

Listening, Reflecting and Collaborating: A Look from Inside the Creation of a Peace and Service Course

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Through the creation of a new course at UC Berkeley, the authors detail how they utilize collaborative practices and a focus on reflection to create a unique space on campus where students could slow the pace of life and truly connect. The resulting course, Six Billion Paths, emphasizes the interrelationship between students' daily actions and their contributions to peace-building and service for social change. By introducing students to theory on conflict resolution, engagement in service, and an on-going practice of reflection, the instructors have found that students are better able to relate to the larger communities in which they live they live and feel like they have a voice and place to make a difference.

CREATING SIX BILLION PATHS

In higher education, there are often few places where students are encouraged to make practical and lived connections with the theoretical models they explore in the classroom. For this reason, Megan Voorhees, Director of the Public Service Center at the University of California Berkeley and Liane Louie, Program Officer at the Shinnyo-en Foundation, an independent foundation focused on cultivating world harmony, developed the idea of creating a peace and service course at UC Berkeley. As their idea gained momentum, Maura Wolf, Staff Consultant at the Foundation, and two undergraduate student fellows, Kana Yoshida and Audrey Lin, entered the conversations. Rapidly, it became a powerful partnership.

The process to create the course was to meet regularly, contribute fully, and allow the creation and teaching of the course to be an experiment. Each partner was committed to bringing our whole selves into the process and reflecting deeply as we worked. When we showed up to a meeting stressed out and overwhelmed, we did not rush to move beyond that place; rather, we practiced slowing down and creating the kind of environment we were hoping to have in the classroom. Because we all shared the belief that service and peace-building are both inherently spiritual in nature, there was room to bring our intellect and our spiritual wisdom to each conversation.

Throughout the following spring and summer, our group met regularly to develop the course that would be facilitated by the two students in the fall through a UC Berkeley program that enables students to design and teach for-credit courses with faculty oversight. The resulting course, *Six Billion Paths: Finding Your Authentic Voice for Social Change*, was developed with the primary goal to increase students' awareness of how their daily actions contribute to peace-building by introducing them to theory on conflict resolution, engagement in service, and an on-going practice of reflection. Central to the development of the course was a focus on the use of reflection in the classroom to help students clarify their values, and consider the alignment of their actions to those values.

Three central pedagogical strategies contributed to creating a deeply transformative process for the students in the class, the faculty who engaged with it, the Foundation staff, and the administrators who were involved. These strategies included: listening to student needs, the practice of reflection, and intensive collaboration between the various partners planning the course. Through examples from the course, we will discuss how we applied these three strategies to achieve transformation in and outside of the classroom.

ADDRESSING STUDENT NEEDS IN COURSE DESIGN

Before designing this course, we sought out student voices in order to gain input and insight into what particular needs we should address. Through our collaboration with student fellows, we identified a number of student needs that many UC Berkeley students experience that a course could address; these needs are described in the fellow's own words below:

1. Students have a need to slow the pace and the noise of campus life.

Today's college students lead very fragmented lifestyles. Walk down Sproul Plaza, a major walkway of the UC Berkeley Campus, and you are bound to meet a mob of neon flyers, pamphlets, and shouts that broadcast upcoming events and political inequalities. Sit in a lecture hall, and you are likely to first listen to a series of students making announcements, and then notice that many students are emailing, on Facebook, or texting others throughout the class.

A typical Berkeley student will take about 14 to 17 units a semester, which is the equivalent of about 42 to 51 hours of schoolwork each week¹. Add this already-full course load to a part-time job, extra-curricular activities, meals, exercise, the internet, and relationships, and there is very little time set aside for reflection, sleep, and relaxation. With so many opportunities, stimulation, ideas, and theories, students are desperately seeking spaces for reflection, stillness, and calm from the bustling college lifestyle.

To address this need, each class began with a grounding or centering practice – sometimes a meditation, other times a reflective question to be answered in pairs. The many reflective conversations, storytelling and practices such as yoga and free writing, were also woven into each class to help students slow down the pace of life and create spaces of calm and quiet.

