in each project could meet these needs. Students who do research with the partner in subsequent semesters can serve as intermediaries, writing updates for the listserv that will keep earlier students informed about current developments in their project.

Regarding the issue of a lack of sufficient time for CBR projects, it is worth considering making CBR courses two semesters, as recommended by many students. This strategy would allow for more time to include the many complex dimensions of cognitive and emotional learning called for in conflict-oriented CBR.

Implications for Future Research

The current study identifies factors that may contribute to students experiencing alienating dissonance in conflict-oriented CBR. Studies offering further insight into the factors and conditions that distinguish between situations in which students experience disorienting dilemmas as transformative and those in which they experience them as alienating will be very useful. Such research will help to develop pedagogies that facilitate students' efforts to work through experiences of dissonance so that they contribute to ongoing learning.

Another potentially fruitful line of inquiry, one that would take place in relatively unexplored territory, is the impact of power on students' learning in conflict-oriented CBR courses. How do professors and students negotiate learning while in the midst of a field of power relations in their community? Phenomenological studies of students' and professors' experiences of learning in this field could offer useful insights for strengthening pedagogies and negotiating power relations such that they enhance rather than discourage learning.

Conclusion

To return to the vignette with which I began the paper, the student who taped her mouth because she felt silenced by the police accountability project dramatically embodies the challenges posed by the risky ways of knowing in conflict-oriented CBR. As a result of a clash in worldviews between the student and community partner, the student withdrew from reflective discourse and connected knowing with the community of learners in our class and the partnering organization. This article explores ways for educators facing this dynamic to develop a stance and pedagogy to keep students of diverse political perspectives in the fold engaged in reflective discourse with other learners, even when they disagree with the worldview and priorities of the partner in a CBR project. There are no easy answers to this disorienting dilemma, but Belenky et al's (1996) midwife-teacher model and

insights from the literatures on transformative learning and threshold concepts offer good starting points from which educators can draw to more fully engage all students in transformative learning. As Belenky and her colleagues note, we will have to be quick on our epistemological feet to take on this role. It is a worthy effort, given the potential for nurturing ways of knowing that can bridge the ideological chasms in our increasingly divided country.

Notes

[1] Data for these items from the national pilot survey were not reported by Lichtenstein et al. (2011), precluding a comparison with data from the study sample.

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