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“Exploring the Basement of Social Justice Issues”: A Graduate Upon Graduation

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“EXPLORING THE BASEMENT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES”

A Graduate Upon Graduation

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This chapter dialogically represents a roundtable at the 2008 International Communication Association conference at which we dialogued about readying students to communicate toward bettering society. After outlining our contextual similarity of Jesuit education that, in the words of one author, encourages “exploring the basement of social justice issues rather than spending all our time the in the attic,” we discuss teaching toward such social justice in multiple contexts. Although we write as if this directly chronicles our roundtable, it is actually a creative narrative¹ written from multiple sources, including our: (a) e-mails seeking participation, (b) original conference submission, (c) presession meeting, (d) actual roundtable discussion, (e) 1 to 23 years of educating experience in Jesuit institutions, and (f) postconference blogging.²

¹Ours is similar to the creative narrative format advanced in Brown (1993).

²Although in our interactions there were multiple conversations revolving more directly around God, faith, and doing our work *ad maiorem de gloriam*—for the greater glory of God—for this chapter, we highlighted the more universal aspects of our discussions that can translate across institutions.

Scene: Drummond Centre room of Le Centre Sheraton in Montreal, Canada at 9 a.m. Friday, May 23, where panelists have gathered in a circle with attendees.

Erika: Good morning! I'm Erika Kirby from Creighton University, and I'd like to welcome you to *Preparing Students to Communicate for Social Impact in Jesuit Education*. Actually the "in" is a misnomer . . . because while we're all educators at Jesuit institutions, we basically see that positionality as a standpoint for talking broadly about readying students to communicate in order to better society. We hope teachers across all institutional types take something about teaching for social justice from this . . .

Discussing . . . Our Contextual Similarity of Jesuit Education as it Applies to Social Justice

Erika: . . . But since our panelists' commonalities do lie in Jesuit³/Ignatian⁴ education, we'll briefly touch on aspects of this philosophy and its links to social justice. We'll first contextualize our contributions by introducing ourselves and how long we've been at Jesuit institutions . . . for me that's 11 years.

Stacy: My name is Stacy Tye-Williams, and I completed my first year at Creighton.

Bren: I'm Bren Ortega Murphy—I've been at Loyola University Chicago 23 years.

Chad: I'm Chad McBride; I'm finishing my fifth year at Creighton.

Jay: I'm Jay Leighter. I'm in my second year at Creighton, and as a confession, before examining Creighton's Web site for my interview, I knew nothing about Jesuit education.

Lynn: My name is Lynn Turner and—amazingly—I've been at Marquette University 23 years!

Sarah: I'm Sarah Feldner. I've been at Marquette 6 years.

Erika: OK . . . now that everyone has some context for "who's who," let's start! In trying to summarize "Jesuit education,"

³For a broad perspective on Jesuit education, see Traub (2008).

⁴The Jesuits were founded by St. Ignatius. Because laity cannot be Jesuits, at times this educational philosophy is also referred to as "Ignatian" to be more inclusive.

I made a few notes. The Society of Jesus is a priesthood order of the Roman Catholic Church. At Jesuit institutions, their mission explicitly relates to social justice and outreach to the poor and marginalized. Brackley⁵ articulated several Higher Standards for Jesuit Education,⁶ including (a) the real world is the primary object of study (whether in soup kitchens or the corporate world); (b) to focus on big, life-and-death questions as areas of study; and (c) to take bias in the world seriously. For me, these standards directly link to preparing students to communicate for social impact. What else would y'all say is needed to understand how educators in Jesuit schools approach social justice?

Bren: I remember a conference where Fr. Joseph Appleyard spoke of Jesuit education as "countercultural" . . . outlining several indicators of Jesuit principles in action: (a) knowledge and action are intertwined, so the test of knowledge is action and the wisdom of action is measured against knowledge; (b) education is a dialogue embodying the mutual inquiry of student and teacher that must derive from/aim back at experience; and (c) the educational process is inevitably aimed at changing the world along the lines of social justice . . . Jesuit education universally emphasizes social justice.

