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Betsy Bowen  
*Fairfield University*

Lillian Campbell  
*Marquette University*, [lillian.campbell@marquette.edu](mailto:lillian.campbell@marquette.edu)

Jenna Green  
*Marquette University*

Emily A. Phillips  
*Saint Louis University*

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Betsy Bowen

Fairfield University, [bbowen@fairfield.edu](mailto:bbowen@fairfield.edu)

Lilly Campbell

[lillian.campbell@marquette.edu](mailto:lillian.campbell@marquette.edu)

Jenna Green

Marquette University, [jenna.green@marquette.edu](mailto:jenna.green@marquette.edu)

Emily A. Phillips

SLU, [emily.a.phillips@slu.edu](mailto:emily.a.phillips@slu.edu)

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## Possibility Thinking in the Community-Engaged Classroom: Uniting Hope and Imagination towards Anti-Racist Action

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Possibility Thinking in the Community-Engaged Classroom: Uniting Hope and Imagination towards Anti-Racist Action<sup>1</sup>

Betsy A. Bowen  
Professor, Department of English  
Fairfield University  
[bbowen@fairfield.edu](mailto:bbowen@fairfield.edu)

Lillian Campbell  
Associate Professor & Director of Foundations Instruction, Department of English  
Marquette University  
[lillian.campbell@marquette.edu](mailto:lillian.campbell@marquette.edu)

Jenna Green  
Teaching Assistant Professor & Assistant Director of Foundations Instruction, Department of English  
Marquette University  
[jenna.green@marquette.edu](mailto:jenna.green@marquette.edu)

Emily A. Phillips  
Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Saint Louis University  
[emily.a.phillips@slu.edu](mailto:emily.a.phillips@slu.edu)

### Abstract

Drawing on the work of Patrick Saint-Jean, S.J., this article examines the contribution that “possibility thinking” makes to community-engaged learning at three Jesuit universities. The article considers ways in which possibility thinking intersects both Jesuit and secular perspectives on hope and imagination, and their relationship to anti-racist praxis. We then describe three institutional contexts at different stages of enacting community-engaged learning in introductory and upper-level English classes. The article concludes by offering three praxis-oriented directions for community-engaged learning educators to take up in their own institutional contexts: developing faculty capacity and awareness; fostering solidarity not charity; and encouraging reflection not reaction.

*To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.<sup>2</sup>*

In *The Crucible of Racism: Ignatian Spirituality and the Power of Hope*, Patrick Saint-Jean, S.J. introduces the idea of “possibility thinking” as central to Ignatian pedagogy and anti-racist praxis. Like hooks, he calls on us to engage with the world, while imagining more than we can see. Saint-Jean transforms the initial concept from leadership author John Maxwell, who describes possibility thinking as an ability to see possibilities in all things rather than limitations, for a Jesuit context. Saint-Jean observes that possibility thinking is inherent to both the life of Ignatius of Loyola as

well as to Jesuit goals of anti-racist praxis: “Ignatian spirituality is about possibility thinking. It refuses to be confined by societal expectations; it looks past appearances. It perceives a deeper reality—and that reality becomes a call to action.”<sup>3</sup>

In line with this special issue’s focus on hope and imagination in community-engaged learning, we—four rhetoric and composition scholars at three different Jesuit institutions—see community engagement as a site to foster possibility thinking among instructors and students. In this article, we provide a brief overview of the concept of possibility thinking and how it intersects both Jesuit and secular perspectives on hope and imagination and their relationship to anti-racist

praxis. Then, we briefly describe our three unique institutional contexts in different stages of enacting community-engaged learning. At St. Louis University, Emily is reintroducing community-engaged learning into a first-year writing course after several years. At Marquette University, Lilly and Jenna are developing an emerging community-engaged learning component within their first-year writing program. And at Fairfield University, Betsy reflects on her ongoing experiences with community-engaged learning in an upper-level literature course, part of an established program.

Finally, in the Discussion section we discuss three praxis-oriented directions for community-engaged learning educators to take up in their own institutional contexts. These include developing faculty capacity and awareness; fostering solidarity not charity; and emphasizing reflection in community-engaged coursework. As we discuss these three cornerstones for enacting possibility thinking, we draw on tools from the Jesuit tradition that can enable faculty and students to enter into community engagement with curiosity, humility, and a critical awareness. These tools include the cycle of reflection derived from the Spiritual Exercises and a commitment to “accompanying youth toward a hope-filled future.” Within each of these sections, we highlight resonances with the concept of possibility thinking and activities and resources that can move instructors and students towards imagining hope-filled possibilities in their anti-racist work for social justice.

### **Possibility Thinking and the Work of Anti-Racist Community Engagement**

#### *The Context for and Challenges of Community-Engaged Learning*

A core concern regarding community-engaged learning at our Jesuit institutions arises from a contextual strength, namely that many of our campuses are located in or near cities. While social justice issues arise in rural settings as well, we recognize that pressing needs surround our urban campuses. Yet, we also acknowledge that many of the students who choose to come to our Jesuit universities bring with them privilege, associated bias, and previous volunteer experience that may,

at least at first, position them as charitable agents rather than active listeners seeking solidarity. Some of our students have limited experience with communities unlike their own, especially ones that are racially or economically different. When they “walk with the excluded,”<sup>4</sup> they may struggle to recognize the assets and agency of those with whom they are working and, instead, see only need. While attempting to honor our Jesuit mission to engage in social action, we must also continually recognize our own positions of power and privilege as both instructors and students.

