



Reflection

Facilitating Student Engagement and Cross-Generational Interdependence: Lessons Learned from Community-Engaged Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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PEOPLE: COLLABORATIVE COMMUNITY-ENGAGED TEACHERS

We, a sociologist (Appelt) and the University's first Community-Engaged Pathways Community Fellow (Baltimore), received our University's *Collaborative Teaching for the Common Good Grant* that supported Ms. Baltimore as a co-teacher of Sociology of Aging in Spring 2020. We used a community-engaged approach to explore diversity and social justice in aging. To facilitate depth of exploration, we elected to focus on African-American elders' experiences within a single community, Pittsburgh's Hill District ("The Hill"). Our individual experiences and established working relationship were essential factors in our ability to carry out a social justice-oriented, community-engaged course during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Ms. Baltimore's Experience

I have worked in The Hill for 26 years at a non-profit organization, where I managed various programs related to: women in recovery and their children; a network of 36 collaborating agencies; arts and cultural activities; community development projects; relationships with local colleges and universities; and neighborhood tours. I am also an alumna of Duquesne University and in 2015

became the University's first Community-Engaged Fellow. Before this appointment (and since), I have facilitated engagement of university faculty and students in teaching and research by conducting annual guided tours of The Hill, connecting faculty with community partners, and helping to facilitate authentic and mutually beneficial partnerships between members of the University and Hill District Communities.

Dr. Appelt and I worked together before this course. Dr. Appelt and her colleague from the University's School of Nursing were interested in researching the lives of mothers in the neighborhood. They wanted to connect with neighborhood women through indigenous leaders and stakeholders. I was one of the stakeholders and took great care to fully comprehend how they would approach the women. In advance of research, I witnessed how curious they were about both people and "place." They talked about their research philosophies and discussed what it meant to be white women looking into African-American women's lives. Their self-awareness was another reason why I agreed to work with them. As the project got underway, I witnessed the care with which Dr. Appelt and her colleague worked with the community. They created an environment of trust and openness for the interview sessions. They never treated the women in the neighborhood like subjects or objects. They were neither condescending nor judgmental. Because of their style, the participants opened up and shared deeply. They truly earned my respect.

I jumped at the opportunity to work with Dr. Appelt on this course. We shared a common vision that students should be provided the opportunity to see their neighboring community, The Hill, in a new way by learning about its history, culture, economic development, and social policies that shaped the neighborhood and about the health and wellness of its residents.

Dr. Appelt's Experience

Although a junior member of the University's faculty, I have more than 15 years of postsecondary teaching experience. My involvement in community-engaged teaching and scholarship began in 2015. To date, my engaged experience includes two research projects, three community-engaged courses, and two iterations of a yearlong, multidisciplinary community-engaged research mentoring program (with colleagues from Nursing and History) for undergraduate students.

While we have had different professional and personal life experiences, we share an important core value – people and their well-being are more important than plans.

Since 2015, Ms. Baltimore and I have enjoyed a collegial working relationship, in which I have learned a lot about both community-engaged practices and The Hill's culture, history, beauty, and resilience. I am a better community-engaged teacher and scholar from having worked with her.

While we have had different professional and personal life experiences, we share an important core value – people and their well-being are more important than plans. This shared value informed our: 1) initial course plans; 2) ability to quickly pivot/change plans to meet students' needs after COVID-19 hit; and 3) decision to loosen pedagogical reins to allow student involvement in decision-making. However, we were unprepared for the vastly different sets of student needs and the classroom dynamics that emerged among our unique mix of students.

PEOPLE: OUR SOCIOLOGY OF AGING STUDENTS

Sociology of Aging is a 200-level course that attracts a wide variety of students. Our enrollment included 17 students, three of whom are non-degree seeking, older adult students over the age of 70. The three men are also returning citizens (persons returning to society after incarceration) and social activists. The 14 traditional/college-age students included: ten female students (71.4%), five seniors (35.8%), four juniors (28.6%), three sophomores (21.4%), and two freshmen (14.2%); seven psychology majors (50%); four majoring in other liberal arts disciplines (28.6%); and three students majoring in health-related disciplines (21.4%). Most traditional undergraduate students at our university, including those enrolled in our course, are white, come from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, and have limited experiences outside of that specific social context.

