

# Communication Activism Pedagogy in Higher Education: Community/Intergroup Dialogue as a Prerequisite to Service learning

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## Abstract

*Education in the U.S. is heavily influenced by neo-liberalism, i.e. an emphasis on measurable marketable skills that perpetuate a hegemonic status quo. Communication Activism Pedagogy (CAP) is an offshoot of critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the use of communication to enable students to become agents of change by promoting justice and equality. While service-learning has been the preferred vehicle to teach these skills, this paper argues that students may not possess the requisite skills to adequately navigate service learning courses. Instead, intergroup or community dialogue should be used to introduce students to issues of injustice and inequality and to allow them to explore their root causes, while also exploring their own voices and opinions that were not previously developed during their K-12 education.*

Higher education in the United States is becoming increasingly influenced by the neo-liberal agenda which seeks to turn institutions of higher learning into training facilities (Frey & Palmer, 2014). Neo-liberalism focuses on what Giroux (2010) calls a “cult of individualism” and the “market driven individual” that emphasizes individual concerns over that of “ethical considerations. . . and moral responsibility is scorned because it places human needs over market considerations” (p. 185). Connell (2010) echoes Giroux, stating “neoliberalism’s general opposition to public sector expansion and affirmative action measures has created a hostile environment for social justice initiatives of all kinds” (p. 34). Frey and Palmer (2014) and Giroux (2010, 2014) argue that the current trend in higher education has been going on for decades and articulate the need to reverse the trend and propose a pedagogical mechanism through which this can become possible — Communication Activism Pedagogy (CAP). CAP teaches students how to use their communication skills to become agents of change through the cultivation of critical thinking skills, knowledge of the causes of inequality and injustice, and the promotion of reflective contemplation. “CAP seeks to unveil political dimensions of community discourses by examining how power is structured, asking what values are given prominence, determining who benefits from policy decisions, and analyzing how and in what ways cultural landscapes shape thought and action” (Jovanovic, 2014, p. 107).

Service learning is touted as a vehicle to achieve the goals of CAP by introducing students to spaces where they can learn how to identify instances of injustice and inequity, discover what is being done to combat these problems, and how they can be a part of a collective effort to effect change. Educators must do this while meeting the student’s expectations for the class as well as their parent’s expectations for the education they are paying for while also staying within the academic culture of the University.

Community and intergroup dialogue are additional tools that educators can use to employ CAP in their classrooms, “not as an a priori method or a set of teaching skills.[but to] provide the

theoretical tools and resources necessary... to provide. Not all CAP courses are created equally. While many courses start out with good intentions and some miss the mark completely, it is becoming increasingly important to critically analyze these courses in order to ensure that we are properly preparing thoughtful, creative students with a passion for social justice to face the harsh realities of life after school. Some service learning experiences toss the student into the deep end of an organization that seeks to effect second order change. Second order change is effected by eradicating social injustice and its causes such as changing laws which cause poor people to lose their homes; as opposed to first order change, which simply effects change in an immediate and short lived way, such as feeding the homeless. Students who are asked to work with organizations trying to change the systematic causes of homelessness may find they lack the skills and knowledge to provide any benefit to the organization and may become frustrated by the experience. These types of experiences are engaging, and great vehicles to connect theory in the classroom to real life. However, the difficulty lies in managing students' expectations of what they can accomplish in one semester. Teaching students that they will not, in fact, succeed at ending social injustice within that time frame — with their inexperienced and untested yet enthusiastic energy, empathy and desire to shine — is an essential component to a successful service learning course.

Instructors often want to immerse their students in organizations struggling for positive social change so that the students can see first-hand what fighting the good fight looks like. To be successful, it is important to build the relationships and understand the contexts necessary to start and maintain a campaign for social justice — and this begins with dialogue and community building. Students cannot merely read a book or an article to equip themselves to deal with the problems that plague our society. Students need to engage with other students, activists and members of the community to come to a deeper, more authentic understanding of the relevant issues surrounding the problems of social injustice. These creative and eye-opening interactions with different groups of people are a vaccine against the disease of selfish individuality; the foundational principle of neo-liberalism.

The best service learning courses develop in students a social justice perspicacity that may not have emerged otherwise. Creating a service learning course that achieves a high level of learning and development in students is extremely difficult, which ultimately means that some courses simply do not hit the mark. Designing fliers for an organization, maintaining their website, collecting signatures for a petition, or making a video may all be engaging and much needed activities, but ultimately play a small part in solving a societal problem. Service learning frequently focuses on these tasks because they are measurable. While it is harder to quantify a community dialogue for grading purposes, this kind of activity ultimately leads to a richer understanding for the student to see how movements are created and sustained while also using the concepts that are learned through theory in the classroom.

