

Little Tokyo and the Multilayered Meaning of Community

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“Critical Praxis: Voice, Memory, and Community Transformation”--a community-based learning course offered through the Critical Theory and Social Justice Department at Occidental College in collaboration with the school’s Center for Community-Based Learning--was created for students to explore questions of “voice”; dynamics of race, gender, and class; the multiple perspectives that shape the meaning of community; and the significance of preserving community space at times of great change. For the Spring 2012 semester, the class examined these topics in the context of Little Tokyo in Los Angeles and worked in partnership with the Little Tokyo Service Center (LTSC) and their Community Organizing Director, Evelyn Yoshimura. The final product of this partnership is the report entitled, “*Little Tokyo: History, Memory, and Community Change,*” which compiles findings from sixteen interviews that the students conducted with a variety of Little Tokyo community stakeholders. The role I played in this class was as the Education in Action (EIA) Facilitator¹ and as a bridge between the class and the community as a 4th generation Japanese-American and Los Angeles transplant, who through the course of an undergraduate career, had found home in Little Tokyo.

The following reflection is based on my experience in both of these roles--as a participant observer analyzing the students’ interactions before and during their time with Little Tokyo, and as a community member examining my own transformation through my relationship with the community and my experience working with the class. The first section of this paper, “The Community and the Class,” focuses on the former perspective and explores the ideas of creating community in the classroom and preparing the class to encounter the community. Next, “The Community and the Individual” is my self-reflection on what Little Tokyo has taught me about belonging to a community. These two sections together explore how the meaning of community is reflected in three different types of relationships: between members within a community, between a community and non-community members, and between an individual and a collective. The first two of these relationships are considered through the context of the students’ experiences in the subsections entitled “Creating Community Within The Classroom” and “Preparing the Class to Encounter the Community,” respectively, and the third relationship is explored in the final section in my self-reflection. Each relationship offers a different perspective on the meaning of community and together the themes that emerge are the importance of place, respect, unity, responsibility, and above all, love.

¹ The Education in Action (EIA) program is run through the Occidental College Center for Community-Based Learning (CCBL). The mission of EIA is to challenge and encourage students to become engaged, active participants in class, and to recognize they have a voice in their education. EIA focuses on creating a means for students to serve as facilitators in classes from a range of disciplines. Rather than working as a supplement to the professor academically, these student facilitators work with the professor and class to coordinate a community-based project, which is developed in coordination with Occidental College students, faculty, CCBL, and nearby community institutions.

The Community and the Class: An Exercise in Empathy

We started the semester talking about the importance of place – the ways in which places reflect personal histories, the ways in which people shape the places around them, and the ways in which places shape people. This topic was introduced early on through an exercise I led called the “History of Place Workshop.” In this, students pushed their desks to the classroom walls and imagined the room as a map of the Americas and later as a map of the world. Next, students went to the location where they were born and discussed their connection to that place with someone nearby. For instance, students talked about the hospital where they were born and what brought their parents to that specific city. We continued with the places where people grew up, where they found their “home-away-from-home,” and where their ancestry was traced back.

Creating Community Within the Classroom

This exercise had two main purposes. The first was for this activity to be a group icebreaker that went beyond name memorization and aimed to establish a safe environment where students would feel comfortable engaging with the group. By asking students to share a piece of their personal history, this activity helped each class participant begin to know their peers as complex individuals whose distinct identities have been shaped by the environments they have belonged to. Our class was a very unique mix of students. Though only eight strong it varied by region, grade, major, ethnic background, gender, extracurricular interests, and level of experience doing community-based work. With students coming from such different walks of life, it was important to develop a safe space that was conducive to collaboration and where everyone felt like they belonged and were respected. Actively working to create this type of community environment within the classroom was also significant because it gave the students another way to learn about the meaning of community—by belonging to one themselves.

By creating a sense of community between the students, the class experienced firsthand how the principles of respect, compromise, and cooperation are critical to the prosperity of a collective. In the context of the class, deliberately working to create such an environment and a productive classroom community lent itself to the success of the final report when the class faced challenges similar to those dealt with by the Little Tokyo community.

