Rooting the Study of Communication Activism in an Attempted Book Ban

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Cultivating deeply rooted community partnerships is vital to the mission of teaching and scholarship that answers the call for robust civic learning and democratic engagement. This paper recognizes that such teaching and research, particularly when it delves into political and contested questions, may provoke criticism and skepticism. So, for those scholars and their students who enter the fray of political action, we argue that the move may be eased and nurtured with strong, sustained university-community partnerships built upon support, action, and, importantly, a commitment to common cause. We argue that unexpected moments in public life can create opportunities to stretch and strengthen those relationships to invigorate our democracy if we have done the work previously to think about, express, and challenge our thinking about what we owe to our communities.

For academics, "going public" is risky business (Hartnett, 2010). That is, when we use our academic training to *think* and *do* the work of democracy that we teach our students, we can encounter resistance and face scrutiny for crossing over into the unknown territory beyond the walls of the academy. The implied critique that engaged scholars must resist from their colleagues is that higher education is supposed to be a "sanctuary for thinking apart from the interests and demands of the world" (Giles, 2012, p. 58).

This essay recognizes that "going public" can provoke criticism and skepticism, even from our scholarly peers, despite a robust movement challenging our nation's colleges and universities

to provide more instruction in civic learning and democratic engagement.[1] For this reason, scholars and their students who enter the fray of political action need to cultivate deeply rooted partnerships with community members and community organizations. Doing so allows them to enhance bonds based on demonstrated community impact and commitment to common cause. In this article, we argue that the value of this important partnership-building work requires teaching the practice of critical thinking and the skills of shared project development in order to allow campus-community partnerships to tap into the unexpected moments in public life where controversies and immediate action are required. In the process, campus-community partnerships can use those new opportunities to stretch and strengthen the collective spirit of citizen action that invigorates our democracy. Responding to community matters in this way, beyond what pre-planning can account for, becomes possible when pedagogical practices are flexible enough to embrace time-sensitive incidents as occasions to influence and support civic projects.

We begin by situating community engagement activity in higher education as democratic action, drawing from Elizabeth Minnich's (2003) measures of democratic thinking as resources for critical pedagogical practices. Next, we illustrate how a social change project was designed to draw from and reflect those democratic capacities within community partnerships. Specifically, we show how a professor and a number of graduate students, with the leadership, support, and guidance of community members, put into practice what Minnich deems necessary for teaching and learning to cultivate civic identity, critical thinking, community impact, and courage. We reason that with a sufficient understanding and engagement of democratic practices, lunging into community controversies, as we did, is not only possible, but also likely. To illustrate, we recount the details around a series of what were at first abrupt, then subsequently planned, actions in response to efforts to ban books in a local school district. We conclude with suggestions for how to purposefully develop students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions in order to cultivate strong scholar-citizens.

Thinking Together as a Democratic Capacity

To inform the kind of civic engagement necessary for a strong democracy, we recognize the centrality of thinking critically, asking questions, and synthesizing passions with action. Elizabeth Minnich's contributions to this conversation are significant. More than a decade ago, she offered for our consideration 10 ways we could analyze thinking that embraces our ethical and political obligations as expressed in writing and speaking: communicating freedom of mind, inclusiveness, rhetoric, beauty, play, emotion, originality, reflexivity, revelations, and connections (2003). The importance of democratic thinking, says Minnich, is in doing the

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[1] Among the most notable of these is the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project started in 2003 "to produce graduates who are committed to being active, involved citizens in their communities" (www.aascu.org/programs/ADP/). The initiative involves more than 250 participating campuses around the country.

thought-inspiring work necessary to make discerning judgments necessary for a vibrant, pluralistic society where we can express what matters to us. She says democratic thinking ought to encourage us to consider others' views carefully, "rather than reducing them to silence by refuting them" (2003, p. 20). Thinking democratically is thus an ethical endeavor as well as one steeped in justice with the goal of using our intellectual gifts as resources in working with others toward a public good. The net result, Minnich suggests, is the potential to imagine a future based on conversations informed by joy, respect, and support for living in a world with diverse others. Viewed this way, thinking democratically is an important starting point for strong deliberative processes in our communities that are characterized by agonistic and multi-vocal contributions (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012).