Sarah: I agree. I chose Marquette largely to support my commitment to service-learning . . . but in immersing in Jesuit tradition/Catholic higher education, I discovered what seemed far removed from organizational communication was quite connected. Ignatian perspectives have deepened my teaching/research on social justice issues by illuminating how you move students from application to engagement. As one Jesuit explained, "it's about exploring the basement of social justice issues rather than spending all our time in the attic."

Jay: What a quote! I'm writing that down. Being educated at state universities, a religiously grounded mission is new . . . one thing I've repeatedly encountered is *cura personalis*, "caring for the whole person" to engage the multiple dimensions of students' lives.

⁵See Brackley (2006).

⁶The seven higher standards for Jesuit education that Brackley includes are: (a) The real world is the primary object of study; (b) focus on the big, life-and-death questions; (c) take bias seriously and pursue cognitive liberation; (d) help people discover their deepest vocation to love and service; (e) study critically and hand on the Catholic tradition; (f) bring in those who cannot otherwise afford it; and (g) *proyección social*.

Lynn: Building on Jay, I do notice that sometimes Ignatian charisms like *cura personalis* can chafe up against reality when care doesn't seem to be demonstrated, and I've found that tension compelling. Overall, it's intellectually interesting and spiritually captivating to be part of an institution with its feet to the fire of a far-reaching mission.

Chad: If you walk into Creighton's student union, multiple banners proclaim Ignatian charisms, including "creating men and women for and with others" and "forming and educating agents for change" that link to social justice. Some of these charisms echo my educational experience at Texas Christian University . . . as a non-Catholic, these "Jesuit" values seem universal if you care about helping others. . . .

Stacy: Chad, I'm glad you introduced religiosity; people invariably ask me "Are you Catholic?" when they hear where I teach. When I say "no," the next question is always, "Is that a problem?" At first I thought it might be, but I've come to realize I was operating from a justice-based mission but just hadn't articulated it.

Bren: Glad to hear it hasn't been problematic. . . . While Jesuit schools try to involve faculty, students, and staff in mission, you don't have to be Catholic or even Christian to incorporate these principles. So thinking about readying students to communicate toward bettering society certainly isn't limited to Jesuit education.

Discussing . . . Embedding Social Justice Within Communication Curriculum

Erika: Bren brought us full circle in illustrating how this discussion can transcend context, so with that background, let's talk about making social impact an *articulated objective* for communication students at the broad level of curriculum. Bren, back to you. . . .

Bren: Sounds good! In planning our new School of Communication at Loyola-Chicago, we pondered how our graduates going into advertising, journalism, public relations, and so on enter fields that are severely criticized for unethical practices . . . for undermining quality public discourse . . . and for neglecting social justice considerations. We agreed such shortcomings aren't inherent to these professions, and we

decided to piggyback on the university's new campaign emphasizing humanistic values⁷ to train these emerging professionals to be intentional about letting values guide their work. I believe we now produce different kinds of professionals, and I think society is better for it. How does this look in practice versus in abstract? We prepare communication students for social impact by requiring majors to: (a) take a balance of theory-centered and skills-centered courses, (b) learn to critique communication practices through an ethics-based lens, and (c) engage in some form of community-based experiential learning. What is your approach, Erika?

Erika: When our department redesigned curriculum, we utilized a "graduate upon graduation" orientation . . . what did we want students to be able to do after earning a degree? After realizing we didn't optimally "form women and men for and with others," we added *societal preparation* as a curricular goal—in the sense of preparing citizens grounded in social justice. This goal seemed best achieved through a stand-alone course, which inspired our Senior Capstone *Communication and Community*. Two primary objectives are to "articulate the historical/current relevance of communication in framing public discourse(s), creating social reality/social problems, and influencing social consciousness, especially from the perspective of a 'marginalized' community" and to "develop a sense of commitment to apply communication skills toward society's betterment." In developing this course, I've tried to make even the syllabus inspirational: "This course is based on the assumption that one person *can* make a difference. Now the question becomes, how can your expertise in communication be used to better the world in which you live?" We start with an introduction to difference and discuss how difference is (re)constructed everyday in interpersonal interactions and organizational structures. We then explore facets of social identity (e.g., sex, race, class, sexuality, ability, and age) and how these can manifest in forms of oppression, emphasizing that "isms" don't exist only in individuals, but also at the societal/cultural and institutional levels. For every form of oppression, we discuss how students can communicate as "allies," utilizing the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Speak*

⁷The Loyola campaign (Loyola University Chicago, 2006) focused on the pursuit of education based on "humanistic values such as serving others, social responsibility and justice, commitment to excellence, freedom of inquiry, and the pursuit of truth" (n.p.).