The Little Tokyo community is small, yet deeply complex. It is multi-ethnic and multi-generational, and is comprised of a variety of stakeholders including businesses, community organizations, and residents who do not always agree on the matters that affect them all. The students encountered this variety of perspectives when they went on their individual interviews and as a result, when we came together to discuss findings on a particular topic we saw that the divides that exist within the Little Tokyo community were present amongst ourselves. Each student felt the responsibility to ensure that their interview subject’s perspective was adequately represented in the final report, and at the same time each student also understood a different reality and opinion based on who they had interviewed. While these views often clashed with one another, the final report is very much a testimony to the community’s ability to come together with the understanding that a united voice is a stronger force than any single individual’s. In a similar way, the students were able to reconcile the different opinions they had heard and bring them together in the report as one, comprehensive voice. For the classroom community to see that the complexity created by differing perspectives is itself a characteristic that defines Little Tokyo was an important lesson in unity, and in the end, it gave the students a glimpse into the type of obstacles faced by all communities.

Preparing the Class to Encounter the Community

A second objective of the “History of Place Workshop” was to prompt the students to recognize their own connection to physical spaces, so that they would be empathetic to that bond when held by others. In the case of Little Tokyo, it was especially important for students to consider how place is tied to identity. Little Tokyo is the historical, cultural, and spiritual home of the Japanese and Japanese-American people of Southern California. As Little Tokyo is faced with the threats of gentrification, corporate takeover, and city encroachment, there is steadfast pushback aimed to maintain its integrity, so that despite any inevitable physical transformation, its history and significance are never lost. Reflecting on their personal connection to place was a way for the students to develop empathy for the Little Tokyo community’s struggle to preserve its home.

Throughout the semester, students engaged in other reflection assignments where they contemplated their engagement with the class and the community. In their written reflections, the students overwhelmingly expressed feelings of responsibility – a responsibility to LTSC to put in a sincere effort while working on the final report and a responsibility to their interview subjects to report their opinions without bias. Constantly encouraging reflection through classroom activities, discussion, and written assignments was critical in both preparing the class to encounter the community as well as guiding them to better understand the relationship they were building with Little Tokyo as non-community members. From the beginning of the semester until the final edits of the report, there was great concern over what the relationship between the class and the community would look like. Students strongly expressed how they did not want to be a group of outsiders coming into Little Tokyo and critiquing the views and operations of the people there. It was encouraging to hear these concerns come from the students themselves because it demonstrated their awareness of the dynamic between themselves and the community. It indicated their understanding that their frames of reference, methods of interpreting experiences, and socioeconomic and historical background were not the same as those held in Little Tokyo, and as a result, they had to continuously check themselves to make sure that they did not impose their own worldview onto Little Tokyo. These exercises in reflection allowed the students to mull over their new connection to Little Tokyo and discover that the relationship that a community holds with non-community members is something that requires the responsibility of sincerity, respect, and self-awareness.

These multiple efforts to use self-reflection to understand the relationship between a community and non-community members led the students to understand it through a lens of empathy and an acceptance of responsibility. This type of transformative learning is consistent with the pedagogy surrounding community-based education that asserts the critical inclusion of exercises in self-reflection. In his article “How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning,” Jack Mezirow writes that “[t]o make ‘*meaning*’ means to make sense of an experience, we make an interpretation of it.” He continues, “[w]hat we perceive and fail to perceive, and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by . . . our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences” (1990). In this argument, Mezirow is stating that the ways individuals interpret experiences are directly related to their realities, or frames of reference. In order to understand different perspectives it is necessary to deconstruct personal worldviews, and the way to do this is to engage in critical self-reflection. Mezirow defines this as “reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling and acting.” In the context of community and service-based learning, other scholars similarly maintain that “[a]s students reflect on their experiences

in various community settings, they need to struggle to make sense of their experiences when what they see and hear does not fit in with their existing worldview. This necessary adjustment may prompt them to a new visioning of reality” (Zlotkowski and Duffy 2010, 33-43). In our classroom, self-reflection was used as a pedagogical tool aimed at getting students to contemplate their relationship with the Little Tokyo community. The “History of Place” workshop did this by focusing on reflection for the development of empathy, and later on with other forms of reflection, the focus was on pushing the students to think about their personal relationship with Little Tokyo and what that meant for how non-community members must encounter and work with a community. While we were not aiming for self-reflection to provoke any major worldview paradigm shift, we hoped that doing an exercise where students could contemplate their personal experiences would help them make the connection between their realities and the realities of others. Deconstructing a personal relationship would help students empathize with that same relationship when it is held by others, and reflecting on changed perspectives throughout the course of the semester would be a way to learn through experience.

