## News Talks: Critical Service-Learning for Social Change

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### Abstract:

We detail the process and results of one campus community partnership in Greensboro, North Carolina that began with the free delivery of the local daily newspaper to low-income residents as a way to encourage civic deliberation and action. Here, we first provide the context for our study by reviewing the often under-utilized critical approach to service-learning programs on college campuses before detailing how newspapers and political action in America offer an impetus for social change. We then describe our specific research project's philosophical grounding in dialogue and feminist ethics, which emphasize the importance of stories in establishing and maintaining communities. After this contextual discussion we describe our research program's mixed methods and findings before concluding with lessons learned to bolster community engagement.

**Keywords:** civic engagement | community | service-learning | low-income | newspapers | Greensboro | North Carolina

### Article:

Campus-community research partnerships are growing as institutions of higher learning recommit themselves to fostering civic engagement among university students, most often through service-learning and community-based research programs. We rally behind the philosophical contention that colleges and universities have an obligation to model and promote democracy not only among tuition-paying and scholarship-funded students, but also with surrounding community constituencies. Moreover, we argue that community-based work ought to target collaborative relationships with under-resourced populations to develop immediate and long-term benefits for those in the community who are the least able to access the fruits of our democracy.

We detail the process and results of one campus community partnership in Greensboro, North Carolina that began with the free delivery of the local daily newspaper to low-income residents as a way to encourage civic deliberation and action. Here, we first provide the context for our study by reviewing the often under-utilized critical approach to service-learning programs on college campuses before detailing how newspapers and political action in America offer an impetus for social change. We then describe our specific research project's philosophical

grounding in dialogue and feminist ethics, which emphasize the importance of stories in establishing and maintaining communities. After this contextual discussion we describe our research program's mixed methods and findings before concluding with lessons learned to bolster community engagement.

**Critical Service-Learning**

Many, if not most, service-learning programs today are designed for students to "help" in the community by tutoring children, cleaning up streams, and serving food to the homeless, to name a few common experiences (Eyler and Giles 1999). These more familiar service-learning programs can be meaningful, to a point. Students may feel empowered by their experiences to assist others in need. They may also recognize their own biases and discomfort in such situations. As such, students in these typical service-learning courses explore the interpersonal and cultural dimensions of community life.

However, students' consideration of political features is less likely in many of these courses (Artz 2001). For instance, when we ask in our classes why people are economically disadvantaged, a more political and critical stance encourages us to ask further questions such as what financial resources are being devoted to low-income schools, or what percentage of a city budget is allocated for affordable housing compared to economic incentives for corporate expansion. Critical service-learning programs that position students to seek deeper understandings of political influences, to question the systemic and structural causes of social injustice, and to dialogically engage community members are far less common in course design, despite how vital such approaches are (Colby et al. 2007; Cushman 1999).

Faculty and community partners need to intentionally design service-learning courses to foster a social justice sensibility in students if such a sensibility is the desired outcome (Wang and Jackson 2005). Exposing students to marginalized communities is a necessary first step, but insufficient by itself to teach students the many ways in which society is structured so that certain populations are unable to fully access community resources. Critical service-learning courses thus introduce students to local political concerns that frequently require cooperative solution by citizens, government officials, and businesses ( Jovanovic 2003). Academic study linked to community action works best, we argue, when each strengthens the other through rigorous study and critical reflection that calls attention not only to the personal role of responsibility in society, but also to the need for collective action and deliberation (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). In other words, as students gain an understanding of community needs from participation with and advocacy for underserved populations, they are primed to initiate social change efforts (Frey 2009; Porter et al. 2008). Such experiences allow students, faculty, and community agencies to work together to reclaim the democratic impulse for wide participation with benefits for all (Wang and Jackson 2005).

**Newspapers and Political Action in America**

As sites for citizen mobilization, newspapers provide summaries, updates, depth, and resources that enable people to effectively participate in political projects (Scheufel et al. 2000). Alexis de Tocqueville (1945/1981) recognized the enduring value of newspapers to uphold democratic

systems by publishing news that brings people together in public association. As the United States of America has progressed from Tocqueville's nineteenth century observations to a technologically-based twenty-first century society, our media tastes have expanded. Blogs, vlogs, tweets, web sites, radio, television, cable, satellite, and other mass-mediated forms of communication have joined newspapers as information access points. Newspapers compete with these other sources, immersed in a battle for reader attention that increasingly abandons news for entertainment (Gunaratne 1998). For those who still value the news media, newspapers provide essential information for citizens to involve themselves in the public sphere (Mindich 2005). When coupled with vibrant discussions featuring personal narratives, a vital deliberative democracy emerges. The act of engaging the newspaper, through reading and discussing the news, what we term "news talks," offers a practical structure for ensuing subsequent social action (McLeod et al. 1999).

Much of this newspaper reading and public conversation, however, is structured to benefit those already privileged. For-profit newspaper companies generally operate and select stories to meet the functional needs of commercial interests and local elites (Cranberg 1997). A large part of the news centers on the political structures and economic needs that occupy middle class America's time. As a result, the life, reflections, and understandings of low-income populations are less likely to be the basis of news stories.