Scholars at Jesuit universities have long considered the tensions inherent in community-engaged learning. As early as 2003, Green noted the risks that arise “if service-learning takes place, as it often does, when mostly white students at predominantly white institutions serve mostly poor people of color in urban settings.”<sup>5</sup> More recently, in their examination of immersion service trips at Jesuit institutions, Haarman & Selak (2021) point out that “the Universal Apostolic Preferences of ‘walking with the excluded’ and ‘accompanying the youth’ have the potential to be implemented in ways that benefit the privileged at the expense of the excluded.”<sup>6</sup> Similar, but perhaps less dramatic, risks occur in local projects. Mitchell and colleagues note that without serious attention to the systemic social conditions, particularly racism, that create or contribute to problems, community-engaged learning becomes part of “a pedagogy of whiteness—strategies of instruction that consciously or unconsciously reinforce norms and privileges developed by, and for the benefit of, white people in the United States.”<sup>7</sup>

A foundational element of our courses, then, must be instruction in systemic social injustice so that students gain a greater understanding of the structures that create the conditions in which the men and women at their sites live. At Saint Louis University (SLU), students discuss issues of housing, education, and prison reform at both the national and local levels. By the end of the first four weeks of the first-year writing course, they begin to see how these issues are inextricably linked because of the systemic racism that perpetuates them. At Marquette, our first-year writing course employs a cultural rhetorics framework to guide students in examining

connections between language, race and power. All students at Fairfield take at least three courses that fulfill the Social Justice [SJ] requirement of the Magis core curriculum. At least one of these courses must address race and racism.

Often the revealing of these pervasive, racist structures generates a sense of hopelessness in our students—the problems seem far too big to be challenged within a 16-week undergraduate course. Recognizing that complex social problems defy easy solutions can discourage students who are accustomed to seeing themselves as having the power to bring about change. Fred Glennon found this in his own students, writing, “My experience with students is that once they learn about injustice in society, they become frustrated, seeing the problem as too big.”<sup>8</sup> As instructors we acknowledge that we, too, often feel hopeless as we learn more about social injustice (indeed, because this learning is never done), but that we have found action to be an antidote to despair. We share Glennon’s hope that “having students act upon a social justice issue in some way” will “help them see that they can be moral agents for justice.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, using the framework of possibility thinking, we move from limitations (“the problems are too big to solve”) to engagement, from despair to hope.

The fusion of community engagement and coursework in our universities reflects Pope Francis’ belief in education as “a natural antidote to the individualistic culture that at times degenerates into a true cult of the self and the primacy of indifference.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than viewing community-engaged learning as a linear relationship from student to community, or community to student, we see the two become interdependent. The student grows in her understanding of the social justice issue by listening to and working with her community partner; her community partner is acknowledged, heard, and offered support in the areas the community partners themselves have deemed necessary. Community-engaged learning then becomes an expression of solidarity rather than charity. In his address to educators, Pope Francis calls for “hope grounded in solidarity.”<sup>11</sup> That means that hope develops, not from ignoring complex problems, but from recognizing one’s

connection to others, both their gifts and their needs. Community-engaged learning, Donahue and Plaxton-Moore maintain, offers students “an opportunity to build [their] understandings and capacities by tapping into the collective wisdom and strength of community members.”<sup>12</sup>

While we acknowledge that students will always be concerned with grades—we would be ignoring our own context if we pretended that this was not the case—we can also use possibility thinking to say “yes, and”—yes, we know that our students want to succeed in our classes and beyond, and yes, we recognize our Jesuit mission calls us to engage in meaningful social action. By combining hope and imagination in our course construction, we become a campus within (rather than adjacent to) the community, and our students learn how to be effective agents of change wherever they find themselves after graduation.

Collectively, we find this hopeful, imaginative approach to community-engaged learning to be helpful because we recognize the potential for students to find themselves hopeless in the face of systemic perspectives on social injustice. While it is important that we support students in moving beyond simplistic perspectives and easy fixes, we also want to emphasize their potential to serve as change-agents in the world. This is where possibility thinking offers a useful intervention. As Saint-Jean emphasizes, it is grounded in anti-racist perspectives that acknowledge the depths of oppression in our current society. That anti-racist work must begin with awareness: “Awareness is the foundation of antiracism. It empowers us to see the possibilities that lead to justice.”<sup>13</sup> For many of our students, this means that the kind of race-blind thinking that they may have been encouraged to use to appear politically correct must be forfeited in the interest of naming racist language and practice in their everyday lives. But as Saint-Jean says, that awareness is the starting point for imagining possibilities. It is the way forward to possibility thinking and envisioning what it might look like to live otherwise. Thus, we see possibility thinking existing at an intersection of a number of Jesuit modes and values including listening, reflection, hope and imagination, and action (see Figure 1).