The grip of neo-liberalism is seen in many service learning courses because they are designed to quantify student learning. Alternately, CAP emphasizes student understanding, engagement, and politicization. These elements are difficult to quantify and potentially problematic to institutions of higher learning which find themselves constrained by the prevailing neo-liberal hegemonic ideology. This systematic pigeonholing of student learning into measurable boxes is at the root of the apathy among many young people. The neo-liberal agenda relies on this carefully crafted atmosphere of depoliticized teachers and students to prevent social movements from gaining any real traction among college students. Giroux (2010) encapsulates the problems that educators are facing in higher education.

The calculating logic of the instrumentalized university... it also undermines the development of public spaces where matters of dissent, public conscience, and social

justice are pedagogically valued and offer protection against the growing anti-democratic tendencies that are enveloping much of the United States. . . (p. 187).

The consequences of the de-politicization of higher education in the United States are an uninformed electorate and “the declining interest in and cynicism about mainstream national politics,” (Giroux & Giroux, 2004, p. 1) as evidenced by the rise of Donald Trump in the 2016 GOP primary race — a group of people unaware of the causes of the nation’s problems and looking instead for an easy scapegoat. In this environment students are rendered immune to the call for change, typhlotic to the horrors of inequity plaguing the country and ultimately programmed to perpetuate this selfish cycle “as social visions of equity recede from public memory, unfettered [by] brutal self-interests” (Giroux & Giroux, 2004, p. 1).

To combat this bleak outlook, this paper advocates for a shift in the way that service learning is implemented — away from forcing students on organizations to collect hours, fulfilling easily measurable and quantifiable requirements — to instead having students engage in community dialogue and relationship building. By bringing new ideas or groups together to work toward social change, students can engage in a different form of service to the community. This shift does not presuppose an end to service learning, but rather an introduction to communication studies via intergroup dialogue that prepares students for more experiential forms of learning outside of the classroom. This introduction would be a prerequisite to service learning, which would in turn give instructors more freedom to create service learning experiences that can go beyond the typical initiatory service learning courses.

In order to contextualize the argument of this paper, I examine Communication Activism Pedagogy, noting the perils CAP educators face in the neo-liberal environs of today’s academic climate, specifically in higher education. Next, I examine and analyze a service learning course featured in *Teaching Communication Activism: Communication Education for Social Justice* (Frey & Palmer, 2014). I chose to root my analysis and critique of service learning in the context of an actual service learning course to provide it with a framework to address specific arguments. The ophidian grip of neo-liberalism on the education system is woven through this analysis to illustrate that the shortcomings of these service learning courses are not inherent in their design or implementation, but are instead symptoms of neo-liberal indoctrination in the United States. I argue that community and intergroup dialogue provides a solution to the service learning quandary. Using community and intergroup dialogue as a prerequisite or part of a multi-semester course of service learning is a preferable and more complete means of developing students into democratic citizens who not only understand and fight against social injustice during their college careers, but continue to do so after college has ended.

### **CAP and the Neo-liberal Agenda**

The neo-liberal agenda exercises influence over education and educational policies in a number of ways, through governmental policy, administrative policy and by some NGOs which seek to fill gaps or advocate for certain educational policies. Critical Activism Pedagogy (CAP) is the antidote to the proliferation of the neo-liberal agenda; a pedagogy which seeks to guide students toward greater civic participation to challenge regressive policies through particular pedagogical strategies. CAP shares a close relationship with critical pedagogy and CAP scholars (Giroux, 2014; Frey & Palmer et al, 2014; Freire, 1980) agree that “the political position — pedagogy as a political act, and schools and teachers as change agents — is what distinguishes critical pedagogy from liberal/progressive education. . .” (Cho, 2013, p. 77). In order to teach students how to be engaged democratic citizens striving for justice and equality, the educator must take a political position. To remain neutral is to “abdicate their responsibilities as public intellectuals in U.S. society”

(Jovanovic, 2014, p. 109). This is important to recognize because, although “U.S. education has been designed to be an apolitical enterprise. . . it promotes values of liberal-democratic capitalism, thin civic volunteerism, rational economic individualism, and corporate values of materialism and stratified institutional authoritarianism” (Palmer, 2014, p. 67-68); the neo-liberal idea that education can be apolitical is in fact a political position (Palmer, 2014, p. 67-68). The neo-liberal agenda goes beyond depoliticizing classrooms, altering how individuals view themselves with larger societal contexts reinforces the individualistic and wholly materialistic vision of societal relations, formally known as the “American Dream,” rather than as social actors who can work in concert to improve conditions for everyone (Apple, 2009)