For low-income populations then, there are fewer obvious benefits of reading the newspaper than for middle-class readers. Middle-class newspaper readers generally profit in multiple ways including increased attachment to the community (McLeod et al. 1999), increased associational membership (Rothenbuhler et al. 1996), and a rise in volunteerism (Sampson 1991). All of these outcomes are indicators of civic participation and thus central to promoting social capital and a democratic citizenry. But low-income populations may not see their concerns and stories routinely reflected in newspaper articles; and even if articles are appealing to them, they may not be able to afford the paper, and worse yet, they may not have access because of advertising and marketing policies that discourage distribution to this "fringe" population (Cranberg 1997). Providing free daily newspapers to low-income residents counters conventional newspaper corporation practices, but, even more importantly, brings these residents into community life. Talking about news furthers the impulse to engage in everyday community activities, resulting in shared narratives that include ideas and actions for local improvement projects, care for area children, and mobilization for policy changes (Gans 2003; Rappaport 2000).

Discussing matters of civic importance puts our views and understanding of the world in front of others for their scrutiny, resulting in robust dialogue that enables varying analyses to come forth. In that democratic practice of public deliberation, values are vetted, decisions made, and subsequent actions are planned (Bloch-Schulman & Jovanovic 2010). For low-income residents, the situation is more complicated, for they are all too often denied the opportunity to adequately express their stories—anywhere—as a result of structural forces. Thus, introducing the newspaper to their daily lives to inspire collective thought, narratives, and action contributes to our community and society.

**Society**

Our research project fit into a larger plan for the city's low-income housing projects. In a strategic report completed prior to the commencement of our research, residents and staff with the local housing authority noted the presence of a shared narrative highlighting a "pervasive sense of negativity and powerlessness" in their communities (Easterling 2004, 11). Two ideas emerged that not only were ranked among the most important to residents, but also were central to our weekly conversations on newspaper topics: first, the need for residents to adopt more positive attitudes and accept more responsibility for their lives; second, the desire for residents to participate in more community activities.

It is noteworthy that these two central ideas in the strategic report put the onus of responsibility on individuals to be and do more—a position rightly critiqued as reflecting an imperial world view that privileges economic growth, competition, and individual achievement above community and mutually affirming relationships (Korten 2006). The unrelenting social narrative that beckons the poor to "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" fails to recognize the systemic conditions that ensure the perpetuation of a stratified society. We point to the declining value of the minimum wage in real dollars since 1968 as one example (see Greensboro Minimum Wage Campaign) and the "absolute shortage" of affordable housing for extremely low-income people as another (see National Low Income Housing Coalition).

In our critical service-learning endeavor, we questioned this dominant narrative of blaming people for their misfortune. Instead, we sought to forge collaborations with the local newspaper and the housing agency in our city to work with people described as clinging to the bottom rung of the proverbial community ladder in an effort to demonstrate that their stories offered the potential for rich dialogue in a diverse setting that could facilitate mutual learning (Dennis 2007).

To ensure the success of our project, we sought the guidance of the low-income community's residents' council, a leadership team organized much like a neighborhood association board. Well before our program of newspaper delivery and weekly discussions began, in-person and phone meetings took place to determine the best method for introducing this campus-community research partnership to the low-income community. We honored the vital role of the residents' council in shaping the program to mobilize their neighbors (Portney and Berry 1997). We relied on the advice of our predominantly African American community partners to shape and manage the program.

**Dialogue and Feminist Ethics: Community Stories as Research**

The guiding principles of our critical service-learning research were based in dialogic theory that explores the intersection of ethics and politics in communication and that identifies this intersection as what drives our actions, interactions, and decision making (Bakhtin 1993; Buber 1955; Levinas 1961/1998). Bakhtin suggests that "the self " and "other" are forever distinct, yet linked by communicative action: "Life knows two value-centers that are fundamentally and essentially different, yet are correlated with each other: myself and the other; and it is around these centers that all of the concrete moments of Being are distributed and arranged" (1993, 74). This connection, says Bakhtin, presumes discourse to be active, oriented toward the other, and the basis of relationship-building as well as narrative construction. Non-discursive features play an important part in Bakhtin's understanding of dialogue. For him, dialogic communication

embodies the words we use *and* the tone of our voice, our expression, and perhaps most vitally, our desire to be with the other as story-telling beings.

As it is for Bakhtin, the presence of one before another is vital for a dialogic relationship according to Emmanuel Levinas (1961/1998). He reminds us that our communication begins with our exposure and vulnerability in approaching and responding to another. This view of communication moves discourse away from acts of transmission of knowledge or feelings, to an ethical encounter and outlook that regards the other as always worthy of dignity and respect (Levinas 1961/1998).

Buber (1955) insists that we owe one another our commitment to engage deeply on matters of central importance. He invokes the metaphor of the "narrow ridge" to suggest that though we may possess differing views, we ought to be able to hold on to our values at the same time we consider the position of others, teetering on this narrow ridge that both separates and binds us in constructing community narratives (Arnett 1986).

In relying on dialogue as a frame for this broad work and finding inspiration from Bakhtin, Levinas, and Buber, we assumed that talk between people at our community site would be "a fluctuating, unpredictable, multivocal process in which uncertainty infuses encounters between people and what they mean and become" (Wood 2004, xvi). In dialogue, we reach for maximizing authenticity, collaboration, and appreciation for the differences among us (Stewart et al. 2004). Concurring with Cooks and Scharrer (2006), we believe that learning is a community endeavor, socially constructed through the interactions between student and community partner residents.