2. External expectations must be balanced by internal clarity of values and priorities.

Implicit in the current structure of higher education is the idea that knowledge exists outside of the students. The lecture format, as well as the emphasis on articles and textbooks, encourages students to rely on their professors and texts as authorities of knowledge. In a typical lecture, students spend one to two hours listening to the professor's presentation and argument, and vigorously recording their teacher's words in their notes. Often, the lecture moves so quickly that students take notes without processing the content behind their words. This educational structure discourages students from thinking for themselves and discovering the clarity and conviction that stems from their own internal authority.

By focusing a significant amount of class time on values clarification, we began to help students seek out their internal belief structures. Instructors invited students to reflect on the values of their ancestors, or a value that was meaningful for them on that particular day as well as complete reflection papers that asked questions about values. Guest speakers also joined the course and spoke boldly and passionately about their core values, which added to this need being met as well.

3. The conceptual focus of current higher education teaching needs to be balanced with a practical and lived engagement with ideas.

It is not uncommon for a typical liberal arts class to require up to two hundred pages of reading a week; when multiplied by four classes, this volume of reading leaves a student swimming in 800 pages of text. With such rigorous demand of intellect, students prioritize the study of ideas and theory over relationships. As a result, they often fall out of touch with their communities and the power of their daily actions. They view social change as something they can affect after they receive their diplomas.

¹ According to UC Berkeley's Academic Senate Regulation 760, one unit is the equivalent of three hours of work per week, or 45 hours of work per semester. See http://slc.berkeley.edu/ucfr/docs/unit_value.pdf.

Though the conceptual focus of academia does expose, and, thereby, empower students with paradigm-shifting knowledge and ideas, it often neglects to consider how these ideas trickle into the practical problems and experiences of daily life. Therefore, by failing to address practical action, the academic focus on concepts dissuades students from acting on their critical understanding and living out the ideals about which they are learning.

Through integrating three distinct service learning projects into course curriculum, all students engaged in and reflected upon their lived engagement along with the ideas presented in the class. These visits to a soup kitchen, a unique restaurant built upon barter, and a self-designed project added a richness to the classroom reflection and conversations.

4. Since hopelessness and isolation are so dominate in current student life, there is a need for intimate spaces of connection that provide a counterbalance.

For many students, college is a time for exploration, newfound independence, and self-discovery. It is the first time most freshmen are living on their own, away from the direct control of parents and other authority figures. While such independence offers students the opportunity to explore different communities and cultivate their passions, the emptiness that arises from having no defined community simultaneously creates a sense of isolation.

Where many students previously belonged to a core community composed of family members and close friends, the wealth of opportunities in today's educational institutions creates a movement of students from one opportunity to the next that contributes to creating fragmented lives. This, combined with the four-year turnover rate brought on by graduation, leaves student communities constantly in flux. Students, therefore, need more spaces that foster deep connection (with both themselves and others) to counterbalance the isolation and despair triggered by the loss of firm community/family values and guidance.

This need for connection and community was addressed primarily through the intimate space created by the student instructors. The class environment was a stark contrast to many UC Berkeley classrooms that are lecture style with at least 60 students whom rarely speak to those next to them. The classroom used for this course was in a residence hall set up with 30 chairs in a circle with ample room to spread out and do yoga or other activities when necessary. This space facilitated and added to the intimacy created by small home groups of 4-5 students that met regularly and one-on-one conversations on a variety of personal topics.

- 5. Seeing the big picture of current social dynamics is challenging, especially when trying to figure out an individual role for impact that has meaning. The question, “How can anything I do really have an impact?” and the thought, “I care a lot but I can’t imagine my efforts will matter,” are common.**

Another introductory course to Peace and Conflict Studies at UCB offers a broad overview of class, race, gender, and sexuality inequalities that are imbedded in the histories of war, policies, genocides, and systems under which our lives are governed. Such exposure of the macro-level forces that drive our world systems and trickle down to our local communities can easily leave college students feeling overwhelmed, depressed, and desensitized. Moreover, as members of academic institutions of power, college students are beneficiaries of the privilege that comes with inequality. Many were born in social positions that enabled them to study, consume school supplies, and acquire goods.