Apple’s (2009) and Giroux’s (2010) description of neo-liberalism is manifested as privatization, standardized tests, “reducing all levels of education to job-training sites,” top-down management of curriculum, and a de-emphasis on classes that do not directly prepare students for life in corporate America (Giroux, 2010; Palmer, 2014). Universities across the country espouse the need for civic engagement and connection to the community, yet this is a secondary goal even in communication studies, which is increasingly geared toward meeting the demand of the prevailing market-driven ideology of education by tailoring courses to meet these neo-liberal dictates (Palmer, 2014).

Utilizing CAP in the classroom has become an increasingly perilous occupation. Ellen Schrecker (2010) notes that there have always been challenges to the notion that academic freedom protects professors’ ability to pose controversial questions and topics in the classroom. Schrecker’s (2010) work focuses on “today’s post-9/11 climate [which] has intensified the frequency and degree of those challenges to a level beyond that of the Red Scare of McCarthyism” (p. 145), frightening teachers who teach students about the neo-liberal causes of systematic oppression and injustice with material consequences, such as lower wages, loss of benefits and tenure, and possible loss of employment. In secondary education, school boards are now interfering in curriculums by de-emphasizing social movements, promoting American exceptionalism over more nuanced truths of its history (Gambino, 2015), adding creationism to science books (Jonas, 2014) and creating lists of “dangerous professors” in institutions of higher education (Horowitz, 2006), among other interferences by conservative politicians. In this climate, many educators have decided to put off using CAP in their classrooms of higher learning until they are protected by tenure. “I have argued on my campus and elsewhere that . . . [this] has a serious negative consequence: After six or more years of actively disciplining faculty away from social justice concerns to the default ‘apolitical’ scholarly identity, the result is the inculcation of a habit of doing more of the same after being tenured and promoted” (Jovanovic, 2014, p. 125). It is imperative that institutions of higher learning have educators that are dedicated to teaching civic engagement, brave enough to bring politics into their classrooms, and tough enough to withstand the churning tide of the market driven systems of influence.

NGOs (non-governmental organizations) attack various problems in society and around the world as envisioned by their founders. The caveat to this influx of goodwill and resources into the overwhelming project of creating an equitable world, is the means by which organizations go about achieving their end goals. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is a world famous NGO that seeks to improve primary education in the U.S. through student testing designed to quantify teacher effectiveness. The idea being that if all children are taught the same concepts and their understanding is measured in the same way then all children will have received the same high quality education. The foundation approaches education in true neo-liberal fashion, looking at measureable outcomes rather than systemic causes to inequality in education that are the actual barriers to children receiving the same high quality education in every corner of the country. However, said testing does measure students’ ability to think critically and instead

approaches students with a one-size-fits-all approach to education (Kaufman, 2011). The tests are designed to provide numerical data to administrators and legislators to determine how funds are allocated and how teachers are to teach. The influence of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation is becoming a ubiquitous influence in schools, with efforts such as bank rolling common core referred to as “market-based education reform” by a group of teachers (Layton, 2014) or a failed project to decrease the size of high schools, costing hundreds of millions of dollars “only to discover that student body size has little effect on achievement” (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2010). However well-meaning the intentions of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are, the emphasis on measurable data and individualistic testing is the corner stone of the neo-liberal agenda in primary and secondary education.

The Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina University system exemplifies how appointed bodies that are responsible for managing higher education systems are influenced by the neo-liberal agenda. Since 2014, the UNC system in conjunction with ETS (Education Testing Service), the same company that administers the SAT, GRE, GMAT and other standardized tests, is developing a program to test student performance in “two core competency” areas: critical thinking and written communication (S. Jovanovic, personal communication, May 8, 2016). The program is still under review, but it begs the question: how can a standardized test measure critical thinking skills better than a professor with a PhD who spent a sixteen week semester with the student? The following year, the UNC Board of Governors voted to discontinue forty-six programs at several of the state’s public universities; including math education, special education, African American Studies, and Women’s and Gender Studies. Board member Steven Long summed up their position in this terrifying way: “We’re capitalists, and we have to look at what the demand is, and we have to respond to that demand” (Schaefer, 2015). Treating a university system like a capitalist enterprise negates the basic principle of higher education, which is to train the next generation of thinkers and doers. Eliminating programs such as African American Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies deprives students of ever taking a single course in these areas in order to broaden their understanding of diversity and inclusion.