Dialogic theory, focusing on the communicative aspects of interaction, dovetails with our understanding of feminist ethics that conceives the person as always in relation with others (Gilligan 1982; Manning 1992; Noddings 1984). Feminist ethics aims at creating a better place to live by recognizing our interconnectedness and by paying attention to relations of power. This relational caring is political because ethics is understood as "fundamentally concerned with the recognition of otherness—as central to the realms of both politics and everyday life" (Parkiss 1999, 378). Jabri (2004) specifically draws our attention to how abstract systems, such as community government and politics, have implications for our everyday actions. This connection of ethics and politics can potentially drive social policy to ultimately "examine and change the systems and discourses within which we function" (Lincoln and Cannella 2009, 279).

The goal of feminist ethical policy is to engender creative social policy that meets the needs of women's particular narratives (Dizuinzio and Young 1997), rather than neutral, or male-biased, social policy. We reflected with our students on questions of structural inequalities that limited the possibilities for meaningful work or community engagement for the women living in low-income housing. Further, we understood feminist ethics, like critical service-learning, as a means by which to question the material, historical, and social circumstances shaping our dominant narratives. That is, feminism unabashedly works toward moving beyond talk to transforming unequal relations into equal ones (hooks 1989). Thus, feminist ethics serves as foundational support for the assertion that newspaper distribution should become an issue of social policy.

Dialogic and feminist ethics are thus concerned with the social, ethical, and political dimensions of our lives that honor the unique contributions of individuals by way of their standpoints, histories, values, hopes, and challenges. At the same time, dialogic and feminist ethics assert that our public discourses need to be examined, challenged, and critiqued in order to address the persistence of poverty and social disparities. That is, where suffering occurs and inequitable conditions exist, this philosophical base instructs us to ask questions of why that is so, and further, to act creatively to abolish social injustice (Swartz 2006). It is from this concern for the welfare of low-income residents in our community that our project was conceived and the research developed. To be effective and coherent to the philosophical suppositions of dialogic and feminist ethics, we strove to situate these service-learning and research activities in collaborative, participatory, critical, and democratic methods.

**Methods**

Undergraduate students were introduced on the first day of class to their overarching assignment. Reading the daily newspaper and talking weekly about the issues reported on those pages were the mechanism by which students and low-income residents were to engage in conversation, propose action, and assert a collective voice for change. In doing so, students would be exposed to the narratives of low-income housing residents as a way to gain firsthand knowledge in how people understand and accept each other, work through differences, and collaborate to address community issues.

The class project was an important dimension of a transparently planned curriculum in which students would be called upon to recognize the political and economic stakes of their involvement. Experienced students from the previous semester's pilot program served as mentors to new students (Mitchell 2008). Together, we discussed the potential of the project to ignite the civic passion among students and low-income residents. From day one, we wanted to provide adequate detail and vision about the project so that students could make sure their calendars, as well as their hearts and minds, would allow for full participation. To measure the impact of the program, the students and faculty advisors steeped their work in more traditional classroom instruction by reading a variety of journal articles and texts that probed the dynamics of community building, the features and functions of narratives, and critical engagement and pedagogy. We also read the newspaper together, a first time experience for many college students. Finally, our course introduced students to the structural and policy-making entities in the community (for example, networks of relationships and bases of power) through a requirement to participate in city council meetings to gain a familiarity with community concerns and the leadership responses to them.

The participating students closely reflected the demographics of the college campus of more than 18,000 students. Two thirds were female, 20% were African American, and 75% held at least one job in addition to attending school. The participating low-income residents' profile at the 236-unit housing complex was somewhat different: 87% female, 96% African American, 57% unemployed, and only 37% with some education beyond high school. The median age of the adults was 33.5 years old and the median household income was $6,137 to support the average

household size of 3.5 people. Of note is that 33% of the residents had incomes of less than $3,000 per year.

*Data Collection*. Our methodology involved using multiple data sets including: seventy two pre- and post-surveys of the low-income housing members' newspaper readership habits; narrative analysis of forty five students' accounts of weekly civic newspaper conversations; and, transcripts of interviews and focus groups with low-income residents and students regarding the program's results. Survey questions were designed by the project's team leaders, including university faculty, newspaper representatives, and housing project residents. Undergraduate and graduate student teams administered the surveys. Narrative accounts were collected from students who attended the weekly newspaper conversations, the core component of the service-learning and research activity. The accounts not only detailed the experiences of the students, but also linked those experiences to classroom instruction and readings on social capital, cultural identity, and deliberative democracy. In preparation for the weekly gatherings, students distributed flyers door-to-door each week, organized ice-breaker activities, researched and implemented arts-related projects using the newspaper for time spent with the children, and determined a flexible agenda for newspaper discussions with the adults. Toward the conclusion of the program, focus groups were organized to query residents and students about their thoughts, critiques, and suggestions about the weekly sessions we had crafted.

*Surveys*. The surveys were designed to probe for newspaper readership habits, community knowledge, community involvement, patterns of communication with public and housing officials, and demographic information (please refer to our survey in appendix A). Student teams were trained in survey collection methods, and informed of the background and details of the housing project and low-income communities more broadly. This training and background information is recognized as essential so students can validly and reliably collect data as well as understand the history, challenges, and opportunities of their community partner (Mitchell 2008). Upon conclusion of the training, forty five students and two faculty fanned out in the community, walking door-to-door, to administer the surveys.

*Weekly discussions*. At Thursday night meetings, news talks were planned for adults. Games and crafts were organized for children. More than 120 individuals participated over the fourteen-week program, ages five to sixty five, many of them returning weekly.