PLANS: COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING BEFORE COVID-19

In addition to the traditional *Sociology of Aging* course objectives, we specified a set of learning objectives related to social justice in aging. As per our course syllabus:

At course completion, students should be able to: 1) Describe the diverse sets of relationships between aging and health in U.S. society and the role of our health care system in these processes; 2) Describe the varying social and cultural contexts surrounding chronic illness, disability and aging in society and their consequences; and 3) Articulate the importance of generational and cultural humility in your personal and professional life and reflect on ways in which you can demonstrate these qualities.

To aid our students in achieving course objectives related to diversity and varying social contexts related to aging, we designed a foundational level community-engaged course. Accordingly, students received basic instruction in the principles of community engagement, and as a foundational level course, interactions with community members during the first half of the term took place in the classroom. During these initial weeks, students were also advancing their social science interviewing skills and exploring facets of generational humility by conducting interviews with older adults from their own families/communities. During the latter half of the term, we had planned to take students on a guided tour of The Hill before initiating a class-wide project based on students' interviews of elders in The Hill.

PLACE: THE HILL DISTRICT COMMUNITY

To maximize student interest and engagement with a community different from their own, we selected The Hill District Community for both its adjacent proximity to the University and its rich, intriguing history. In Pittsburgh, however, local narratives depict The Hill as a place “to be avoided.” We wanted students to set aside what they had heard about this community and to cross, with open minds, a socially constructed boundary to interact with their neighbors. We facilitated this by welcoming guests to our classroom, providing a virtual tour of The Hill, and

we had planned for student interviews of older adults in The Hill, but the interviews were precluded by COVID-19.

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Our two classroom guests represented different experiences, generations, and styles, but both provided an “insider’s perspective” that could foster understanding and appreciation of The Hill from the perspectives of its residents. Our first speaker, Amir Rashidd, is an elder who is an artist, storyteller, musician, and historian (Here The Hill, n.d.). He transformed our classroom by covering a large table with African cloth, musical instruments, and photographs. Mr. Rashidd introduced himself and immediately engaged students by telling a story about how he came to The Hill from Cleveland and why he chose to stay. He distributed instruments and instructed students to play when cued. He further engaged students by asking each to draw a slip of paper with the name of a story from his cloth satchel, and then called on students to direct him to his next story. The students appeared engaged and put at ease by Mr. Rashidd’s novel delivery even as he raised difficult subjects like slavery and racism.

Our next speaker was artist Njaimh Njie, who created an interactive public art project in The Hill. Ms. Njie, not much older than our traditional students, is a native Pittsburgher, but did not grow up in The Hill. She shared images and explained how exclusionary policies/practices, such as redlining, influenced The Hill’s development. She told us how she engaged residents in her project by setting up a table at bus stops to gather photos and stories. As she collected photos, subjects led her to other subjects. Her project culminated in four installations around The Hill and a website (Nije, n.d.). Based on her work, Ms. Njie was named the 2019 Duquesne University August Wilson House Fellow. She told our class how her fellowship highlighted the importance of campus-community relationships.

Both guests provided advice for students’ upcoming interviews with elders, including the allowance for “small talk,” allowing time for interviewees to finish their thoughts, and asking follow-up questions. Mr. Rashidd stressed the importance of patience and reframing questions for elders. Ms. Njie spoke about not stereotyping interviewees. “By remaining open,” she said, students would “discover the unexpected.” Mr. Rashidd shared how an appreciation of storytelling could enhance students’ interviewing skills. “Listen fully,” he implored, “ask follow-up questions. Be okay that sometimes the answers will take you well beyond the questions you ask. Be curious. Be patient. Be present.”

PEOPLE: EMERGENCE OF DIFFERING STUDENT NEEDS AND ROLES

Our older adult, returning-citizen students frequently shared their life experiences, perspectives, and insights on various issues and details related to past and present daily life in Pittsburgh’s African-American communities. Early in the term, the younger students were so enthralled that each would physically twist around in his/her seat to provide full attention each time one of the men shared. The intensity of engagement was exciting to us, but at times, we

felt as though we should have redirected the older students from speaking to listening to allow younger students to speak or for us to deliver more course content.