The examples provided above show just a few instances of how market-driven education policies, no matter how well intentioned, can have negative consequences. These challenges are neither absolutely fixed characteristics of higher education nor are they representative of insurmountable obstacles put in place by tyrannical bureaucrats intent on preventing dedicated educators from acquainting students with issues of social justice. Articulating these challenges is intended to provide the caveat that is in the back of every educators’ mind as they navigate the choppy waters of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Teaching Communication Activism: Communication Education for Social Justice* (Frey & Palmer, 2014) details how educators across the country are navigating this gloomy academic atmosphere to guide their students toward becoming engaged democratically minded students who see beyond themselves in order to engage in social justice struggles. “CAP, thus, offers a needed educational alternative to the traditional thin liberal view of democracy to which students routinely are exposed in the current educational system, giving them instead, opportunities to experience strong democracy in action” (Frey & Palmer, 2014, p. 26). Service learning can provide an opportunity for students to experience the “strong democracy” that Frey and Palmer refer to by exposing students to environments they may not otherwise have accessed.

### **Service Learning**

Service learning, properly executed, can be a tremendous tool for CAP instructors to utilize in their classes. There are numerous pitfalls, however, that an instructor or student can fall into when navigating complex service learning classes. Courses that make an honest attempt to utilize CAP to develop a route to social justice require analysis, as good intentions don’t always translate

to success. Sometimes it is the goals of a course that make it problematic, sometimes it is the execution, and sometimes the course itself is just inappropriate. These analyses are not intended to tear down, but to point out what is problematic to leave space for an alternative approach to service learning that can help to increase its efficacy and lasting impact on the student's sense of justice and civic responsibility.

In their chapter "From community service to democratic education: Making (class) room for communication activism," Billie Murray and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz (2014) write about a CAP course they designed and implemented while they were doctoral students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In true critical pedagogical form, they describe how they sought to engage their students in activism; to change their perceptions of activism as disruptive, to challenge their conceptions of hegemony and power, to move beyond charity-oriented idea of service, to explore broader systems of "oppression and domination", and to help their students become engaged in social change (Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014, p. 171-172). Yet, rather tellingly, they state in the very first sentence of their chapter, "Communication instructors are quite adept at helping students to grasp the intellectual significance and professional utility of the communication discipline" (p. 169). Note that they include the phrase "professional utility" in the first sentence of their article. It begs to question how they are approaching this course that they have painstakingly designed. Are they using this phrase to hide their leftist intentions to politically engage their students by asking them to work with organizations such as "North Carolina Stop Torture Now, NC Women United, Independent Voices, Democracy North Carolina, and Planned Parenthood Action Fund of Central North Carolina" (Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014, p. 177)?

Jovanovic (2014) discusses the difficulty that some academic professionals have using CAP, in that they must often mitigate perceptions of promoting certain left leaning political ideologies by choosing a neutral sounding name for their course, or — as Murray and Oraiz have done — suggest that the lessons learned in their CAP course can also be applied to a professional setting (Murray & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014, p. 169). In the same volume, Palmer (2014) echoes, "Students flock to communication courses with the promise of parlaying their degree into a professional career, and, in general, they find an instructional field ready, if not primarily designed, to accommodate their professional needs" (p. 46). Palmer's (2014) critique is an important one; one of the goals of CAP is to educate students to be active democratic citizens, not corporate-ready, market-driven citizens. Focusing these courses on market-readiness "conceals the spectrum of social injustices and their structural causes" (Palmer, 2014, p. 65). I argue here, that this is a matter of unintended problematic language use on the part of Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz rather than an indication of neo-liberalism in their course.

Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz's (2014) aforementioned problematic first sentence presents the CAP scholar with something to bite into, "but they are just beginning to invest in the potential of communication studies as an engaged, democratic, and activist pedagogy, and to cultivate in students an appreciation for and a desire to participate in such endeavors that are critical to public life" (p. 169). It would seem that Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz see the potential of their course to create active and democratically engaged students that will take the skills and knowledge gained through service learning out into the world once they leave the University.

I note here that the course that Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz (2014) designed and implemented is an elective course, not a course required course. UNC-Chapel Hill requires students to satisfy an "Experiential Education" requirement for graduation, which this course obviously does; however, the definition of the "Experiential Education" requirement is broad enough to allow any student undesirous of experiencing anything that may challenge their notions of injustice, power, or activism to avoid doing so (UNC.edu, 2015). By the University's definition in the undergraduate bulletin, not all experiential courses are service learning courses (ibid). The other options for

satisfying the experiential learning credit include a study abroad program, research program, internship, honors thesis or community or audience-oriented activity (UNC.edu, 2015). This subtlety allows the University and the department to put on the populist mask of care and commitment to social change while never truly encouraging students to work towards any goal that is counter to their capitalist magnates who have here to fore maintained the neo-liberal indoctrination present in education since the Industrial Revolution. Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz's course does fall into the realm of a true CAP service learning course which offered an opportunity for the students at UNC- Chapel Hill to engage in something meaningful and democratically oriented. Educators like Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz are needed to offer these alternatives which allow students the opportunity to learn, in a guided and structured way, how to engage with the community in a meaningful way that allows space for lessons in social justice.

