

# #WEWANTSPACE: Developing Student Activism Through a Decolonial Pedagogy

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## Highlights

- An example of decolonial pedagogy connected to community psychology values.
- Illustrates the potential outcome of praxis assignments connected to social justice.
- An example of how class projects can raise student awareness and activism.

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**Abstract** This article explores how decolonial pedagogy can develop a sense of student activism (Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013). Decolonality in the classroom requires decentering dominant groups to make space for marginalized voices and experiences (Cruz & Sonn, 2011, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 47, 203). Aligned with community psychology values (Amer, Mohammed, & Ganzon, 2013), this paper argues for the importance of employing decolonial pedagogy in undergraduate learning through praxis projects. Centering the analysis on one college course in United States, the author showcases how a large-scale class project can engage students in decolonial thinking and foster an interest in social action. The Practical Activism Project, a 45 student collaborative project, explores how class projects can work to decolonize the classroom environment and further push students toward social action and activism. Co-authored with some undergraduate students from this course, this article will examine how decolonizing-informed class projects can lead to campus activism that has spearheaded institutional change for marginalized students. Integrating both perspectives, the authors conclude with lessons learned from this project and advice for future educators.

**Keywords** Decolonial pedagogy · Decolonization · Group projects · Diversity · Social justice · Community-based learning

## Introduction

We wanted to do something different, something that was aligned with what Gandhi, MLK, Babbie, or Alinsky would do, but that was also representative of us. Connected to our lives, our identities, our class diversity. We walked out.

(undergraduate student, winter 2015)

As a social justice activist, educator, and scholar, I consistently look for ways to transform my classroom and course assignments into experiences that can facilitate student interest in social change and action. The above quote is from a student reflection letter from my winter 2015 Institutions & Social Change course, an undergraduate class that integrates decolonial pedagogy within a community psychology framework. The student is referring to the course's Practical Activism Project, a class project that requires all 45 students to collaborate in an effort to create their own social change. As decolonial pedagogy seeks to decenter dominant practices, narratives, and voices in an effort to help students develop "pragmatic toolkits" (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003), this project was designed to facilitate student interest in social action (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Portillo, 2013).

This paper considers how decolonial pedagogy can facilitate student interest in social action through course

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projects and raise students' critical consciousness on issues of social justice. Drawing on the works of feminists of color, critical race theorists, and community psychologists, I examine how teachers can use class projects to decolonize education and promote community building and agentic change. Moreover, I will illustrate how class projects that use decolonial methods—both in design and approach—can lead to social action beyond the classroom, creating positive impacts on the campus community and leading to institutional change. Co-authored with six students who have chosen to speak from one collective voice, this paper will offer one example of decolonial pedagogy to promote social action and will conclude with lessons learned when developing classroom projects intended for social action.

### Defining Decolonial Pedagogy

Decolonial pedagogy sees education as a tool for empowerment and confronting injustice (Villanueva, 2013). According to Buttaro (2010), it is a pedagogical approach that “challenges the dominant practices of schooling and makes schools concrete sites for developing critical consciousness in the interests of working class, indigenous and non-white peoples” (p. 2). In this sense, critical consciousness means creating opportunities to raise student awareness on social issues, differential power, and how to work collectively to facilitate change. Teachers and educators must confront and uncover the ways in which schools, curriculum, and institutions create barriers that colonize students and often position marginalized students for failure (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). Dominant voices, perspectives, and narratives that often shape mainstream curriculum and textbooks are decentered in order to amplify the voices, experiences, and histories of students often erased in the classroom. For teachers, it means teaching, strengthening, and honing students' analytical skills to question dominant narratives and develop a critical lens. To prepare students for critique and action, Portillo (2013) contends that teachers must take on controversial issues that are often absent from the mainstream curriculum. It requires that teachers create classroom environments that value diverse voices and perspectives where students develop the necessary tools for social action and analyzing institutions (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Lissovoy, 2010; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). By conceptualizing classroom space and “appropriate” curriculum, decolonial pedagogy can facilitate transformative learning that encompasses a student's personal growth and fosters an interest in social action.

