

## **Public Education Forums**

### **Parents and Teachers**

Arts for Action, an experimental advocacy project involving parents and teachers, ran training workshops, conducted public forums, attended local school board meetings and used theater techniques to involve the local community in brainstorming innovative solutions to the race, class, language and gender disparities in academic achievement in the Cambridge public schools.

### **Student Organized Forum on The Miners Canary, April 2002**

"Students put together a forum for approximately 150 participants at the Kennedy School. They raised the money, organized the panels, and did all the publicity. The subject was Rethinking Race and Power to Build Multiracial Coalitions. Although the formal panels were conventionally organized, the students invited community activists and spoken word poets, including high school students from Freedom Academy, to re-enact the ideas in less academic language. Audience members did not just sit passively to listen to speakers. They joined small groups to perform role-plays that enacted the themes of the conference: the strengths and weaknesses of coalitions.

"The audience was invited to participate by forming a huge semi-circle. They were introduced to exercises involved images of the word "power" in both its oppressive/controlling dimension and then later in its collaborative/generative potential. Groups of 4 - 6 people (mostly strangers and quite heterogeneous) created physical images (with their own bodies) of power. One group stood in a semi-circle of people linked hand to shoe. This was a graphic demonstration of helping behavior but it was also unstable as everyone was standing on one foot (a fit metaphor). My group, including a high school student, a dean of students at the Kennedy School, a former K School student, now an Asian American community organizer, and a black K School Fellow, created a merry go round in which we each joined one hand and rotated slowly, leaving the other hand free to pick up new members. At the suggestion of the high school student, he moved in the same direction as the rest of the group but walked backwards to signal the existence of dissent and diversity within our group. The exercises crystallized the more abstract themes of the panels in ways that truly resonated with the audience."

Lani Guinier

## **Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogue**

### **Arts and Civic Dialogue, Summer 2000**

The Institute on the Arts and Civic Dialogue (IACD), directed by Anna Deveare Smith in association with the W.E.B. DuBois Institute and the American Repertory Theatre, was an experiment "to create a new kind of civic space where artists and their audiences ...engage in dialogue on compelling and complex social issues." Audiences were invited to respond to works in all art forms, shown at an early stage. The project created long-term relationships with the core audience, who committed to attend every performance during one of the three summers of the experiment. Guinier and Tim Mitchell used Augusto Boal's interactive theater exercises to facilitate audience involvement and stimulate further conversation about an artist's photographic presentation on prisons

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Gray Matters was a series of five public conversations among prominent artists, scholars, and audiences. Sponsored by IACD, each conversation paired a prominent scholar and an artist. For approximately one hour, the two discussed a previously agreed-upon topic. The next hour consisted of audience questions and comments.

Lani Guinier and Tim Mitchell were asked to put on the final conversation of the Gray Matters series, to follow immediately upon the heels of a presentation by Dred Scott, an artist who used photographs and audio recordings of prisoners to stimulate a discussion about the role of prisons in our society.

Tim Mitchell began by leading the audience in a warm-up. He asked audience members to shake hands with those around them, with the restriction that they could not release the hand of one person until they had taken the hand of another. This exercise was designed to make the audience members aware of the physical barriers that separated them, the so-called "third wall" created by the seats.

After the warm-up, Tim Mitchell explained image theatre techniques and created a sample image of the chosen phrase "social change" as well as images of the "opposite" of social change. All images were created in silence. Women, men, and children took turns coming up on stage and modeling our group into their images of social change. One man had three of the facilitators lying on their backs head to toe, with their arms crossed across their chests like corpses, while the other three stood with their backs to the prostrate group and their arms clasped behind their backs. Some images were humorous; for example, one man positioned group members as basketball players guarding a net and preparing for a rebound, with Lani Guinier as the free throw shooter. Some participants used other audience members in their pieces. For example,

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in one complicated image, a woman had the entire first row of the audience hold hands and form a chain around Dred Scott's pictures. She then stepped forward and kissed one of the pictures, and the entire group followed suit.

Tim Mitchell then announced a new exercise: audience members were asked to construct images of the opposite of social change. Participation was again enthusiastic. One young boy created two different images. In one group, two facilitators had their hands outstretched, trying to touch fingers, while a third pulled their wrists apart. In the other group, two women facilitators held hands, while a male facilitator chopped at their hands with his arms. The final image was created by Dred Scott and added to by another audience member. Scott positioned two facilitators in a scene of domestic violence. The male facilitator's upraised hand was poised as if to strike the female, who cowered in front of him. An audience member then added three other audience members to the image. One acted as if she were videotaping the event, while another modeled a television set and a third a television viewer, who leaned forward and turned up the volume on the set so as not to miss any of the action. This addition transformed the image from a depiction of household, private domestic violence to one of societal violence, in that the abuse was endorsed and celebrated by the television viewer.