Murray and Fixmer- Oraiz (2014) cite Alcott when they discuss how they tried to emphasize the difference between "speaking with" and "speaking for" others. The problem arises when they emphasize the students' "learning goals". Felten and Clayton (2011) state that the definition of service learning includes "reciprocal collaboration among students, faculty/staff, community members, community organizations, and educational institutions to fulfill shared objectives and build capacity among all partners" (p. 76). Certainly this is a noble effort, but in practice there can be a breakdown and failure to achieve these goals. Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz (2014) provide selections from reflection papers written by their students that show both how the course achieved its stated goals and how, in at least one case, it failed to do so. A group of students who stated that they had difficulty with their project stated, "I wish more classes were offered like this one. However... there was a great deal of miscommunication between [community partner] and the goals we wanted and needed to fulfill for the class" (p. 184). The student recognized the value of the class, but at the end of the day, for a college student, grades are the driving force behind their efforts. It appeared that the student would have liked to "speak with" the population the organization was trying to help, but the emphasis on measurability, competition, and personal achievement promoted by a neo-liberal conception of education can be the biggest barrier to achieving the "reciprocal collaboration" that Felten and Clayton (2011) discuss. Since grades aren't going anywhere soon, the frank elucidation of the concerns of the above students present a very real concern that needs to be addressed in future scholarship.

The material concern of grading aside, students need to recognize that becoming engaged with an organization that has been working on solving a problem, fighting injustice, or raising awareness, has been doing so long before the student entered their organization and will continue to do so long after. It is up to the instructors to set realistic expectations for the student while at the same time encouraging them to become civically minded. Giroux & Giroux (2004) argue that "higher education may be one of the few sites left in which students learn how to mediate critically... between identities founded on democratic principles and identities steeped in forms of competitive, atomistic individualism that celebrate self-interest" (p. 237). Some students are looking to be leaders or to flex their academic and creative muscles within an established organization. This attitude is a product of the indoctrination of neo-liberalism in schools that Giroux (2010, 2012), Giroux & Giroux (2004) and Connell (2010) describe; it teaches students that if they work hard enough they will accomplish their personal goals, rather than emphasizing collaboration as a means to effect change. Collaboration and engagement with a larger community are the primary vehicles that students need accomplish goals with broader reaching implications than the personal satisfaction or grade of one student.

Murray and Fixmer-Oraiz (2014) address the "example of a student expressing disappointment with her group's experience," stating that the "community partner-student relationship was managed too heavily by the community partner" (Murray & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2014, p. 187). Many

organizations do not want service learning classes coming to “help”, since students often commit and focus on their own personal experience rather than on the goals of the organization. Organizations that have dealt with a range of volunteers may control the situation more than the instructor or students would like; however, this presents another opportunity for scholars and activists to develop better techniques for designing service learning courses and managing student expectations.

At the same time, there are real concerns that come from community partners and social justice organizations which need to be recognized in order to properly develop these courses. Ivan Illich (1968) offers a succinct assessment and critique of individuals who engage in helping activities, claiming, “I do have deep faith in the enormous good will of the U.S. volunteer. However, his good faith can usually be explained only by an abysmal lack of intuitive delicacy” (Swaraj.org). Nina Eliasoph, further articulates this problem stating:

In my research, I was surprised to find that volunteers can do real damage... in an after school program for underprivileged kids, volunteers wanted an emotionally rewarding experience (and maybe a line on their CVs), but had only a couple hours a week for a few months to spare. Wanting instant intimacy, and lacking time to get to know the kids enough to help them, the volunteers ended up distracting the kids from doing their homework. (Bell, 2014)

Service learning is an incredible tool, but it must be implemented carefully and thoughtfully, with an eye to more than just the student learning outcomes. Perhaps students’ backgrounds need to be factored into creating a service learning experience. Bordelon and Phillips (2006) recognize that there has been no study of the backgrounds of students who understand and effectively navigate service learning courses. Identifying the type of student that will actually be a collaborator, who can grasp the concept of “speaking with,” who has chosen this course because it fits in with their goal to be an agent of change rather than to fulfill a requirement, will help to increase the efficacy of CAP service learning courses. Admittedly there are students who will benefit from CAP, even without meeting all of the above criteria for the perfect service learning student, who needs the experience to be challenged and perhaps changed by the experience.