One final way that we worked to prepare the class to encounter the community was by establishing a close relationship to our community partner that made clear the more literal responsibilities and role our class would have in Little Tokyo. During the project, community members relayed some reservation about being written up in a report because they did not want to feel as though they were being studied like animals in a lab. Thus, it was imperative that the relationship between the class and LTSC was built on respect, solidarity, and mutual benefits. The community-based project was developed by LTSC as a part of a larger initiative of asset mapping that documented the businesses, community organizations, and other resources that currently exist in Little Tokyo in light of the major development that will be happening in the coming years. LTSC did not have the capacity to include the voice of its human asset, the community, into this larger project, and so the research that the class conducted contributed directly to the work of LTSC. Thus, while the relationship between the students and the community carried many concerns from both parties, it also carried mutual benefits. LTSC would have this report to use to inform their own decisions about the future, and the students would gain valuable insight about the inner workings of a community.

The steps that were taken to prepare the class to encounter the community were necessary to ensure that the relationship between the students and Little Tokyo was one based on respect, empathy, and responsibility. There is a saying that community organizers like to use when introducing Little Tokyo: “Welcome to Little Tokyo, please take off your shoes.” What this phrase means, besides alluding to the Asian and Japanese custom of removing ones’ shoes before stepping into a home, is that Little Tokyo welcomes new faces and friends, but those who come into the community must respect what is already here. Do not walk over and desecrate our home after we have welcomed you in. In this sense, the steps we took to prepare the students to encounter and understand their relationship to Little Tokyo not only made the class aware that they need to “take off their shoes” in Little Tokyo, but it also taught them why they must do so.

The Community and the Individual: Finding My Way Back Home

I was introduced to Little Tokyo *the Place* at an early age. From the many short visits I took with my grandmother and other relatives living in Los Angeles, I came to know Little Tokyo through its restaurants, the Japanese American National Museum, and the East West Players Theater. Along the way I also developed awareness of Little Tokyo as a place where the preceding generations of my family had been before. As I would walk along First Street and pass

the restaurant where my father used to go during high school, the café where my grandmother would eat lunch after visiting the museum, the bronze statue that an uncle helped to carve, and the theater where another uncle debuted the first play he wrote, Little Tokyo became a place that held memories, and I felt comforted walking around the streets that my family has known.

I was introduced to Little Tokyo *the Community* much later as a college student. When I moved down South to begin my undergraduate education, Little Tokyo was one of the few places that I thought I knew in Los Angeles. However, my understanding of Little Tokyo was limited to the place created by my personal history, and I was not cognizant of anything beyond that. It was not until I participated in a Japanese-American collegiate program during my second year in college when I began to learn about Little Tokyo and the people who have worked to create it for the past 150 years. Those first meetings held at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center marked the beginning of a path along which I connected with those who have organized in Little Tokyo for the last few years and the last few decades; learned about the radical history of the community; and saw that many of the same beliefs, hopes, fears, and passions that I hold resonate and reverberate throughout Little Tokyo. I found that this was a space where I have always belonged because generations of dynamic community members have worked to make it a place represented by the ideals of unity, equity, social justice, and service to others. Little Tokyo is home not only to my family's past but also to my beliefs.

Hillary Clinton wrote that “it takes a village to raise a child,” and I believe that it took a community to raise me as a student. Belonging to the Little Tokyo community led me to develop my identity as a 4th generation Japanese-American – a Yonsei and a Nikkei – and it gave purpose to that sense of belonging as it also taught me about collective good and about contributing to something greater than myself. As I feel like I am part of something bigger in Little Tokyo, I also see that the Little Tokyo community belongs to a greater progressive movement aimed at empowering marginalized communities to make the City a more equitable place for all. Through the few years I have spent being active in the Japanese-American and Asian/Pacific Islander community, I have seen an inherent yet actively cultivated connection between the regions' other distinct ethnic communities. This connection is based on a common commitment to justice and manifests in multicultural programming, political demonstrations, and statements of solidarity. This connection gives people strength, and seeing my community take part in such powerful acts of unity taught me what it means to be an individual operating within a collective. Communities and collectives and movements are vehicles for individuals to pursue justice.