Yet, the unfortunate reality is that too often our schools are failing to stand up to unjust practices. Critical scholar Henry Giroux points out, "Schools are in crisis, and critical theories of teaching and learning seem to have either fallen silent or have been consigned to the dustbin of history" (2009, p. 9). So instead of cultivating democratic citizens who understand and can operate effectively within the political landscape, our schools increasingly structure their spaces and curricula as a training ground for young people to learn how to be acquiescent, consenting members of society. Students learn to become workers who keep their heads down. These learning outcomes, says educator Bill Ayers, represent "...the hallmarks of every authoritarian regime throughout history—it banishes the unpopular, squirms in the presence of the unorthodox, and hides the unpleasant" (2013, p. 160). If we are to ensure our democratic way of life, and make meaningful progress toward addressing the inequalities that persist, we need to ensure that students and community members learn together and take action side-by-side. That is, our educational opportunities must offer students multiple ways in which to engage, collaborate, or resist, depending on what is called for in the community, so that our young people learn lessons of resiliency for which they can be proud.

From the Academy to Community Engagement

Traditionally, academics have concerned themselves with generating disciplinary knowledge without always teaching students to think about and ultimately act within the messy contingencies of lived, communal life. According to the more traditional paradigm, the academic is revered for her unbiased stance that is assured by remaining personally detached from students and even to some degree from the teaching material itself. Maintaining distance allows the academic expert as "outsider" to thus be considered "fair," and able to most clearly "see" the matter under study free of undue influence.

For scholars who take their research *into* the community, work *with* the community, and develop work *for* the community, that conventional mode of scholarship and relationship is critiqued, and hardly regarded as neutral. Engaged teachers and scholars instead say that an objective stance is misguided in its purpose, and disingenuous in its posture. For them, the point of education is to intervene where social injustices exist. As communication professor and activist Dana Cloud says, "If you are a critic of our [capitalist] system, the ideologies that

sustain its horrors, putting ideas into action is the only conceivable thing to do" (2011, p. 22). We join with those scholars steeped in research and teaching to advance free spaces for dialogue, deliberation, and action (Boyte & Evans, 1992; Escobar, Faulkner & Rea, 2014). They assert that while intellectual, disciplinary-based inquiry is needed to examine public problems, reflective thinking and concrete action in the world are required as well to keep scholarship from being *simply* academic.

In the face of persistent societal violence, hypocrisy, and injustices, engaged scholars thus choose to advance their dual identities as scholars and citizens (Lee, 2011). The price to pay in remaining "neutral" is painful for scholars who struggle to make sense of the contradictions played out on the national and international stages about resources and power that fuel inequalities, systemic problems, and even war. Charles Bazerman, professor and founder of Rhetoricians for Peace, illustrates his reflective thinking on the political passion that remained dormant until it was reignited by troublesome questions he had to confront after the events of 9/11:

> How can I reconcile keeping my little corner of the world habitable, if I live at the expense of the turmoil elsewhere? How could it even be possible? What are the actions that will allow me to see my life as honorable? (2011, p. 46)

DeBlasis and Grettano (2011) agree that the classroom is an important space to introduce students to the problems of the world. They argue that instructors need to promote dialogue and discussion rather than deconstruct artifacts and issues in the abstract from the position of the lofty metaphorical ivory tower. Activist-scholars, in other words, see themselves as integral to the democratic project: "We view the academy as a tool to foster and extend democratic practices, not simply to generate and offer knowledge to wider publics" (Edley & Lozano-Reich, 2011, p. 126).

Post-secondary education in the United States has the opportunity to "encourage the development of [a] critical consciousness among students and teachers in the interests of building working-class solidarity and opposition to global capitalism" (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001, p. 136). To do so, instruction needs to make visible democratic thinking and principles that both create and reflect commitments to inclusion, transparency, critical analysis, and, importantly, action.

Yet, as colleges and universities are increasingly subject to the discourses of austerity and efficiency metrics, a market-driven model for education is gaining momentum to characterize the 'postmodern university' as one in competition for resources and producers of standardized modes of education (Evans, 2004; Giroux, 2012a; hooks, 1994; Newfield, 2008; Scott, 2011; Smith & Webster, 1997; Waters, 2004). The vestiges of liberal arts schooling are rapidly being replaced with neoliberal education fervor and "unbridled individualism—almost pathological in its disdain for community, public values, and the public good" (Giroux, 2012b, p. 57). The fallout from this includes a deteriorating of campus-based democratic decision-making and

teaching, as well as the demise of in-depth critical learning (Glickman, 1998; hooks, 2003; Newfield, 2008; Smyth, 2006).