### Decolonial Pedagogy in the Classroom

Evidence suggest that decolonial pedagogy—when utilized thoughtfully and intentionally—can play a transformative role for students through an increase awareness of power and providing skills to collaborate toward social action. A curriculum against domination, creating classrooms that center diverse perspectives and foster alternative spaces of learning is not an easy feat (Lissovoy, 2010). If the intention is to provide students with a new framework to foster local and global awareness and investment in social issues (Lissovoy, 2010), we must consider what these concepts mean in terms of applicability. What is often missing from these discussions within community psychology are concrete examples of how to use decolonial pedagogy effectively and how this approach can develop critical consciousness where students learn collaboration and how to listen to diverse voices in order to work toward social action.

Within the last decade, scholars have noted that if teachers want to decolonize their classrooms, they must purposefully develop opportunities for their students to work “within the contact zones” that allow them to confront dominant ideologies, learn from struggles, and develop an understanding of systems of oppression, particularly within institutional settings (Gill & White, 2013). Within community psychology classrooms, participatory action research (PAR) projects can help challenge dominant academic research paradigms while simultaneously decolonizing learning (Cammarota, 2009; Gill, Purru, & Lin, 2012). According to Julio Cammarota (2009), PAR is a powerful tool for teachers wanting to take a decolonial pedagogical approach because its emphasis on collaboration and learning from others. Closely linked with praxis, PAR provides students with opportunities for reflection and action that has the potential to lead to activism and resistance (Lissovoy, 2010; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013).

Community-based learning projects can also provide students with an opportunity to decolonize their understanding of institutions and social structures (Amer, Mohammed, & Ganzon, 2013). Amer et al. (2013) argue that community-based learning projects often have a powerful impact on students due to the “real life” context of the project. In their classroom, 20 students collaborated on an instructor-identified project for community action. Utilizing a PAR approach, the authors contend that students developed skills for social change often absent in other classroom projects. Similarly, in their experiential learning exercise called “Star Power,” Nnawulezi et al. (2013) discuss how they fully integrated an ecological framework to move students toward a group level analysis of social issues. They contend that this approach, similar to PAR and community-based learning projects, promotes

social justice and aligns with the goals of community psychology.

### Making the Case for Praxis

As a community psychologist, I agree that decolonality aligns with the field's commitment to liberation linked to personal and community transformation where lived experiences of marginalized groups are centered (Cruz & Sonn, 2011). Committed to teaching people how to work within diverse settings, understanding positionality, and to work toward equity for historically marginalized and subordinated communities, a decolonized pedagogy is a useful approach in community psychology to engaging students in social action projects. On a broad level, community psychology pedagogy often seeks to promote student agency and collaborations through participatory educational projects that challenge hierarchies and offer opportunities for reflection through praxis (Camarota, 2009; Freire, 1970; Whelan & Lawthom, 2009). By decentering curriculum to include the voices of marginalized groups and developing students' skills for analysis, collaboration, and action, both pedagogical approaches attempt to raise awareness as students work toward liberation of subordinated groups (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Whelan & Lawthom, 2009). As community psychology views praxis as a necessary step toward transformation, decolonial pedagogy can foster a classroom environment that ties curriculum with social action.

### Decolonial Pedagogy & Community Psychology: The Practical Activism Project

Absent from these conversations are explicit examples of how decolonial pedagogy can be intertwined with community psychology pedagogy to foster students' critical consciousness around social issues and institutional structures that can motivate them toward social action. In this paper, I will provide an example of how I use decolonial pedagogy in my Institutions & Social Change course through the class Practical Activism Project. Although Institutions and Social Change is not explicitly a community psychology course, community psychology and decolonial pedagogy inform both how I construct the course and my approach to classroom learning. I begin with a course overview to illustrate how I constructed the learning objectives to teach about decoloniality. Next, I will explain the Practical Activism project, a praxis project that required all 45 students to work together on one class-identified social institution that they wanted to facilitate positive social change. Finally, I will explain how the students came to select our university as the social

institutions they wanted to change through organizing a campus walkout and protest for a Diversity Center.