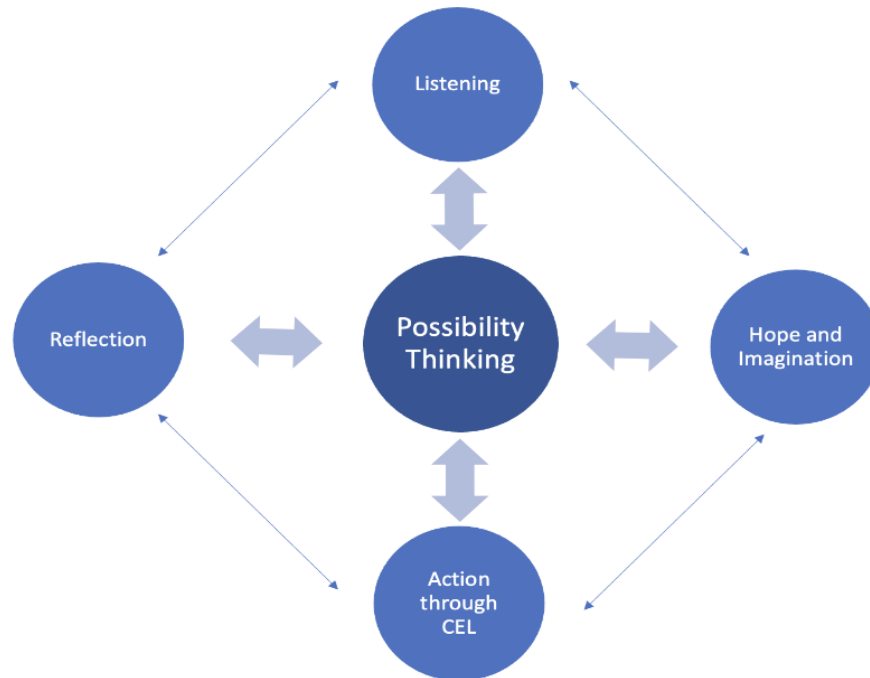


Figure 1: Possibility Thinking Conceptual Model

After an overview of our experiences in our three programs in the next section, our Discussion section considers three praxis-oriented directions for community-engaged learning educators that are specifically tied to our framework of possibility thinking. We begin by discussing how to develop faculty capacity and awareness, recognizing that before we bring students into a possibility thinking mindset, we must ensure that our instructors understand that goal and strategies for approaching it. This means navigating a range of instructor relationships to Jesuit pedagogy and to anti-racist praxis more broadly. Then, we discuss how to support faculty and students in fostering

solidarity, not charity. This section specifically draws on the use of imagination as a means to “fuel empathy, allowing us to explore what it means to see, feel, and think as another person. It enlightens the ignorant darkness of racism.”<sup>14</sup> By building awareness of injustice that is grounded in individual experiences and community learning, we help students to move past simplistic understandings of oppression. Finally, in fostering reflection, not reaction, we consider how students might engage with experiences of systemic injustice by turning to possibility thinking, grounded in difficult realities but also imagining a better future.

## Program Contexts

*Saint Louis University: (Re)Launching a Program*

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING AT SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY	
<b>Community Partners</b>	500+ sites available through the SLU Community Partners Database
<b>Course title</b>	Research, Rhetoric, and Social Justice (English 1900, part of Eloquentia Perfecta sequence in new core)
<b>Faculty members involved</b>	Emily Phillips, instructor of course
<b>Faculty development</b>	Faculty can develop curricula through the Center for Transformative Teaching & Learning
<b>Students involved</b>	Two sections of 20 students each
<b>Placements</b>	Student use the SLU Community Partners Database to connect with sites

English 1900: Advanced Strategies in Research and Rhetoric is the first course in Saint Louis University's *Eloquentia Perfecta* sequence and its completion is a requirement for all SLU students. Each course has a topic of inquiry that focuses research, discussion, and project development. For example, Emily recently taught two social justice-focused sections of the course in which students learned about inequities in education, housing, and imprisonment. All 1900 courses connect research and rhetoric in meaningful ways by asking students to not only learn about a specific topic but then use that information to craft an effective intervention through a multimodal project. For example, a student might learn about the relationship between property taxes and public education before creating a persuasive video that calls on local voters to support legislation that would generate greater

equity in school funding. Students are not necessarily asked to share such a video with *real* voters; rather, the creation of the video itself is the rhetorical exercise. While many elements of this work are instructive for students as they learn about current events, stakeholders, and media production, the work often stops short of active engagement with her local St. Louis community. Thus, while students begin the work of becoming "men and women for others," they often do not, in fact, apply what they learn in immediate, concrete action. As such, they fail to "let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage in it constructively." While they do develop skills in research and rhetoric, they do not necessarily, as Kolvenbach describes, "learn to perceive, think, judge, choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and oppressed."<sup>15</sup> If the "real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become."<sup>16</sup> Emily wants her upcoming 1900 courses to go a step further in individual transformation, connecting students to the world around them as Jesuit scholars have done for centuries.

Like a number of other instructors at SLU, Emily has attempted to weave community-engaged learning into her 1900 curriculum in the past. In the fall of 2016, she taught community-engaged learning sections of English 1900 with a focus on Gender & Identity. She worked with the SLU Center for Social Action office to pair groups of students with local partners, and while some students may have experienced the development in perception, thought, judgment, choice, and action that Kolvenbach describes, the community-engaged learning time requirements also generated palpable angst. When some community partners were slow in responding to students, they became increasingly concerned; the semester was ticking along and before they could even get started at the site, students had to establish contact and get in paperwork, like background checks. Because English 1900 includes rigorous coursework without community-engaged learning, the additional concerns in connecting to community partners to get started highlighted the tension between active service and academic achievement. If students were required to complete at least 12 hours of service (as she had established at the



beginning of the term), and several weeks into the semester they still had not been able to visit the site, the focus shifted from meaningful participation to a race to meet the minimum time requirement by the end of the term. As a graduate instructor at the time, she found it difficult to navigate these issues and reverted to coursework without community-engaged learning the following term.

Seven years later, Emily is attempting community-engaged learning in her 1900 courses again. After meeting with students who were both troubled by the availability of housing in St. Louis and also intrigued by our SLU Prison Program, she began to imagine a version of her English 1900 course that would go beyond students learning about local social justice issues through reading alone. Agreeing with Fred Glennon that “when it comes to social justice active learning is better than passive learning; doing is better than receiving,”<sup>17</sup> Emily imagines them moving out of the isolated academic exercises of the campus and into the complicated realities of the St. Louis community that surrounds them. What if, rather than reading about social justice issues before creating hypothetical projects, students spoke with stakeholders in real time and asked them what they needed? Through a combination of greater teaching experience on her part, an active pedagogical choice to focus on listening and learning, and the energy seen in students to learn and do more, Emily hopes that this iteration of the course will better embody the call to social justice in the St. Louis community.

