

Forging Connections: A Student's Perspective on The Power of Building Community

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Students at Washington and Lee University (W&L) have many academic opportunities that allow us to advance our knowledge through engagement within our local community. An essential part of fostering an environment where academia goes beyond what is taught in textbooks is forging relationships with local community members. I was fortunate to have experienced meaningful connections when taking two courses at a regional correctional facility that consisted of students from W&L and incarcerated students from the facility, which for the remainder of this article, I will refer to the collective, as 'us,' 'we,' or 'classmates.' Throughout this experience, I grappled with the question, "What do we owe each other?" That question has been ruminating in my mind since taking the first of two courses. Learning alongside my fellow scholars, I truly grasped what creating, valuing, and fostering community meant. Yet, due to safety concerns, once W&L students completed the course, we were prohibited from visiting or contacting our correctional facility classmates. It was evident that we signed up to create relationships destined to end and never revisited, but the powerful lessons I learned from these courses continue to impact me today.

About the Courses

Through the partnership W&L created with a local correctional facility, I had the opportunity to participate as a student in my first course: *Justice, Mercy, and Forgiveness*. In this course, we explored our understanding of what we owe one another as fellow human beings. The class learned to collectively define justice as the ability to give each other what we are due, and forgiveness as the process of acknowledging that a person is not defined by the mistakes they have made. In my second course: *Narrating Culture, Society, and Identity*, I took on the role of a teaching assistant, alongside a fellow peer from the correctional center. In this course, we explored the importance of narratives to understand how our stories are not merely our own, but an intricate interplay between our personal lives and the societal forces

that have shaped us. Each of us, with our unique backgrounds and experiences, contributes to this larger narrative. Our stories are not isolated; they are interwoven, creating a mosaic that reflects the richness of our shared human experiences. Through these interactions, I learned the importance of being devoted to understanding my classmates' lived experiences and the value of diversity that each student brought to the classroom. I also discovered how to engage in educational spaces in the face of adversity.

Course Preparation and Structure

While engaging in these courses and their content, my classmates and I faced many challenges. Some difficulties were due to the limitations placed on our incarcerated classmates that were outlined in the correctional facility's safety policies. As W&L students, the journey of developing our academic and social awareness within the confines of a correctional facility was marked by the stark juxtaposition of "us vs. them"—a division created and reinforced during the initial day-long training we underwent.

The training sessions served as an introduction to W&L students and provided us with the necessary context to navigate this unique educational experience. We learned specific protocols for navigating the correctional space, including how to address one another (only by last name), how to maintain appropriate boundaries with each other, and how to identify and prevent fraternization. These guidelines were designed to create a safe environment, but also served as a barrier that emphasized the divide between our W&L students and correctional facility classmates.

Class Discussions

When engaging in vulnerable conversations based on classmates' lived experiences, guards often monitored student discussions. This constant surveillance served as a reminder of the barriers our class faced when receiving our education, solely due to the institution we attended. Yet, this challenge also deepened our appreciation for the

shared intellectual pursuit we were embarking on together and the impact it had on our lives.

It was clear that this journey was one beyond academic exploration, as we uncovered the true meaning of building relationships that bridge an understanding between the general public and those who had been segregated from our society. From the beginning, it became apparent that we were not just classmates, but a community bound by a common purpose. That purpose being our shared commitment to unraveling the complexities of culture and identity. Through the course discussions and readings, we were navigating the entanglements within social structures, the nuances of social stratification, and the implications of cognitive dissonance.

Building Relationships

Our classroom in the correctional facility was more than an academic environment, but rather a place where all walks of life met to invest in one another's worldly understandings. The value of every student's journey enriched our capacity to deeply explore the many fundamental questions that guided our courses. We aimed to better understand what justice demanded of us, resulting in the pursuit of comprehending how our unique paths led us to the room we occupied.

As a teaching assistant in my second course, this role allowed me to better understand every student's intention for participation in our class. There were W&L students who were curious about what a correctional facility looked like, how it operated, and how to interact with incarcerated populations. Many of my peers and professors spoke to students from W&L, regarding this class as a "great" experience for us to have. However, the intelligence and poise that my incarcerated classmates possessed were often left out when describing why this would be such a revolutionary class to participate in.

The academic, professional, and lived experiences my incarcerated classmates possessed magnified the meaningful conversations that would typically occur within an average college classroom. Having students from varying educational backgrounds and disciplines of study allowed us to approach philosophical conundrums head-on.

