



## **Building Communication Skills, Consciousness and Relationships: DeAnza College Course on Community-Based Learning in Intercultural Studies**

### **An “Essential” Course**

Students in DeAnza College's certificate program in Leadership and Social Change speak to the powerful impact of the course: *Community Based Learning in Intercultural Studies*, developed by Edmundo Norte, Dean of Intercultural/International Studies:

*“[This] class was essential. How are you taking care of yourself? That’s what you need to be an effective organizer. Take care of yourself and people.”*

*"You have to find out who you are so you can go out and motivate others."*

*“Understanding internalized oppression – How I have taken so many of my values from the dominant culture and how to recover from that.”*

*“You get to know each other because you are doing the work together. That class knows things about me that my family doesn’t know. These are the people you have to rely on.”*

The course offers six credits over the fall, winter and spring quarters. Each week, students combine three or more hours in class with an equal amount of time working with an organization that is tackling an important community issue on campus or in the broader community. The experience includes deep personal and group reflection and training in nonviolent communication skills.

### **Internship Placements**

Most of the students choose internships on campus. The on-campus organizations they intern with include a resource center on issues facing undocumented students, a Black leadership development program, organizations working on immigration reform and divestiture by the college from carbon industries, and an advocacy organization through which students won nonstop commuter bus service from San Jose to the campus, cutting commuting time in half for many. Off-campus placements include work with Silicon Valley DeBug on issues that include police violence, homelessness and migrant worker needs.

One placement site, Mentors for Youth Empowerment, has strong ties with four high schools where community college students mentor high school students, including interesting them in continuing on with their education after graduating from twelfth grade. Each year the Institute of Community and Civic Engagement, which administers the Leadership and Social Change certificate, holds the Youth Voices United for Change conference that reaches out to 300 low-income high school students. The conference brings them to campus for a day-long event which mixes workshops about social justice issues and community college life with hip hop music. The college students -- whose backgrounds are similar to those of the high school students -- then offer to provide leadership development and mentoring on campus and to work with students in organizing on a social justice issue which concerns them.

Students tend to choose campus placements for three principal reasons. First, the placements do not require travel, a great advantage for the many students who already face lengthy commutes from South and Central San Jose. Second, DeAnza offers a rich variety of organizations and campaigns that relate to social justice. Third, focusing on-campus issues gives students an opportunity to work with each other and develop close relationships. This helps them build their community -- an important priority for the leadership and students at DeAnza who are striving to create a strong sense of community that is typical of residential colleges.

### **Classroom Experiences**

The class meets once a week for three or more hours. Edmundo notes that it usually goes overtime by 30 to 90 minutes because the students are so involved in discussing a hot issue that they want to continue the discussion.

Students include a cohort of twenty students who are working on their certificate in Leadership and Social Justice. Several additional students who have already taken this course come to class to reconnect with the principles, practices and sense of community the course offers and which they find reinforce them in their further studies and work.

The classes prepare students for dealing with injustice and carrying on the struggle involved in addressing trauma, conflict and oppression, including issues of race, class, gender and other forms of discrimination. Students address the traumas in their own lives as well as the injustices and challenges they confront in their internships. The class is based on recognition that in order to sustain continuing work on tough issues of social justice, students must give serious attention to building their internal strengths and relationships and their sense of community with others who share their values and are committed to the same struggles.

Edmundo Norte is an expert in nonviolent communication, sometimes called "compassionate" or "collaborative" communication. He has designed the course to help students better understand themselves while also strengthening their capacity to communicate and work with others who are engaged in the same struggle.

Each class is structured to address the issues that most preoccupy the students. The following outlines a typical class session:

- **Quiet Reflection.** Five-ten minutes of silent reflection.
- **Pair/Share.** Pairing up with another person to share and reflect on any issues that arose during the opening, quiet grounding time.
- **Group/Share.** Sharing these experiences and reflections among the whole group.
- **Announcements.** A time for open announcements of activities and events.
- **Mini-lecture/Presentation.** A brief presentation or further investigation of one of the issues raised earlier, that holds lessons for real-life learning.
- **Practice Applications.** Breaking into empathy groups, as described below, for small group practice in applying the principles and practices of nonviolent communication to addressing the issues that students are confronting.
- **Exercises and Discussions.** Students reflect on issues in their internships or other topics, often using a variety of exercises or role-playing, and staying in empathy groups.

The empathy groups include 4-5 people who select their own group members and stay together through the rest of the course, forming groups in which they feel comfortable and best able to share their inner thoughts.

### **Steps in the Process**

The process followed in the classroom is based on recognition of the importance of relationships to bringing about any substantial change. Edmundo emphasizes that to gather strength people must invest time in getting to know each other, overcoming the reticence that often blocks real communication and sharing our life stories. His approach includes exploring how we need to understand what has shaped our vision of the world and what we want to get from our relationships and our collaborations.