As my commitment to teaching toward decoloniality includes making space for students to "be the storytellers of their experiences," (Samudzi, 2016), six students will be co-authoring this paper to narrate how this project developed their critical consciousness on power within institutional settings and motivated them to work toward socially just change on our campus. The class selected these six students to represent their collective voice based on their leadership in the course. Students will use class assignments, project notes, and peer interviews to address how this approach to decoloniality encouraged them to reflect on their individual privilege, to raise up and not speak for their marginalized peers, and what the course taught them about collective action and activism. Unfortunately, given the length of an academic article, they are not able to represent every individual voice in this paper. To ensure the paper represented their classmates, they shared the manuscript with their peers for member checks (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In addition, they chose to integrate the work of their peers over their own written assignments to avoid bias when possible. Although six students were the primary co-authors, they will explain why they have chosen to use the collective group name from the class project, rather than their individual names to emphasize their commitment to decolonizing academic spaces.

### Context

#### Institutional Demographics

Established in 1990 as part of the tri-campus University of Washington system, the University of Washington Bothell (UWB) prides itself in smaller classrooms, community-based learning, and diversity. According to the campus mission, UWB excels in critical thinking, knowledge building, quality curricula, in addition to fostering an environment that honors a diversity of voices, experiences, and groups (UWB Mission, 2015). During the 2014–2015 academic year, 4600 students were enrolled (4000 undergraduate, 600 graduate, respectively) (Fast Facts, 2015). Among first year students, 51% identified as first generation college students and 69% were from diverse backgrounds (Fast Facts, 2015). Overall, UWB is highly diverse, with 46% students identifying as white, 25% as Asian American, 8% as international students, 8% as Latinx,<sup>1</sup> 6% as biracial or

<sup>1</sup> Latinx describes people from Latina and Latino origins. Aligned with scholars and activists, I choose to use Latinx (pronounced "Latin-ex") to address the "collective aim to move beyond the masculine-centric 'Latino' and the gender inclusive but binary embedded Latin@" (Scharro-Del Rfo & Aja, 2015).

multiracial, 5% as African American, 1% as American Indian, and 1% as Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, respectively (UWB Fast Facts, 2015).

### Institutions & Social Change

This narrative centers on the winter 2015 Institutions & Social Change (I&SC) course. One of required courses for our Society, Ethics & Behavior (SEB) major, Institutions & Social Change also fulfills requirements for our Community Psychology (CP) degree. The course seeks to explore patterns of power embedded in institutions and the actions that can bring change to improve the social fabric, locally and globally (UWB Course Catalog, 2010). Offered twice during an academic year, each faculty member adjusts the readings and syllabus to fit their pedagogy and expertise.

*I&SC Students, winter 2015.* Forty-five students enrolled in the winter 2015 Institutions & Social Change course. Twenty-four identified as male and 21 identified as female. The class was racially and ethnically diverse, with 16 identifying as white, 13 as Latinx, eight as African American, seven as Asian American/Pacific Islander, and one as Indigenous. The majority of the students ( $n = 38$ ) in the course described themselves as “traditional” students, meaning they were between 18 and 24 years old. Seven identified as “nontraditional” students, ranging between 30 and 47 years old. In terms of majors, 17 students were Society, Ethics & Behavior and Community Psychology majors, nine were Society, Ethics & Behavior majors, nine were Community Psychology majors, six were Business majors, two were Global Studies majors, and two were Media & Communications Studies majors, respectively. For the non-SEB majors, this course satisfied an elective requirement for their degree. The class met twice a week during the evenings for 10 weeks.

### Our Path Toward Decolonization: Practical Activism<sup>2</sup>

According to critical theorists, decolonizing pedagogy requires (de)centering dominant forces (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013). To decenter the dominant, it requires the centering of marginalized voices, narratives, perspectives,

<sup>2</sup> This section was written in collaboration with six students from the winter 2015 Institutions & Social Change course. They requested to use both their individual voice in quotes and statements from their course work, as well as a collective voice through the use of “we”.

and experiences that are often absent within mainstream curriculum. Moreover, this process involves conceptualizing what qualifies as “academic,” moving away from the standard curriculum design that denies student creativity and often does not honor their multiple identities. Written by six undergraduate students with the advisement and support of their 39 classmates, this section aims to center the marginalized voices of the students to illustrate the need for a campus Diversity Center. By inviting students to co-author this paper about the class walkout, we are redefining “academic” as one that values the lived experiences and expertise of students in class projects. Additionally, we want to illustrate how such projects that invite students to share their identities can facilitate individual and social transformation with regard to social action. Class projects such as these can build students’ skills to challenge dominant narratives and work toward social change. Our intention is to illustrate how decolonial pedagogy can be a powerful tool for both students and faculty.