In learning about these structural forces, students often find themselves in a state of cognitive dissonance; they feel wrong about the violence that they have both inherited and from which they have benefited, yet they are simultaneously entrenched in the system, and they must find some way to justify how the freedoms of their lifestyle are still contributing to harm. Any change, students reason, must change the whole system and all the layers and structures of inequality. Such a daunting task leaves students paralyzed from taking any practical steps towards change.

“What is your path?” was a central question that students were able to focus on all semester within our course. This directional focus helped them identify their individual roles and desires for engagement along with inspiring guest speakers who told the stories of their path and offered a model of how to reflect upon experiences and make sense of them on a day-to-day basis as a way to lead to meaningful engagement in social issues.

The needs that Kana and Audrey, student co-instructors, articulated connect closely to the preliminary results of the *Spirituality in Higher Education* research study. Similar to the findings shared in an April 13, 2005 press release from the College Student Beliefs and Values Survey, three-fourths of the students say that they are ‘searching for meaning/purpose in life’ and similar numbers report that they have discussions about the meaning of life with friends; likewise, about two thirds consider it ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ that their college enhance their self understanding (69%), prepare them for responsible citizenship (67%), develop their personal values (67%) and provide for their emotional development (63%).

Once articulated and discussed, these needs formed the basis from which the course was created, highlighting important areas where pedagogy and practice can be addressed both inside and outside the classroom.

INCLUDING A FOCUS ON REFLECTION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

Our approach to developing the course involved a process of reflection and values clarification as we collaborated about the course design. During this shared process, we took the time to think deeply about our own relationships to peace and service, and share stories that brought these themes alive for each other so we could understand where we were coming from and what we hoped would be incorporated into the class. We practiced reflection workshops with students before deciding what should be included in the curriculum and debriefed after many of the sessions with the students. We knew that we could teach about this topic only to the degree we were living it.

This course focuses on reflection for the means of exploring self, values, and a personal sense of purpose. It comes from the Shinnyo-en philosophy that states, “As you become more aware of the connections between your actions and your attitudes, beliefs and values, you can learn to shift your perspective or your actions so that service can become more meaningful to you” (Link, Corral & Gerzon, p. 207). The orientation of the class is on helping students to clarify about what it is that brings them joy and peace, while it simultaneously benefits the world in some way.

According to Shinnyo-en Foundation staff:

The awareness of “being in integrity” is a continual process. In each moment, factions in our internal and external environment change. We get sick, others come to lend us a hand, our beliefs change, our emotions change, and people around us do things that impact our day. We have to be flexible and adjust ourselves to move with these shifts. Sometimes this requires us to have a new relationship to our thoughts, emotions or sensations in our bodies. At times the shifts that are needed are huge, and life-altering. Most of the time, they are not; they are minor adjustments that can be made on a very subtle level (Link, Corral, & Gerzon, p. 209).

The format of the course includes a variety of reflection methods: a grounding practice at the beginning of each class, guest speakers that engage students in reflective practices, and service projects that engage students in thinking about their values and the ways in which their actions are in sync with their values. Guest speakers presented on topics that range from ‘developing a spiritual practice’ and ‘non-violence and Buddhist principles’ to ‘understanding our stress response.’ Another central part of the course structure is a component called “home groups.” Home groups are small groups of four to five students whose purpose is to create a safe space for students to process their lives in the context of class topics. These groups provide students the space to build deeper relationships with their peers as they share personal goals and challenges.

Overall, the course focuses on bringing students’ minds, hearts, and actions into alignment. It is based in an understanding that this is a process that takes repetition and time. According to co-teacher Kana Yoshida, “It has only been through working with this material over a period of many months that I am beginning to internalize it at a deeper level. As I am doing this, I can tell that it is having a ripple effect on the class.” Co-teacher Audrey Lin reinforces a similar sentiment, “It’s the process of engagement and reflection that is making what we are learning personal and purposeful.”

THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATION

While designing this course, we choose to create an intensive collaborative and non-hierarchical process that we hoped would help us meaningfully address student needs and interest in new ways. Our collaboration also helps to ensure that while also ensuring the practices and wisdom from the fields of peace and conflict studies, spiritual development theory, and service-learning were incorporated in our curriculum.

Earlier strategies we highlighted demonstrate how we listened to student fellows about their needs to create a collaborative spirit in our work. What did they feel like they needed in their education? What formats might work for them? What needs did they perceive in their peers that might be met by a course like this?

Another strategy we used was identifying areas in which the collaborators wanted to teach. Discussing how our passions and interests connected to course topics and readings resulted in the class coming alive from a place of authenticity that none of us had experienced before within the confines of higher education.

Because we had hoped this course would ripple out to impact the traditional faculty-taught courses at the University, we extended this spirit of collaboration to the Chair and several professors within the Peace and Conflict Studies Department. One such collaborator was the faculty-sponsor of the student-led course, Professor Americ Azevedo. Early on, he was excited about the course and happy to support the students; he showed interest in learning from their work and collaborated to help them think about the structure of the syllabus, guest speakers, and navigating the University's administrative system.

In the end, Azevedo became not only an advocate of the course but a convert to some of its strategies. He noted, "It has changed the way I'm teaching my class. As a result of what happened in the student-led course, I've incorporated vision actualization projects into my Non-Violence Today course. These projects invite students to get clear about what their vision is for how they want to contribute to the world, and begin acting on it in a tangible way. They are all asked to find their purpose (or dharma) in this nonviolent world."

Professor Jerry Sanders, the Chair of the Peace and Conflict Studies Department, was impressed enough with the class to agree to partner with the Shinnyo-en Foundation in developing a faculty-led course with another professor that is modeled after *Six Billion Paths*. It is also currently being taught and the Foundation staff is invited in regularly to lead reflection activities that connect to the lecture content.

SHARING STUDENT VOICES ABOUT *SIX BILLION PATHS*

The impact on the students who participated in *Six Billion Paths* was rich and varied as their reflections demonstrate. Five primary themes, many of a very spiritual nature, were mentioned in final reflection papers, including:

- Recognizing the interconnectedness of all people;
- Having a new understanding for the importance of crossing boundaries and interacting with people formerly viewed as “the other”;
- Cultivating gratitude;
- Making commitments to developing a spiritual practice; and
- Grappling with the complexity of clarifying and living with a sense of purpose.

One spoke to this process of grappling with the complexities when she wrote:

Recently, after much turmoil and many sleepless nights, I’ve been exploring new frames of mind in which I can frame my identity. I’ve discovered that there are multiple sides – sometimes contradicting points of view – that are a part of me. How do you reconcile elements that may not fit together cohesively to create harmony? The truth is that it is probably impossible. To strive for perfection is folly because there are sides within me that are irreconcilable. Realizing this, I decided to dispense with perfection and struggle to discover a combination that is not perfect but works best for me even with its own inherent weaknesses.

Another spoke to the growing sense of gratitude:

In the beginning of the semester, when a group of us went to GLIDE Community Church to help serve food for many of the homeless people in San Francisco, I became more aware of the great need that many communities have. This experience has since allowed me to be grateful for the opportunity given to me of being in college, and the fact that I am well enough to provide a simple service to others who are in more need than I am.

A third, recognizing the power of interconnectedness, noting:

I have learned that all of our roots are intertwined, no matter where we come from. We all have places, people, smells, food, that we hold dear. They may not be the exact same things, but the fact remains, we have these things in common at the core of our beings.

In general, the students in the course report that the repetition of the reflective practices and related pedagogy (from silent sitting to writing, small group sharing, guest speakers who speak to the concepts of daily practice), all have an impact on their ability to internalize the reflection process while they are growing in their understanding of non-violence.