At this level the course is similar to Marshall Ganz's course at Harvard's Kennedy School. Formerly an organizer with the United Farmworkers Union, Marshall stresses story telling as key to organizing. Ganz trains students in public narrative, sharing with each other: a story of self; a story of us; a story of now. The teaching process and content are both geared to strengthening the emotional intelligence of the students, preparing them to build effective relationships in the communities where they work and to build strong working relationships with their colleagues in community change work.

The DeAnza course is structured to take students through five steps that are critical to taking on leadership on community or social change issues. These steps are especially helpful for students of color and others who face discrimination, injustice and internalized oppression in their own lives and who find the dominant culture daunting or harmful to them and those they care about. They are designed to decolonize people's minds and give them a chance to reframe their understanding of themselves, of others with whom they deal and of situations they face.

Following are the five stages of decolonization:

- I. **Awareness.** Something happens. Students experience a crisis in their lives, a sudden insight, perhaps an issue which emerges in class, perhaps abuse, alcoholism, or another long-standing issue in their family which causes the person to recognize that the situation he/she

faces is, as Edmundo notes, is “really messed up.” This has a strong visceral emotional impact. The student may recognize that they have been held back by feeling that they are not seen and valued for what they bring to the table, that there's something wrong with them: "I'm less than..." The person realizes that this situation is not right, that they are not to blame and the root cause is not their fault. It is outrageous and they want to change it.

2. **Mourning.** Grieving over this real hurt. The injury has an impact on them emotionally, not just intellectually. They see a legacy of historical trauma and take the time to be with that as an essential part of a healing process. It is far more powerful if people have this experience collectively, as doing that in community makes them realize that they are not alone and it fortifies the support group. Edmundo notes that in our lives we have learned not to show our emotions and our pain and grief for fear that we will be ridiculed or seem weak. We need to take the time to acknowledge that we are grieving over a real wrong, that this has a powerful impact on us, and that we need to create opportunities to overcome these barriers and to share our pain and our compassion. This is a major part of the class, as students have much to share, including experience with racism, classism and various forms of prejudice. They gain enormously when they find that others will listen to them with compassion and understanding, and will, in turn, share from their hearts as well.
3. **Dreaming.** Forming a vision. Having created a real sharing situation, the student grasps a vision of what they want for the world and begin believing that they can change the world and recreate that understanding. Because this is now rooted in their experience, they are reminded that change is possible. This is why students who have completed the class often come back to the class for reinforcement and reconnection with the principles and practice of the class.
4. **Commitment.** Change occurs. This stage comes organically from a student's own longing and need to bring about changes that will create that better world.
5. **Action.** Fostering transformation. This stage involves action to move the world, the organization or the relationships in the direction of positive change. The goal is to have that action be truly transformative, not just reactive, and to reflect the mourning and healing process which enables a person to address their pain and overcome rage. This healing process is critical to social justice work, because unaddressed pain and rage is toxic. It leads to individual burnout, infighting and implosion among groups seeking change.

These five steps were developed by the Hawaiian activist and writer PokaLaenui in Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision, edited by Marie Battiste. They build on the thinking of Leny Mendoza Strobel in her book Coming Full Circle: The Process of Decolonization Among Post - 1965 Filipino Americans

Central to the process and to the course is recognizing the challenges of social change work and the confidence that students can develop new ways of working with others. Edmundo sees that the attitudes and assumptions they enter with are usually those of the dominant culture. This includes thinking that stresses how things are right or wrong, good or bad, mine or yours or reflecting that the views of one person who is inherently right or dominant are right and

other views are inherently wrong. He asserts that nonviolent communication provides an alternative way of looking at the world. It starts with the assumption that the best answers and the soundest organizations or collaborations come from developing common ground through a process of introspection, listening to each other, healing and sharing.

Other elements of the course include having the students write weekly reflective papers. Some of these reflections complete an assignment from the professor, but most are reflections on experiences students are having in their internships, their other courses in social justice or elsewhere in their lives. Periodically, the class discussion focuses on a joint assessment of what parts of the course have worked well and which ones have been less successful, so that the instructor has guidance from students which can be applied to future teaching.

### **Moving to Transformative Action**

In learning this set of reflective practices and building a support group of relationships, students become better prepared to overcome feelings of inadequacy, to relate closely with others in common cause, to understand the rage they may feel and to address the pain which is its root cause. Mourning and healing prepare them to move into transformative action. Edmundo has seen that there is little you can accomplish if you feel inadequate, cannot collaborate with others fully, or cannot address your anger and build the supportive relationships and healing strategies which are essential to lifelong work for constructive change.

### **Additional Course Texts**

King, Ruth. Healing Rage: Women Making Inner Peace Possible. Sacred Spaces Press. Berkeley, CA, 2004.

Rosenberg, Marshall. Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life. PuddleDancer Press. Encinitas, CA, 2003.

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### **About the Community Learning Partnership**

The Community Learning Partnerships is a national network of Community Change Studies programs, establishing authentic partnerships among community organizations and institutions of higher education. We develop and institutionalize courses of study leading to Certificates and Degrees in community organizing, community development and community change.

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