On average, forty seven people filled the community center each week to discuss issues in the news. We learned from the residents' council president that "door prizes" were necessary to attract residents to the events, so our participating newspaper partner provided weekly fifty dollar grocery cards and several ten dollar phone cards for this purpose. Funding from a local community foundation paid for food and drinks. After large posters at the housing community's entrances failed to attract large numbers of participants in the early weeks of the program, we found that taking student-produced flyers to the residents in their homes was a crucial outreach mechanism to boost meeting attendance. Student visibility in the community was an additional and important feature of the door-to-door campaign. Their presence served to open not only actual doors, but also the metaphorical doors into the lives of the residents who shared stories and experiences through these informal interactions.

***Interviews and focus groups.*** Audio and video tape recordings of the voices and stories of twenty two participants were transcribed and analyzed for additional qualitative insight into community concerns and newspaper reading habits. The focus groups were organized as the only instance where the students and low-income housing residents were separated.

***Data Analysis.*** We employed a mixed-methods approach to analyzing the data by identifying emergent themes in the discourse from narratives, focus group transcripts and video interviews, as well as interpreting the statistical data collected. After initial readings of the data, faculty used the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of tacking back and forth between data sets to lift up the recurring significant patterns and themes. Our research team crosschecked assumptions, observations, and implications following established protocols of qualitative inquiry.

Throughout our research process we questioned power differences in how we as researchers positioned ourselves, how we managed our privilege in being able to visit and then leave the site of our study, and in how we represented the residents' voices in our research (Mitchell 2008). We sought residents' input in determining the design of our research program and invited residents to voice their concerns, thoughts, and requests for changes to the design and process.

With a focus on societal power relations, we hoped to contribute to the ideal of an expanded role of citizens in relation to the media (Christians and Nordenstreng 2004). This approach moves us in the direction of a social policy wherein newspapers are accountable to all sectors of the community, not just beholden to the advertisers or economic drivers who generally set the agenda for news consumption (Gans 2003).

**Findings**

Our semester-long program was designed around the weekly meetings with the public housing residents held at their community center in addition to the twice-weekly class meetings with students held on campus. Students and low-income residents gathered Thursday evenings to talk about such current issues as the war in Iraq, AIDS, unemployment, teen violence, social security, racial tensions, and neighborhood needs. Together, they forged new bonds through informal socializing, built greater community understanding as they ate dinner together, and crafted ideas that generated some needed community changes. In class, students reflected on the previous week's news talks and explored ways to deepen their understanding of the low-income population and social issues they were facing. Those discussions, in turn, led to more newspaper reading, research, and brainstorming about the communicative means by which to engage in yet more meaningful ways with residents.

The housing project residents welcomed the students into their community center, and also hosted other community organizations, local elected government representatives, and the newspaper's editorial page editor. In this manner, a broader community partnership was collaboratively created and designed to increase opportunities for sharing stories and community organizing.

**Low-Income Community Member Outcomes: Using News as a Bridge to Foster Education and Community Building.**

Prior to the introduction of the newspaper to this community, less than 5% of the residents were regular subscribers, though 21% reported reading the newspaper regularly by purchasing the paper from a news box or reading one provided by a family member living elsewhere. After six months of free delivery, the weekday newspaper readership jumped to 71% and the weekend readership reached 94%. This finding is most important as the increased newspaper readership habit reflects a crucial behavioral change, seen as a first step in boosting civic involvement.

To determine how participants understood the specific value of newspaper readership, we probed for what residents believed was worthwhile in the newspaper. For instance, at the beginning of our research, none of the residents identified the educational value of the newspaper as a primary benefit. Six months later that changed markedly. One in eight respondents (13%) reported that the newspaper's educational value to their children was the most highly rated benefit of receiving the newspaper.

A graduate student involved in the research program was particularly encouraged about how news information could so positively impact the education of future generations as she shared a story she had almost forgotten:

> Because the resident's [preschool age] children were not yet old enough to read the newspaper, I almost skipped this question on the survey. However, I mentioned it briefly and she commented that her older daughter *does* like to look at the comics' page even though she can't read. This struck me personally, because my father taught me how to read using the Sunday comics.

The student was reminded by the resident that children from low-income families labeled "at risk" and considered indifferent to school are indeed interested and capable of learning given adequate resources. The student learned that systemic inequalities—in this case, the lack of reading materials in low-income families—demonstrate how the effects of poverty cross generational lines.

We believed from the onset of our program that once low-income residents were given regular access to the daily newspaper, their community interest and participation levels would rise (Fleming et al. 2005). In fact, we did note modest increases, particularly in the efforts of community members to assert a collective voice to city officials who attended some of the weekly meetings. The community members saw the realization of material outcomes after they spoke out, including upgrades in playground equipment, new outdoor food preparation equipment, and the continuing availability of the newspaper.[1]

One resident explained the value of the newspaper and weekly discussion circles this way: "I look forward to every week coming and having these different sessions 'cause it gives you something positive to do." Ed expressed his deep appreciation for having a reason to assemble that makes a difference in the quality of his life by noting, "I'm glad you all is doing this, this here. It's helping a whole lot, I mean it really is. It's helping a *whole* lot."