This section narrates the class’ path toward decolonization through our Institutions & Social Change class Practical Activism Project. We begin with an overview of my pedagogy and my intention for the project. Students will then discuss their perceptions of the course, connecting their 10-week experience to the literature of decolonizing pedagogy and the role of class projects to decolonize higher education. Since we are writing from two different perspectives, we will identify each voice.

### My Pedagogy

Institutions & Social Change introduced students to points of contention within institutions and the role of individuals in changing these institutional structures. As decolonial pedagogy seeks to raise students’ critical consciousness via transformative educational experiences, I also attempt to achieve this in my teaching (Buttaro, 2010; Villanueva, 2013). As a Latinx, CIS<sup>3</sup> gender, woman who was a first generation college student, I remembered what it was like to sit in a lecture hall and feel changed by a course. The first time I could bring my whole self into my coursework and develop skills for community change left me in tears. Moreover, I wanted to see how knowledge could become action and how this action could transcend the confines of the classroom. In my courses, I intentionally provide opportunities for students to center their lived experiences in relation to scholarly texts selected to disrupt the dominant narratives that have defined their lives (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). In this course, I was committed to providing students with an opportunity to embody the

<sup>3</sup> “CIS” gender defined as a person who identifies with the sex assigned at birth.

writings of social activists, theorists, and scholars through their own social change.

### Practical Activism Project

I had recently changed the final project from small group projects to one class project that required the students to identify a social institution and facilitate some form of action. Called the Practical Activism Project, students were required to work collectively, conduct research, integrate course material, and perform an action (see Appendix 1 for project description). The concept of practical activism stemmed from the “Practical Activism Conference” held each year at the University of California, Santa Cruz, my alma mater. As an attendee, organizer, and presenter at this conference during my schooling, I wanted to bring the concept of practical activism into the classroom. I designed this project with the intention for students to express their frustrations with regard to institutional politics, society, and their greater community by applying theory into action. The Practical Activism Project embodied two critical aspects of decolonial pedagogy: critical analysis and praxis (Buttaro, 2010; Freire, 1970; Villanueva, 2013). I was asking students to analyze an institution of their choice and to justify their selection with course material. My intention was for students to understand that social change requires logical planning, careful assessment, and an understanding of past struggles and triumphs. Moreover, I was requiring the students to engage in praxis by reflecting on their actions through an individual reflective letter due at the end of the course. I wanted them to understand how their actions connected to the outcome and that this was a process, not the final product.

Students were told they would have two weeks (four, two-hour class periods) to collectively select their social institution, begin research, develop a timeline, and determine their action. They were required to communicate with me after each class session, informing me of their progress, raise questions, and ask for any guidance needed. After their two weeks of planning, I then gave students the first 30 minutes of each class to convene and work on the project. I made a point to step out of the room, both for the two weeks of planning and the additional planning sessions. I did not want to influence the students’ actions or decisions, nor did I want my presence to silence any students. I wanted them to work collectively. If my intention was to provide students with skills for their individual and collective “toolkits for social transformation” (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003, p. 8), I needed to step away so they would use the skills they had acquired from previous courses. To decenter the classroom, I also had to decenter myself and relinquish some of my power in the process.

As Tejada and Espinoza (2003) suggests, decolonial pedagogy is a pragmatic tool for teachers who are seeking to have their students understand their roles in social transformation. What follows are students’ views on the process of practical activism, their selected action, and what this project taught them about collaboration, equity, and social change. The six students who took the lead on the writing process requested that they use a group name in this paper to highlight that this was a collective project and they are representing their unique experience as a class embarking on practical activism. As they stated in their notes to me, “we entered this project as individuals and became a collective. We reject the notion that we must be identified as individuals when hierarchy was something we intentionally worked against in class. This is our choice” (Students for Diversity Now, personal communication, March 21 2015).

Is this a Joke?<sup>4</sup>

Three words describe how students felt the day we learned about the practical activism project: angry, excited, and apprehensive. Many students were angry, letting out audible groans of frustration and annoyance toward Professor Silva as she went over the project guidelines. Several students took out their phones to see if there were other classes they could transfer to avoid the project. When it was clear that it was a collective project and we would not be able to convince Professor Silva to change it, some students started to question her pedagogy. Other students were excited about the large class project. A few cheered and started to write down ideas about what they wanted to do. The majority of the students, whether angry or excited, were apprehensive about the scope of the project. We were not accustomed to having this much freedom in choice of project or outcome with such a large group. An advanced undergraduate class, we were prepared to take on more leadership in this course, but we were not prepared to have to work as a class.