*Marquette: Emerging Program*

<b>COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING AT MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY</b>	
<b>Community Partner</b>	Wide-range of partners (schools, food banks, support centers, etc.) assigned to courses by theme
<b>Course title</b>	English 1001: Foundations in Rhetoric
<b>Faculty members involved</b>	7 English faculty (tenure and non-tenure track)
<b>Faculty development</b>	External training through the Center for Teaching and Learning; Internal monthly check-in's and support
<b>Students involved</b>	Primarily freshmen; 10 sections and 200 students
<b>Placements</b>	Service learning office assigns partners to courses based on theme; students select a site from partners that are affiliated with their course

Marquette’s Foundations in Rhetoric (FiR) course is housed within the English department and taught primarily by non-tenure track teaching professors, who as of this past year have a track towards promotion and longer-term contracts. Teaching professors teach a 4-4 load of primarily FiR, with more disciplinary courses in the spring. About 70% of incoming freshmen at Marquette take FiR and it is the only required English class in the core curriculum. In Summer of 2020, we created a new shared first unit of FiR that focuses on cultural rhetorics and revised course assignments to better meet the needs of a diverse student body. We (the director, assistant director, and instructors) have continued to revise and update our anti-racist curriculum in the course through summer reading groups on topics like contract grading and this past year, collaboration with mission and ministry to integrate Ignatian pedagogy.

Our initial revisions of the English 1001: Foundations in Rhetoric curriculum were aimed at supporting incoming freshmen in having complex conversations about racial justice as they developed college writing skills. Our goals in revising the curriculum were two-fold: (1) to support students' understanding of and comfort in talking about the cultural contexts surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and the fight for racial justice and (2) to help all students, especially students of color, to feel like a part of the Marquette community and to see English courses as places where they could challenge themselves and continue to grow as citizens with a "sense of purpose" who "promote stronger communities" and "advocate for a better tomorrow" (Marquette University Core Curriculum, 2022). We found that grounding the goals for the course in core outcomes was a good way to build institutional buy-in for our revisions and recommend that others looking to incorporate anti-racist frameworks into community-engaged learning courses look for similar alignments.

The English 1001: Foundations in Rhetoric curriculum currently features four separate units. All instructors are required to adopt the anti-racist cultural rhetorics framework for Unit 1 and assign three one-page analyses. In Unit 2, instructors choose their own theme but all students work to write an academic synthesis essay utilizing texts curated by the instructor. During Unit 3, classes work alongside an assigned university librarian to learn about academic research, particularly finding and evaluating sources. Students can choose their own research question and sources as they catalog their learning in a research journal. In Unit 4, students utilize their findings from their research journal to compose a creative project with a critical reflection. Similar to the multimodal project in SLU's English 1900 course, Marquette students are tasked with demonstrating their rhetorical knowledge by selecting an appropriate genre to convey their findings to a particular audience. Popular student project genres include: websites, brochures, infographics, videos, podcasts, and social media campaigns. Additionally, all instructors are asked to engage their students in sustained critical reflection throughout the semester, including: an initial reflection on the first day of class, a reflection at

the end of Unit 1, about a month into the semester, and a final course reflection.

Lilly taught a community-engaged learning section with assistance from the university's Service Learning Program, using an older version of the FiR curriculum in Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 (until March), but this Fall will be the first time we are offering a substantial number of community-engaged learning sections and working within the revised curriculum structure. We will have 9 sections and seven instructors teaching community-engaged learning. We are using a placement model, where our service-learning office identifies potential partners for courses based on an instructor-chosen theme and then students register for a weekly commitment to one of the organizations. Themes include: education/literacy; neighborhood resources; LGBTQ support; community health; and food instability, many of which build on or are connected to previous themes instructors were using in the course. We have tried to keep the curricular transitions smooth for new instructors, by creating parallel assignments for all of the units that are similar to the original ones and encouraging them to bring in materials they have taught before. We recommend a similar approach for programs that are hoping to integrate community-engaged learning into multiple sections, since it helps make the switch more appealing for instructors and ensures they will continue to be able to use materials they are passionate about in their curriculum.

As we move into re-integrating and expanding our community-engaged learning offerings in Foundations in Rhetoric, we are particularly interested in how community engaged learning will work alongside our anti-racist first unit curriculum, the Jesuit pedagogical principles we have worked to integrate into the course during the 2022-23 academic year, and the many other existing demands on first year writing from campus collaborators.

*Fairfield University: Sustaining an Established Program*

<b>COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING AT FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY</b>	
<b>Community Partner</b>	STEP Project: Cesar Batalla School
<b>Courses</b>	10 courses engaged with Batalla in 2023-24
<b>Faculty members involved</b>	10 Fairfield faculty, from Counselor Ed., Ed.Studies, Engineering, English, & Spanish
<b>Faculty development</b>	3-day workshop and grants provided to faculty by the Center for Social Impact; faculty assisted by trained & paid CEL Assistants [CELA]
<b>Students involved</b>	158 overall; 125 in CEL courses; additional 33 in after-school volunteer programs
<b>Placements</b>	The Center for Social Impact works with faculty to develop partnerships with a wide range of community organizations.

Community-engaged learning is well established at Fairfield University, supported by the Center for Social Impact and involving faculty, students, and staff across the University. Since 2007, over 100 different courses have been developed and offered, of which 44 are still regularly taught; another 16 have been approved to be offered soon. Eighty-four current faculty members have either participated in the community-engaged learning course development cohort, taught a community-engaged learning course, or both. For the past six years, an average of 650 students enroll in community-engaged learning courses, with about 10% of those taking more than one community-engaged learning course in a given year. Perhaps most significantly, 49% of students

in the 2022 graduating class had been enrolled in a community-engaged learning course at least once in their undergraduate career. The University's Center for Social Impact is responsible for this work, supporting it with both a permanent Associate Director of Community-Engaged Learning [CEL] and a rotating Faculty Chair of CEL, a position in which I served for four years.