Our research illustrates an opportunity to counter the increasingly common phenomenon to withdraw socially, rather than actively engage others as Robert Putnam (2000) has noted in his studies of declining social capital. We believe that weekly discussions where community members shared their stories, coupled with newspaper reading, may be an important step to introducing people to the work and rewards of dialogic communal engagement and other outwardly focused activities. Everyone, from residents to housing staff and elected officials expressed surprise and appreciation at seeing so much interaction with the university students. Bringing residents together in their own neighborhood was a noted achievement. Although our work was situated within a low-income community and among college students, we believe the program's potential to ignite civic passion may be applied to nearly any demographic group.

**Student Outcomes: Stories of Community Engagement**

For students, this project showcased how a classroom's curriculum can inform community conversations to be "mutually informative, appropriately demanding, and responsive to community needs" (Cushman 2002, 50). In other words, the benefits of a critical service-learning experience like this one provided the opportunity for extended discussions of contentious issues where students and residents remained in conversation, rather than stalling, giving up or walking away (Ngan-Ling Chow et al. 2003). Participants listened attentively to one another as they put forth their own views in what we assessed to be productive and ethical dialogue ( Johannesen 2002). As one student said, "I often found myself utilizing my skills as a good listener to *really* concentrate…and not so much interjecting my personal opinions."

Multiple voices, including those of community members, their children, community administrators, students, and faculty, were articulated and heard in an interwoven narrative that reflects the feminist concern of interconnected lives (Noddings 1984; Wood 2003). A student summed up the value of forging connections when her story concluded with the insight, "To establish commonality with the other is to recognize kinship, and therefore obligation."

Another student lamented how ubiquitous the negative stereotyping is of low-income and poor people:

> I was taught that people who don't have money are bad people because they don't use their resources to their advantage to get ahead in the world and make something of themselves…[I learned that] really understanding why people are in poverty is the key to solving the problem.

This student indicated that the time she spent listening to what the residents had to say about their situations and the community more generally was one of her best learning outcomes and a testimony to the power of stories to give deep meaning to otherwise abstract social concerns (Rappaport 2000).

Our safety precautions and research gathering guidelines were extensive. Yet, despite our best efforts and detailed protocol to ready students for their service-learning encounters, we were not, and perhaps could not be, fully prepared for the spontaneous fear and learning that erupted once students were out of the classroom and on-site for the first time. Some students, visibly shaking,

echoed the sage advice their parents had given them as children. "Stay away from poor neighborhoods. You just don't want to know what happens behind those closed doors." These fears were real, as were the drug-dealing activity, drive-by shootings, and other criminal actions that circulate in low-income housing projects. We as faculty turned to dialogue and the feminist ethical precepts of authenticity, care, and reverence to guide us in our conversations and actions to model the research principles of our program for social change. Importantly, we stayed *with* our students inside and outside the classroom so that we could respond in the moment to what would arise.

The fear that is at the heart of a societal narrative prejudiced against poor people was evident among the students as they began this project. That fear, however, gave way to wonder by the end of the first day of survey data collection. Once students met the people they had previously only heard or read about, their engrained fears were allayed. Students reported being introduced to extended family members who graced framed photographs near the front doors of the homes they visited. Students watched children get their hair braided or nails painted as parents and grandparents happily answered survey questions. What was initially deemed a scary encounter, turned into a genuine moment of meeting as students' stereotyped narratives were replaced with positive experiences as this student explained: "My experience began before we surveyed the residents. It began in the gutter with my thoughts and I left it up to the community to dig themselves out of it. After they proved me wrong, I felt bad about my preconceived notions."

Upon reflection, most students likewise reported confronting biases they had not previously been aware they had, mirroring research results from a different three-year study of more than 2,000 students on how service-learning enhances academic outcomes. Those researchers found, "At times there was initial fear of the unknown, but repeatedly students reported the compassion, the passion, and the empathy they developed as they learned others are 'just like me'" (Prentice and Robinson 2010, 13). Further, the students reported overwhelmingly (99%) that the service-learning experience was an important way to put communication theories into practice to create social change for the benefit of the community.

**Community Outcomes: Narratives of Collaboration and Understanding**

Collaboration was also an essential dimension of student/low-income community member discussion groups (Stewart et al. 2004). Group members came together, in one instance, to write letters to the editor of the newspaper on health-care costs and after-school needs for children, which were later published and then prominently displayed in the community center as a source of great pride.

Further, the students and low-income community members were continually confronted with the need to reconsider their own views. For example, students one night were shocked then absorbed by the story of one community member living with HIV/AIDS, who despite her own challenges is an advocate for public education reform. Another evening proved sobering when movie tickets were offered to but rejected by adolescents we had come to know. The movie tickets were appreciated. However, without accessible bus transportation to get residents to the theatre, the tickets were deemed worthless. That insight allowed the students to expand their knowledge once

again into issues of public transportation routes, which they recognized as inadequate for these low-income families.

Another instance of collaboration and understanding was the newspaper company's decision to hire a community resident to deliver newspapers daily to each household. This act provided one resident a sustained income for nearly six months. In recognizing this need and meeting it, those individuals at the newspaper who provided this funding acknowledged this inequality. Additionally, as students learned of this hire they recognized that particular economic choices impact specific people in our communities. We highlight this funding for its small but powerful illustration of recognizing economic inequalities and acting toward social justice in concrete instances.

