

## 14. Culture, Community and Identity as Agents of Change

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*“ But all our phrasing – race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy – serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this.”*

— Ta-Nehisi Coates

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CLP sites share an understanding that – to prepare for life as an organizer and agent of social change in any community – students benefit greatly from classes which help them develop their understanding of themselves, their fellow students, their community, and issues of race, class, gender, culture, and privilege. These classes typically enable students to learn by –

- Exploring their personal history and identity while delving into issues of race, class, power and privilege, internalized oppression, trauma, and healing,
- Drawing strengths from their culture, community, and identity,
- Analyzing structural racism and other biases and how they affect public policy and the behavior of institutions and individuals, and
- Providing a cultural context which helps them understand the communities where they will work and to develop their capacities for reflection, critical thinking, active listening, conflict resolution and the building of groups, organizations, coalitions and alliances, as well as cross-cultural collaboration.

Courses focusing on these deep topics vary considerably from site to site in the CLP network. They range from 1 to 6 credits, and they often include field experience exploring these issues and following practices developed in class. Some are free-standing courses, while others are structured as modules for use

in courses on community organizing, community development or a particular community issue like violence prevention or student housing.

Nevertheless, they all are aimed at preparing students to be thoughtful, effective organizers and change agents who can work sensitively and effectively in communities like their own and across cultures. They address issues of race, racism, and white domination in depth through study, dialogue, experience, and reflection.

### **Growing Emphasis on These Issues:**

Over the decades issues of race, culture and community have been heavily emphasized by movements and organizations led by people of color, from Black Power to Black Lives Matter, from the Brown Berets and La Raza Unida to the DACA and wider immigration movements, from the American Indian Movement to similar movements among Asian Americans and white ethnics. They also have been heavily emphasized by many social workers and community organizers, and the vast majority of independent community-based organizations of all types have drawn great strength from the traditions and strengths of communities of color and working-class and low-income neighborhoods

As the larger networks of organizing groups have concentrated on building city-wide, regional and statewide multiracial, multiclass organizations, until recently most have been cautious about using race and culture as a base for organizing. They have relied on highly professional organizers, usually from middle class and well-educated backgrounds, and been strongly criticized by many people of color as not being solidly based in their communities or responsive to their needs and priorities. In gaining breadth, they have lost some of the depth they had in earlier years.

However, over the last five years, there have been remarkable changes in the leadership of the major community organizing networks and support organizations. While the Gamaliel Foundation and the IAF in the West and Southwest have been directed by people of color for many years, several other organizing networks are also now addressing issues of race and ethnicity far more seriously than they did earlier. People's Action now emphasizes multiracial leadership and race-conscious campaigns. The Center for Popular Democracy

stresses racial and economic justice and has a multiracial leadership team, and the Center for Community Change has gone through a racial and generational change over the last 15 years, and now has an African American and a Latina in the two top positions.

**One particularly interesting story is the thoughtful, step-by-step process one of America's largest organizing networks has gone through in transforming itself** after serious study and debate about how it addresses issues of race. Faith in Action (formerly the PICO National Network) believes in the “power of people to transform systems (people, institutions and our larger culture) to create more just and equitable communities through catalyzing a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith collaborative movement.”

Through its organizing, the network is “actively engaging communities of color to be the authors of their own liberation and in that process seeks to adapt principles of organizing to match the cultural nuances and traditions connected to those communities.”

Reverend Deth Im, Director of Training and Development for Faith in Action, has been one of the active leaders in this transformation, which has led to a major shift in the network's leadership and its emphasis on race-conscious organizing. The network's new Executive Director and many of its other top leaders are now people of color. And there are many other major changes, including a new emphasis on race-conscious organizing.

After the first two years of study, discussion and debate, Reverend Im described this challenge as follows:

“There have been numerous challenges that PICO faces in recruiting and preparing people of color for leadership within the organization. Perhaps the underlying challenge that informs the other challenges is that we’ve had to identify the principles and practices within our organization and our work that are rooted in white dominance. Therefore, the impact is a culture that is more successfully navigated by white people, which leads to visible leadership positions within the organization.