Once emotions settled, we were finally able to listen to Professor Silva’s directions and ask questions. One of our peers asked, “Are you serious about this? Is this for real?” Professor Silva asked if others were hoping this was a joke. As hands went in the air, she proceeded to walk us through her rationale for this project and her pedagogy. Aligned with decoloniality, Professor Silva was walking us through a process of decentering (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013). We had grown accustomed to teachers giving assignments with clear, direct rules and often punished if

<sup>4</sup> This section is written by six students in I&SC winter 2015. We will also be providing analysis regarding our process and the project.

we strayed from those expectations. We had accepted this form of schooling where students do not challenge dominant narratives or teaching methods (Villanueva, 2013). The banking method (Freire, 1970) was comfortable to us because we knew how to work within it. As one of our peers joked, “there is no banking our way through this,” we were confronted with a new challenge. It was evident that this class would require us to rethink our educational experiences and the possibilities of class projects.

#### “Keep it Local”: UWB

We decided as a class that each student could give one suggestion about which institution we should select. We did not anticipate that some students would assume leadership roles without the consent of the class. During our first class session, two CIS White male students walked to the front of the class and attempted to lead the conversation. Immediately, students objected, asking why they should lead. We were on a downward spiral very quickly. Not having our instructor present was a new experience; it was up to us to decide who should lead and what this leadership should look like. One of our peers raised her hand, asking if she could facilitate the conversation. We agreed, and she led us through the process of determining ground rules (that were separate from our class established ground rules) and a timeline for deciding the project scope. Her facilitation truly shifted our conversation and the course of the project.

It is important for us to state that this was a class of strangers collaborating for the first time. We had to remember that as we worked through our decision-making process. We needed to be cognizant of how we spoke to one another, how we gestured, and our body language. Those of us from dominant groups often struggled with learning to sit down and listen. In our ground rules, we borrowed from our class agreements where we said that a person could not challenge lived experiences or question its validity. This was a struggle for many of us. Mainstream schooling had not prepared us for the tensions that arose when marginalized students and identities entered and dominant narratives were challenged (Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003).

By the end of the first class session, we realized we were all interested in working on projects that were specific to our individual needs. What was one student’s passion was not another’s; if we were to be successful, we needed to find common ground. A Latinx identified female student stood up and proposed that we focus our project on our university, since the common identity that we shared was being a UWB student. She spoke of the struggles and needs of our peers and using this project as a catalyst for change. Addressing the class, she shared her

own story of what it was like to be an undocumented, CIS gender Latinx female at an institution with no Diversity Center. As she spoke, a White, CIS gender male military veteran student stood up and echoed her concerns. He said that the Veteran students also needed a space like a Diversity Center. Slowly, the conversation shifted to using this project to raise awareness of the need for a Diversity Center on campus. We decided to each think about this as an option and we would begin the next class addressing questions and concerns.

For the subordinated students in the class, working on a class project about a future Diversity Center was exciting. This project was an opportunity to “validate my experiences and my voice, rather than stifle it and silence it as usual” (Muslim, CIS gender female student). “Disrupting” and “dismantling” these narratives and redefining what qualifies as an acceptable class project were central to this project (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). Unfortunately, this was not a shared sentiment among many students from dominant social groups. During the following class session, several students asked what the point was of a Diversity Center. “What does it mean for me?” was a common question raised, often from White, CIS gender students. Our conversation escalated from peaceful to defensive. As one student said, “I left to fill up my water bottle and then I came back to a classroom with folks shouting at one another”. We were not confident this project would be able to continue given the hostility in the room. Calmly, our class facilitator stood up and suggested a short break. When we came back from the break, our facilitator told us that we needed to listen to each other if we were going to complete this project, regardless of which institution we selected. Students started to share why we needed a Diversity Center. As the stories unfolded, a few White students offered their support. They agreed that educational institutions were built for students “like them” and not for their peers. Instead of trying to argue or question students’ experiences, the students that were arguing against the center listened. Students began to decenter themselves because we understood that we did not need to dominate every conversation (Portillo, 2013).