Jovanovic (2014) discusses how students who are new to activism or service learning would benefit from a gentle introduction to this type of work by doing something as innocuous as getting people registered to vote. This is important to consider when designing an ambitious service learning course. Students are exposed to issues they may not have had any interest in or a knowledge of prior to arriving in class, and preconceived notions and ideas can be quite powerful and sometimes difficult to overcome quickly while also learning new communication material. Many students are up to the task and thrive in this challenging environment, while others may appear apathetic because they lack context and prior knowledge.

The benefits for students and society as a whole are undeniable, however. Borden (2007) conducted a study about how students scored on the Generalized Ethnocentrism scale before and after participating in a service learning course. The study showed a significant reduction in ethnocentrism after students participated in the course. Critical analysis of how service learning courses such as the one presented here are implemented are necessary to develop the best programs possible. Students can benefit from CAP service learning courses greatly, but a multi-semester approach should be advocated — one that starts with inter group dialogue or community dialogue to provide a foundation upon which service learning can build.



### Community Dialogue and Intergroup Dialogue

To aid in the design and implementation of these types of courses, community dialogue and intergroup dialogue are means by which students can enter spaces to see beyond themselves to learn how to “speak with” others. Community dialogues can come in many forms and involve large groups or small groups and can be a great supplement to a CAP course by adding an experiential element to a theoretically based course that centers on local community based issues. CAP also does not have to be something that is utilized only in formal educational settings and can emerge through community dialogues that facilitate learning and understanding between members of the community.

#### Community Dialogue and the Greensboro TRC

In Greensboro, North Carolina, community dialogue has been utilized in classrooms, in the community, and everywhere in between in an ongoing effort to heal the community from some of its darkest days dating back 35 years and longer in some cases (Jovanovic, 2014). The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) utilized community dialogue as a means of facilitating understanding between different members of the Greensboro community. The TRC was formed to investigate the events of November 3, 1979, which resulted in the killing of five members of the Communist Workers Party at the hands of the Klu Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party (Final Report, 2006). I focus on this community dialogue to tie theoretical concepts to the concrete. Intergroup dialogue is introduced here utilizing previous research by Lopez and Zuniga (2010) which focused on individual intergroup dialogue courses as well as the Multiversity Intergroup Dialogue Research Project (MIDRP). The MIDRP was “a multi-institutional collaboration [which] included researchers and practitioners—faculty, graduate students, administrators, and program staff. . . [who] designed and implemented a common intergroup dialogue curriculum and researched educational benefits with funding over a three year period. . .” (p. 37). The TRC provided a model for how CAP can be integrated into service learning courses.

In Greensboro, we had the unique opportunity of living through the reconciliation Greensboro has been longing for these last 35 years. The people of Greensboro engaged in community dialogues and small group dialogue, which strengthened the bonds between many citizens. Greensboro’s citizens of different political persuasions, ethnic identities, religious affiliations, and racial associations joined together to strengthen the quality of their interactions. In doing so, they confronted conflicting views and understandings of their community. Leaning on alternative discourse pathways, they formed new alliances with the express aim of effecting cultural shifts in the city (Jovanovic, 2012, p. xi).

Jovanovic (2012) and twelve graduate students became engaged with the community regarding this divisive issue by attending community meetings (p. xii). This process continued with, according to Jovanovic (2012), “hundreds of other students and fellow community members. . . Though we were initially unfamiliar with Greensboro’s activists. . . it was clear that our city had a unique opportunity to address a past wrong by talking about it in order to reconsider the facts that could lead to new understandings” (p. xii). The TRC provided a concrete real world way for everyone in the community to become engaged together. It provided an opportunity for students to use their communication studies skills to be a part of the conversation and assist with the tasks the community needed to accomplish.

The TRC made numerous recommendations in their Final Report in 2006, all of which were rejected until 2014, when a member of the Beloved Community Center got approval from NC Highway Historical Marker Program to have a marker erected to memorialize those who were killed. This development afforded the city, and students from across the city to come together to once again have a community dialogue in the form of active participation in a City Council meeting where the wording of the marker would be debated.