“This leads to a second challenge wherein white executive directors and supervisors face difficulties mentoring and supervising people of color to understand the rigors of the work, how to meet performance expectations and ultimately how to move into positions of leadership. People of color feel trapped trying to organize within their indigenous contexts and are faced with the dilemma of organizing the “right” way or leaving to find something which is more culturally contextual.

“Another challenge we face is positioning people of color too soon for leadership. Given the organizational commitment to identifying people of color yet faced with the optics of having few people of color in leadership positions, when talented people of color are identified they are put into leadership positions before they’re fully ready and oftentimes this leads to on-the-job training in which the new leader faces a series of failures which can then lead to termination or resignation.

“Given the barriers listed above, there are opportunities for PICO in communities of color. First, there is a commitment from leadership within PICO to more fully address the issue of racial inequity and how the culture of our organization reflects white dominant culture. For the last five years, we’ve committed to put race at the center of our work, which has resulted in a deeper racial analysis both for our work and for our organization. Our commitment to understanding implicit bias and seeking working relationships with thought leaders such as John Powell, Rachel Godsil, Manuel Pastor, Heather McGhee and Ai-jen Poo have been instrumental in helping us examine our practices.

“This commitment to put race at the center coupled with an emergence of leaders within communities of color who are seeking to change professions into organizing provides an opportunity for us to establish new practices that are both more equitable and culturally contextual.

“Finally, if we are able to engage the energy of young people who come with deep commitment and passion to racial justice work, we have an opportunity to train a new wave of organizers who reflect the communities from which they come and can incorporate practices that also reflect those communities as well.

“As an organization, we developed strong relationships with young people and young adults in Ferguson, MO who had some instincts for organizing and had boundless energy and commitment to changing the racist infrastructure throughout St Louis County. Our experience in Ferguson was forged in direct relationships with young people and young adults in direct action protests and negotiations with the police. Moreover, we ran a four-day voter engagement program in Ferguson, November 2014 which identified a need that we are grappling with related to career pathways in low income, communities of color.

“PICO typically runs a volunteer voter engagement program, because we believe the passion commitment of our people to the issues is longer lasting than what we can get with paid canvassers. In Ferguson, our canvassing teams were comprised of Ferguson/St Louis County residents we paid them for their time. It raises the issue of how we compensate people from low-income communities for their time when they are engaging in our systemic change efforts and it probably means we cannot operate unpaid internships.”

This process led to a major transition in the composition of Faith in Action’s Board and top staff leadership and then the hiring of a new Executive Director who is African American and a former leader of one of PICO’s local affiliates.

While not held back by racism, **low-income and working-class whites** face many of the same barriers and seldom are chosen to lead nonprofit organizations. They face many of the interlocking obstacles which afflict people of color, starting with the fact that credential, educational and work requirements often block them from organizing jobs and staff leadership roles. Formally or informally, organizations frequently reject candidates without a Bachelors' degree or at least an Associate Degree from a community college. In addition, when they look for people who already have had work experience or a relevant internship, this disadvantages candidates who cannot afford to work or intern without pay.

Why not hire people who have surfaced as community leaders in organizing campaigns or social movements? Traditional community organizers often discount that background, believing that the spokesman/visible leadership role is in conflict with the "organizer's" role of working behind the scenes to develop others.

### **The CLP Network's Courses on Race, Community and Identity as an Agent of Change:**

Drawing from his Native American roots, CLP's former Field Director Syd Beane emphasizes that to prepare yourself to be an agent of change you must start from where you came from, your ancestors, their rituals, their experiences and their philosophy and see culture as providing the context for healing, developing a sense of your own power, understanding the people you're with and building relationships with them.

When he taught in the CLP program at **Minneapolis College** (formerly MCTC), Syd began his Introduction to Community Organizing with his tribe's traditional rituals and ceremony and then focused on story, on family history, on community. He had students reflect on their own backgrounds through a series of exercises. He helped students capture their own story and overcome the influence of the dominant culture, pointing out that it guards against changes to the status quo, including challenges to "democracy" and "capitalism". Students are helped to discover and understand their own culture and power.