One of the most illuminating descriptions of justice that I have read was written by a young Martin Luther King, Jr., who wrote that “[j]ustice is never discontinuously related to love. Justice is a negative application of love. . . . Justice is a check (by force if necessary) upon ambitions of individuals seeking to overcome their own insecurity at the expense of others. Justice is love's message for the collective mind” (Branch 1998, 86). These thoughts deeply resonate with me as I reflect upon what the Little Tokyo community has taught me about justice. Individuals belonging to a larger community and communities belonging to a larger social justice movement are representations of love for something greater than the self. Justice cannot be sought by the oppressed alone, and having the love to belong to a community means that your heart has the capacity to care about others. This sense of compassion, empathy, and love that comes from belonging to a community is fundamental in the pursuit of justice.

In one of the readings assigned to the class, “The Paradox of Dispersal: Ethnic Continuity & Community Development Among Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo,” authors Toji and Umemoto argue that the extent to which a community can be a space that allows people to connect and participate in a wide range of ways is indicative of the community's strength (2003,

21-45). Being an EIA facilitator allowed me to experience the truth in Toji and Umemoto's assertion as this experience gave me a new role to play in the community and a new perspective on my relationship to Little Tokyo. Little Tokyo was fundamental in helping me get through my undergraduate education with wisdom and a commitment to justice. Little Tokyo was my home, my safe space. Little Tokyo gave me strength, and inseparable from that strength will always be responsibility – a duty to make sure that Little Tokyo's history will be remembered, that its community members will always have a cultural home to come back to, and that future generations will be able to walk the same streets and feel the same sense of support that I have. My experience as an EIA facilitator gave me the opportunity to connect and participate in the community using my identity as a student. It was a way to bring my education home by taking the skills that I had internalized – research skills, critical analysis, and essay writing – and channeling them into a project that would support the work that others are doing to serve Little Tokyo.

As I have already described, Little Tokyo is a community and a place that in many ways is defined by its diversity. The range of stakeholders, opinions, and visions present within the community can easily lead to debilitating divides, however what has arisen instead is a sense of unity and strength. This is because Little Tokyo is a place where a White student from the East Coast and a Japanese-American student with roots already growing in Little Tokyo can establish relationships to the community, can see those relationships bloom into a sense of responsibility to the community, and can use their backgrounds and identities to carry out that responsibility. In this way, Toji and Umemoto have illuminated the essence of Little Tokyo's strength – the ability to develop responsibility and the avenue to fulfill it. As it seems, the relationships that exist between members of the community, between community and non-community members, and between individuals and the collective are not only what define Little Tokyo, but they also weave together to make Little Tokyo strong.

Conclusion

Through this class, the multilayered meaning of community was able to emerge and that is demonstrated through the different relationships that were cultivated over the semester – between outsiders and a community, between different community members, and between individuals and the collective. The relationship between the class and Little Tokyo demonstrates how communities must be treated with integrity and respect, and how those principles must be actively sought through different forms of preparation. The relationship between members of a community demonstrates the complexity of collaboration yet shows that the ability for disagreeing parts to come together in unity is what makes communities strong; it is necessary for their survival. Finally, my personal relationship with the collective shows that the essence of participating in a community is that of responsibility, love, and ultimately justice.

What I take away from this experience is twofold. First, observing class interactions and reflecting on my own relationship with Little Tokyo taught me that the meaning of community is multilayered. Community is the product of the different yet interwoven relationships that surround it, and this makes communities complex, dynamic, and strong.

Second, this experience was not only about learning the meaning of community. It was also about learning from the community – Little Tokyo taught me about justice. Belonging to the Little Tokyo community showed me what it looks like to work in solidarity with other communities in a movement fighting for ideals – equity, agency, opportunity – that affect all

people. Having love for a collective greater than the self is fundamental to communities and it is fundamental to justice.

In closing, this community-based learning experience was tremendously significant to me as it symbolized the culmination of my time as an undergraduate within the Little Tokyo community by connecting my academic world with my Little Tokyo world. In comparison to other community-based learning classes that I have taken, this was by far the most meaningful because instead of operating from the outside – applying class material to events surrounding a community – the class built relationships that allowed them learn from Little Tokyo in a way that was truly genuine. Community-based learning for us was not about choosing a particular group of people or a place to help us understand a topic, but it was about how to learn through relationships and experience. Instead of simply learning about the various issues surrounding a certain people and leaving that knowledge in the classroom, we worked to assist the work of the community and in turn, we were all profoundly changed by it.

References

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