A consistent feature of these shared stories was the recognition by students of the pronounced difference of resources available to some sectors of the community. For instance, grocery stores, banks, social service agencies, and other common businesses are not within walking distance for the residents who are for the most part without the use of cars. Relying on public transportation is reasonable, yet difficult. Bus transportation is limited—routes running every thirty or sixty minutes—and for residents who use the bus, they must stand as they wait at most bus stops, since more than 90% are without benches or shelters. In turn, this prompted a process of questioning individual and communal obligations to address such inequities. Although talking about what it requires to ameliorate injustice is not always the same as securing change, we uphold the view that talk creates our realities and is an important form of action itself that transforms views, sets agendas, and sometimes, if not always, also secures material change (Del Gandio 2008).

A vital dimension of the weekly discussions then was the openness of community members and students to engage each other's stories, even if they were uncomfortable or challenging (Ngan-Ling Chow et al. 2003). The people in our program came to know how their conversational partners were the proverbial "others" to be respected for their distinct stories and experiences (Bakhtin 1993; Parkiss 1999).

**Lessons Learned and Conclusions**

Providing access to the news as a gateway to political engagement, we argue, is a moral obligation of communities to their most vulnerable populations and should become part of social policy ( Jabri 2004), one that specifically addresses social inequality for women who fill so many of the homes in our low income communities (Dizuinzio and Young 1997). It is within this context that conversations emerged before, during, and after the project with local and regional newspaper employees about that possibility. We know of no other similar program in the country that has not only focused on building community relationships through use of the newspaper but has also advocated for public policy change for greater newspaper distribution to vulnerable populations.

This research used newspapers as a vehicle to probe matters of politics and voice, dialogic and feminist ethics, community and participation, and cross-cultural story sharing as a form of critical service-learning in order to advocate for civic engagement and social change in a low-income community among residents and local university students. In Greensboro, like many

other communities, the challenges of diversity show themselves in the political arena. There, decisions are made regarding the adequate and fair distribution of resources. From our news talks, we learned lessons we believe are relevant to others considering similar critical service-learning programs.

First, even though low-income community members reported low political engagement (in the previous year, only 10% reported contacting an elected official and 6% attended a political rally), their actual behavior demonstrated more active community participation. Community members wrote letters to the editor of the local paper and requested (and received) new grills and playgrounds. The participation in our project, in sheer numbers, indicated a robust engagement reflecting an incipient and emerging political activism. One possible explanation we considered for why residents may have underreported their involvement was that they are so often disciplined and directed to follow orders in the systems of social services. The requirement to comply with what residents may view as arbitrary rules may make them more attuned to bureaucratic structures than individual accomplishment. Another and perhaps more likely reason for the discrepancy, we concluded, is attributable to differing definitions of political action. Identifying political action as voting, protesting, and petition-gathering does not recognize the importance of talk, the ability to articulate one's views, and the everyday stories and actions that contribute to a community's well-being dependent on an informed and reflective understanding of political choices and actions.

In understanding what prompted the activity we recorded, it could be argued we were witness to a Hawthorne effect (Kraut and McConahay 1973) that suggests our interest in residents provoked their positive changes to impress our research team. In fact, we find this explanation less than insightful as it discounts low-income members' stories of their own agency and self-knowledge, negating their worth, dignity, and respect (Levinas 1961/1998). Also, while there remains agreement that a Hawthorne effect identifies the performance of compliance, there is little agreement among researchers of what actually causes the Hawthorne effect (Kraut and McConahay 1973). Instead we view low-income members' actions as recognition of their voices, speaking toward the budding political engagement that emerges when people share their hearts and stories with one another; this is both a premise and a promise for long-term democratic participation.

Our second lesson was to note the necessity of transparency in communicating the assumptions and goals of a critical service-learning program to inspire political engagement. Offering clear course expectations was beneficial for students. We made visible that we would be probing the structural, political, ethical, and democratic demands of civic engagement as a member of society. The course emphasis on stories, dialogue, and public participation informed students that we would learn about an issue through academic literature, daily newspaper reading, and engaging diverse others in authentic discussion to address the need for social change (Stewart et al. 2004).

Third, students and low-income community partners are well suited to teach and learn together through storytelling and critical inquiry. Communication for understanding occurred across different cultural and ethnic groups in what Putnam (2000) terms "bridging" social capital. The net result was not just tolerance of different views, but a sincere appreciation by the students for

the structural challenges facing low-income residents and an equally sincere appreciation by the low-income residents for the meaningful opportunities for engagement that college students were afforded through higher education (Dennis 2007). James, a community member with young children of his own, encouraged the college students to continue their studies and to look behind the stigma and stereotypes that defined him and others. With other low-income community members, James spoke with hope as he put his faith in the college students to talk with city officials to find and then share information with the residents about after-school programs for children, summer youth employment, and adult job training opportunities.

While Putnam's (2000) work is encouraging for citizens and leaders who want to build strong communities, scholars may want to focus more closely on the *quality* of interaction. Putnam notes the importance of the quantity of interactions, but we recognized that meaningful relationships would emerge not from shallow conversations no matter how plentiful, but instead through storytelling and dialogic encounters, where ideas could flow freely in an environment of respect, authenticity, and openness (Bakhtin 1993).

As the stories unfolded in our program, we witnessed a greater appreciation for and enactment of what the newspaper has to offer a community by way of prompting deliberation within families and between different social groups. For instance, one resident explained, "I got my 10 year-old son, you know, I'm trying to get him into the habit, he's always trying to grab and read the sports, I tell him you can read them sports, but you also going to read something else too." College students likewise got into the routine of reading the newspaper. One student noted the benefit of doing so:

> As college students, we know very little about the community compared to other citizens…. I now have a new outlook on community involvement [and] …it has become a habit of mine to read at least the headlines of newspaper articles. I am now interested in what goes on in my local area, not just the university.