Resisting this drive toward education commodification are teachers and students who refuse to abandon the democratic mission of education. For them, political thinking and activism are mainstays of teaching and research activity. In democratic classrooms that view students as active agents who co-create knowledge, there is deep respect for the students, instructor(s), and community members as co-contributors of valuable insights into the lingering societal indignities that surround us, and the locations of hope for a better, different future (Freire, 1970).

This transformative pedagogy requires holistic thinking marked by integrity and activism that combines the elements of constructivist and critical theories to encourage students to examine their own beliefs, values, and knowledge as well as the perspectives of others. Doing so deepens their critical consciousness and serves to develop the students' agency to act (Ukpokodu, 2009). If successful, the result is engaged learning where students: 1) Act in the community, drawing from what they have thought about and learned or are learning in the classroom; 2) Experience a shift in worldview that expands understanding; and, 3) Imagine new possibilities for social change (Pugh, 2002).

To foster this engaged, activist learning, students need to be exposed to current, controversial discourses, and encouraged to struggle through reflexive thinking and moments of revelation that cause them to act within those controversies. The classroom environment thus needs to feature time and space for thinking, dialogue, and action that comes from the trust and equitable relationships among students and with the teacher (Taylor, 1998).

Likewise, strong partnerships in the community must also be built on a foundation of extended dialogue and trust. For Martin Buber (1970), dialogue is the bridge that holds people accountable to one another by insisting that they share their thinking by communicating with authenticity, freedom, and respect. To engage in dialogue is thus a courageous act, one where we risk sharing what is important to us, and trusting that we can build something or take action together with others. Understood that way, dialogue, like thinking, is a profoundly democratic practice that highlights the contributions of many voices, not just our own ideas. As Edwards (2009) reminds us, interpersonal relationships are central to this dialogic endeavor:

> Perhaps the single most important factor to remember in the process of intercollegiate and multi-community collaborations is that institutions do not collaborate—individuals do. It is the individuals who have the creative ideas and the drive to put those ideas into production. (p. 56)

Dialogue that emerges from thinking among whole persons engaging with others is indeed the gateway to reimagining our identities, beliefs, and community action as we enter into relationships to forge solidarity, even as we maintain our profound differences, to address matters of social justice (Mahoney, 2011).

A Course Lays the Groundwork for Community Engagement

Communicating for Social Change is an elective course at a research-intensive university in the Southeast designed for graduate students interested in communication activism. The seminar-style class depends on thoughtful conversation about assigned readings to probe the theoretical and practical dimensions of scholarly writing on historical social movements, 21st century neoliberal policies, and current events targeting policy changes. Importantly, the course readings consider how change can be initiated both within established community institutions and among grassroots coalitions. Students thus identify, seek to understand, and analyze the discourse practices of activists and established community members who strive to transform values, assert credibility, and organize others.

Howard Zinn's book, *A People's History of the United States*, is used in the course as an important text that reframes history for many students who had previously not understood the historical complexity and struggles to advance democracy (2003). Zinn showcases how everyday people in the United States formed coalitions to advance labor movements, gender equality, and race relations. More than two million copies of the book have been sold since its original publication in 1980, even with criticism that it offers only a revisionist history and lacks sufficient source citation. In response to those persistent criticisms, Zinn with Anthony Arnove published the 700-page volume, *Voices of a People's History of the United States* with more than 200 primary source documents included (2009).

Zinn's book is complemented in the course by the work of other writers who detail more current movements for social change (e.g. Hessel & Morin, 2012; Jovanovic, 2012; Kahn & Lee, 2012). Taken together, students learn what constitutes a social movement and how communicative practices of various stakeholder groups influence opportunities for change.

To put that learning to work locally, the students, in their first major project in the course, produce a narrative account of an individual or group's experiences with a specific social change action. Students rely on personal interviews and research to construct a story to learn from and appreciate the significance of the activists' work. That project paves the way for deeper class discussions and projects, like the one that would ultimately become the subject of this article.

Class discussions, student-written reflections, and continued readings are designed to explore the power structures that produce and maintain inequality. Students are asked to consider the key questions: who benefits from the status quo. And, why do inequalities and inequities persist despite significant efforts for reform and progress?