Community-engaged courses are offered in all five schools of the University and span the curriculum, from "Biomedical Instrumentation" to "Politics of Humanitarian Action." A staff member in the University's Center for Social Action connects faculty members with a community organization that might be interested in a joint project. Many, although not all, of the projects at Fairfield are hosted in Bridgeport. The Center has deep connections there; its staff know the capacity, staff, and interests of many local organizations. The difference in demographics between Bridgeport and the town of Fairfield make essential a critical, rather than traditional, approach to community-engaged learning<sup>18</sup> that can identify systemic disparities in access to resources as well as assets of the community partner.

The largest and oldest CEL partnership at Fairfield involves the University and Cesar Batalla School. Betsy's "Literacy and Language" is one of the courses involved in this partnership. Formed in 2011, the Students and Teachers Empowerment Partnership [STEP] brings faculty and students from Fairfield's College of Arts & Sciences, School of Education & Human Development, and School of Engineering & Computing to learn and work at Batalla. The school, named for a local Puerto Rican community activist, serves children from preschool to eighth grade and has a special mission to serve English language learners, with 39% of students speaking a language other than English at home. The initial goal of the STEP program was to improve literacy outcomes for children in grades K-3, while providing opportunities for Fairfield students to learn on site. In the past twelve years, the program has expanded to involve students across grade levels and subject areas at Batalla, and across three schools at the University.

Both Batalla and Fairfield have made substantial investments to support the STEP project. Batalla has given time, space, and energy to the project, allowing Fairfield Education faculty to hold some of their courses on site and adjusting their schedules at times to accommodate the University schedule. The University, too, has committed resources to sustaining this partnership. The Center for Social Impact provides transportation, student CEL assistants [CELA], and faculty development. This year, the University made an additional commitment to the project by hiring the former ELL coordinator at Batalla to serve as full-time coordinator for STEP with responsibilities at both schools.

At Fairfield, another key form of support for STEP and other community-engaged learning projects are faculty course development grants. Faculty who want to begin working with the community beyond campus apply for a grant from the Center for Social Impact. Grant recipients participate in a stipended three-day summer institute on the theoretical foundations and practicalities of community-engaged learning. Grant recipients also receive a small grant for supplies as well as mentoring as they develop their projects.

Since 2015 community-engaged learning has been a major component of Betsy's "Literacy and Language," a sophomore-level course in the University's recently revised Magis Core curriculum. The course is part of the University's Ignatian Residential College program which integrates academics, residence life, and mentoring.<sup>19</sup> "Literacy and Language" introduces students to literacy in American lives through fiction and nonfiction readings across a range of genres, as well as through an examination of their own family's experiences with literacy. Using imaginative fiction and nonfiction, students examine issues related to literacy and education—who has access to it; what fosters or impedes growth; what are the consequences, for the individual and society, of unequal access to literacy. Working with and at Batalla enables students to put their learning into action.

The project has changed over time, moving toward more parity between students at the two schools. In the first years of the project, college

students tutored pairs of second graders in reading and writing. Last fall, when an opportunity came up to work with eighth graders, Betsy's students served as "writing partners," helping Batalla students with essays. Eventually, they moved into collaborative writing, with college students and eighth-graders co-authoring essays on a social issue of the younger students' choice.

To prepare for community-engaged learning, the Fairfield students first enter imaginatively into others' experiences, reading poems, selections from memoir, editorials, and even a sermon from Pope John Paul II, his 1995 Lenten Message on literacy. The narratives and poems encourage students to participate imaginatively in the lives of others. Students also write their own personal narratives of learning or language, using, at a more advanced level, many of the same skills that the eighth graders will use. Fairfield students have access to all the materials the eighth graders use—assignments, rubric, sample narratives. In class, they role play conferences on drafts. At the same time, students read *The Student Companion to Community-Engaged Learning* and consider ideas such as asset-based engagement and the differences between charity and solidarity. Prior to the first writing workshop, students participate in a two-part orientation—the first part, on campus, assisted by the CELA; the second at Batalla, led by the STEP project coordinator.

Once the project begins, all students in "Literacy and Language" go to Batalla at the same time, during the regular class period, accompanied by their instructor and the CELA. That provides all students with a common experience and emphasizes that the work at Batalla is a "text"—as essential to the course as any other text we consider. After each workshop at Batalla, the college students discuss or write about their experiences. The final assignment in the course centers work with the community, asking students to analyze how community-engaged learning confirms, complicates, or challenges ideas presented in the literary texts in the course.

## Discussion

### *Developing Faculty Capacity & Understanding*

Like students, faculty members and instructors need time and support to develop their understanding of community-engaged learning and its connection to core Jesuit values. And like students, instructors may be prone to despair and discouragement when faced with the extent of injustice in our current world. Thus, introducing possibility thinking to instructors can be a means to both emphasize their own potential to create change through community-engaged teaching and their ability to foster possibility thinking in their students as well. In this way, possibility thinking can serve as a reflective tool for instructors to practice discernment in their lives and professions and as a heuristic for community-engaged pedagogy in their classrooms.

### *Possibility Thinking as a Tool for Instructor Discernment*

In order for possibility thinking to become a tool for instructors' individual discernment while teaching community-engaged learning, Jesuit institutions must find ways to foster instructor engagement with Ignatian pedagogy that reaches those from both secular backgrounds and a range of religious perspectives. In Cuban and Anderson's research on the Faculty Fellows Program at Seattle University, they note that if Jesuit institutions are to be successful in sustaining a social justice approach to community-engaged learning, they may need to develop a "critical mass"<sup>20</sup> of faculty who have learned together to "nurture collaborations while respecting boundaries and changing needs of community-based organizations."<sup>21</sup> While program administrators can work to foster these connections between mission and ministry and community-engaged learning instructor cohorts, these collaborations will benefit from initiatives on the part of the Jesuits to reach out to and connect with community-engaged learning instructors as well.

