

Pedagogical Pivots to Promote Inclusion in a University Bridge Program

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The Ohio Wesleyan University Bridge Program includes a three-week, immersive, experiential summer session. Each year, as part of the summer component of the program, we travel with students to allow them to apply classroom concepts to a space that is directly linked to the overarching topics of the course. One of the purposes of the program is to foster a sense of belonging among incoming first-year students. Unlike many bridge programs, our program is open to everyone, including international students. While we actively recruit Black and Brown students and center their experiences, the program also addresses issues like ableism, trans- and homophobia, classism, and marginalization. Our faculty are women from diverse racial, socioeconomic, national, and disability backgrounds, sexual orientations, and familial college experiences. We are also diverse in terms of our academic disciplines and expertise. We are experts in the areas of Communication, Political Science, and Black Studies who unapologetically center Black perspectives and cultural experiences to combat anti-Blackness. The intersectional nature of the Bridge Program's academic component allows us to engage in collaborative pedagogy that promotes interdisciplinary thinking. We change the course topic and travel destination every two years. For summers 2018-2019, the topic was "Social movements and Environmental Racism," and we traveled to Flint, Michigan. Summers 2021-2022, we traveled to Richmond, Virginia to connect to the topic of "Historical Memory of Slavery and Black Activism." This year's course, "Sports, American Capitalism, and the Black Body," led us to Louisville, Kentucky.

The Encounter

We stood in Jefferson Square Park, situated in downtown Louisville, Kentucky between the County Courthouse and the police station. We wore identical t-shirts that read, “You don't choose the times you live in, but you do choose who you want to be. And you do choose how you think” (Lee, 2013), words spoken by Asian-American author, civil rights activist, philosopher, and feminist, Grace Lee Boggs. An older white woman approached and wanted to know who we were and what we were doing there. We were an enigma to her. A mystery. A visual defiance of how we generally understand U.S. racial demographics; a group that centers the global majority¹. We told her we were a college group discussing the significance of the space we currently stood in.

We'd just finished engaging with an interactive digital art installation (Harlon, 2020) memorializing Breonna Taylor, a young Black woman killed by Louisville police officers serving a no-knock warrant. As is the norm in the Bridge Program, we were in the midst of a pause, what we call a “debrief.” A moment where we reflect on the space or content we have just engaged in. In this case, we were discussing the role of the park in the 2020 protests and the first responder memorials housed there, when she approached us. She directed her next comment towards a small group of our white students. “What happened to Breonna Taylor was horrible, yes...but...,” said the woman as she approached our diverse group of staff, faculty, and students. Her comment unnerved some members of our group, particularly the white students she had approached and the faculty, because we instinctively understood why she chose them. We had seen this before—an instance of whiteness seeking validation from whiteness. We also understood her telling of the history as one told through the lens of whiteness, a telling that is almost always incomplete. This kind of telling renders the Black experience of that same history invisible. It is a singular narrative that historically places Blackness on the margins.

¹ “Global Majority” refers to the ethnic groups which constitute approximately 85 percent of the global population (for more information see Campbell-Stephens (2021)).

It is through this brief interaction that we were reminded of the poignancy/significance of Boggs's quote serving as the theme for this year's program. While it's true that none of us choose the time and circumstances into which we are born, it's important to recognize the challenges and prejudices that exist in society and equip students with the tools needed to navigate and challenge them. Here we had encountered an individual whose self-identity, self-worth, and evaluation of others appeared to be deeply ingrained in white supremacy and entitlement. Unsolicited, this person asserted authority over determining whose lives and deaths held significance for Louisville and by proxy, what we could or should teach our students about the city.

The Pedagogical Pivot

In the build-out of our syllabus for 2023, Breonna Taylor was not a focal point. Yet, we recognized that in teaching a course on Black athletes and activism, it was important that we acknowledged that she was, and remains, at the center of Black activism. In response to our exchange with the woman in the park, we decided to pivot in real time and ask other Louisvillians about their perspectives on Breonna Taylor and the subsequent protests in 2020. This shift in focus brought an opportunity to include additional voices and expand the local narrative surrounding Taylor. Collaborative interdisciplinary teaching allowed for the quick pivot. It also allowed for a disciplinary framework to take the lead in the learning moment. Our Black Studies professor redirected the attention to the concept of historical memory and its role in maintaining exclusion.

Historical Memory

Emphasizing the ways that historical memory (Hite, 2021) is constructed and the power that memory holds became important to center for the learning moment. Who creates the narratives that we consume as history, and the power these narratives hold, *needed* to be challenged in that moment. The comments from the woman in the park highlighted the reality

historically minoritized folks face every single day: including the denial, exclusion, or diminishment of one's right to belong in a given space by individuals who feel entitled to that space and defining it. To build a more inclusive understanding of what Breonna Taylor's murder meant to the city of Louisville and its residents, we needed to expand *who* we engaged as sources.

The pedagogical pivot pushed us to shift our gaze towards historical memory and to think through who we asked questions to and what their responses meant. This became a way for us to build a more inclusive classroom experience for the remainder of our journey. It encouraged us to interact with folks in different ways than we might have otherwise. As part of the pivot, we asked a Black administrator from Simmons College, a white University of Louisville professor, and a Black restaurateur for their thoughts and received different responses from each person. Their unique perspectives assisted the students in understanding that the statements made by the woman in the park did not reflect the sentiments of all Louisvillians.

Inclusivity Moving Forward

In our efforts to engage students in experiential learning we inadvertently exposed them to a situation where they were told they didn't belong. The woman in the park, a "seventh generation [white] Louisvillian," told us Breonna Taylor didn't belong, and by proxy, that we didn't belong either because we weren't centering the "true essence" of Louisville. While incidents like these may occur, we modeled how to pivot and subsequently reaffirmed that the students *do* belong in these spaces. Although this situation and the subsequent pivot were unplanned, they provided us with a rich learning experience that continues to inform our respective pedagogies.

Currently, two of the Bridge Program faculty members are co-teaching a section of a first-year seminar. Within the classroom, which is made up entirely of Bridge scholars, these faculty members are both actively engaged to facilitate *Pedagogical Pivots* as needed. Future iterations of the Bridge Program will be designed to include a single question that we mindfully pose to

local residents to garner multiple perspectives on a single issue/topic. Furthermore, as the four of us collaborate in various domains, we aim to conscientiously integrate *Pedagogical Pivots* in both our classroom settings and everyday discussions. We frequently discuss our responsibility for exemplifying healthy disagreement in front of our students. We like to say, “the best disagreements happen on the bus.” In these moments, we’re able to demonstrate constructive conflict–disagreement that is not divisive but rather contributes to individual growth and/or the development of ideas. In the moment that the woman in the park disrupted our discussion, we were able to challenge historical memory and gather diverse perspectives. Through this interaction, we learned the power of the *Pedagogical Pivot* to embody the goals of truly interdisciplinary curriculum and collaborative teaching models.

References

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