“Every course starts with helping students understand themselves. Only then will anything have meaning. Students must learn that it is not all about what others think is right and what's wrong but about what you think is the right answer. Discovering this is empowering and you gain it through experiential learning.”

The course stresses that spiritual healing is critically important. While trained as an organizer by Saul Alinsky, Syd disagrees with Alinsky about making anger central to organizing. He thinks anger separates and divides and that instead the emphasis should be on pain and healing. He sees culture as providing the context for healing, enabling students to create a sense of their own potential power and efficacy as an agent of social change and community-building. Drawing from his Social Work education, Syd differs from Alinsky in stressing the importance of “building an understanding of the other person, his pain, what needs to take place to heal that pain, and how I can relate to that experience to build a relationship: this is in contrast to the classic Alinsky approach that you need to build power so you can then do what you want.”

## REFLECTION OF SELF IN THE COMMUNITY AS AN ORGANIZER

*“Cultivating Consciousness is a course intended to provide a space for community organizers to explore issues of race, class and privilege and its impact on the self and communities. Students will learn skills and knowledge related to group dynamics, self-analysis and macro and micro issues related to the role of community organizers.”*

*“This class will explore the role, principles and real challenges that an organizer faces in balancing their life as they work for justice. In addition to exploring the life-work balance of an organizer, we will also explore both local and international practices and models of those who do community organizing while incorporating the “fully human” aspects of our lives into the social justice work.”*

*“We will look at how internalized oppression plays into our lives as people of color and organizers. This exploration into our own internalized oppression will reflect on the ways we work in the community. .... Understanding race, power and privilege in inter-personal relationships. Critiques current social justice organizations that fight for social justice yet continue to uphold dominant power structures.”*

This core course on “Cultivating Consciousness” is taught in the Community Planning and Organizing curriculum which CD Tech offers in Los Angeles. Among the elements included in the Los Angeles course are: Group dynamics, non-violent communication, facilitation, active listening and finding your voice/style while working in communities; developing a conflict resolution facilitation plan for various community conflict scenarios; comparing and evaluating the approaches of other students.

Students in **DeAnza College's** Certificate program in Leadership and Social Change speak to the powerful impact of their course in *Community Based Learning in Intercultural Studies*, developed by Edmundo Norte, Dean of Intercultural/International Studies at DeAnza.



*"[This] class was essential. How are you taking care of yourself? That's what you need to be an effective organizer. Take care of yourself and people."*

*"You have to find out who you are so you can go out and motivate others."*

*"Understanding internalized oppression – How I have taken so many of my values from the dominant culture and how to recover from that."*

*"You get to know each other because you are doing the work together. That class knows things about me that my family doesn't know. These are the people you have to rely on."*

*"A required component of the program was a crash-course in nonviolent communication. This taught me about how empathy is the quickest and most effective way to create change because it allows you to see every person as human, and to understand where they are coming from, what motivates them. When you understand this about a person, you can truly build community and create change."*

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The course offers six credits over the fall, winter and spring quarters. Each week, students combine three or more hours in class with an equal amount of time working with an organization that is tackling an important community issue on campus or in the broader community. The experience includes deep personal and group reflection and training in nonviolent communication skills.

The class meets once a week for three or more hours. Edmundo notes that it usually goes overtime by 30 to 90 minutes because the students are so involved in discussing a hot issue that they want to continue the discussion.

The classes prepare students for dealing with injustice and carrying on the struggle involved in addressing trauma, conflict and oppression, including issues of race, class, gender and other forms of discrimination. Students address the traumas in their own lives as well as the injustices and challenges they confront in their internships. The class is based on recognition that in order to sustain continuing work on tough issues of social justice, students must give serious attention to building their internal strengths and relationships and their sense of community with others who share their values and are committed to the same struggles.

Norte is an expert in nonviolent communication, sometimes called "compassionate" or "collaborative" communication. He has designed the course to help students better understand themselves while also strengthening their capacity to communicate and work with others who are engaged in the same struggle. The course is structured to help students overcome their sense of isolation and nervousness and to get to know each other and share their stories, what they have been through, what experiences helped shape how they see the world, what sustains them, what they want to get from relationships.