At Marquette, Jenna and Lilly greatly benefited from the opportunity to engage in a year-long faculty reading group on Jesuit thinking that helped to inspire the relaunch of the community-engaged learning FiR initiative. During the

summer prior to launching the curriculum (2023), they also ran an optional summer reading group for all FiR instructors drawing on a number of the readings from their year-long exploration. Six of the seven community-engaged learning instructors participated. This reading group introduced excerpts from Saint-Jean's book on anti-racist Jesuit praxis as well as readings from rhetorical scholars on *Eloquentia Perfecta* and discussion of the Universal Apostolic Preferences, including an excerpt from *Walking with Ignatius* (2021).<sup>22</sup> The group also participated in a two-day orientation to service learning designed in concert with the Center for Teaching in Learning, where instructors had gained an in-depth understanding of some of the logistical and curricular components of the course. Therefore, instructors had a good baseline of knowledge to draw practical connections between readings and implementation in the classroom. Possibility thinking for instructor discernment necessitates this toggling between understanding larger pedagogical values and principles and considering their direct application to classroom praxis.

While less directly connected to Mission and Ministry, Emily was able to find support through participating in a Course Design Institute hosted by SLU's Reinert Center for Transformative Teaching & Learning. The institute facilitated discussion, course development workshopping (including feedback from colleagues who used community-engaged learning in their own courses), and guidance for how to reimagine a course with established outcomes. Thus, while it was not operating specifically within the Jesuit tradition, the opportunities to practice discernment and possibility thinking still existed. Her primary goal was to avoid simply tacking community-engaged learning onto the established course; rather, she wanted to thoughtfully integrate community-engaged learning into each unit so that students could easily see the "why" for community-engaged learning in the course and be better prepared to listen and respond to community partners. She plans to reach out to both the CTTL and Center for Social Action throughout the term to navigate challenges and continue to develop her own understanding of community-engaged learning in the Jesuit tradition.

*Possibility Thinking as a Pedagogical Framework*

One challenge in integrating Jesuit pedagogy in the community-engaged learning classroom is how to recognize Jesuit values that underlie our institutions' approaches to community engagement while still making space for students who are uncomfortable with explicit references to Jesuit tradition. Indeed, some faculty members who are strongly committed to social action are equally wary of what they see as "religiosity," even as their approach to community engagement aligns with core Jesuit values. At some institutions Mission and Ministry can help instructors to navigate this balance, how to help students to recognize the alignments between Jesuit frameworks and community-engaged learning curriculum without necessarily using religion as the only justification for community-engaged learning. Indeed, possibility thinking can offer a more holistic starting point for helping instructors to frame the course's community learning components.

At SLU, Emily is working with the Center for Social Action to help connect students with community partners in ways that align with her curricular goals. The first unit in her course covers current social justice concerns so that students can gain a better understanding of these issues before deciding if they want to gather additional research about housing, education, or imprisonment. This represents the beginning of the "awareness" stage of understanding that Saint-Jean emphasizes. It is in this stage of the course that students will also connect to a community partner in that area and expand their awareness and imagination through direct community engagement and collaboration. Relying on the CSA to help foster these connections ensures that she can focus her attention on curricular throughlines, supporting students in building connections between in-class conversation and their community-engaged learning experiences.

While Lilly and Jenna's facilitated instructor conversations worked to connect Jesuit writings to the FiR curriculum broadly, we also had a number of opportunities to bring instructors into conversation about fostering possibility thinking, while also avoiding a savior complex or unrealistic expectations for creating change. We shared

materials on our course Sandbox site to support these conversations in the classroom, some from Jesuit contexts and others that were secular. These included Davis' essay "What We Don't Talk about When We Don't Talk about Service" and the first chapter of *The Student Companion to Community-Engaged Learning*, a book written by Jesuit colleagues.

It remains to be seen how these conversations and resources will shape instructors' experiences in their first semester of community engaged teaching. However, Lilly and Jenna suspect that the ability to anticipate and even imagine the pitfalls and potentials for possibility thinking in their classrooms prior to the start of the course will help instructors to intervene strategically through the readings they select, the discussions they facilitate, their reflective prompts, etc. They also want to emphasize that all of this preparation work was made possible specifically through the university's investment in engaging faculty with Jesuit mission and ministry, first through Jenna and Lilly's course releases that enabled their year-long participation and later through stipends for instructors to participate in service learning training and summer reading.

*Fostering Solidarity*

If community-engaged learning is to be truly "Jesuit," it needs to be committed to solidarity *with* others rather than charity *to* them. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis observes that "Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community."<sup>23</sup> Our challenge, then, is to help students cultivate that disposition toward community. Or, as Krista Ratcliffe puts it, to encourage students "to move from viewing 'others' as objects (i.e., as them) to seeing people as subjects with individual names and identities who may offer the students doing the service as much if not more than the students give."<sup>24</sup> The commitment to solidarity influences the nature of our community partnerships, the language we use to talk about community-engaged learning, and the capacities we cultivate in our students.

*Community Partnerships:* Our commitment to solidarity influences the ways we engage with individuals and organizations beyond campus.

Collaborating on a shared project with a university places demands on community members or organizations, many of which are already strained. Even a mutually rewarding project that meets a need identified by the local partner can demand resources to plan, sustain, and assess. While a university may want flexibility to accommodate changing faculty schedules or emerging faculty interests, a community partner may need to be able to count on a project continuing. “Acting in terms of community,” then, may mean recognizing and negotiating that tension. At Fairfield University, that has led to increased attention to developing sustainable partnerships, such as the STEP project, so that community organizations can better realize over the long term the benefits of the work involved in the initial planning.