Following the image creation, two of the facilitators led a discussion about the exercise. Audience members noted that the static nature of the images made it difficult to depict the dynamic nature of social change. One woman commented that she found it much easier to design images of the opposite of social change than to design images of social change itself. A man discussed the contrast between the activity on the stage and the static photos by Dred Scott, which formed an unintentional backdrop for the entire exercise.

After the discussion, Tim Mitchell explained an exercise called "magnetic images" to the audience. He asked audience members to come onto the stage and form individual images of their reactions to the work of Dred Scott. Then people walked around the room in their "frozen" sculptures, looked at each other, and formed groups with other people whose sculptures seemed to resonate with their own. The groups then sat down and discussed why they came together, with the stated goal of facilitating future action by group members.

## **FYAH!**

One of the group projects in a critical perspectives class was to teach critical perspectives in an urban high school environment. Unlike highly motivated law students, some of the participants were recruited from among those serving detention or were not academically inclined. They were joined by students with strong high school records as well as students who were passionate about social justice issues. Even the less motivated students were able to connect with larger questions of social policy through the use of hip hop lyrics, movies, and their own art projects.

### **Critical Perspectives Final Group Project Reflections by Lorelei Williams May 22, 2002**

#### **Try to achieve more of a gender balance.**

We had more young men than I have ever seen in a class / workshop like that. I thought it was beautiful, particularly because a lot of the brothers that participated were the type that never bothered with these kinds of classes before. I know that the two black male law students were a big inspiration for them to attend. And I know overall these young guys gave and got a lot out of the experience. However, the seven girls in the class often expressed frustration about feeling overpowered by the guys because of their immaturity and general disruptiveness. For another class I'd like to have more room for the voices of these young women. (Because they were strong sisters, intellectually and in general, they contributed a lot - but it would have been nice to have even more of a female presence in the class).

#### **Continue to recruit a very ethnically / racially / class diverse contingent of students.**

One thing I loved about our class was its diversity. We had about 6 white students, 2 Latinos and 2 biracial (Asian and White and Jamaican and German). Of the roughly 12 Black students, about half had some Haitian ancestry and others were African American. One student was openly gay. Roughly one third of the class was female. All hailed from a variety of class backgrounds.

You could tell a lot of these kids hadn't had the chance to talk to each other before. Many of the black students hadn't come to terms with the fact that poor whites existed in their school and I think a lot of the white students hadn't really heard young black men (in particular) talk about what it meant to be young, Black and male at CRLS and in Cambridge / America. Latino students had the chance to voice their frustrations and feelings about being neither Black nor white; they talked about what it meant to relate to Black people (and often to be

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“lumped into” a Black identity), but still have a distinct Latino heritage. The one young man who openly talked about being gay ended up demonstrating real courage and gaining the respect of all of his classmates (I was surprised at the level of respect even the most immature kids eventually conferred on him). By the end of the graduation exercises at Josh’s house, you could really see a high level of respect and cordiality had developed amongst the students. They showed a lot of love for each other. (Of course, there were also moments of immaturity too – but sometimes the kids would discipline each other rather than us having to reprimand them).

### **Continue to use poetry, hip hop lyrics, and movies as teaching tools**

More than anything the kids responded to these types of tools. Some of the poems we used, like “Nigger-Reecan Blues” and “Please Don’t Take My Air Jordans,” helped generate fruitful discussions on Latino identity and on class / economics of capitalism. Hip Hop artists like Nas and Queen Latifah were useful as well – but there needs to be a good chunk of time devoted to a critique of rap music as an oppositional force. (Sometimes a lot of the lyrics we ended up using were problematic – even as they were positive on some levels). In general though, a lot of the kids, particularly the young men, always got excited about listening to their favorite hip hop artists on a more critical level. (They loved the idea that hip-hop could have a valid place in their classroom). Movies generated a lot of excitement from the class. In particular, J.’s exercise – in which we looked at Just Another Girl on the IRT and Crazy Beautiful to get the kids to identify class markers and discuss their own class positions – was really fruitful.

Other exercises, like “All on the Wall” (a brainstorming exercise where they write or draw the first thoughts / images that come to mind on a particular subject) were useful in getting the kids to get in touch with their initial thoughts on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality since a lot of them don’t know how to begin to talk about these things in a group setting.

These types of learning tools were important especially in the first few classes – I have a strong feeling they are what kept the kids coming back. It made the class seem less “academic.” And it also helped them enter into an area of study that many of them weren’t initially interested in.