We ultimately decided to select UWB as our institution and the establishment of a campus Diversity Center as our activism. It made sense for us to attempt change at an institution we each interacted with and had an established connection. Although the vote was unanimous, we would be negligent to suggest that everyone was pleased with this outcome. Several students were still questioning the purpose and value of a Diversity Center on campus. Many students left that class meeting feeling that they had to prove the value of this choice. Seeing the push back in a class of 45 students, we knew that we needed to prepare

for the push back we might receive from the larger campus community. Using our numerous skills from our respective majors, we worked on building our “pragmatic toolkit” (Tejada & Espinoza, 2003) as we moved forward.

### Working as a Collective

After selecting UWB and identifying the goal of working toward a campus Diversity Center, we needed a game plan. A core group of students that were advocating for this project choice decided to meet before class to come up with a strategy for our remaining weeks of class. To gain “buy-in” from our peers, we wanted to focus on skills. Although this class was a core course for the Society, Ethics and Behavior major, it also met the requirements for students from other majors, including Community Psychology, Business, Media & Communication Studies, and Global Studies. We wanted to highlight the skills that students from these majors bring to the classroom and to this project. We also wanted to make this project a collaboration between our class and other students on campus wanting a Diversity Center. Student activists had been raising the question of a Diversity Center in various administration town halls, forums, and campus climate surveys. We did not want to take ownership of a movement that was already growing; rather, we wanted to use our class as a way to build relationships and start a collective movement.

Our strengths-based approach worked. Although some students were still reluctantly on board, once we approached the project highlighting our individual and collective skills, we started to make progress. We quickly broke off into teams: research, publicity, organizing, communications, business model, survey development, and an interview group. Each team identified a leader who would be in communication with the other leaders and Professor Silva. Drawing on our collective skills allowed us to see how this project required all aspects of ourselves (lived experiences, identities, and project-based skills) to facilitate social action. Moreover, it contributed to our sense of empowerment that strengthened our collective commitment to the Practical Activism Project (Buttaro, 2010; Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Villanueva, 2013; Whelan & Lawthom, 2009).

### WALKOUT!

In the Practical Activism guidelines, Professor Silva stated that we must “do something”. Specifically, this project asked students to determine the project outcome and evaluation scale. As decolonial pedagogy suggests, the Practical Activism Project was designed to further develop our understanding of systems of oppression that might lead to

social action (Lissovoy, 2010; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). Moreover, we knew that our action would have to be justified with course material and readings. As a class, we talked about different options for our practical activism. Our research and interview teams shared what they had learned while investigating the role of Diversity Centers on college campuses. In our class conversations with campus activists, they urged us to think of how we could transform our classroom to be a part of this movement. After several discussions, we decided as a class to collaborate with these students on a campus walkout for a Diversity Center. Four of us who knew these activists from classes or student clubs volunteered to be our liaisons/class leads. This dialogue was critical to ensuring we were acting with a collective vision. One week prior to the walkout, we set up picnic tables in various areas on campus to collect student, faculty, and staff signatures in support of a Diversity Center on campus. We pulled together our research and connected our class readings with the students’ list of demands. Together with the student activists, the four student leaders wrote a joint statement to justify our actions, drawing upon the works of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Angela Davis, Plato, Saul Alinsky, and Earl Babbie. We critically analyzed the institution to provide a sound argument for the need of such spaces at UWB. On February 25, 2015, our class, along with student groups, led over 400 students in a campus walkout for a Diversity Center. Our main slogan was #WEWANT-SPACE. We had seen the power of hashtags in promoting messages on social media and wanted to provide our peers with an easy to take part of the demonstration beyond the walkout. For us, the hashtag meant our activism could transcend this specific day of action.

