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Putting Community Voice and Knowledge at the Center

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Abstract: Service-learning curriculum is grounded in a critical, asset-based framework of community engagement to guide honors students beyond a mere acquisition of skills toward understanding how participatory and democratic processes increase social equity and justice. An innovative, collaborative community arts program is described.

Keywords: inquiry-based learning; community arts projects; service learning; civic participation; Dominican University of California (CA)—Honors Program

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“I am thinking giant puppets!” my community partner exclaimed during a pre-semester planning session for my honors community-engaged art class. The image of college honors students doing papier-mâché flashed in my mind. *What? Puppets?* My partner’s ideas stemmed from her thirty-year successful career as executive director of a performing arts program for youth in Marin City, a historically marginalized Black community in Marin County. We were co-designing projects for my honors class as part of an effort to ensure an accurate count for the 2020 Census. Marin City is identified as “hard-to-count,” and we aimed to bring the community together around this critical issue. My partner’s expertise and the relationships she has built with Marin City residents were vital to the success of the class and the projects.

Community engagement and service learning are noted by NCHC as modes of learning that provide “measurably broader, deeper, and more

complex learner-centered and learner-directed experiences” (NCHC). These educational approaches focus on the “acquisition of practical skills and experience that lead to engaged citizenship” (NCHC). While these statements are true, they do not capture the depth of civic and democratic learning that can occur in a critical, asset-based framework of community engagement that imbeds community voice and knowledge and that calls for the critical analysis of root causes and structural oppression. For faculty and students this kind of learning requires a paradigm shift from the privileging of academic expertise and controlled classroom environments. The shift requires openness and listening, recognizing power dynamics, and supporting students in navigating the complexity of community collaborations.

A critical and asset-based community engagement framework includes curricula and learning that challenge the dominant norms in higher education of who holds knowledge, expertise, or authority. Community-engaged art puts the perspectives and experiences of community members at the center. Participants use an inquiry-based approach so that creating and communicating knowledge is in the hands of community members. With an emphasis on process, artistic expertise is not required to design and execute an impactful, community-engaged art statement that conveys the histories and narratives of a community.

On the first day of class, we met the youth in my partner’s afterschool program at the local elementary school. Children were having fun, running around the playground and hallway. I watched as college students took their seats in a multipurpose room, observing that many had puzzled expressions. My partner knew all the children by name, and she knew their parents as well. She said to one little girl, “You need to be part of this project. I’m calling your mother.” She took out her phone. By the end of the session, co-creators were partnered, and the collaboration had begun.

Back on campus my students and I checked in. Their first impressions were that the experience seemed disorganized and chaotic, and they were concerned about being able to get anything done. As the discussion continued, students acknowledged the resources needed for what they considered an ideal situation, which opened up a conversation on Marin County’s rank as #1 in the state for economic inequity based on race and why this mattered in the Census 2020 efforts. The students also began to sense the reality and importance of the project.

The Marin City community became integral to the course as co-creators, teachers, networkers, and experts. The artwork, designed for everyday spaces

(e.g., laundry rooms, bus shelters, dumpsters, and parking lots) required permissions and contacts, which my partner had. Students were introduced to a grassroots school program founded by the grandmother of a student who attends our institution. The student spoke to her peers about the community's activism and organizing history, which continue today. My partner's historical archives further informed us on this less-known story, which became the heart of our art project: *Marin City Counts!*

In the end, we ran out of time to make the giant puppets, but the artwork we created for lamppost banners and bus shelters had a huge impact and remains up even after the close of the 2020 Census. In their final essays, students connected their creative experiences to the asset-based and critical community-engaged framework, providing clear illustrations of how community knowledge gave rise to new understandings. Moreover, each student could analyze the root causes and systemic issues that communities of color face in highly segregated areas, convincing me that the broader, deeper, and more complex learning we strive for in honors can be found in exposing students to the outstanding work that communities have already done in creating social change.

REFERENCE

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