As an underpinning to the examination of power in society, students reflect and acknowledge their own subject positions. The student co-authors of this paper, Mark Congdon Jr., Crawford Miller, and Garrett Richardson, self-identified as white males and recognized that their many unearned privileges were acquired by virtue of birth. Mark had completed his bachelor's degree in communication studies and was a Teach for America alum before entering graduate

school for his master's degree. Crawford and Garrett were in their second year of master's studies, Crawford continuing straight through upon completion of his BA and Garrett back in graduate school after working in housing and residence life at two universities. Mark offered:

> We realized that the quality of life we live comes at the expense of others. We had to consider the implications of that, and the social responsibilities we had as graduate students. Critical inquiry and reflection became possible and perhaps even inevitable as we participated in a democratic community of learners while engaging with community partners and local activists.

The students consider throughout the course how they could become, like the people they were studying, active citizens and agents of change, in addition to developing their disciplinary expertise in communication studies.

When an in-town documentary screening of the film, *Fixing the Future* (Spiro, Smith & Brancaccio, 2010), was announced midway through the semester, the entire class attended the event to view examples of alternative local economy practices, worker cooperatives, and time banking practices. The event also included mingling and networking with local organizations including the Greensboro Chapter of Slow Money, the Durham, NC–based Bountiful Backyards, Guilford College's Greenleaf Coffee Cooperative, the Renaissance Community Co-Op, and the Greensboro Currency Project, among others. Mark recapped the evening by saying, "This experience gave us a more intimate brush with a world of difference that many of us had not been exposed to before. We were realizing the importance of putting our knowledge into action, and not being passive citizens."

Building (on) Strong Partnerships

Our involvement in a community protest action against the banning of books in our public schools arose out of our contact and solidarity with local, grassroots organizers. Our study and community actions reflected a commitment to the teaching principles of democratic thinking, dialogue, dissent, and community organizing processes. With an appreciation for working *with* the community, we recognized the potential for our campus-community action to build cross-group coalitions, support community leaders, and bolster an existing community effort (Boyle-Baise, 2002). In other words, we engaged in a multi-dimensional partnership that was marked by reciprocity in response to a political moment in our community.

Reciprocity

More specifically, we saw our reciprocity as being potentially transformative. We agree with Dostilio, Brackmann, Edwards, Harrison, Kliewer and Clayton (2012) who urge scholars to be more precise in their descriptions of the reach of reciprocity in their work. They argue that the service-learning and community engagement literature has routinely pointed to reciprocity as

a marker of strong partnerships, yet there is little agreement on how reciprocity is defined or applied in those partnerships (Dostilio, et.al, 2012).

To both deepen our understanding of reciprocity and challenge its limits, Dostilio, et al. (2012) distinguish three epistemological understandings based on an iterative and inductive conceptual analysis of published articles. They conclude that reciprocity has been defined in one of three ways: 1) Reciprocity as *exchange* where community engagement is conceived of in terms of programs for mutual benefit; 2) Reciprocity as *influence*, marked by relationships that are shaped by the participants over time; or, 3) Reciprocity as *generative* where partners create something new together. In their study, the authors maintain that because the three frames are rooted in differing epistemological orientations, they in turn lead partnerships to pursue different goals. Since we saw our work as having the potential to effect a change not only in what the participants in our partnership did, but also in who we were as activists and how our community responded, we consider our action as having the possibilities associated with generative reciprocity (Dostilio, et al., 2012). More explicitly, we saw glimpses of:

> Transformation of identity (at some level)...[that] enables individuals to learn about and honor each other's diverse perspectives and ways of knowing and/or doing...Something greater than each respective entities' potential impact is created, synergistically. (Dostilio, et al., 2012, p. 25)

Generative reciprocity suggests that the partners recognize power, privilege, and the systemic features of oppression in society and in relationships as they engage in community action.

Unscripted Opportunities

Our eventual protest actions were not exactly planned, but instead they developed from a somewhat abrupt moment, or what Minnich might call an "imaginative moment" (2003, p. 23) and what Dostilio, et al. (2012) might call a generative opportunity. That is, because of the local relationships that Spoma Jovanovic, as the professor of the course, had cultivated with long-time community partners, she was able to introduce Crawford to Parents Supporting Parents (PSP), a community based organization dedicated to providing support to parents to ensure their children's academic success in K-12 education (www.parents-supporting-parents.org).