*Language:* Our commitment to solidarity also shapes the language we use to introduce community-engaged learning to students. Even well-intentioned, but not carefully examined language can work against our goals. For instance, when we try to motivate students by pointing out the difference they can make through community-engaged learning, we may unintentionally suggest that they are “donors” and their partners are “recipients.” That language feeds what Donahue & Plaxton-Moore refer to as “the savior (industrial) complex”<sup>25</sup> and impedes students from seeing themselves as accompanying others, rather than “fixing” them. Moreover, as Mitchell et al. point out, terms like “building bridges” or “experiencing a new community” elide the experiences of some of our students who may already know or come from communities like the ones that host community-engaged projects.<sup>26</sup>

Our language also matters to those we work with off campus. A few years ago, at a meeting at Fairfield, community partners pointed out that when we described projects as being “in the community,” we suggested that the University was actually separate from “the community” and that our students were going into “the community” only when they left the campus. Instead, they suggested that “community beyond campus” better reflected the idea that the university and the people and organizations nearby were, in fact, part of a shared community.

*Capacities* Finally, we advance solidarity by helping students develop the skills and capacities that they need if they are going to work with and learn from others. That means critically engaging students’ prior experiences and understanding of “service” and emphasizing the importance of rhetorical listening prior to acting. At Marquette, the first assignment of the Foundations in Rhetoric course—an assignment called “Words Matter” within the broader curriculum—offers students readings that critically engage common words like service and volunteer, including Davis’ article on unexamined assumptions about service and Mosle’s *New York Times* essay “The Vanity of Volunteerism.” Students critically reflect on their previous experiences and how this course and its community-engaged component may challenge preconceived notions. Similarly, in the education and literacy sections students read “Notes from a Former Educator” by James Foley, a Marquette alum and international journalist. The essay describes Foley’s experiences as an AmeriCorps volunteer in the Southwest and is brutally honest about his failures to motivate or inspire the students at his school. Readings such as this one help students to consider the various systemic barriers that Foley is unable to overcome through his singular role as well as the many biases in his own perspective that limit his capacity to create change. The course also draws on Krista Ratcliffe’s work on rhetorical listening, helping students learn to rhetorically listen to the experience of others without immediately acting. The emphasis is on thoughtful engagement, without premature action.

#### *Revising Reflection & Requirements*

Thoughtful engagement is fostered through both our writing pedagogy and the Jesuit tradition as they both point us toward consistent, active reflection. Specifically, we can look to the iterative nature of the Daily Examen to move us out of reaction (which can lead to the despair and avoidance discussed earlier in this piece) and into hope as we review our actions and imagine a more just tomorrow. While the practice of the Daily Examen comes from a faith-centered, Jesuit context, it can be seen broadly as five key movements: a focus on presence, an openness to understanding, a review of the day, a reflection on what we have done and how that aligns with our

values and goals, and a vision of how we might better act in the future. We see similar movement in our pedagogy as many of us consistently ask students to review their work, assess it against assignment goals and course outcomes, and make plans for revision. This review often takes the form of reflection activities, which can be revised to incorporate emphases on the capacities explored above, including solidarity rather than charity.

*Short Reflective Assignments:* Imagining the integration of community-engaged learning into English 1900 led Emily to an action-reflection model combining local engagement, the practices of the Daily Examen, and recursive writing. In his “Experiential Learning and Social Justice Action: An Experiment in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” Fred Glennon supports the use of this model, writing, “Without action for justice reflections about justice become *blab*, ideas that students can regurgitate on a test or essay but which make very little claim on their lives. Acting for justice deepens their learning by making ideas about justice and injustice concrete, forcing students to reflect on the responses people and institutions have to their actions.”<sup>27</sup> Veronica House’s application of the DEAL model to service learning is particularly helpful as it generates critical thinking that goes beyond an individual focused, diary-style writing.<sup>28</sup> As Emily revises her English 1900 course activities to integrate community-engaged learning, she plans to use reflection prompts she has in place but expand them to include student experiences, thoughts, and feelings that stem from both their study of course texts and their work with their community partners.

Currently, these short reflection activities begin in the first four weeks of the term as students gain a foundation for exploring social justice issues. For example, in the first unit students read texts, like the introduction to Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*, and watched documentaries, like *13<sup>th</sup>*, before crafting responses in which they explore what they knew about each topic before the unit began and how their thinking has developed. They also reflected on what they still do not know about the topic, fostering both humility and inquiry. Students often expressed surprise at how much they did not know (a realization that comes

from students who often have substantial volunteer experience before beginning the course). By focusing on process—the process of learning, questioning, acting, and reflecting—she hopes, like Glennon, to “enable them to make connections between their actions and their effect on their views of social justice and of themselves as moral agents.”<sup>29</sup>

*The Service Learning Journal:* Because Emily wanted to make a concerted pedagogical shift away from community-engaged learning as a practice tacked onto, rather than integrated effectively into her course, she needed to develop assignments that would require active involvement from students but went beyond a simple time log. So, in addition to revising early reflective pieces, students in her fall course will complete a community-engaged learning journal with at least three entries. The first, titled “Initial Thoughts,” asks students to review the available information for their chosen site before discussing why they want to work with this community partner and what they believe the community partner may need from them. The second, titled “Early Visits,” prompts students to discuss their experiences with their community partners with an emphasis on what they learned (rather than what they did). The final journal entry, titled “Then & Now,” asks students to return to their first entry and reflect on how their understanding of the social justice issue at hand and their community partner has developed and how they envision themselves using this understanding in the future. Her hope is that by having these three core entries rather than a set number of site visit hours, students will be able to focus on learning from and listening to their community partners.