In their recent book, Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) describe the current state of exploration of values and meaning in higher education. They make the case for the need for programs and courses like the one described in this paper and offer more in-depth examples of schools that have taken this mission on wholeheartedly. In drawing to a close they state:

Effective leadership for recovering spirit requires attention, commitment and deep personal integrity. It requires the courage to take personal risks and to act out of what Parker Palmer calls “the Rosa Parks decision” – the decision to “live divided no more,” to no longer behave differently on the outside than the true self on the inside (p. 271).

In higher education, it is important to create spaces for students to explore their values and learn how to integrate their learning experiences into their lives in meaningful ways. While this can be done through innovative courses such as the one described here, it is also important to create opportunities in every course for students to reflect on the connections between their lived experiences and the course materials, so they can apply their learning, while learning from one another.

Audrey Lin is a third-year Interdisciplinary Studies major at UC Berkeley, concentrating on “Nonviolence, Spirituality, and Societal Evolution.” Since January 2008, Audrey has served as a Service and Peace Fellow with the Cal Corps Public Service Center and the Shinnyo-en Foundation. She also works with the Metta Center for Nonviolence Education (mettacenter.org), where she will co-facilitate their 2009 Summer Mentorship Program in Nonviolence. An advocate for creating cross-cultural dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation, she narrated UC Berkeley’s 2009 production of Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* (a play as part of a greater campaign to expose and end violence against women; vday.org). She lives for the transformations she sees in both herself and others through the work of nonviolence, peace education, and social change.

Liane Louie Badua serves as Program Officer for the Shinnyo-en Foundation. A local San Franciscan that graduated from UC Santa Cruz in Psychology, she has a Master’s of Science from Boston University, and a Master’s of Arts and a Ph.D. from Pacific Graduate School in Psychology. She is a psychologist, specializing in child, youth and family clinical issues, and has worked in the Bay Area and Honolulu in a variety of different capacities. Her interests have included post-traumatic stress disorder, Asian American mental health and women’s issues. She has served on a variety of board and local organizations and has worked in the nonprofit sector for many years. Upon becoming staff in 2002, Liane has overseen the grantmaking program, and has worked to develop meaningful relationships with grantees and Foundation friends. Liane’s greatest joy is being the mother of her three-year old son, Kai.

Megan Voorhees is the Director of the Center for Public Service at the University of California, Berkeley and has spent the past twenty years working with youth and young adults through service-learning, experiential education, and leadership development programs. She has a Masters in Theological Studies from the Graduate Theological Union where she explored how to support the spiritual development of students through service and social action in secular settings.

Maura Wolf is a Staff Consultant for the Shinnyo-en Foundation, and has been engaged in leadership development activities relating to young adults for the past twenty years. With an M.A. in Leadership from Saint Mary's College of California, she began her commitment to leadership as a student at the University of Richmond while heavily involved in starting the Volunteer Action Council and Virginia COOL. Author of *Exploring Realities: Stories of Young Women Making Decisions and Finding Meaning*, she has long been an advocate for young people engaging in reflective practices combined with community engagement. In addition to consulting, she is a leadership coach with InBalance Coaching (www.in-balancecoaching.com).

Kana Yoshida is the 07-08 Service & Peace Fellow at the Cal Corps Public Service Center at UC Berkeley. Her work involved a direct partnership with the Shinnyo-en Foundation to bring the foundation's peacebuilding initiative, *Six Billion Paths to Peace*, onto the Berkeley Campus through facilitating workshops for students, organizing a retreat, and developing and teaching a *Six Billion Paths to Peace* curriculum in a student-lead class that explored different philosophies and practices on how to develop and sustain the authentic self for social justice and social change work. Currently, she is a 4th year student studying Peace & Conflict Studies and Japanese Language, working at the Center for Japanese Studies at UC Berkeley and getting ready to graduate this May. Her plans after graduation are to continue building and living her path to peace while working in Japan and connecting back to her cultural and spiritual roots.

References

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