**Remote community engagement activities (by Tessa Hicks Peterson)**

*Author's note:* In the past 14 years, I have taught over 50 community engagement courses and directed multiple centers for community engagement, yet this is the first time I've ever considered shifting what is typically experiential, interactive, praxis-based learning to occur remotely, without in-person engagement. While "social distancing" initially sounds antithetical to "community engagement," the current climate necessitates our creativity and flexibility to figure out how to continue with our community-campus partnership projects remotely and digitally. It is time now to consider diverse routes of engagement beyond our traditional practices of direct service-providing, grassroots community organizing, or participatory action research; these might include moving towards assignments that get to the core structural issues that have resulted in conditions necessitating service; finding ways to engage in digital advocacy such as writing letters to an elected official lobbying for policy change or considering how to make meaningful digitally-based group projects to meet community partner needs. In an effort to contribute to the emerging options for distant engagement, I offer here adapted activities from my book that advance the praxis of critical, contemplative community engagement through effective activities for use in the classroom or as written assignments (Student Development and Social Justice: Critical learning, radical healing, and community engagement, *by Tessa Hicks Peterson, 2018*).

**Student assignments:**

Social Change Autobiography
Assign students to write a paper that critically reflects on their own identities, positionality, values, beliefs, biases, and personal experiences that inform their understanding and interest in the social changes issues they wish to attend to through community partnerships.

Community Research Assignment
Assign students to read and write about the community, the community organization, and social change issue relevant to their organizational partner, both in the immediate context and in regards to the larger historic and systemic conditions that have led to the current circumstances necessitating this partnership/project/service. Explore the history, assets, needs, and aims of the community organization. Invite students to create storymaps, asset maps, or GIS maps to visually map out the narratives, challenges and resources of the community. Conversations with community partners about what outcomes (maps, report, narrative, etc) might be most beneficial for their own organizational needs should drive this effort.

Researching Root Conditions of Injustice
Further advancing a component of the previous assignment, ask students to find artifacts (social media, texts, films, historical archives, interviews, public policies) that speak to fundamental structural/systemic/legislative issues that surround the community issue that the community-campus partnership wishes to impact.

Researching Historic Social Change Efforts
Assign students an ethnographic digital interviewing project, connecting with those they have already built relationships in the community or others that may know about local challenges and

achievements. This might include elders, city officials, clergy, teachers, community organizers, or service-providers. Questions might include asking for instances where folks came together to imagine changes they could make to improve quality of life, places where community came together to garner skills and support to reach their goals, instances where they attempted to shift the narrative and failed and what they learned in that process, as well as instances where they surmounted obstacles to collectively mobilize on a community-driven issue.

Liberation Arts and Radical Hope
Ginwright (2015) defines collective hope as a series of maneuvers that bond, inspire and uplift communities. Some of these may include connecting with others over common lived experiences, building on inherent community assets, cultivating radical imaginings of what the future could look like, garnering skills and support to reach goals, and mobilizing successfully on a community-driven issue. Inserting art practices into theoretical discussions helps students embody and connect to concepts beyond an intellectual grasp, allowing them to see the issue and each other from a different perspective. Artistic collaborations in the classroom and in workshops with community partners are also valuable tools to provide emotional release, self-discovery, communication, and connection. Art-making has long been seen as an act of self-expression, personal expression, spiritual expression, and political expression, creating a vehicle for healing and social change.

I. Using any medium (yarn, markers, paper, cardboard, tape, glue, clay, wood, stones, and other art supplies), create a creative, visual representation of how the theories of social change studied in class manifest specifically in the community and the daily operations of students' community partner organization.

II. Using any medium (yarn, markers, paper, cardboard, tape, glue, clay, wood, stones, and other art supplies), create a creative, visual representation of one's own identity and positionality as a change agent.

Remote praxis project
A praxis project is one that enacts theories in real life and reflects on their move into practice:

I. Assign students a "praxis project" wherein they take their theoretical frameworks from class, together with their knowledge of and experience in the local community, to formulate some action that will be tangible and beneficial to the community. Examples might include organizing an event, lobbying on behalf of an issue, crafting a grant proposal to fund a community organization, creating a new website or other online media for community partners, making a documentary about community members, etc. Walking away with some evidence of progress gives organizations needed tangible tools, helps keep momentum and motivation going in the long-term process of slow-moving change and allows students to examine what it looks and feels like to put theories into practice.

II. Assign students to work in groups of 2-4 people, collaboratively creating some "action" that manifests theories of the course and commit to practicing that for a week (for example, an action that advocates for wellbeing and social change). Topic can be decided remotely through digital conversations and then acted out by participants in one's own life, within one's own home/family, or through social media. After the conclusion of a week of action, students will reflect together and write a 1-2 page summary about what they did, the impact it had on individuals and groups and how it encapsulates, questions or advances the theories of the class.

