

## Partnering for Social Change: A Reflection of a Community-based Project Learning Experience

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During the Summer of 2017, Dr. Strohschen, aka “Dr. G.” offered a graduate course at DePaul University's School for New Learning. Entitled, "Partnering for Social Change," it provided opportunities for participants to engage in community settings throughout Chicago to participate in social action and build relationships across class, race, and other barriers toward mutual understanding within an "Empowerment Tour" project. This is a project of a Chicago startup and community based organization, whose founding members were also SNL students. This reflection describes the author's personal experiences and learnings.

The Empowerment Tour is courage in action – self-expression and social action. This value stems from the idea that people must choose empowerment. Frantz Fanon (1963) believed that power is not given to the underdog or the colonized, rather it must be taken. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1972) states that freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift (p.47). The Empowerment Tour sought to bring transformative opportunities for empowerment to communities in Chicago, Illinois and Indiana by sharing information, expanding awareness and celebrating community through the power of ‘we’. Merriam and Kim (2008) reference the African proverb “There is No Me Without You” and the Native American thought “We are, Therefore I am,” and from this communal perspective, learning is the responsibility of all members for the community, because it is through this learning that the community itself can develop.

Dr. G., our facilitator suggested the Empowerment Tour as the community project for this graduate level course to provide the context for a discourse about race and white privilege and the meaning of partnering for social change. The founding members of the Empowerment Tour, all students of DePaul University, are African American. Our facilitator, and a peer of mine and me in the course are white. Students in the course came together to showcase and share their projects and talents, and with community members engage in community events.

Emdin (2016) says such collaboration requires an understanding of the privileges that certain individuals have because of the groups of which they are part. The point is not to force everyone to be part of the dominant culture, but rather to move everyone to be themselves together (p.109). The empowerment project also reflects a Japanese word, *kyosei*, which means ‘creative coexistence’. The spirit of sharing and uniting to lift all, underlies the working relationship of such a group. Sometimes our group efforts seemed chaotic and in flux, yet still purposeful despite being subject to change and revision. I was reminded of bell hooks in (1994) where learning was viewed as liberating and education as the practice of freedom (p.6).

Baldwin (1963) says the purpose of education is to create the ability to look at the world for oneself, make one’s own decisions. These processes can be messy and require fluidity. Each of the individuals in the Empowerment Tour brought their own ideas and projects to the collaborative, and worked to network with other partners to expand the stops of the tour. The energy of group was palpable when we met for classroom discussions. The sense is that I was on a train that kept picking up steam as it went. An online organizing tool, Basecamp, was used to coordinate and store information from and to partners, communicate with members and to share files. Social

media was also used between sessions. The group was resilient and persistent, undeterred by setbacks. For example, scheduling for a Chicago Youth Talent event was planned for July but failed due to a delay of the City's issuance of permission for use of the location. Eventually the event was rescheduled. Members of the Empowerment Tour were inspired to succeed. The only time I witnessed tension or frustration was when there was miscommunication about a meeting point at a local block party. These moments were learning opportunities for the Tour leaders for this event in terms of better understanding their partner's values, and adjusting plans for subsequent events.

I self-reflected and engaged with others with dignity around ideas, complexities and tensions. I felt marginalized at times because everyone had a project they were promoting on the tour. Because my white peer and I were not involved in the Empowerment Collaborative endeavor prior to the start of the course, we were described by a fellow classmate and cohort member as "flies on the wall," acknowledging the groups' momentum, and recognizing our struggle to find ways to make meaningful contributions to this project. I felt like there was little else I could contribute, as my community work is in literacy with native-Spanish speakers, native-Chinese speakers and prisoners housed within Cook County Jail. The experience of being an outsider and being marginalized was useful in understanding institutionalized racism, as our white privilege served up a new and powerfully different experience for us in the group.

Another insight was that I see how I have been conditioned by the dominant ideology in academia and society at large to focus on outcomes. It was difficult for me to grasp the idea that the process is the outcome; people come together and as Dr. G said "eventually something happens." The Empowerment Collective is about participation and collaboration – communal learning and collective leadership. It is a paradigm of connection and cohesiveness as opposed to one of separation and disconnection. I am empowered by this learning. It will influence the "Life Skills" class I've been asked to teach at the Aquinas Literacy Center in the Fall. I keep a fan that someone gave me at the block party during the Empowerment Tour. It was a hot, steamy day so I used the fan to cool off as I talked and stood in a crowded booth with partners and visitors. The fan, from the Obama Foundation, is imprinted as follows: "I am asking you to believe. Not in my ability to bring about change – but in yours." Praxis – or informed action – has new meaning for me thanks to the engagement in an Empowerment Tour as the context for exploring the practices of partnering for social change.

### References

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