*Up!*⁸ text. Finally, students complete service-learning with a population that is “different” from them. So that’s my example of building social justice into curriculum by encouraging students to be allies against “isms”—values that could be taught *anywhere*.⁹

Discussing . . . Infusing Social Justice Into Communication Courses

Erika: Now that we’ve discussed curriculum, we’ll narrow in on how educators might infuse communicating for social impact into courses. Let’s hear from Jay first.

Jay: At every institution I’ve been at, someone always complains about public speaking. I prefer to conceptualize public speaking as foundational to the liberal arts and a cornerstone of civic engagement . . . something fundamental to not only an undergraduate education, but also to human experience.¹⁰ I pondered how to teach public speaking in light of the Jesuit focus on justice, trying things individually and then, as course coordinator, moving the approach to all faculty. We adopted a textbook¹¹ framing speaking as an integral part of civic engagement and gave students tools to prepare speeches that were truly “public” in nature. I reorganized the master syllabus to feature Creighton’s identity statement and (re)defined how we meet the College’s “skills” requirement in light of Jesuit mission: “[Public speaking is] a necessary component of ‘making a difference in the world,’ forming ‘women and men of competence, conscience and compassion,’ serving a ‘faith that does justice,’ reaching your ‘potential as citizen-scholars,’ ‘serving the greater good,’ and ‘dealing with an increasingly complex world.’” I think (re)defining the “skill” of public speaking in light of social impact/justice actually raised the course’s sophistication. There are notable changes in student invention; students are encouraged to choose topics of significant social consequence and, with the new course frame, do so with little prompting. My students

⁸See the Teaching Tolerance Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center (2005).

⁹The syllabus is available through Erika’s Web site at <http://www2.creighton.edu/ccas/communicationstudies/facultystaff/fulltime/kirby/index.php>.

¹⁰Jay would like to thank Dr. Leah Ceccarelli for instilling in him the belief that public speaking is foundational to the liberal arts and a cornerstone of civic engagement.

¹¹The text we are using is Zarefsky (2007).

have chosen topics ranging from local hot-button issues such as downtown renovation/gentrification to global humanitarian concerns such as invisible children in Uganda. Students become deeply connected with/committed to one "umbrella" topic of consequence in their community while hearing about the important topics their classmates have chosen.

Sarah: I think that's the best way to teach public speaking.

Jay: I find that one semester-long topic better prepares students to communicate for social impact because they (a) gain a more comprehensive understanding of a socially important topic; (b) have more time for speech writing, argument construction, and audience analysis; and (c) often commit to action on their topic because they feel invested. For example, one student's topic was homelessness, and she started volunteering at the local shelter and changed her major to pursue working as an advocate for homeless people. Another student said her speeches forever changed the way he'd view homelessness—I'll never forget that day. To summarize, we show students how engaging with community and advocating for change is inextricably linked with developing communication competence. . . .

Bren: A course I recently developed exemplifies my attempt to concretize the values we've been discussing. It's called *Community as Story: Urban Children's Literature & Performance*, and it combines community service and classroom instruction to explore the nature, function, and power of narrative, particularly with young children. Students engage in various types of community-based service/exploration around Loyola-Chicago's Lake Shore Campus, often described as one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the country. They work in a variety of places such as The American Indian Center, The Apna Ghar Center (domestic violence in Asian families), and others.¹² By engaging in service-learning, students appreciate the area's rich cultural resources. Concomitantly, they also learn ethnographic research, storytelling, creative writing, illustration, children's literature, and performance as means of critical inquiry. Using individual and group performance of extant children's

¹²Other service-learning sites include the Centro Romero (programs for Latinos); the Chinese Mutual Aid Society; Inspiration Café, Sarah's Circle, and Deborah's Place (all three address the needs of homeless people); Be-HIV; Misericordia (Down syndrome children and adults); and numerous after-school tutoring groups.

literature, they refine their critical understanding of such writing, and their final assignment is to complete and perform their original children's literature to local children whose experiences often aren't voiced.

