

3-1-2009

Bonding, Bridging, and Social Change

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Recommended Citation

Nester, Nancy L. 2009. "Bonding, Bridging, and Social Change." Presented at Developing Long-Term, Reciprocal Relationships with Community Partners. Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. San Francisco.

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CCCC 2009
Session: W 4

Workshop: *Developing Long-Term, Reciprocal Relationships with Community Partners*

Paper Title: “Bonding, Bridging, and Social Change.”

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Theoretical Framework:

To invoke social capital as a touchstone for this talk is to reach back to the insights of Alexis De Tocqueville who visited America in 1831 to study the penal system. His trip is most notable, though, for insights published in *Democracy in America*, his oft-quoted impressions of an untidy democracy in motion. Though skeptical of rule by the will of the majority, DeTocqueville—nonetheless—was struck by the power of civic associations. One hundred sixty-four years later, Harvard Political Scientist, Robert Putnam, would spark public concern after plumbing the depth of our civic engagement and finding it shallow. In a 1995 article, entitled “Bowling Alone,” he argued that Americans had lost their zeal for joining associations, clubs, even bowling leagues, that they were, in fact, “social[ly] disengage[ed]” (“Bowling Alone” 70). Images of lone bowlers and quiet alleyways took hold in the public imagination and made his audience susceptible to claims that a flagging interest in creating such networks translates into fewer opportunities for people to reap social capital, thus weakening the democracy. For Putnam, “[S]ocial capital refers to ...social networks and the norms of

reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (BA 19). It is a type of situated, socially vibrant and mutually beneficial civic virtue (19).ⁱⁱ

As I prepared the Spring 08 semester of our Program’s 200 level Writing requirement, I turned to Putnam to create the theoretical framework for our understanding of cooperative relationships. I assigned Putnam’s article as well as his book *Better Together*, the latter a series of case studies detailing the material changes harvested from bonding and bridging alliances. For Putnam, forming meaningful connections with others in pursuit of a shared goal is a civic imperative.

Concession

I concede, here, that I approach Putnam in a rather uncritical manner. Although I describe some of the challenges made to his theories, I do not make those critiques the object of class inquiry. I’ll touch upon some here, though. They include objections to the term “capital,” “its association with capitalism” (Zuern 1) and quantifiable resources (Blunden, “[Social Solidarity vs. Social Capital](#)”), in addition to the theory’s reductive reactionary implications. (Edwards and Foley, in “[Social Capital and Civil Society Beyond Putnam](#)”). Nonetheless, the heuristic value of the concept *is* affirmed (Edwards and Foley).

Bonding and Bridging

The bonding and bridging relationships that Putnam describes provide a conceptual framework for harnessing the gravitational push and pull we experience daily, as we cooperate and collaborate in various ways depending on circumstance and purpose. These connections engender trust, the ilk of which

Putnam distinguishes as “thick and thin,” thick the by-product of carefully nurtured personal relationships (136) and thin, the broader ranging trust produced by more diffuse relationships.ⁱⁱⁱ In *Better Together*, Putnam ties trust to the connections involved in two forms of social capital—bonding and bridging-- both of which reap social, civic, and personal benefits. In bonding, individuals connect with people who have similar interests and aspirations, forming “thick” trust in the process. In bridging activities, on the other hand, individuals join forces with people in various situations to achieve civic and social goals (2). The trust is “thin” but expansive, capable of “extend[ing] the radius of trust” (136). These concepts are accessible and the vocabulary easily assimilated into the course parlance.

Pedagogy

I was able to fold the aims of social capital into the goals and practices of our Writing Program which is in the process of affirming its rhetorical core. Thus, I frame this Writing course as an application of “procedural rhetoric,” in the paedeutic tradition (Fulkerson 671).^{iv} As David Fleming emphasizes in his article, “Rhetoric as a Course of Study,” rhetoric “can be learned...and is worth learning” (Fleming 178) especially as a preparation for civic life.^v The habits of thought and practice such study encompass serve civic ends^{vi}. (See Fleming, the paedeutic tradition).

Community-based learning can provide our students with the venues in which to practice paedeutic rhetoric and to generate social capital. Linda Flower, in her “Rhetoric of Making a Difference” course, provides an aspirant

model. She describes her course as one “about the potential and practices of everyday people, including students, writers, and teachers, to critique the injustice, affirm commitments, and act in community with others” ([Rhetoric of Making a Difference,” Syllabus](#)). As we know, Flower has inspired palpable change in communities using dialogic methods of inquiry that find their expression in action. The movement from inquiry to action, though, over the course of a fifteen week semester is a challenge.