The emergent dynamic called us to task on our commitment to place people before plans, but we did not respond. Perhaps we might have responded later in the term had the dynamic not been upended by the transition to online course delivery. We wanted the older students to feel respected and encouraged, but looking back, we realize now that our reasons for not intervening had less to do with pedagogy or commitment and more to do with each of us.

To me (Appelt), it felt wrong to silence the voices of those with the lived experiences we sought to understand. In the moment, I had used the engagement among the younger students (which was mostly ‘listening’) to rationalize my inaction. I (Baltimore) felt an obligation to accommodate the older male students because of my upbringing. I was taught to let elders “have the floor,” so it was hard for me to interrupt them or ask them to share the space. In hindsight, we suspect that by not reining in the older students' participation, we may have caused some of the younger students to hold back or assume that their own participation was of lesser value. This pattern of generational asymmetry was abruptly interrupted by the transition to online learning; in fact, the pendulum swung to the opposite side before a balance was negotiated.

(REVISED) PLANS: TRANSITION TO ONLINE LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Just after midterm, our University transitioned all courses to online delivery. Most of our traditional students left their dorm rooms and off-campus apartments to return to their parents' homes. Two of our older adult students had only recently returned to society (after nearly 50 years of incarceration) and now found themselves living under a state-wide shelter-in-place order. As instructors, we had only a few days to transition our course to online delivery. Our discussions of how to proceed centered around three priorities: students' well-being, maintaining high levels of student engagement, and providing some degree of continuity in community-engaged learning. We decided to hold synchronous online classes (on Zoom) at our regular class times. We believed that this approach would facilitate the course's unique objectives and provide students with a much-needed semblance of normalcy.

We knew that COVID-19 posed increased risks to older adults and that older adults could be denied life-sustaining treatment if health care providers were forced to ration ventilators. Further, there were growing concerns about the mental and emotional effects of pandemic-related stress and social isolation. These emergent concerns led to our next critical decision -- *to position older adults' experiences and perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic as a central theme for the remainder of the course*. We leveraged this theme to meet our traditional learning objects and to provide continuity of community-engaged instruction.

Our plans for the remainder of the term included: 1) starting each online session by creating space for students to talk about how they were doing; 2) exploring the application of sociology of aging concepts to current events as they unfolded in real time; 3) providing a virtual tour of The Hill; 4) inviting a nurse practitioner to speak to students about COVID-19 and older adults; 5) asking a U.S. healthcare historian to speak about how epidemics/pandemics throughout history affected

various age cohorts, with specific attention on the effects of the Spanish Flu Outbreak in The Hill; and 6) changing the class-wide interview project (from interviewing elders in The Hill) to a COVID-19 Pandemic-related interview of an older adult in students' own families or communities. We reasoned that the virtual tour of The Hill, coupled with reflective discussion connecting back to the presentations by Mr. Rashidd and Ms. Njaimah, would provide some continuity in community-engaged education and establish a foundation for students' reflections on their older adult informant's position within their own communities during the pandemic. Further, we felt that the pandemic-specific content from the academic guest speakers would prepare students to write relevant interview questions and to provide more meaningful interpretations of responses.

PLACE: A VIRTUAL TOUR OF THE HILL DISTRICT COMMUNITY

Ms. Baltimore created a two-and-one-half hour virtual tour of The Hill that included a video about the neighborhood's past to help students understand the place's deep history. The tour also included historical places, prominent people and buildings, and a glimpse into future development activities/plans. The tour was another opportunity for students to learn new information that pushes against the negative things they had "heard" about The Hill. As such, it was important for students to see the full arc of this neighborhood's life over the past half-century. While most students responded positively, the most extraordinary enthusiasm came from the class's older adult students. At the end of the tour, one of them indicated feeling "choked up" and exclaimed, "Thank you for doing this, Ms. Baltimore! This means so much." Then, each of the older students shared that they had spent time in The Hill during their formative years, what The Hill was like in "its heyday," and their understandings about the things that have influenced the neighborhood's more recent difficulties.