Although a city council meeting is a different type of community dialogue than the one described by Jovanovic (2012), it provided an example of community dialogue as activism for residents and students alike. Seventeen people came forward at that meeting — survivors of the tragedy, clergy, students, teachers, and activists — and each used their identity to support a common purpose (Field notes, February 3, 2015). Five young activists with Black Lives Matter Greensboro presented a prepared and coordinated a statement that they read to the council while also holding up pictures of those who had died that day (ibid). These young members of the community, organically developed the presentation to affirm their often marginalized voices to the community at large and explicitly to the city council. This is exactly the type of activity that is vital for including all voices in the democratic process, a key concept in CAP.

Jovanovic's (2012) experience with community dialogue while working on the TRC illustrates how vital communication and community dialogue are to democratic action, and that the building blocks for these practices can and should be facilitated in the classroom in order to teach students the best way to accomplish second order change. She describes how these conversations led to meaningful dialogue and advocates for additional training to teach people how to have conversations that "cut across social class and racial lines" (Jovanovic, 2012, p. xiii). A potential opening for the training that Jovanovic (2012) advocates for is in intergroup dialogue, which can begin in the University or college setting. Such training could, in essence, prepare young people for the types of community dialogues that occurred in Greensboro during the TRC process, the events that followed, and the conversations the city continues to have.

### **Intergroup Dialogue**

Lopez and Zuniga (2010) discuss intergroup dialogue as a mechanism for bringing students with different identities together to effect social change. "Intergroup dialogue presents an important opportunity for students and others to practice the skills needed to cultivate diverse democratic culture in higher education and broader society" (Lopez & Zuniga, 2010, p. 36). Active listening, a relational communication concept, is an important part of a successful intergroup dialogue that helps students learn how to facilitate relationships with many different groups of students who belong to various identity groups. Relationship-building is an intangible and unmeasurable skill that will benefit students in future interactions in every aspect of their personal, professional and academic lives. These relationship-building skills are instrumental in helping students facilitate what Murry and Fixmer-Oraiz (2014) identified as problematic service learning and partner relationships to produce more favorable outcomes for all those involved.

Lopez and Zuniga (2010) identify multiple ways that intergroup dialogue courses have been implemented at various institutions nationwide. Courses have been facilitated by students, graduate students or faculty who use structured curricula that incorporate readings, written assignments and group projects (ibid). Freire (1980) tells us that educators should not reinforce hegemonic hierarchies in the classroom by being the gatekeepers of knowledge that is given to students. Instead he tells us that learning is fluid and that for understanding to take place, both student and teacher learn from their interactions. Friere's proposal is a tenant of CAP that both community and intergroup dialogue can exemplify.

Lopez and Zuniga (2010) focused on "three categories of expected educational outcomes... intergroup understanding... intergroup relationships... and intergroup collaboration" (p. 38). These goals are more aligned with Freire's (1980) philosophical conception of true dialogue, which requires participants to not view themselves as "other." Intergroup dialogue can help to break down the barriers of oppression that Freire (1980) describes, by erasing the domination of the "elite" onto the oppressed. Through their research, Lopez and Zuniga (2010) discovered the same change that Borden (2007) saw —intergroup dialogue students, when compared to waitlist control students, demonstrated significant change in awareness of group inequalities, intergroup

understanding, empathy and motivation to bridge difference. The notable difference between the learning goals of service learning courses and intergroup dialogue courses is that the learning does not rely on cooperation from a service partner. These organizations have goals that may or may not align with that of the student, which may unintentionally be hierarchical due to the fact that the organization must put its long-term goals ahead of the short-term goals of the student, thereby dictating to the students what the learning experience will ultimately look like.

For intergroup dialogue to work, the classes must be intentionally assembled. Lopez and Zuniga (2010) use examples that are drawn from a longitudinal study intended for research purposes; however, the process by which the students were assigned to the classes can be adapted to a single classroom. In order for there to be an intergroup dialogue, the class needs to be comprised of equal numbers of students from different various groups: i.e. black, Asian, trans- gender, homosexual, multi-racial, socio-economically privileged/underprivileged, male, female, white etc. The studies cited by Lopez and Zuniga (2010) involved hundreds of students, which could be problematic depending on interest and size of the campus; however, with careful planning and creativity, classes could be formed that represent multiple identities. Intentionally filling classes with equal numbers of different types of students promotes equality in the classroom by not favoring any one particular group to give each student an equal amount of power.