Students learned from and with our community partners to speak competently about issues of poverty and its effect on housing opportunities, employment opportunities, health care, and education—all matters that impact the daily lives of low-income community members. Also, the experience allowed students to apply their academic knowledge to the "complex real-world situations and problems" they encountered (Prentice and Robinson 2010).

The rapport between Jill, a Southern raised, traditional age, white student, and Sylvia, a middle-age Southern-raised Black woman illustrates this learning well. Jill discussed in class one day that she did not fully understand how people ended up in public housing until she met Sylvia and heard the story of this public housing resident who at age forty was supporting two children and an elderly mother. Sylvia had worked full time, but eventually quit her job to care for her mother. The student learned that though Sylvia was highly educated with a solid work history, she was unable to hold onto a job in the face of her mother's illness. This situation, in turn, led to a discussion of what social services exist in the United States to help people in such situations, and what alternative forms of health care exist in other countries to mitigate the situation in which Sylvia found herself. This student's reflection and participation in a larger discussion about

social inequality demonstrates the lesson of recognizing structural inequality for members in our critical service-learning project and relocating blame away from the "poor" person.

The fourth lesson was our acknowledgement as faculty of the necessity for close coordination with our community partners and students. In our case, we benefited from first launching a pilot program with residents in a smaller low-income community. Our missteps there, and there were several, allowed us to see gaps in our understanding of cultural differences. Faculty and students alike learned from the pilot project and made adjustments to the design of our study to more dialogically engage low-income community members from beginning to end. The cooperative learning endeavor meant that student insights served at least three main functions. First, the students reflected in speech and writing assignments how their personal experiences challenged or upheld the implications of classroom readings. Second, students manifested and had to take responsibility for learning beyond what is possible, or even desirable from an instructor-delivered curriculum. Third, students experienced what we see as a more democratic form of teaching and learning wherein the students' experiences and new, local knowledge were folded into deeper understanding, discussion, and community action.

On a related note, we found that for critical service-learning to be successful there needs to be a long-term commitment to the process. Our campus-community partnership continues after more than five years. The project has shifted directions slightly to take place at a high school where students from several surrounding low-income housing projects attend. A long-term relationship allows all members to work out the difficulties, surprises, and discoveries of a dialogic, critical service-learning process.

The semester-based structure of college life can clearly disrupt community initiatives, and even cause them to be short-lived. As a result, we have thoughtfully imagined ways to bridge the work of students one semester to the next. We use the work products of previous students and residents—narrative accounts, end-of-semester video presentations and posters—to introduce the project to new students each semester. In this way, the past work is not lost, but instead carried forward by the faculty and community partners who continue with the project and use the bi-annual breaks as well to reevaluate, redirect, and improve the program (Cushman 2002).

In this process, we have found that a successful campus community partnership involves not just one, but many partners to increase the resources available for a targeted group. By having multiple partners, the possibility to garner wide community support increases exponentially to ensure the project's success. Our program involved a corporate-owned daily newspaper, a nonprofit focused on the area's public schools and early childhood education, the local community foundation's young philanthropists, the area's housing authority, and the university's office of leadership and service-learning. Cultivating and managing such relationships demanded great effort. We involved students in the process, but ultimately learned that it is faculty members who best provide the home base of consistency from which long-term community partnerships flourish, by sustaining and promoting the stories that emerge.

This unique critical service-learning project illustrates our moral obligations, especially toward women, to use the news and to collaborate with multiple community partners to advocate for public policy changes directed toward greater newspaper distribution and its attendant political

engagement for vulnerable populations. This research also demonstrates the importance of "news talk," that is, of discussing the news among a diverse group of people as a means to contribute and create change through talk (Del Gandio 2008). By engaging in such a critical and political service-learning project we learned that transparent expectations for students are vital. We also learned that the quality of conversation and interaction is essential to bridging social capital (Putnam 2000) and in the development of self-other relationships (Bakhtin 1993) that allow for this bridging to happen. Finally, this study affirms the importance of close coordination with multiple service-learning partners, over the long term, as a means to create effective critical service-learning for all participants.

This study confirms that a vibrant civic life is greatly enhanced by access to news and the ability to engage in civic processes through storytelling to encourage dialogue. We contend that similar projects could and should be replicated in other communities with strong benefits for all campus-community partners. As such, we hope these lessons and the stories that inform them are useful to others who are interested in bolstering civic engagement via newspapers and critical service-learning courses.


## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## ENDNOTES

1. Free door-to-door delivery of the newspaper concluded after six months. However, our media partner reconfigured the newspaper stand on site to be an "honor box" that allowed residents to get the daily newspaper for free or pay. It is of note that this "honor box" netted revenue equal to that of the for-profit newspaper boxes located in the city's downtown.