Fortunately, our students appreciated our decisions to adopt a COVID-19 Pandemic theme for the rest of the course. However, the initial weeks of online learning were chaotic, and we quickly learned that the digital divide is alive and well. As instructors over the age of 50, neither of us had any previous experience with online education or using Zoom. The older students, for whom computer technology is novel after many years of incarceration, struggled initially with technical issues. Most of our younger students adapted quickly, and some seemed more engaged within the new medium. For others, attendance became somewhat sporadic. One of the younger students just stopped attending class for four weeks.

PEOPLE: A SHIFT IN CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

The shift in cross-generational dynamics among our students seemed to have been signaled by the transition to online learning. The first sign of this shift came during a "check-in session" at the start of one class. Our five graduating seniors had realized that there would be no commencement ceremony that term. The rest of us listened as these students spoke, mainly to one another, about how they and their families were affected by this disappointing reality. After a long pause, one of the older students, who by his early 20s was already a few years into a (recently commuted) life sentence, spoke. He said [to the best of our recollection], "I in no

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way want to minimize what you all are feeling. I know that this must be very disappointing to you right now. I challenge you to picture yourself in the future -- to imagine looking back on this moment in 20, 30, or even 50 years from now. You are going to have *one hell of a story* to tell your children and grandchildren about the year that *you* graduated from college!" As we recall, this was the first time that the younger students' experiences were at the center of a discussion, and it had a leveling effect.

PEOPLE: STUDENT DECISION-MAKING FOSTERS INTERGENERATIONAL DEPENDENCE

About four weeks before the end of the term, one of the older students approached me (Appelt) about his concern for local elders living in low-income, high-rise apartment buildings during the COVID-19 Pandemic. He relayed concerns that were shared by the other two older students. His concerns included the prevalence of misinformation about COVID-19, whether people could pay their bills, and the effects of social isolation on elders' mental and physical health in their community. We talked at length and developed a proposal to create an informational packet to provide local elders with 1) accurate information about COVID-19 and how to vet future sources of information; 2) a list of economic and civic resources (e.g., programs for deferral of utility bills, absentee voting, and voter's registration), and 3) tips from returning citizens about how to cope during times of social isolation and restricted freedom.

As instructors, we were thrilled to support this student's idea for several reasons. We believed that an informational packet was a valuable contribution to the community, a way to support the returning citizens in their new roles, and a project around which we could simultaneously engage the younger and older students. The older students pitched the project to the class, and then we explained that this was a second option for fulfilling the course's project requirement. Two of the younger students in the class elected to join the older students on the new group project, and a student from another of Appelt's classes also joined in later. Twelve of the younger students opted to stick with the original interview project. In-class presentations of the projects allowed students to learn from two different sets of experiences.

Students who completed the original interview project wrote about using advice received from Ms. Njaimah and Mr. Rashidd. Students drafted eloquent reflections demonstrating careful thought about their interviewee's life within a social context. They shared summaries of their interviews and their responses to critical reflection questions, such as: In what ways did your interviewee respond unexpectedly? On what assumptions were your expectations based? We used these qualitative data to explore common and divergent themes related to older adults' perspectives on the pandemic. By engaging in this exercise as a whole class, students working on the alternate project could also benefit.

One of the younger students on the packet project team designed a phone app to include the packet's information, links to additional information, and an interactive chat area to be moderated by the older students. This student's creative innovation brought a vital element of sustainability to the project by allowing for ongoing communication and dissemination. Next, this same student taught the older students how to use and manage the app on their cell phones. To date, the "Surviving and Thriving During the COVID-19 Pandemic Packet", which includes instructions

for accessing the app, has been distributed to residents in 663 apartment units across four local, high-rise apartment buildings. The older students participate in the Elsinore Bennu Think Tank (the EBTT) for Restorative Justice, where they have initiated weekly food deliveries to elders in these four buildings. The packet project team and several EBTT members presented their project at a nursing conference on campus during Fall 2020.

A unique outcome of our course was the emergence of intergenerational dependence among our students. In addition to sharing their life experiences and perspectives, the older students supported and reassured the younger students during a difficult time, and they afforded us all a socially distanced, community-engaged project. The project was much improved, however, by the younger students' addition of technology, and further by the instruction and support that they provided to the older students.

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