Crawford's work on the narrative assignment of a social change organization led him to interview the two leaders of PSP. In addition to detailing how they operated and the successes and challenges they faced, the women told Crawford that they hoped to have audience support when they attended an up-coming school board meeting to talk about their concerns over how the Common Core Curriculum[2] was being implemented absent sufficient training and

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[2] The Common Core State Standards is an initiative of the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Offices to offer competency benchmarks for K-12 language arts and mathematics to states that voluntary choose to use them (see http://www.corestandards.org/ for more

supplies for teachers. When Crawford completed that assignment, he shared his experience and the PSP story with the class. Crawford urged the rest of us to join him in attending the next school board meeting, and so we did.

As it would turn out, our attendance as mere observers was disrupted, our thinking was engaged, and our activist responses were ignited. For on that night, one of the speakers from the floor publicly launched a campaign to ban from school reading lists, the multi-award winning book, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, among others. The parent-speaker, with dozens of supporters in the audience, argued that Atwood's book and selected other books on the school district's approved reading list denigrated the Christian faith by incorporating profanity and depicting sexual encounters. The parent-speaker was enraged:

> She felt Christian students are bullied in society, in that they're made to
> feel uncomfortable about their beliefs by non-believers. She said including books
> like The Handmaid's Tale contributes to that discomfort, because of its negative
> view on religion and its anti-biblical attitudes toward sex. (Carr, 2012)

Flanked by high school students holding up signs of protest, the parent presented the school board with a demand and a petition signed by 2,300 parents to remove the books from the approved reading list.

Within the week, a community-wide mobilization effort was formed in opposition to the attempt to ban books. We were part of that effort. We, as a professor and a number of graduate students, joined the K-12 teachers and parents who had formed an ad-hoc list serve to organize themselves. Another professor, who had previously co-taught a course with Spoma, facilitated our introduction to this parent-teacher group. Spoma, in turn, made contact with her friends and associates at the Fund for Democratic Communities, a local foundation promoting participatory democracy. Mark spread the word of the book ban and follow-up actions to the graduate student association on our campus. Garrett wrote a letter to the editor and spoke at the following school board meeting. Our largest effort culminated with a march that Mark organized, with support and guidance from Spoma, that attracted students, professors, parents, teachers, and other community members to carry signs of protest on a one-half mile walk in the downtown area to the next school board meeting. To spread the word, we tapped into a long-established network of community partners and area faculty who had been vocal and present at other social justice events, including concerns surrounding the achievement gap in education, affordable housing, and other peace and justice actions. Mark contacted the media, Crawford reached out to Parents Supporting Parents to spread the word,

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information). As an incentive, states were offered federal funds through Race to the Top grants to implement the common core curriculum.

and Spoma made sure information was posted to the Peace and Justice Network, the local list serve promoting activist action.

Our roles as scholar-activists were being shaped, in part, by the collective effort against the book ban. While Spoma had participated in other grassroots efforts dealing with local, state, and national elected leaders, this was her first demonstration at a local school board meeting. Garrett and Mark had prior experience advocating for education on other campuses in other cities, but not in such a high profile and public venue. Crawford, who held the least experience in advancing social change, put his full support behind what he saw as an effort to inhibit critical thinking in the schools, limit the voices of students and parents to read acclaimed fiction, and restrict the already small amount of discretion that classroom teachers have to do their jobs. When all was said and done, the school board declined the parent's demand to ban the targeted books from school reading lists. The community outpouring, of which we were a part, successfully communicated two important messages: 1) Support to maintain reading options, especially for controversial titles; and 2) Active protest against efforts to restrict or ban books in schools. The story of victory for our short, but intense episode of activism indicates that while most social change efforts require years of diligent planning and strategizing, sometimes the need to defend what we considered a just position, requires swift attention, and arises in what seems spontaneous ways. Being aware of and connected to networks of activists already permitted us relatively easily to rally with a respectable sized crowd who could speak with knowledge of the issues.

 The project described here developed with contributions by all the stakeholders. The ad-hoc list serve was started the same night the book ban was proposed by a concerned parent. The on-line discussions that followed offered information on other proposed book bans nationally, more details on the books in question locally, suggestions for future action including the preparation of three-minute speaker-from-the-floor presentations by volunteers, and organizing details for the march plans. In these email exchanges, the prevailing tone was encouragement to share the links and forward the thread of communication to other people. Thus, each idea for action was offered with minimal critique. The tight timeframe under which everyone was operating—two weeks—may have contributed to the full support for the creative efforts by all.