Discussing . . . Encouraging Social Justice in Communication Assignments

Erika: Thanks for those reflections. . . . You lead us to consider how assignments can prepare students to communicate for social impact. Sarah and Lynn, we haven't heard much from Marquette folks—who wants to begin?

Sarah: I'll start. I've sought methods to educate students about social justice and transform them into engaged citizens who will communicate for social impact. Perhaps my greatest "aha" moment was in reading *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on human work.¹³ I learned the Catholic Church has much to say about humans' fundamental right to work, as well as the responsibility/ethic to structure work in ways that allows workers to live a full life and enjoy family, community, and faith. I now ask students to read church documents focusing on work issues, and most react by saying, "I never knew the Catholic Church had an opinion on this." These connections were unexpected and energizing. . . . I now incorporate materials/ideas in my teaching that I never imagined I would tackle. I regularly ask students to take up George Cheney's¹⁴ question, "What would happen if we make organizations truly about the humans within them?" Using this literature challenges students to think differently about their organizational lives. These documents also illustrate the interrelationship among organizations, society, and culture because such a significant institution (i.e., Catholic Church) includes these messages about work as doctrine. At times I've wondered whether I would teach this way somewhere else . . . and I think I would. But because including religious texts might feel too risky for some, you could illustrate similar principles through encompassing social justice initiatives more broadly to examine current ties between the U.S. government and faith-based community initiatives. Whether we support, oppose, or are indifferent to these initiatives,

¹³See Pope John Paul II (1981).

¹⁴See this sentiment in, for example, Cheney and Carroll (1997).

they present a challenging context to think about the interconnections among all the organizations we encounter. . . .

Lynn: For me, to truly teach for social justice, we need to get ourselves and our students engaged with our surrounding community. I involve students through service-learning . . . forging a partnership between the university and the community.¹⁵ At Marquette, I developed a service-learning project with colleagues to provide opportunities for students to use curricular knowledge and explore social issues. Our Next Generation, Inc. provides programs and services to enhance the academic and social success of children from low-income households who are often living in chaotic or dysfunctional circumstances. The project entailed sending family communication students to Our Next Generation's after-school center to teach them about family interaction. The project gave the children some life skills to help break the cycle of poverty while sensitizing Marquette students to the complexity of issues surrounding social class, education, and race. Both goals are essential for social justice education. Although service-learning as pedagogy is employed in both secular and faith-based institutions, Ignatian pedagogy demands that education focus not only on knowledge acquisition and developing intellect, but also on nurturing moral/spiritual character . . . challenging students to form goals and values to impact the rest of their lives. The Ignatian impulse reminds us that meeting the challenge of social justice education cannot simply be about applied learning; it must be tied to our communities and approached in a discerning way.

Erika: Thanks, Lynn. Chad will talk about discernment soon. . . . Our last speaker on assignments is Stacy.

Stacy: I became a teacher to make a difference . . . like Robin Williams in *Dead Poet's Society*. The notion of inspiring students to go change the world was incredibly exciting, and so I set about creating an environment where students would be expected to think critically about societal issues such as inequality and harassment. I soon realized such inspiration isn't easy, and since arriving at Creighton, I've felt even more pressure to inspire students with a mission to "form women and men of competence, conscience, and compassion." As I sat in new faculty orientation, I wondered how to help students see the importance of compassion and service and real-

¹⁵See Annie E. Casey Foundation (2006).

ized such connections could happen in how assignments are structured. In particular, I do a fundraising assignment to allow students to combine communication and justice.¹⁶ Students decide on a charity or cause and, as a group, create a fundraising event and donate the proceeds. They then reflect on their experiences using course concepts and theories to guide their assessment of group effectiveness. Through this process, students garner more than just practical experience—they help the larger community by donating money to a variety of important causes. When I last used it, I was at a public institution, which illustrates that many strategies we've discussed transcend institutions.