Exigence

In the Spring 08 semester, when I shifted the focus of the course to “The Significance of Community; the Impact of Writing,” I had an agenda. I wanted to address needs that had emerged in conversations with an agency I was partnered with during our University’s annual Community Connection event, a day in which students work with agencies across Rhode Island on predetermined projects. For the past three years, I’ve volunteered to be the site leader for the group assigned to the James L. Maher Center, a neighboring facility committed to meeting the educational, social, and vocational needs of developmentally challenged adults. Each visit to the Center involves building maintenance and socializing. We have painted the walls in halls and bathrooms, cleaned lockers, scrubbed metal tables as well as made puzzles, crafts, danced, barbequed and served the annual picnic. I admit that these are short term projects, disconnected to service embedded in the curriculum. Still many insights emanate from the interaction amongst constituencies, especially during the reflective sessions that close each CC function, insights which can inspire critical

inquiry and impel future action. Often groups that have bonded and bridged on a contingency basis can locate the spaces and circumstances in which longer-lasting reciprocal ties can form.

At the conclusion of the 2007 session, for example, we invited clients and staff to join us in our reflections and to provide suggestions for future projects. In general, the clients wanted more opportunities to mingle with the campus community. The staff hoped to secure access to campus resources. One particularly vocal client suggested that we arrange a campus tour. His request was compelling, and I wanted to nurture the nascent relationship by fulfilling it. But for the project to be mutually beneficial for students and clients, I waited a full semester before acting on my impulse. The 08 shift in my course focus afforded me an opportunity to present the client's request in such a way that the service would be an expression of an ethos formed in an atmosphere of inquiry and praxis.

Application

Thus, I situated the Maher Center Project in the third of the four segments into which I organize the semester. I consider these segments to be “phases of inquiry” (Shor 113)—the first of which is to explore Putnam's initial claim regarding diminishing social capital and put it to a 21st century test of validity. We search for the markers of “social connect[ivity]” (“Bowling Alone” 73) by examining relationships that engender trust, norms of behavior, active engagement, and mutual reciprocity. The second unit focuses on the applicability of social capital to the students' respective fields, especially the ways

bonding and bridging relate to the disciplinary domain each student has chosen to study.^{vii} Most disciplines, at heart, are working toward social betterment, efforts that are facilitated by bridging relationships. Upon completion of those two units, students recognize community involvement as a natural outgrowth of our conversations, research, and writing. At this juncture, I introduced the *Bonding, Bridging, and Social Change: The Local Level* project.

To make the transition, I use passages from Ellen Cushman's article "Rhetorician as Agent of Social Change," in which she writes of the psychic and physical remoteness of the academy in relation to the community of which it is a part (8). My students know that the University intends to be fully integrated in community life, a commitment it signifies during orientation. Still, while the CC experiences commence the process of engagement, other activities must sustain the relationships forged with affiliated agencies. The third unit in my course is intended to thicken the engagement. Though a campus tour, at first blush, may not appear to have that type of transformative power--to be more cosmetic than substantive--the project afforded us greater contact with staff and clients and deepened the trust between agency and University. The stakes of our affiliation were raised, though, in a planning meeting when we learned that the Center was on the verge of losing a chunk of its state support, due to budget cuts across Health and Human Services. The Director was stoic, committed to preserving as many of the enrichment programs as possible, but practical, preparing to adjust life at the Center to its modest means. Students, sensitized to the needs of the clients and to the quality of care they received at the hands of the skilled,

committed staff, were troubled by the news. We decided to stay the course in terms of the project but to adapt the fourth unit to address the developing issue.

Outcomes

Ultimately, the tour was no small task. It involved 17 students, 14 clients, several faculty members, public safety, the Recreation Center, Marine and Natural Science Center, and many genres of written texts. Students considered issues of access, interest, safety, and respect. On the day of the tour, students and clients toured the wet labs and chemistry labs, the recreation center, and played basketball. The tour was a mutually gratifying experience, but its impact ephemeral. The semester ended; the clients went on with their daily routine; students moved on to new classes; some continued working with the Center; most did not. But then and now, the potential for the Center/Academy link to yield reciprocal benefits is evident.

For example, in a post-semester meeting with the Center's Director, I was apprised not only of the tough stance they were taking to protest the cuts, but also of their many ambitious initiatives intended to maintain current services. The professional staff, in conjunction with the art director, for one, had embarked on a clay bead jewelry-making project from which the clients could derive occupational training, social skills, an appreciation of the arts, and income. The Center was trying to make the project sustainable and sought on-campus venues for the product. In addition, we discussed employment opportunities for clients, pool privileges, library services, and admission to sporting events.

So in the Fall 08 semester, I retained the *Bonding, Bridging, and Social Change: The Local Level* project, but used an ‘in medias ras,’ approach, building on the accomplishments of prior partnerships. When I introduced the project to the new cohort of students, I explained the progress made in the previous semesters and described the new objectives. Students put access to campus resources and employment opportunities at the top of the list. They bonded in task forces and bridged with campus officials. By the end of the project, of the resources they sought, they procured job prospects in the dining commons, pool use agreements, and parking privileges.