### **Add more of an emphasis on reading.**

While we had initially prepared a curriculum that included reading assignments for each week, we found ourselves relying on lots of the teaching tools above instead. The kids enjoyed reading Malcolm X. (That was our introduction to making the move from apathy to action. We used Malcolm X as an example of the personal transformation that is necessary in order to begin working for social justice). The problem was that almost 2/3 of the kids didn’t do the reading and in the next weeks they continued to do very little of the reading. Because time was so limited, we didn’t push them to do the reading, and relied

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on easier texts like poetry and rap. However, I think there was so much more learning that would have taken place if we had pushed them to read and discuss more of the assigned pieces.

### **Continue using the “team-teaching” approach and keep the class size small.**

I loved sharing this project with the other members of my group. I think we each complemented each other very well in the planning and teaching of the course. Having three teachers (even though we only had about twenty-two students) really helped us give more individual attention to the students – and to handle a pretty rambunctious group of kids. It also fostered more creativity in our approach to designing the curriculum and peaking the students’ attention. We each learned a lot by watching each other in action.

### **Lengthen the class & add service/political action projects.**

There was no way we could ever really cover what we originally set out to cover in 5 weeks. Gender and sexuality were a little shortchanged. And I would have liked to talk more about social change – including an historical context (i.e. Civil Rights Movement, women’s movement, the Black Panthers and Young Lords) and conversations on current social change movements. Ideally, the class would take place over the course of an entire semester.

Finally, and most importantly, I would have made it mandatory that each student get involved – during the entire semester – in a some sort of social justice/service/activism project of their own design. It could range from having them volunteer at a soup kitchen, put on a fundraising performance or start a Big Brother / Big Sister program with younger people in their neighborhood. I think more useful learning occurs when we put our theory into practice.

### **II. Some last thoughts:**

In an excerpt from (one of the drafts of) my political autobiography, I wrote:

**“I realize now that this work I want to do with young people must come from a place of unconditional love, unrelenting support and deep faith. Lisa Sullivan said once “It is a powerful thing to believe in a child even before they believe in themselves.” And it has proven to be true. ...After our first day of FYAH! yesterday, the kids that Rindge’s teachers thought were apathetic, poorly behaved and unintelligent were quite sharp, articulate, and engaged – Twenty-two 9th – 12th graders – for a whole two hours! I’m looking forward to the next five weeks of faith-raising on both sides.”**

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Of all the wonderful things that I take away from this experience, the importance of showing love, genuine interest and confidence in each of these kids is central. High expectations are crucial; they show the kids our level of faith in them and also give them something to reach for. The ways that some of these

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kids opened up and also began to take themselves more seriously over the course of the five weeks was really amazing. When they know they are being watched, that we care what they say and they know they have standards to fulfill, their behavior changes. They speak up more and show more interest in the conversations we're having.

Really, the idea of having faith in kids and showing them a little love is nothing new, but I get a strong sense that many of them don't get it at CRLS and many others didn't seem to get it anywhere else either. A lot of them talked about the ways they felt neglected by their teachers – esp. the Black and Latino students – being passed over for AP classes and other opportunities. Many others talked about what it felt like to be perceived as drug dealers or criminals, just by standing on the corner and “walking while Black.” You could hear hurt in their voices about the hardships they encounter almost relentlessly and see them reaching for new definitions of themselves.

In the end, I like to think FYAH! helped them to find new levels of agency in defining themselves and in shaping their surroundings in a more positive light. I hope we raised their consciousnesses about the roles that race, gender, class and sexuality play in their lives and in the lives of their peers. And I hope they continue to consciously use the model: [Understand the Problem / Imagine the Alternative / Take Action] that we tried to weave into every discussion as they think about changes they want to see in their world. Basically, I hope we added some fuel to the powerful FYAH they already possess.

**"Designing and teaching this course was one of the highlights of my year at Harvard. It brought me back full circle to the things I am most passionate about – namely working with young people / social change. It also helped me to think through my approach to this work with these young folks and reminded me why this work is so central to my life."**

## **Conference or Workshop Facilitation**

Some of the same methods can also be used to develop a learning community over a one or two day workshop. This can be done by breaking into small groups, bringing together people with different disciplinary backgrounds and roles and having them work together throughout the workshop. We conducted new paradigms symposia on policing, on media, and on affirmative action. We pre-interviewed participants to get a sense of their concerns and to create a common text for the group and to develop the agenda. We involved the participants in active roles over the course of the day instead of having people make formal presentations. We varied the format to encourage different ways of participating and to give relative newcomers to the community a chance to come to life in a smaller setting.

A stand alone workshop is a limited tool. Resources for follow up, the existence of a larger project, and the possibility of continuing with a small working group make a longer term payoff more likely.