Discussing . . . Structuring Social Justice Into Individual Interactions

Erika: Our final topic concerns moments of individual interaction where we can prepare students to communicate for social impact. In Jesuit education, we often speak of discernment. . . . You've already heard that word today . . . Chad has some thoughts about helping students to discern.

Chad: I tried to frame my thoughts in terms of easy "takeaways" for all instructors helping students think about social activism. I was recently part of a discernment seminar. . . . At a basic level, discernment is a form of decision making based on moving in the direction of God's¹⁷ plan for you, and St. Ignatius wrote much about discernment because of his experiences in determining God's calling in his life. We've all encountered students faced with dilemmas about where they are called to go: which internship/major to choose, what to do post-graduation, what thesis/dissertation topic to study. One notion associated with Ignatian discernment that we can use in such interactions, or even in advising, is tied to three ways to make decisions: the first time, second time, and third time.¹⁸ The first time is associated with an instance when God so moves us that we know what to do without doubt . . . like a flashing neon sign telling us which road to take. Usually, this "time" or type of decision making isn't what our stu-

¹⁶Stacy would like to thank Dr. Jordan Soliz for sharing the fundraising assignment.

¹⁷We utilize *God* as the creator term in light of our context, but recognize this term as having multiple meanings across faith traditions.

¹⁸For a modern translation of Ignatius, see Brackley (2004).

dents experience because two choices are both "good." So the second time is based on feelings . . . feeling closer or farther from God when we do different things. Ignatius says this type of decision making is true discernment—when we go in directions that make us feel most alive, most passionate. But because we are taught to downplay or ignore our feelings/intuition in Western culture and feelings can be hard to decipher when we're presented two equally positive options, this type of decision making is more difficult. The third time/way of making decisions utilizes reasoning: Ignatius suggests three "thought experiments" to help weigh pros/cons, including: (a) considering someone you don't know and thinking about the advice you would give him or her, (b) imagining being on your death bed and thinking about what you wish you would have chosen, and (c) imagining that you meet God after your death and are giving an account for your life. For Ignatius, the answers aren't as important as the process . . . you would have students go through these exercises and reflect on how each choice makes them feel in that given situation. The emergent feelings from this process can be used to take the student back to the second time of making decisions—true discernment—helping them get in touch with their passions and intuition. Faculty could assist students in discernment by utilizing these approaches to decision making . . . where are they stuck? . . . have they exhausted the rational lists/options? If so, meet them in the third time and push them to reflect on their feelings. If we want students to communicate for social change, they'll be more effective if they are "called" in a certain area. If we help students find their passion, their work can enrich their lives and make it more likely for them to continue.

Sarah: I hope I'm not stealing your thunder, but what you said about discernment made something connect. An Ignatian approach to pedagogy helps move from reflecting about issues as "out there" to making issues about individual agency. Discernment asks us to think about how we individually make choices/decisions that impact ourselves and communities. Ultimately, I think Ignatian tradition provides a pedagogy that makes thinking about social justice possible, and it is replicable in any institution. Getting students to see themselves as agents of change requires time spent working through these issues in discussions and writing. I continually ask students what organizations would be like if they were

more about people, and students journal on their observations of organizational life. Throughout the semester, we specifically devote time to reflecting on what they've observed and how it relates to course content as well as initial question. The repetition and reflection help students to create a more complex and nuanced answer . . . educators in any context can apply such reflection.

Discussing . . . Questions About Communicating for Social Justice

Erika: Well it looks like we have time for a question or two. . . .

Q1: I'm excited about this stuff, but unless "assessment" accompanies an idea, it doesn't get much attention at my university. Have any of you assessed your efforts to prepare students to communicate for social justice?

Jay: On the final, I have a short essay question where students review Creighton's Identity Statement and connect it to public speaking by providing two ways that writing a speech and two ways listening to their classmates' speeches has prepared them to live up to this statement . . . and answers typically referenced aspects of the identity statement that are more universal in nature. Students will paraphrase "we approach education with a passion for learning and a zeal for making a difference in our world" and then discuss their social/community issue research or remark how another student's speech changed their perspective. They will mention "the most contemporary issues of our world" and marvel about how much more aware of the world they feel. These answers suggest part of our job is just reminding students why communication is so significant.

