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Developing Community Through Energy: The Impact of Student Extracurricular Collaboration

Tiyana Dorsey

*Students collaborate in order to educate one another and to develop community. Students often use their own personal experiences for collaborative events in order to appeal to their fellow classmates' empathy to inspire change. Discussions centered on objective systems of oppression can be less effective than subjective experiences and require more student affairs professional assistance to create a fruitful experience. I examine two student events, *Happy in a Hijab (HH)* and *Real Talks: The Race Thing (RTRT)* to demonstrate how the discussion's subject relates to its effectiveness. I review the timeline of the events, what type of energy, and how much energy are generated based on each activity or action; energy in this case is defined as anything that might be emotion-inducing that can later lead to community building. HH can attribute its success in generating energy to its subjects being womxn who wear the hijab and to the creation of a safe space. RTRT produced less successful results due to its subject being the entire system of racism and its failure to create a safe space or learning environment. In this paper, I seek to affirm that diligence is needed when determining how collaborative events are held in order to uphold community building and reduce harm and trauma demonstrations.*

Keywords: collaboration, empathy, community, energy

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SENTIENCE

Collaboration breeds energy, whether
filling a room with warmth or
sucking out all the oxygen.

Student interaction is the baton that
manipulates the invisible but palpable energy
that shakes the campus community to the core.

Interconnectedness lives through energy.

Students each hold their own baton,
independent conductors in the energy symphony.
They gesture them in every which way,
lifting and shifting, pulling and tugging.
Energy makes its home in the heart of each student,
a souvenir from the spectacle that
doesn't get left in the corner of one's room,
but under one's pillow, stirring up their dreams.

Interconnectedness lives through energy.

We are all witches, pouring emotions
and facts and our experiences into a
brewing pot. It is likely to bubble over,
and that is okay, necessary to
make a spell, a ball of energy that
settles over the entire campus.

Interconnectedness lives through energy.

What Do I Mean By Energy?

I mean to encompass anything that can be emotion inducing. This can often mean that it is without logic, but nonetheless it is a sentiment that sits in one's soul and leaves an imprint.

A soul is a box of wet sand.
Impressionable,
to be molded and shaped by hands,
washed away by ocean waters,
melted and blown into glass.

Energy is the hands, the waters, the elements that shape.

It can be indescribable, but you feel it in your physical body on how it settles or wrestles with your soul. When discussing trauma to invoke change, empathy is the target emotion. However, the target of the empathy and what to do with said empathy is a major indicator of the success of the event.

Energy Monitor

Energy matters because it dictates the actions of the attendant. Based on how an attendant feels due to the energy generated by the event, they can be driven to do the actions discussed at the event. The greater likelihood that positive actions and interactions will occur in the community indicates the event's success. For this reason, I will describe the way the energy shifted in two events based on my firsthand experience and discussions with attendants.

Happy in a Hijab (HH)

This event addressed life wearing a hijab based on a panel of hijab-wearing Muslim womxn¹ that directly answered questions asked by attendants.

Restless: The normal din of the room as everyone awaits the start of the event, unsure of what may unfold.

Calm: Still, open minds watch "Hijabi World," the first taste of life as a Muslim womxn. It is a film about experiences directly from the mouths of the womxn who live them.

Lighthearted: "Hijabi World" places everyone at ease, as although it addresses pain, it addresses the humanity of these womxn in every way, including the hu-

[1] I use womxn instead of women to be gender inclusive and to acknowledge that I did not know the full range of gender identity and expression at the event.

morous blooper opening.

Sobered: The spoken word poetry of the event's performers speaks upon the pain of being a Black womxn in a hijab, and the reality of that intersection in identity brings the crowd back to a more serious tone.

Ebbing and flowing: The women of the panel are amazing. Each one tells a different story, each full of personality, each contributing a different piece to help us understand what daily life looks like for a Muslim womxn. We laugh, we sigh, our hearts break. Most importantly, we learn.

Warm buzzing: After the panelists are finished, a happy buzz fills the room, as attendants grab the last of the snacks, discuss the events with their peers, and try on scarves in a hijab fashion. Those who try on scarves get to take them home as a memento of this experience.

SUMMATION OF COMMUNITY ENERGY: Small, but powerful, generally positive with potential to affect the lives of attendants.

Real Talks: The Race Thing (RTRT)

This event addressed race. It was formatted as an open forum that allowed anyone to come to the podium and share their experiences with racism.

Restless: The normal din of the room as everyone awaits the start of the event, unsure of what may unfold.

Calm: Still, open minds listen to the three representatives from each organization introduce themselves. They all come from men's social fraternities, the majority of each organization's membership representing a different racial/ethnic group.

Fraying: The representatives give the first Merriam Webster definition of racism: "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race," ("Racism," n.d.). There is no mention of systems of hierarchy, or acknowledgement of intersectionality. Some students feel a ripple of confusion and disappointment.

Cracking: There are no ground rules set in regards to a safe space. A microphone is posted at the corner of the stage. Everyone is free to say whatever they please.

Joining: People of Color² share their painful experiences and all students simply [2] I choose to capitalize People of Color to acknowledge it as a racialized term while giving respect to those within this category.

watch and listen. Learning is the goal and that is what is happening.

Shattering: One attendant stands and announces to all the white³ student attendants that it is a privilege to have Students of Color share their stories, but that they should not have to relive their trauma in order for people to understand. There are more than enough resources to learn about the experience of racism without trauma demonstrations.

Silence: The majority is not in accord.