This is particularly important because we often do social justice work in toxic situations, seeing injustices we want to heal, facing great tensions and arguments with each other. A key question is how do we make our work sustainable in those situations? What personal and interpersonal strategies can we develop for understanding ourselves, for self-care and for cultivating relationships which sustain us for the long haul?

Each class is structured to address the issues that most preoccupy the students that day. The following outlines a typical class session:

- **Quiet Reflection.** Five-ten minutes of silent reflection.
- **Pair/Share.** Pairing up with another person to share and reflect on any issues that arose during the opening, quiet grounding time.
- **Group/Share.** Sharing these experiences and reflections among the whole group.
- **Announcements.** A time for open announcements of activities and events.

- **Mini-lecture/Presentation.** A brief presentation or further investigation of one of the issues raised earlier, that holds lessons for real-life learning.
- **Practice Applications.** Breaking into empathy groups, as described below, for small group practice in applying the principles and practices of nonviolent communication to addressing the issues that students are confronting.
- **Exercises and Discussions.** Students reflect on issues in their internships or other topics, often using a variety of exercises or role-playing, and staying in empathy groups.

Much of this course is carried out in small groups, often including exercises to cultivate practices which sustain us. Students create “empathy groups” of 4-5 people who choose groups in which they feel comfortable and best able to share their inner thoughts. They stay together through the rest of the course.

The process followed in the classroom models the relationship-building which is key to bringing about any substantial change. Edmundo emphasizes that to gather strength people must invest time in getting to know each other, overcoming the reticence that often blocks real communication and sharing our life stories. His approach includes exploring how we need to understand what has shaped our vision of the world and what we want to get from our relationships and our collaborations.

At this level the course is similar to Marshall Ganz’s course at Harvard's Kennedy School. Formerly an organizer with the United Farmworkers Union, Marshall stresses story telling as key to organizing. Ganz trains students in “public narrative”, sharing with each other: a story of self; a story of us; a story of now. The teaching process and content are both geared to strengthening the emotional intelligence of the students, preparing them to build effective relationships in the communities where they work and to build strong working relationships with their colleagues in community change work.

The DeAnza course is structured to take students through five steps that are critical to taking on leadership on community or social change issues. These steps are especially helpful for students of color and others who face discrimination, injustice and internalized oppression in their own lives and who find the dominant culture daunting or harmful to them and those they care about. They are designed to decolonize people's minds and give them a chance to reframe their

understanding of themselves, of others with whom they deal and of situations they face.

Central to the process and to the course is recognizing the challenges of social change work and having confidence that students can develop new ways of working with others. Edmundo sees that the attitudes and assumptions they enter with are usually those of the dominant culture. This includes binary thinking that stresses how things are either right or wrong, good or bad, mine or yours, or reflect the belief that the views of one person who is dominant and therefore inherently right and other views are inherently wrong. He asserts that nonviolent communication provides an alternative way of looking at the world. It starts with the assumption that the best answers and the strongest organizations or collaborations come from developing common ground through a process of introspection, listening to each other, healing and sharing.

Other elements of the course include having the students write weekly reflective papers. Some of these reflections complete an assignment from the professor, but most are reflections on experiences students are having in their internships, their other courses in social justice or elsewhere in their lives. Periodically, the class discussion focuses on a joint assessment of what parts of the course have worked well and which ones have been less successful, so that the instructor has guidance from students which can be applied to future teaching.

In learning this set of reflective practices and building a support group of relationships, students become better prepared to overcome feelings of inadequacy, to relate closely with others in common cause, to understand the rage they may feel and to address the pain which is its root cause. Mourning and healing prepare them to move into transformative action. Edmundo has seen that there is little you can accomplish if you feel inadequate, cannot collaborate with others fully, or cannot address your anger and build the supportive relationships and healing strategies which are essential to lifelong work for constructive change.

The class accompanies an internship which takes about 3.5 hours per week. The class meets one day each week for 3.5 hours. It sometimes goes overtime when there are live issues which students want to keep discussing.