Bren: I agree . . . but it means relating as well as reminding. My friend Fr. Paul Soukup has argued that how students live in society, think critically, express themselves, recognize and confront injustice, and relate to others form part of that education of the whole person, which *requires* that Communication departments address the impact of contemporary media and other forms of "social communication."¹⁹ Like it or not, Facebook and texting do have impact for them.

. . .

¹⁹See Soukup (1999).

Q2: I hear you talking about how enriching this approach is and how much it adds to your courses, curriculum, and interaction with your students, but I don't teach at a Jesuit university. In fact, I don't even teach in the United States—how does a focus on Jesuit pedagogy speak to me?

Chad: Well, like Stacy said, several of us aren't Catholic and have done similar things at other schools, including public, secular institutions.

Stacy: That's right. One point I wanted to convey is that this approach isn't limited to Jesuit universities. Regardless of where you teach, there are many ways to embody a social justice mission—even in something as simple as an assignment. It's something we can all embrace nationally and internationally. Although social justice may look different depending on one's country, the basic ideals can be translated to fit a particular context.

Chad: . . . Overall, Ignatian pedagogy provides an intellectual, philosophical, and value-based framework for proceeding in efforts to better care for the global community . . . and just as a sidebar, when you think about this historically, the U.S. Jesuit institutions were formed more than 400 years after Ignatius formed the first school in Italy. . . . In the 16th century, there were Jesuit schools all over the world, including in Europe, South America, India, and Japan . . . so such education is already internationalized.

Q3: Well, now that you've introduced the widespread international nature of the Jesuits, as a postcolonial scholar, I feel a need to voice that Jesuit evangelizers weren't always socially just on their missions . . . they often didn't respect local cultures, and so I see that as a contradiction . . . and, of course, your approach of Jesuit education isn't the only way to offer faith-based pedagogy. . . .

Lynn: Thanks for raising that point—certainly other ways exist to blend faith/spirituality and teaching/learning toward social justice . . . this is just our common frame of reference.

Sarah: And I'd like to speak to your first concern further . . . before I took this job, I asked myself whether I could live with the contradictions I knew I might experience at a faith-based institution. Ultimately, I decided there are opportunities in working through the contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies of a Jesuit social justice mission you articulate. I've also led

students to tackle these tensions—both in terms of the philosophy itself and the ways in which it is lived out in practice.

Erika: I recently gave a presentation where I talked about “inculturation” as it is being re-imagined by the Jesuits. In recognition of their past, where in their words they “have often contributed to the alienation of the very people we wanted to serve,”²⁰ the Jesuits now talk about presenting the gospel not in European/Western terms, but in terms of the culture being approached. . . .

Jay: . . . I’ll speak to that by way of example. Last year, I traveled with a group of faculty and students to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. We were part of a mentoring program designed to help high-school students on the reservation make the difficult transition to college. On that trip, the conversations we had about the nature of the relationship between the Church and the Lakota people always meant reconciling the troubling past with the needs of the people in the present. These aren’t easy matters to reconcile, but students benefit by dealing with these tensions.

Erika: I hate to stop this great discussion, but because people are arriving for the next session, I’d like to move toward conclusion and offer some “lessons learned” from our time together. In thinking about graduates upon graduation, we view communication education as an instrument for introducing students to the idea of advocacy for social justice; as teachers, we want them to know they have both the responsibility and ability to enact change. In this, our teaching is aimed not just at introducing theory, concepts, and skills, but it also involves leading students to discover their own voices and their own value systems, and we hope to lead them to discover how this understanding will impact their entire lives. Earlier, Sarah introduced the metaphor of “exploring the basement.” The most interesting and essential questions aren’t found easily when looking in the attic. . . . They are in the basement—and to advance social justice, we need to lead our future communication graduates down there to move around some of the boxes, so to speak. And with that, we’ll wrap it up . . . if you have more questions, we can certainly meet informally. Thanks!

²⁰See Jesuit General Congregation 34 (1995/2008).

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