Letter to an Elected Official

This assignment will be done in pairs and involves writing a clear and compelling two-page letter to an elected official identifying a federal or state policy problem that is meaningful to their community partner, proposing a solution to the problem, and conducting and interpreting research to bolster the letter. In the letter, students must analyze how this problem impacts them personally, people in their community, people in their state, and, if a federal issue, people across the United States. Students must recommend at least one legislative solution, either an original legislative solution they come up with or they can support or oppose a portion of a bill that is currently pending before Congress or their state legislature. Students must support their solution with data and examples from at least two outside sources (books, journals, reliable internet sources) and discuss why their solution is better than other options. All outside research must be properly cited.[i]

**Digital classroom (zoom) activities**

Constructive listening pair share

This activity aims to build relationships and encourage participants to share information about themselves that reveals something of their personal experience. This is an activity that can be done digitally (via zoom) whereby pairs are formed and put into separate spaces together. Partners are asked to each answer the prompted question, ensuring that each person gets a turn for two minutes and that each one practices constructivist, contemplative listening when the other is talking. The facilitator should keep time and remind partners to change turns speaking at the two minute mark. After both partners have shared for two minutes each, the pairs are changed by the facilitator so that each person has a new partner and a new question is asked. After some or all suggested questions are asked, facilitate a debrief about what participants learned, felt and gained from this experience (highlighting the impact of the intentional, active listening component) and how it uncovered some of who they are and the aims of their coming together.

Suggested prompts include:
1. What is the story of your name?
2. Where are you from (geographically, politically, culturally, spiritually)?
3. What communities do you belong to and which feels most important right now?
4. What price do you pay (and have others paid) for you to stand where you are today?
5. When was the first time you remember feeling excluded and/or misunderstood?
6. When was the first time you remember excluding someone or expressing a bias?
7. When have you advocated for yourself or someone else? What did you learn from that experience?
8. When have you failed yourself or someone else in the community? What did you learn from that experience?
9. What does the topic of this class (i.e., "social change") look like, sound like, and feel like?
10. Who/what does this class/ community partnerships serve?
11. What are your hopes and fears around this community engagement endeavor?

"We are From" Group Poem[ii]

1. Instruct participants to work individually to write a poem responding to the prompt: "*I am from…*" Invite participants to relinquish nervousness around poetic cadence or spelling—anyone can do this! Encourage vivid imagery, bringing to life what it smells like, tastes like, feels like, looks like, or sounds like to be where they are from. Remind them that being specific and vulnerable helps us connect with our own experience and with each other. Ask participants to begin each line with "I am from…"
2. After 10 minutes of individual writing, return to the large group and ask each person to share their poem while everyone else actively listens and takes notes on any vivid imagery that struck them from someone else's poem.
3. Following each sharing of a poem, invite another participant to share one image or line that stayed with them from someone else's poem and why.
4. Ask each poet to circle their favorite line from their own poem.
5. Invite everyone to then take a turn and read aloud their chosen one line from their poem, one after another, until everyone has shared a line of their poem. Individuals should choose to speak after they hear a line that they think connects with their own.
6. The group will now read the poem again, in the same order, but ask each person to read their one line again, but this time ask participants to change the pronoun in their line from "I" to "We," so each line reads "We are from…". Each person's offered line should follow directly after the last one so it becomes one collective "*We Are From"* poem.
7. After the final version of the "*We Are From"* poem has been recited, follow up with a group debrief exploring both the process and the product of the activity and how participants understand the concepts and each other differently as a result of engaging in this form of individual and group expression.
8. Close the activity by reminding participants that this poem can only be created with this particular group of individuals, today. It binds the group together, even though personal experiences are distinct. Introduce the concept of "liberation arts" (Watkins & Shulman 2008) and how the arts have always served as a vehicle for personal healing, collective empowerment and community building.

Mindfulness Practices

Inserting a mindfulness practices at the beginning of class or in the midst of a challenging discussion in the course of a class can help individuals self-regulate, begin to gain fuller consciousness of their embodied experience, the ways in which they often react on autopilot rather than respond mindfully, and gives concrete tools for being present with discomfort in order to become more attuned with ourselves and our community. These activities are also ones that are extremely beneficial when incorporated into other facets of one's life; they can be conducted quietly during moments of strife or adopted as long-term, consistent, daily practices.

*Mindful Breathing Exercise[iii]*
 Breathing in, I am aware that I am breathing in.
 Breathing out, I am aware that I am breathing out.
 Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of mindfulness in every cell of my body.
 Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of mindfulness in me.
 Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of solidity in every cell of my body.
 Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of solidity in me.

Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of wisdom in every cell of my body.
Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of wisdom in me.
Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of compassion in every cell of my body.
Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of compassion in me.
Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of peace in every cell of my body.
Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of peace in me.
Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of freedom in every cell of my body.
Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of freedom in me.
Breathing in, I am in touch with the energy of awakening in every cell of my body.
Breathing out, I feel nourished by the energy of awakening in me.

## Critical Reflection on Radical Healing of Self and Community

Our intellectual or political interests in community engagement and social change are not divorced from our bodies, minds and spirits. We need to take care of both, individually and as collectives, if we wish to build here and now the vision of a better world that we are advocating for. Reflecting on how we care take ourselves and each other as a component of social change work will allow us to see where gaps, resistances or limitations exist in ourselves and our movements. Committing to an intentional practice of caretaking personally and communally will put into practice movement ideals of peace, wellbeing, and liberation in our daily lives. The following prompts should be reflected on and written about individually, then debriefed and explored in pairs or group conversations with classmates and/or community partners.