Service learning courses provide wonderful opportunities to put students in experiential learning spaces that help to broaden their minds and the scope of social justice issues in the community. A necessary element to a productive CAP course is an analysis of power structures, which, depending on the class, can reinforce the students' prior knowledge or challenge the essence of what they have been indoctrinated to believe. Since No Child Left behind, K-12 education has been a minefield of neo-liberalism in the form of common core curriculums, standardized tests, competition, and an increasing pressure to perform for children even in the youngest grades (Giroux, 2014). For some students, this could be a lot to process, or this could prompt them to disengage from the service learning experience altogether. Giving students an opportunity to explore structural causes to inequality and injustice through a dialogic process can strengthen a student's foundational knowledge necessary for maximizing the benefits of a later service learning oriented course. Lopez and Zuniga (2010) note the benefit student's gain from intergroup dialogue: "Listening and learning from diverse peers, in addition to content-based learning, appears to help dialogue students develop multiple ways of making meaning of their experiences and observations" (p. 39).

Intergroup dialogue gives students more control and ownership over their learning outcomes by centering the process around their experiences and the experiences of their peers in a guided way. A student-owned process can also accomplish four goals. First, it could put the success or failure of the interactions into their hands, by putting the onus on their ability to honestly share their experiences and their ability to actively listen to the experiences of others. Second, the process would be a practical lesson in relationship-building around an issue that all parties had a stake in. Building movements relies on relationships, and to begin this process in a classroom environment would give the students both the opportunity and the confidence that they *can* engage effectively in relationship building across identities through active listening (Lopez & Zuniga, 2010). Third, students who were given the opportunity to be a co-creator or facilitator of their educational experience in the classroom could learn that their voices do have power and meaning, and that learning does not have to be managed in a neo-liberal, top-down fashion to be effective. The last goal, and arguably the most important, is that students could continue to seek out these experiences, share their experience in the class with friends and family, and continue to work toward ending the structural and systemic causes of injustice. Lopez and Zuniga (2010) found that students who understand these structural causes to injustice and inequality had a "sense

of efficacy for and post-college commitment to taking action," which is the one of the greatest outcomes an educator can hope for (p. 38).

### Future Scholarship

It deserves repeating that measurability and competition are hallmarks of neo-liberalism and suggest that it is founded on meritocracy. A higher education system that leaves out discussions of power relations, social injustice and inequality reveal the lie that the system is based on merit. Pushing students through courses and checking off boxes that correspond to marketable skills and test scores while ignoring the political dimension of the system that created the reality of modern higher education serves to perpetuate an oppressive system which only sees some rise to the top while others continue to languish at the bottom of our social and economic system. The system of measuring everything from how fast a six year old can read a list of words to grading teachers on how well students perform on standardized tests has not fixed any of the problems that plague our education system. Future education scholars and brave administrators have the opportunity to invent a different system of gauging how much a student at any level has learned. The core of CAP is not social justice, but rather a mechanism for *teaching* students about the world they live in to help *them learn* how to make it a more equitable place. Scholarship in this area can help to make the case for a learning environment focused on learning and not grades.

### Conclusion

The stated goal of this paper is to advocate for a multi-semester course in intergroup dialogue or community dialogue, followed by a more in depth course in service learning. This approach is unfortunately a Catch-22 that puts the communication department at odds with the University administration. Politicizing the classroom will require courage on the part of tenured professors and heads of departments to insist on a more holistic approach to service learning that emphasizes the communication process. Intergroup and community dialogues can act as an antidote to apathy by situating struggles of injustice within these discursive spaces and calling attention to how these struggles are experienced by their fellow students. The brave and protected professors who choose to embark on a quest to advocate for more realistic ways of educating students about the causes of injustice and inequality will be rewarded with the intangible, yet career defining moment of seeing the pieces click into place in their students' minds.

While the educational system in this country continues to be dominated by neo-liberalism, it is not by any means a death sentence for critical education and CAP. Educators must continue to push for spaces to empower students in democratically-minded ways. Giving students the opportunity to critically and creatively examine their lives, the lives of others, and the intersection of the two provides them with rich opportunities to develop the kind of life skills that will cause a shift in priorities from a measurable metric for success in a service learning class (i.e. number of hours logged, people signed up, dollars raised) toward one that emphasizes the less concrete understanding and meaningful dialogue to facilitate the possibilities for change. If we cannot do both because the university does not prioritize courses that do not teach clearly marketable skills, then we must then strive for dialogue to create change one classroom at a time. Allow students to see that the current system is destructive, so that they may go spread the word with small group dialogues within other spaces in their lives.

The flaws in service learning courses are part of the larger flaws of higher education in the United States. The place of CAP inside the academy is not secure in the neo-liberal doctrine that controls education in this country. Hope is not lost while we still have a voice. We are ethically bound to reverse the trend that stifles innovative expression, true and meaningful dialogue, and the fight for justice in the academy for a resume bullet point.

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