The Politics of Partnerships

To say that our community change project was political is an understatement—we recognized that we were organizing with others for the express purpose of "disrupting stable patterns of power and interaction" (Stoecker, 2013, p. 94) that defined a conservative contingent of the school board. At least a few of the school board members expressed visible support of the book ban as evidenced by their congratulatory remarks to the parent speaker. Our reaction was communicated with ethical, dialogic principles of respect and care in mind. Still, we recognized that the need to confront what we viewed as an attempt at censorship required action bold enough to bring attention to the many members of the community who uphold

the need and right to read material that admittedly can be offensive to some. As Mark stated in an email communication to the graduate student association members on our campus:

> No one is disputing the right of parents to request an alternate assignment if they object to a book their child is asked to read. What is at issue is the freedom of the other children to read books that have been chosen for them by teachers and librarians who have applied professional criteria to select the best books. (personal communication, November 6, 2012)

Thinking together about what we wanted for our communities, we rallied to determine how best to enact the activism we were studying in our graduate class. We focused our thinking on how we could counter what we regarded as an assault on community values by expanding our understanding of the political processes designed to allow for the expression of dissent.

In response to the email Mark sent out, a faculty member (not on the original distribution list) responded that same day. She wrote us to offer "a little more information" and to caution folks as well. She said the parents at the school board meeting were merely asking for a "review" of the reading lists; as such, she urged us to reconsider our use of language. She said, "Try to frame the situation as 'parents asking the school board to restrict access to (ban and sensor may be terms that are bit too loaded) to assigned readings' as this is truly what is happening."

We gave considerable thought to her message, reviewed our experiences at the school board meeting, and then wrote back. First, we acknowledged her position and thanked her for reaching out to us. Then, because we felt compelled to explain in more detail, Spoma wrote:

> From what we saw and heard, the parents were not asking for a 'review' of the readings list. Instead, they were asking that the school board remove the books altogether. Still, it is the parents' constitutional right to ask for that. No one interrupted their remarks, nor did anyone show disrespect to the speakers...The next school board meeting will feature other organized voices so that the school board is aware there are many people who do not believe or agree with what was so forcefully presented the last time. Absent this, only the position that is in opposition to books (and the advocating of the school board to ban books) would be the one made public...In a climate and culture where more restrictions are being placed on virtually every aspect of public life, and more narrowly defined features of education are being promoted in our schools, we welcome the opportunity to align with those who want to keep open our access to the books in question, and others like them.

Reflecting on Activism and Democratic Thinking

Moving academic study of social justice from classroom discussion to public action admittedly challenges the "slow and methodical" ways of scholarly work (Hartnett, 2010, p. 83). To move at the appropriate pace necessary for communities at times means that academics and

students have to be ready to deploy their rhetorical skills for the public good, and that process can challenge traditional forms of instruction.

We proceeded by operating from a common commitment to shared goals and with a pledge to act with a collective, visible and consistent presence in the community; it is these features that distinguish strong community-school partnerships (Carter, 2013).

To consider how well we met the evaluation criteria for democratic thinking and action that Minnich (2003) sets forth, we focus on three measures that we believe best illustrate how an unscripted social change project drew from and reflected the dimensions of revelation, rhetoric, and play in the students' demonstrated civic identity and critical thinking. That is, our community involvement brought to life lessons we were studying.

Crawford said his interview with PSP leaders, a class assignment, illuminated his passion for education and creating change. Following that encounter, he asked himself, "What could I do to support their cause and speak out against the inequalities that existed within the community?" Crawford's phenomenological response to his new community heroes demonstrated a deepening of his moral convictions. This process, says Michael Hyde (2001), reminds us how everyday practices can evoke the call of conscience to influence our individual and community commitments. According to Hyde, the other calls out, "Where art thou?" and the self responds (Hyde, 2001). From philosophy to community action, Crawford's thinking and subsequent actions had the ripple effect of bringing 13 other students and a professor to the school board meeting. His civic identity was awakened through critical thinking and in this context, what Minnich calls democratic thinking. Crawford said:

> Too often, students both at the graduate and undergraduate levels are not challenged and encouraged to exercise or discover their voices, and use them as active democratic citizens. Isn't that the point of education, to push students to question the status quo? Shouldn't students be charged to utilize the knowledge they gain, to help make society a better place to live?