I extended a similar invitation to my senior seminar students. This group of advanced students arranged two on-campus sales of the clay bead jewelry, yielding \$500.00, as well as produced leads that resulted in a consignment arrangement with the Barnes and Nobles Book store in our Commons. In addition, they marketed the product to local business, condensed the Center’s existing brochure, and developed a handout.^{viii}

The Take-Away

The long-term benefits of forging the relationships with the community and sustaining them by integrating experiential learning in a Writing course are multifold. Students develop a deep appreciation of rhetorical situations, the texts, readers, writers, constraints, and exigence involved in communicating with purpose. As importantly, they conceptually explore a theory of civic engagement as well as exercise it.^{ix}

In two years, my relationship with the Center's Director has fluidly transformed from a bridging relationship to more of a bonding one. We share similar aims and an appreciation of the constraints under which our respective clients and students operate. We assess projects in terms of appropriateness, in scale and scope. We are co-learners, researchers, and teachers. Ours is the responsibility for sustaining the tender relationship. On my end, I must cultivate, anew, in the next cohort of students, the desire to share our collective talents with the Center.

I acknowledge, here, that to elide the important steps in the *dialogue to activism* trajectory that Paulo Freire outlines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the audit of local concerns, the forming of relationships and the "generative" dialogues in which trust is formed and needs are vocalized, is to abridge the process. But I have learned to take the long-view of the agency/academy relationship, to see it as evolving over time and across classes, the projects implicating shifting populations of students with which I bond. Libby Miles has urged us to assess Writing Programs vertically, to see students' learning deepening over time as they acquire rhetorical knowledge and apply concepts that are revisited and ultimately critiqued. We can extend this model to civic engagement and service. The sustained interest in the well-being of an agency and the population it serves makes the relationship durable. That durability, though, depends on the legacy we share as we describe experiences and situate new groups of students within that relationship, in a context where concern for and action with are facets of the learning we catalyze. We are the repositories,

along with whatever archives we establish to chronicle our involvement. Our message: the community partners we serve are not outliers, not disenfranchised—they are rather participants in on-going, albeit fragile relationships, within our “radius of trust.”

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ⁱ Francis Fukuyama refers to social capital of as the sine qua non of stable liberally democracy (“Social Capital and Civil Society,” 1)

ⁱⁱ The World Bank defines social capital as “people’s skills and abilities as well as the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions” (“Sustainable Development in the 21st Century.” *ESSD Network. World Bank*. <http://web.worldbank.org>. Accessed 3/6/09.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, too, Fukuyama’s explanation of the limitations of relationships that encompass a “narrow radius of trust” (Social Capital and Civil Society” 2).

^{iv} In “Composition at the Turn of the Century,” Richard Fulkerson articulates an “axiom” of procedural rhetoric: “[W]riting can be judged by its suitability to the context (situation and audience)” and involves “classical issues of pathos, and ethos” (671) as well as a “complex ...set of (teachable) activities that includes the steps in the invention to revision process” (671).

^v Fleming: “Rhetoric in the paideutic tradition is a knowledge attained only by a combination of extensive practice, wide learning, native ability, formal art, and love of virtue” (178-179). “[T]he goal of rhetoric is not material product, nor body of language, nor technical proficiency in achieving pre-determined ends...it is to become a certain kind of person who has internalized the art of rhetoric and who possess ‘faicilitas’, the capacity to produce the appropriate and effective language in any situation” (179).

^{vi} In *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, describe the classical impetus for the teaching of rhetoric as a desire to perform well in public matters, especially matters of state. “The study of rhetoric was equivalent to the study of citizenship” (1).

^{vii} One of the objectives of the assignment is to acquaint students with the ways that practitioners in the discipline create bonding social capital through affiliation with national associations and familiarity with a professional discourse (as expressed through readership of and submission to journals and listserves), as well as the ways those affiliations coalesce concern on problems and issues which have implications for practitioners in the field. For example, in *Education Week*, Education majors might find articles on how a student’s learning experience is altered by poverty; an architecture major, in *Architecture Online*, might see articles on the relationship between local environmental regulations and design elements.

^{viii} A formal written assessment culminates the Bonding, Bridging, and Social Change unit, one which requires that students perform a nuanced analysis of the experience. Students assess whether community-based projects should be embedded in the Writing Curriculum. Eligible projects must meet five critical standards of validity: Institutional consistency; Intellectual Rigor; Educational Value; Civic Benefits; and Sustainability. To lesser or greater degrees, bonding and bridging are implicit in each measure. Institutional consistency invokes alignment with the greater goals of the University. Intellectual rigor calls forth the habits of thought and the practices of other learners and writers; sustainability implicates the agency, institution, and students—present/future.

^{ix} If, as many pragmatists maintain, “a theor[y] is to be judged primarily by [its] fruits and consequences” (“Pragmatism” 5), cultivating social capital through bonding and bridging relationships, at least in my experiences with the Maher Projects, yields results.