## Literature on Race and Organizing:

For teachers and trainers, there are many useful teaching materials which go beyond the standard “Alinsky” list to include four interrelated types of literature

- Literature which directly addresses structural racism, and related issues and the history of race in America.
- Literature which tells the story of organizing and movement history which is inspired and led by people of color, and which therefore can inspire and connect students to those traditions as well as reflect what kinds of strategies fit and work best in a particular culture (like Freedom Plow, Malcolm X’s autobiography, biographies of Willie Velasquez, George Wiley, Fred Ross and others, Aldon Morris’ *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, *The Black Panthers’* mix of education, services, and organizing, histories of the slave revolts, MAYO and LaRaza Unida, the Farmworkers, Black Lives Matter, minority voter registration and analyses of minority political strategies, etc.)
- Literature which is useful for organizers interested in drawing from a particular culture’s traditions of “organizing”, reweaving the ties between cultural organizing and community organizing which Alinsky stopped emphasizing along the way. An example of this is the book *Blood Struggle* which analyzes the history of about 125 years of US policy toward the Indian reservations, what that’s done to the culture, and how AIM, Alcatraz, and other developments have begun to restrengthen the Native Americans’ culture, self-confidence, sense of voice and power and traditions of self-organization, etc.
- Materials on Historical Trauma – there is an abundance of illuminating studies of cultural and historical trauma.

The following materials on the CLP website reflect the different approaches which educators at CLP sites have developed. Interviews with students demonstrate that these courses are having a powerful and often transformative impact on them.

**Cultivating Consciousness: The Reflection of Self in the Community an Organizer:** This is a one-credit introductory course taught as part of the Community Planning and Economic Development Program at CDTEch.

**Community Planning 10: Comprehensive Community Violence Prevention Strategies:** This course includes many sessions on Critical Consciousness of

Culture, Community and Self, and of racism and other structural barriers, oppression, trauma, healing and personal transformation.

**Building Communication Skills, Consciousness and Relationships: DeAnza College Course on Community-Based Learning in Intercultural Studies:** The DeAnza course on nonviolent communications and self-reflection toward action is a program highlight for many students.

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*“It was the Civil Rights Movement that said we don’t need to just pray for things to get better in America, we need to march in the street and challenge the injustices of society, and declare that segregation was not only a political problem, but a moral problem.”*

— Rev. William Barber

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*“When you teach a man to hate and fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or your job or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies – to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and mastered.”*

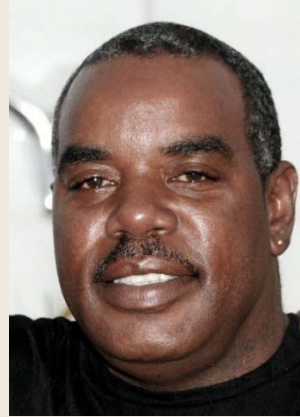
— Robert Kennedy

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## STUDENT STORIES

### **Fanya Baruti**

*“What struck me and stayed with me most from the program was the concept of internalized oppression. When they hit that, I said to myself that’s what I’ve been suffering from. I’ve been suffering from this syndrome for a long time and now it has a name. As Black males, we experience so much so where we become hardened and apathetic. If we do not talk about the systematic walls of institutionalized racism – and tear them down like the Berlin Wall – we’ll never be recognized as human beings. We’ll only be sugar-coating a lot of the pain and the privilege some people don’t want to let go of.”*



### **His Pathway into the Program**

*Fanya Baruti has faced the walls of institutionalized racism directly – as someone who was incarcerated and as an organizer. While incarcerated, Fanya organized other prisoners to fight for better conditions, educational and self-development opportunities, and pre-release programs. When he was released, Fanya started working as an organizer with A New Way of Life Re-Entry Project. That’s when a colleague who told him, “Hey Fanya, there’s a class at CDTech I think you would like.” Fanya recalls: “We were in a phase of organizational maneuvers where we were trying to figure out the best practices so I looked into it. It turned out that I already knew Benny [Benjamin Torres, CDTech President and CEO] through a community collaboration we were involved with so I enrolled and was accepted.”*