He further said that what began as "just" a class assignment turned into a "real" partnership once he met and then worked with the parent leaders at Parents Supporting Parents.

The graduate classroom assignments deliberately encouraged students to consider community outreach activity to fulfill higher education's mission to form partnerships with community organizations that work toward equality:

> Recent efforts to expand academic debate into community settings, and utilize local community issues as the subject of activist and public debates, illustrate the importance of complementing the democratic skills learned in communication classrooms with experiences and perspectives culled from the associations of civil society. (Murphy, 2004, p 86)

This *revelation* that hope resides in collective action was, for Crawford and the rest of us, what led to the expanded and thoughtful use of rhetorical messages to fully support our community action and partnerships.

Garrett's actions were likewise prompted, in part, by classroom instruction. His letter to the editor of the local newspaper detailed how deeply he cared about the state of our education and the conditions our children face. He concluded with a dramatic statement of opposition to the proposed book ban. He said an essay he read earlier in our class prompted his actions. The authors of that essay were activist rhetoricians who believed that academics have the responsibility to speak out and educate others (DeBlasis & Grettano, 2011). Garrett heeded their words by attending a meeting and then writing a letter—two simple but significant acts for social change taken without waiting for someone else to set the agenda, frame the issue, or otherwise establish what needed to be done.

Garrett did more. He prepared remarks for the next school board meeting as a speaker from the floor. The impact of Garrett's comments, sandwiched between two other speakers, was that multiple voices in partnership were presented as a united front in opposition to the book ban. As philosopher Alphonso Lingis (1994) declares, "What is imperative is that you be there and speak; what you say, in the end, hardly matters" (p. 108) for the words, as important as they are, are less important than the act of speaking out with and for others. Garrett relied on the tools of *rhetoric* as a budding academic to "speak with many people, engaging them through understanding of their languages, their ways of thinking, their knowledge, and their emotions" (Minnich, 2003, p. 23). The audience acknowledged the rhetorical force of Garrett's words with appreciation and silent applause.[3]

Finally, Mark's leadership in the protest activity was heavily influenced by both the class readings and his desire to be recognized as a scholar-activist like his professor. The march, as it turned out, was a way for Mark to build solidarity with his graduate class peers. Eventually, nearly all of them participated in this school board action. Spoma counseled Mark in ways to also reach out to the community. She directed him to grassroots and faculty contacts in the area that she had cultivated over the past decade. The result was that those students and community members carried from one institution, the public library, to another, the school board meeting, the message that books are vital to a democracy. Mark's outreach and organizing skills demonstrated *play* and creativity that developed into brightly colored signs proclaiming, "Celebrate the Freedom to Read," "Let our Children Read," "Got Books?" and "Books Free our Minds." Walking the city streets with these signs was designed to catch the eyes of car drivers and pedestrians. Once at the school board meeting, the signs were held up in support of Garrett and the other speakers. Mark saw his community action forging alliances with relevant stakeholders to explore and develop solutions to local problems (Ozanne & Anderson, 2010). For him, the experience highlighted the importance and significance of

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[3] The norms of acknowledging speakers from the floor require audience members to hold up quivering hands as people who use sign language do, to signify applause.

community action and disciplinary knowledge of social movement theory to bring about social change.

The impact of the protest activities spurred Mark to do more. "I felt empowered to change the pedagogy in the public speaking class I was teaching to be more democratic." He introduced more critical classroom discussions, incorporated more of the undergraduate student voices into assignments and peer feedback, and he structured the next generation of his class assignments around social justice and equality. As a result of Mark's own protest action, he encouraged his students to consider the benefits of joining efforts of public dissent. Some of his students later attended a gay rights rally, others joined a student action conference on budget cuts, and another participated in an event to raise awareness for students with special needs.

Mark admits that much of what he learned in the *Communicating Social Change* class was not something he was exposed to in high school or fully introduced to in his undergraduate education. The focus on teaching democratic thinking for him led to a contextual understanding of the economic and education systems at work and a deep inquiry into citizen actions that can uphold the liberties of individuals, advance the betterment of society, and increase the fellowship of community (Hessel & Morin, 2012). He said that from the experience of the class and the community protest action:

> We experienced an internal revolution that not only influenced our worldviews, but also affected our working relationships and pedagogical philosophies. We learned the importance of nurturing the development of a new consciousness to transform knowledge into action.

For us all, we recognized that teaching democratic thinking requires risk, time, and courage to form valuable, reciprocal partnerships.