Roiling and mobilizing: The next three speakers negate the previous attendants words, stating that she is increasing the divide, and ignoring their privilege, per colorism, in regards to how racism has affected their lives.

Joining and fraying: These speakers incite enthusiasm and agreement, and the majority have a positive experience, as this discussion has been a place for growth. However, some attendants feel isolated and alienated, and that only complacency and coddling white fragility has been promoted in this space.

SUMMATION OF COMMUNITY ENERGY: Large and powerful, but partially exclusive, with major ability to influence the future actions of attendants.

Review of Energy

In both events, energy moves and exchanges between attendants. Happy in a Hijab (HH) was filled with womxn and femme-presenting people and only had about 65 attendants. Real Talks: The Race Thing (RTRT) had upwards of 200 to 250 students of varying genders. Both had racially and ethnically diverse attendants, including white, Black, Asian, and Latinx students. Both provided platforms for students to speak directly about their experiences. HH focused on the experiences of Muslim womxn who have chosen to wear the hijab. RTRT focused on the experiences of People of Color in regards to racism. Both of these events are relatively similar in structure, identical in basic purpose: to educate using the words of individuals who live those experiences everyday. The recounting of experiences generates emotion and human connection so the goal is to generate energy that will incite empathy and appeal to one's fellow student to rethink how they view the world.

One of the major differences between these events is the nature of the topics. Life as a Muslim womxn is a niche topic and the experts are the ones who experience

[3] I have written white in lowercase to emphasize the importance of putting People of Color at the forefront of these discussions and giving weight to their voices and needs. It is a stance against white fragility and white supremacy.

it. No one outside of that group could credibly claim that their experiences are invalid. The people that live it determine the meaningful aspects and can point out the factors that need to be considered when dealing with Muslim womxn. Racism is a much more complex topic and while the people that experience it are experts in their own way, in the wake of the rise of the concept of reverse racism, and the neglect of topics such as anti-blackness and colorism, there were a great deal of gaps that were not discussed that could have been opportunities to introduce and interact with basic critical theory. HH did not need any definitions to educate, whereas RTRT needed some expert instruction to fully explain the basic complexities of racism as a structure of oppression. In this instance that the lack of faculty or student affairs staff at either event is apparent. HH did not necessarily need that extra guidance, but RTRT could have benefited from faculty support.

As a facilitator for HH, I must admit that I am biased in regards to its power. It is easy to ignore that it is still an event that played on the recounting of my fellow students' trauma to feed the energy in the room. Yet there was one question that demonstrates why I believe HH to be a success: "How can I as a white woman be an ally to Muslim womxn?" This question reflects that the event was a space to challenge how we as attendants currently interact with this specific community and the world as a whole and what actions we can take to reflect what was learned from challenging our current mindset.

In contrast, the reason why I view RTRT as a failure is because it overall encouraged complacency and the reliance on trauma-sharing to educate. Based on a conversation I had with an attendant, I believe it was established that merely attending the event was doing your part. Students felt that simply being in the room while racism is discussed was revolutionary and there was no need to self-evaluate their part in the system. RTRT actively worked against the notion that there is more to learn to better oneself after the event was done. There can be no community building if there is no change. The students that feel discriminated against and made outliers remain there because those at the center are not using their privilege to change anything. What good is collaboration if nothing new and substantial is built?

Conclusion

The purpose of collaboration is to come together to share resources. In the case of the events, one group provided the content with their experiences, while the other provided a platform to an audience who might not regularly hear these stories. As a student, my greatest learning came from outside the classroom, directly from my peers. Collaboration between student organizations is an extension of the classroom that relies heavily on empathy to educate, which can be both powerful and detrimental. Two student collaboration events, both in which students

shared their experiences living under a certain demographic, differed in their presentation of information, which in turn affected the type of energy and strength of the energy generated and the effect of said energy to campus culture. One had a smaller platform which allowed a more intimate experience and space to challenge preconceived norms. The other had a greater platform, which contributed to its downfall as it did not foster a safe space, nor did it have the necessary faculty to fill in the necessary gaps. I find value in all collaborative efforts but believe that the presence of student affairs staff is more important when the main topic is a very complex, multifaceted system of oppression. I think both events were effective in regards to engaging their audiences, but find that RTRT was irresponsible in regards to content, which led to more potential harm and therefore away from community building.

Discussing the impact of student collaborative events is important to me because my peers' tireless labor is how I learned the majority of information that informs my political ideals and concepts of gender, sexuality, race, and all other marginalized identities. I grew so much because I was around people I respected that challenged my world view. The energy I speak about is what constantly stirred me and left me unsettled to the point that I had to wrestle with my personal beliefs until I determined how the knowledge I was presented with fit in. It took some serious growth, but I learned to always be open to understanding how other marginalized people experience the world, and how I contribute to their oppression. As a Black womxn, one that eventually confronted and acknowledged her queerness, how could I knowingly perpetuate the same type of harm that I had experienced all my life?

These events work for students such as myself. The pain others suffered was real; their oppression was an objective fact. My personal experience allowed me to accept this fact even at discomfort to myself. However, not all students, or people in general, exist in this manner. For this reason, I wanted to discuss two events I had proximity to that exhibited how the difference in attitude can determine the learning environment and impact. The baseline for positive outcomes in these events is (1) acknowledging oppression is based on a power structure and (2) respecting the people sharing their stories. HH did both and RTRT barely did one. Without both, there is no empathy. Without empathy, there is no move to action. Without the action of potential allies, there is no community building; the gap between the privileged and the oppressed is maintained.

Reference

Racism.(n.d.) *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>