*The Multimodal Assignment & Process Paper:* While the community-engaged learning journal exists as a separate set of assignments, students will also engage in critical reflection through the first unit’s short writing assignments, guided small group discussions, and finally, the process paper that they will submit with their multimodal assignment toward the end of the term. This process paper closely aligns with the DEAL model, developed by Ash and Clayton and applied to service learning in House’s work, as students describe what they did in the production of their project, explain why they made the creative and content



choices they did, and articulate their learning through discussing the process of creating the multimodal assignment (including research, work with community partners, and media production) and what they will do with that knowledge beyond the end of the semester.

Despite this hope and the preparation that stems from it, Emily accepts that some student reflections will lack the critical awareness and growth described above. Here House offers encouragement, writing that this “does not necessarily mean that the student’s experience was miseducative or can never *become* educative, but rather, that the student has not *yet* learned from it.”<sup>30</sup> Just as the Daily Examen ends with a view toward tomorrow, these reflections offer students space to consider how their experiences—what they have heard and what they have done—can shape what they will do in the future.

Finally, while critical self-reflection can help transform students’ learning, the Jesuit tradition

also reminds that we *all* must engage in reflective practice. Drawing on Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratio*, Ratcliffe describes the Jesuit Principle of Development of Character via modeling, “Jesuit education echoes the idea of rhetorical modeling, too, in terms of linking seeing and doing with becoming.”<sup>31</sup> In order to actualize the possibilities of community-engaged learning, as instructors and program directors, we need to prioritize opportunities to model the critical reflection we ask our students to engage with and to make those opportunities available to all faculty. We encourage collaboration between instructors and other campus units to help instructors model reflection to help guide students to cultivating their imaginations and capacity to hope. As Saint-Jean reminds us, Ignatian spirituality is about possibility thinking and through modeling awareness, solidarity, and reflection, we can help our students become rhetors who are called to action by the possibilities within problems.<sup>32</sup> HJE

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 110.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Saint-Jean, S.J., *The Crucible of Racism: Ignatian Spirituality and the Power of Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Society of Jesus, “Universal Apostolic Preferences,” <https://www.jesuits.global/uap/walking-with-the-excluded/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Green, “Difficult Stories: Service-Learning, Race, Class, and Whiteness,” *College Composition and Communication* 55, no 2 (December 1, 2003): 277.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Haarman and Annie Selak, “An Examination of Alternative Break Trips and Whiteness in Jesuit Higher Education,” *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 10, no. 2 (2021): 138, <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol10/iss2/14/>.

<sup>7</sup> Tania D. Mitchell, David M. Donahue, and Courtney Young-Law, “Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Whiteness,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 613, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.715534>.

<sup>8</sup> Fred Glennon, “Experiential Learning and Social Justice Action: An Experiment in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning,” *Teaching Theology & Religion* 7, no. 1 (January 2004): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2004.00188.x>.

<sup>9</sup> Glennon, “Experiential,” 33.

<sup>10</sup> Francis, *Global Compact on Education. Together to Look Beyond, Papal Message* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, October 15, 2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201015\\_videomessaggio-global-compact.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201015_videomessaggio-global-compact.html).

<sup>11</sup> Francis, “Global Compact.”

<sup>12</sup> David M. Donahue, Star Plaxton-Moore, Chris Nayve, and Tania Mitchell, *The Student Companion to Community Engaged Learning* (Bloomfield: Stylus Publishing, 2018), 42.

<sup>13</sup> Saint-Jean, S.J., *The Crucible of Racism*; 70.

<sup>14</sup> Saint-Jean, S.J., 314.

<sup>15</sup> Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education” (Santa Clara University, October 6, 2000), <https://www.scu.edu/ic/programs/ignatian-worldview/kolvenbach>.

<sup>16</sup> Kolvenbach.

<sup>17</sup> Glennon, 33.

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<sup>18</sup> Tania Mitchell, "Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning: Engaging the Literature to Differentiate Two Models," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14, no. 2 (March 22, 2008): 50, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ831374.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of service learning in a similar living/learning program at another Jesuit university, see Allen Brizee, Kate Figiel-Miller, and Marianna Carlucci, "Living, Learning, Serving: Outcomes of Combining a Living-Learning Program with Service-Learning Courses," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* 11, no. 1 (2022): 51-74, <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol11/iss1/5/>.

<sup>20</sup> Sondra Cuban and Jeffrey B. Anderson, "Where's the Justice in Service-Learning? Institutionalizing Service-Learning from a Social Justice Perspective at a Jesuit University," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 40, no. 2 (May 21, 2007): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680701246609>.

<sup>21</sup> Cuban and Anderson, 152.

<sup>22</sup> Arturo Sosa, S.J., *Walking with Ignatius: In Conversation with Darío Menor* (Bilbao, Spain: Loyola Press, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti, Encyclical Letter* (Vatican City, Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), para. 116, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

<sup>24</sup> Krista Ratcliffe, "Reflection: Echoes of Jesuit Principles in Rhetorical Theories, Pedagogies, and Praxes," in *Traditions of Eloquence: The Jesuits and Modern Rhetorical Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 398-400.

<sup>25</sup> Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, *The Student Companion to Community Engaged Learning*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell et al., "Service Learning as a Pedagogy of Whiteness."

<sup>27</sup> Glennon, "Experiential Learning and Social Justice Action," 32-33.

<sup>28</sup> Veronica House, "The Reflective Course Model," *Reflections: Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 30.

<sup>29</sup> Glennon, "Experiential Learning and Social Justice Action," 33.

<sup>30</sup> House, "The Reflective Course Model," (emphasis in original), 30.

<sup>31</sup> Ratcliffe, "Reflection: Echoes of Jesuit Principles," 399.

<sup>32</sup> Saint-Jean, S.J., *The Crucible of Racism*, 70.