Conclusion

Underlying almost any discussion of community activism and education are the unvoiced assumptions and thinking about the function and purpose of higher education. We believe pedagogy must be transformative (hooks, 1994), poised to examine how public policy, cultural conditions, and economic practices are shaped. However, the current approach to education typically veils and even congratulates itself as being neutral. Thus, faculty and students that intervene to make their communities better run the risk of being spurned by their academic peers for being political, with the inference that being political is bad, wrong, or misguided within the halls of higher education. It is a risk we think is worth taking in order to uphold the democratic vision of education as supporting everyday people to shape the quality of their lives, throughout their lives (Mathews, 2014). It is this type of education—political and meaningful—that has the potential to awaken students' thinking, interest and involvement in the world (Jovanovic, 2014). Then, students will be able to understand and act with others in an

increasingly complex political environment, equipped with knowledge and experiences, and importantly, benefitting from the partnerships that emerge from community engagement.

Campus activism is hardly as robust as in the 1960s era of anti-war and civil rights protest. However, ample political vibrancy in fact exists on campuses everywhere. Our action was focused and local in impact. Elsewhere, large-scale student involvement was seen in sit-in, teach-in, and other organizing efforts for the Occupy Movement, letter writing campaigns and events designed to draw participants to anti-sweatshop protests, creative involvement in programs to advance DREAM act legislation for immigrant rights, and civil disobedience in support of affordable public education (Shaw, 2013).

Like the episode in this article has shown, connecting with previous community relationships and experiences can pave the way for deep political action to follow in multifaceted partnerships involving colleges and universities, local foundations, parent groups, and community members. In our case, the students and professor were a part of both pulling together diverse others and being pulled into action by experienced others. Together, we expressed opposition to a proposed book ban; the result was that the school board maintained its current policy and did not yield to the parent demand to remove approved books from the school reading lists.

The take-away here that has relevancy for other teachers and scholars who want to promote teaching democratic thinking and action is that in order to respond to time-sensitive political concerns in the community two conditions are necessary. First, course design needs to be flexible enough to accommodate the inevitable community concerns that are rarely discernible when instructors plan and finalize their syllabi and research projects months earlier. Community life is contingent, evolving, and responsive to the needs of its members. The proposed book ban we encountered was a surprise, one we could not have predicted in advance. Fortunately, we were able to take advantage of broadly conceived assignments to enter into the important community action. Second, faculty must sustain long-term community relationships for many reasons, recognizing them as valuable teaching resources. We are advocating that faculty become involved in the community, with a genuine interest to better it, not simply to network with people in order to have classroom speakers or service-learning project locations. Instead, just as faculty continually read new (and older) books to add to their collection of intellectual resources, there must be an equal measure of investment in community actions to advance a democratic teaching agenda.

Students and community stakeholders who work together increase their relevance in public life. They learn how to inhabit their agency to influence decision-making and policies "outside the classroom, in the messiness and accomplishments of social change itself" (Simpson, 2014, p. 95). Mark, Crawford, and Garrett each in their own way reflected on this outcome of their protest action—their self-definitions in relation to others as agents of change. In class discussions and writing that dovetailed seamlessly with the study of communication, these

students continued a tradition well documented in the field of communication studies to shape a stronger, more vibrant public:

> Since its inception in higher education, the communication discipline has sought to develop and broaden the communication skills of democratic citizens, while simultaneously exploring the ways in which communicative practices themselves organize and define systems of democratic governance. (Murphy, 2004, p. 75)

As Crawford summed it up, the process that he and the other graduate students found themselves in—exercising their activist voices—instilled in them an obligation to be invested in community concerns.

Thus, to purposefully develop students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for a thriving democracy, we see the need for education to include teaching democratic thinking that draws from an historical understanding of social injustices, contemporary readings of social change agents, partnerships with community organizations, and the development of close reading, questioning, and listening skills. In doing so, "We make our commitments not only to the future but to the present moment, not only to changing the world but to changing ourselves, not only to arguing against something but to believing deeply in something else" (Hartnett, 2010, p. 93). Now, as has always been the case, we need to confront our country's growing indicators of inequality and active forces to exclude, diminish, and otherwise disregard the foundational principles of democracy. We need to lean on our educational institutions as vital resources to thoughtfully and pragmatically attend to the moral and political consequences of our actions, and that of our communities.

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