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**APPENDIX A: SURVEY**

Please provide your home address:_____

**Newspaper Readership Survey**

**Before delivery last week, on average, how often did you read the *News and Record* during the week (Monday-Friday only)?**
Never Once a Week Twice a Week Three Times as Week Four Times a Week Every day

**Before delivery last week, on average, how often did you read the *News and Record* on the weekend (Saturday and Sunday only)?**
Never Once on the Weekend Both Saturday and Sunday

**What is the likelihood that you would read the *News and Record* if it was not provided free?**
Not at all Likely Somewhat Likely Likely Very Likely Extremely likely

**In addition to the *News and Record*, what other source(s) do you use to get informed about news and events?**
**(Check all that apply)**
_____ Television _____ Radio _____ Magazines
_____ Internet _____ Church/Place of Worship _____ Community Newsletter
_____ Carolina Peacemaker _____ Rhinoceros Times _____ Greensboro Observer
_____ Family _____ Other (please list:_____)

**Which do you consider the most important source for your news**
_____

**If you do NOT read the *News and Record* at least once a week, please skip the next 3 questions.**

**1. When you read the *News and Record*…**
a. Are you better informed about local community issues & events?
Yes Unsure No
b. Are you better informed about national issues and politics?
Yes Unsure No
c. Are you better informed about international issues?
Yes Unsure No
d. Are you better able to discuss local, national and international issues with family and friends?
Yes Unsure No
e. Do you save money by using the coupons?
Yes Unsure No
f. Are you better informed about store sales?
Yes Unsure No
g. Are you better informed about job opportunities?
Yes Unsure No
h. Are you better informed about things for sale in the classifieds?
Yes Unsure No
i. Are you better informed about movies, art, and entertainment?
Yes Unsure No
j. Are you better informed about the outdoors and the environment?
Yes Unsure No N/A
k. Do your children benefit in their educational goals and homework?
Yes Unsure No N/A
l. Please indicate any other benefits you receive from reading the *News and Record*:
(please list:_____)
******Please circle the most important benefit you receive in the list above.**

**2. Check off the sections you read in the *News and Record*:**
_____ Front page _____ Sports section
_____ Local community section _____ Editorial section
_____ Classifieds (such as real estate, jobs, cars) _____ Obituaries
_____ Business section _____ Life section (such as movies and arts)
_____ Comics _____ TV Listing

_____ Coupons/Advertisements _____ Other (please list:_____)
******Please circle the section that you read first in the list above.**

**3. List the 3 most important things YOU have learned from reading the newspaper in the last month:**
1.
_____
2.
_____
3.
_____
**Have you ever subscribed to the *News and Record*?** Yes No

**If you haven't subscribed to the *News and Record* in the past, which of the following describes your situation?**
___ Not within my current budget
___ Don't find useful information in the newspaper
___ Not enough time to read the newspaper
___ Don't like newspapers laying around my house
___ Prefer other forms of media
___Other(please list:_____)

**How many people live in your home other than you?** 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more
**Please skip if you live alone**. Excluding you, list the ages of people living in your home and the TOTAL number of days you think they read the *News and Record* each week (Sunday-Saturday):
Age_____ Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Age_____ Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Age_____ Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Age_____ Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Age_____ Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

**Think about your family meals at home. How often do you discuss the news over a meal (circle one):**
Daily Frequently Occasionally Rarely Never _____

**Community Involvement**

**How often have you participated in the following events in the local community in the past 6 months? (Circle your response)**
Attended PTA meeting at your child's school
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Attended Greensboro City Council meeting
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Attended free cultural events (such as music in the park)
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Attended free public lectures

Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times

**How often have you participated in the following events in the local community in the past 30 days? (Circle your response)**
Went to the local Farmer's Market
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Went to the Greensboro Public Library
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Attended neighborhood gatherings
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Attended local church/place of worship services
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Volunteered in the local community
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times
Visited a park or recreation area
Never 1-2 times 3-4 times 5-6 times More than 6 times

**In the last year, have you... (check all that apply):**
___ Written a letter to a newspaper?
___ Done regular volunteer work?
___ Attended club meetings?
___ Spoken in front of a large group?
___ Contacted someone in state government?
___ Contacted someone in local government?
___ Attended a political rally?

**Did you vote in the last presidential election?** Yes No Unsure
**Did you vote in the last citywide election?** Yes No Unsure
**Do you follow local news?** Yes No Unsure

**How comfortable do you feel approaching city officials to discuss your needs and concerns?**
Not at all comfortable Somewhat comfortable Comfortable Very comfortable Extremely comfortable

**How worthwhile is it for you to approach city officials to discuss you needs and concerns?**
Not at all comfortable Somewhat comfortable Comfortable Very comfortable Extremely comfortable

**How comfortable do you feel approaching Ray Warren Homes/Greensboro Housing Authority managers to discuss your needs and concerns?**
Not at all comfortable Somewhat comfortable Comfortable Very comfortable Extremely comfortable

**How worthwhile is it for you to approach Ray Warren Homes/Greensboro Housing Authority managers to discuss your needs and concerns?**
Not at all comfortable Somewhat comfortable Comfortable Very comfortable Extremely comfortable

**Demographics**
**Age:** _____
**Gender:** ____ Male ____ Female
**How would you identify your Race/Ethnicity?**
___ Black/African-American ___ Asian/Pacific Islander ___ Hispanic
___ Native American ___ White/European American ___Other(please list)_____

**What is the highest level of education you have completed?**
___ Elementary/Middle School
___ High School
___ Community College/Technical Institute
___ Some College
___ 4-Year College/University
___ Graduate/Professional Degree

**Are you employed?** ___ Yes ___ No
If so, what is your occupation?_____

**How many people contribute to your household income?** 1 2 3 4 or more

**How long have you lived in Greensboro?**
Less than 1 year 1-2 years 3-5 years More than 5 years
If more than 5 years, please list number of years: _____