1. What self-care practices or community-care practices do you engage in regularly?
2. Do you engage in any activities that prompt self-reflection, self-regulation, or self-love?
3. Do you engage in any activities of radical, communal healing with others?
4. What activities can you imagine participating in that physically embody peace, healing, and interconnectedness (in culturally appropriate ways)?
5. Why might you resist such practices? Can you become curious about this resistance?
6. What do you need to be able to be present, vulnerable, and listen well in doing community change work?
7. What can you do to encourage self-care practices or community-care practices with others as part of the work for social change?
8. How can you imagine "liberation arts" (creative means of expressing our ideas and visions for justice and liberation) being put into action in spaces of healing and social change work?
9. How can you support movements or communities that you are a part of integrate self-care and radical healing as a collective value and practice?

## Community Partnership Considerations: partnership-reflection practices

I. The following was originally written as an activity for community-campus partners to consider at the start of their collaboration but it is likely a useful practice to return to now, as community-campus partnerships shift in this moment, so that faculty, staff, students and community members become clear about the roles, goals, logistics and evaluation components of their community engagement collaboration in the following weeks and months. This involves collectively creating a document that defines the concrete goals of the partnership, expectations and responsibilities of all stakeholders

to ensure each party is clear about and accountable to upholding their shared agreements. Such a document should include stating:

1. The assets, needs, and resources each partner brings to the table;
2. Specific tasks or projects students and/or faculty will engage in;
3. Roles pertaining to supervision and education of students in engagement work
4. Community involvement in education (co-teaching or co-enrolling), research and service
5. University contributions to community needs (such as serving as advocates, co-researchers, or board members; understanding around available access to university resources like libraries, art and technology facilities, meetings spaces, etc.)
6. What mechanisms will be in place to ensure all partners can regularly communicate and assess the effectiveness of partnership
7. What mechanisms will be in place to ensure all partners actively work to make changes as a result of assessment findings;
8. A shared understanding of how larger structural/systemic/policy issues can be addressed beyond what specific projects the partnership focuses on.[iv]

II.      It is critical to interrogate how community engagement efforts conducted through community-campus partnerships might themselves maintain or advance unequal systems, even if such interrogation can elicit discomfort. We can use this time now for faculty, students and community partners to collectively evaluate social change progress of the partnership, using such prompts as:

1. Are students critically analyzing the existing structural inequalities that have forwarded the need of outsiders entering into a community to conduct services or engagement?
2. How can we ensure that it is not solely the student, faculty, and/or service providers that gain greater capacity and success from this community-campus partnership but also the community members who directly face the brunt of oppression?
3. Are larger goals of community building and social change kept at the forefront of the work or lost in the time constraints of the university's academic calendar or desire to do only immediately gratifying service providing? What could be done to prevent that?
4. Can we reflect on if there any ways in which students, faculty, or the partnership itself inadvertently causes harm in the community? What could be done to prevent that?

III.     Faculty, students and/or community partners may also wish to examine the three stages of partnerships development (as outlined by Dorado and Giles, 2004), with special attention to prompts that investigate what these actions look like on the ground level of their own community-campus collaborations:

*Stage 1: Learning* (gaining familiarity with partners): How does this occur? Where? With whom? Have past practices work well or need re-visiting?

*Stage 2: Aligning* (reviewing/assessing partnership aims, goals, process, and outcomes): How often does this occur? With whom? How does the group uphold accountability for each partner? Have past practices work well or need re-visiting?

*Stage 3: Nurturing* (cultivating support on a committed path of engagement): What concrete practices will communities and campuses forward to nurture this collaboration? What feels supportive to each? Have past practices work well or need re-visiting?

IV. Explore what partnership characteristics are most important to all involved and what they look like in action. To help inspire or complement such a list, participants can refer to those qualities that researchers have found to be most important, such as "relevance, respect, reciprocity, and reflection" (Butin 2014, p. viii) and "benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competence" (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran 1999, cited in Noel 2014, p. 178).

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[i] This activity is lifted from the instructions of a national competition called Debating for Democracy through Project Pericles.

[ii] I originally encountered the primary prompt for this activity ("where I'm from") in the curriculum of a long-standing poetry program that Pitzer students facilitated at a local juvenile detention center. Given how fraught the question "Where you from?" is when posed to youth on the streets who may be from opposing neighborhoods or gangs, this activity aimed to re-cast the question as one that can elicit self-expression about one's background and community. I further adapted it by bringing in the group poem components (steps 3-8). I have since heard this activity used in other locations and am not sure to whom the original activity should be credited.

[iii] This exercise is one of many mindfulness practices offered by the acclaimed Engaged Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. It is from his book, *Creating true peace: Ending violence in yourself, your family, your community, and the world.* (2003, p. 31)

[iv] Adapted in part from Pitzer College Community Engagement Center MOU template, 2016.