Through our class experiences, we gained profound relationships with one another. For instance, my fellow teaching assistant was given the opportunity to lead a lesson. Naturally invigorated by academic exploration, they took this as a

chance to lead with the intention of collective contribution. They delivered their lesson plan to me, emphasizing where they would like my input or assistance in leading certain activities. This simple act of being included in their lesson plan showcased the strength behind the connection we had forged.

The community the class built was strong in its foundation. The relationships we formed were not innate but developed through active participation and the intent to break barriers and misconceptions we had of one another. I even had W&L students from my first course tell me to send their well wishes to my classmates at the correctional facility while in my second course. The classroom enabled us to build meaningful connections, as our impact on one another is everlasting.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the courses my answer to the question "What do we owe each other?" was ever evolving, fluctuating with every story and emotional expression explored in the courses. Through these classes, I found that we owe those who do not share the same lived experiences the time for understanding, and to also be open to the unknown. Every person is an expert of their own lives, and to honor that recognition is to approach listening with empathy. I came to understand that when I listen, it requires my ears to hear, my eyes to see, and my heart to feel. I must be kind, considerate, and compassionate, even when my faith in reciprocal agape (an outpouring of unconditional love) is continuously tested.

Throughout our sessions, we dove into challenging topics, such as how to reckon with the irreversible harm others cause one another. We questioned what justice demands when people are instrumentally impacted by the harm imposed on them by others. We developed a profound realization in this understanding, recognizing that forgiveness is a journey, not just an action. Hurt people hurt people, and those hurt individuals within marginalized communities were harmed by intentionally crafted social factors beyond their control. We turned to Deborah Miranda's (2013) alternative to forgiveness, understanding. Not necessarily forgetting wrongs, but instead acquiring the ability to forgive the mistake with the intention of using experiences to make conscious decisions moving forward. As Bryan Stevenson (2014) said, "being broken is what makes us human" (p. 289). What happens to us makes us human, but how we respond and continue to conduct our lives defines

who we are as people.

Throughout this experience, I have found that in the pursuit of fostering true empathy and understanding with those whom I was unfamiliar with before, it is imperative to appreciate the narratives and lived experiences of others. Meaningful exchanges and conversations thrive when all involved value the distinctiveness of every individual present. Every person has their own story and truth, and the key to bridging the gaps in understanding what is unknown to us requires one key component: authentic listening. In my past experiences, I have often participated in conversations intending to contribute a specific piece of knowledge or belief I possessed. Consequentially, actively listening was lost. When we truly listen, we can place ourselves in a different space that should aim to avoid abrupt judgment or diminishment. Our perspectives and life experiences often shape the beliefs we place on other's decisions or actions within a situation we have not yet been placed within. My first professor taught me a valuable philosophical tool that has influenced my ability to approach unfamiliar circumstances or decisions individuals make with empathy and respect. This mechanism is John Rawls's *veil of ignorance*. The veil of ignorance urges people to envision various situations without personal circumstances or identities implicating the perspective of what is "fair" in society (Huang et al., 2019). I often use this technique, listening to others' stories with the intention of understanding rather than casting blame. However, this is a practice that I need to consistently remind myself to nurture. It is one thing to learn these lessons, but another to put them into practice. I have learned that when delving into the motives behind people's actions and embracing the fluid and complex concept of genuine forgiveness, a pathway toward one's own personal growth and collective understanding emerges. Therefore, through this course experience of cultivating a sense of community, we were able to uplift one another and dismantle stereotypes we possess of each other. As an aspiring educator, this realization emphasized that learning is a lifelong journey for all individuals, one that is ever changing and evolving.

Concluding Thoughts

Within the closing session of our courses, emotions were heightened. Tears of sadness and joy were shed as the endeavor we embarked on together ended. They were not the typical last days of classes that you might see on campus, where we would later

pass each other in the halls of the academic buildings or cafeteria. This was the end of our relationship as peers. Although this marked the conclusion of our course with one another, the call to action began. Cherishing our relationships helped us foster a commitment to enact positive change outside of the classroom. Our goal was not only to be scholars in the academic sense but also compassionate and conscious leaders in our communities and beyond. This included supporting a cultural mindset that people can change and learn new approaches to understanding others and themselves. The community-based learning model of our class encouraged these transformative realizations and urged us toward a call to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society for all. I have learned that when we are committed to caring about others' narratives, lived experiences, and personal truths, we not only enrich our understanding of the world around us, we cultivate a collective narrative that will enable meaningful and sustainable change in the world.

References

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