### Reflections on the Process

The Practical Activism Project asked students to collaborate on one project that will help to create a spark for future students to follow. This winter 2015 Institutions & Social Change course was my first attempt at assigning such a project that allowed students to determine the outcome and evaluation process. I was confident that the students could succeed and it would teach them about the course, society, social change, and collaboration. This decolonial approach to classroom learning illustrated that by decentering myself and dominant paradigms in the classroom, students would further develop their analytic tools to think critically about social institutions (Buttaro, 2010; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003). Furthermore, it connected my pedagogy as a community psychologist by centering praxis through projects to facilitate empowerment and social action (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Whelan &

Lawthom, 2009). Unbeknownst to me, this project shifted the classroom from 45 strangers wanting to fulfill degree requirements to 45 student activists, wanting to work toward collective action. This is evident in the final reflection letters students submitted for the project. Collectively, the student authors will discuss why they think this approach worked and what they gained from this experience. I will then offer my own reflection on their campus activism.

Student reflections: “It changed me. . .it changed us.”

At the end of the course, Professor Silva asked us to write her an individual reflection letter on the Practical Activism Project. In these letters, students commented on our process, class communication, individual and collective contributions, and how this course contributed to their understanding of one another and ourselves. Although the excerpts are anonymous, we felt it was important to highlight our identities in our writings. These identities shaped our understanding of the course and further illustrate what decolonial pedagogy can teach both privileged and marginalized students. Below are some excerpts from students’ letters:

When you first announced there would be a collaborative group project I, like many others in the room, cringed at the thought. Then you mentioned it would be the WHOLE class working together and in all honesty there were a few moments where I questioned exactly how much I really needed to finish my degree. . .The first couple of days working together were rough, tempers were flaring, but I was actually pleasantly surprised because it seemed that most of the conflict came from passion, people had opinions and direction and while communication wasn’t the healthiest, I was actually really excited after that first week to see what would come out of it all. . .This project was completely different than anything I’ve ever been a part of before. It didn’t feel like school, it felt like I was getting a glimpse into what it feels like to make social change. This assignment was unique, I left class feeling powerful, I got to see first-hand what a rag-tag team of college students was capable of. It was empowering to see my words and opinions in class come to fruition, I felt important, valuable, and capable, something that traditional classroom learning hasn’t provided for me. (White identified, working class, CIS gender, female, first generation college student)

I tried to practice tolerance by staying open-minded and listening to others’ points, even when I wanted

to leave the room. I realized that though the situation in the class was chaotic it was necessary in order for us to learn how to organize and figure the problem out together to reach a common goal. I could have never even imagined that we would have the success that we have had as a class and I am so proud of all of us. I believe that our class went on an unusual journey together where I witnessed people that didn’t like each other in the beginning becoming friends, collaborating, and even hugging at points. . .I loved cheering on my fellow classmates that held the microphone and gave voice to us all. Especially when their voices have been silenced. And I felt it was important to keep my voice low at times because so much of this institution is created for me to succeed. Even as a single mother and survivor of DV. I am proud of the work that I contributed and the passion that I have towards the movement. And to be part of a movement. (White identified, middle class, CIS gender female, single mother)

I am not going to lie to you. I hated this project the moment you said we had a group project and then I really hated it when you said it was a WHOLE CLASS GROUP PROJECT. I left that night thinking literally WTH (what the hell)? I wanted to drop the class, but I do not give up. . .This whole process was a self-purification process for me. I had to stop and think, if I really wanted to support a diversity center, then I had to accept and support the diversity that was in our class. The Gandhi article really spoke to me. I practiced love. And it was hard! My favorite part of this project was witnessing the change in people. I thought I was the only one who saw it, but after conversing with others, it was confirmed. One student was strongly opposed to the diversity center. After several discussions in and outside of class, his oppositional questions changed to ‘How do I as a white privileged male help?’ He actually heard us and then we began ally ship conversations. People can change. . .I found my voice. I am learning my opinions are rooted in facts, in my lived experiences. I can speak out against racism, sexism, xenophobia and other injustices that injure the spirit and assault a person’s dignity. I am not alone in my truths. This practical activism made me look at my identities and realize I have been denying parts of myself the freedom needed to grow. My voice cannot stay inside any longer. My satyagraha<sup>5</sup> has finally been discovered. My life is forever changed. (Pacific

<sup>5</sup> Widely attributed to Gandhi (1942/2003), satyagraha translates to “life force”. When examined in the context of passive resistance, it means holding on to one’s truth.



Islander and African-American identified, CIS gender female, working class, single mother)

This was radical. As a student of color, I wanted to make sure that my voice was constantly present. This was the first class project I have had that I wanted to work on day and night. It was freedom and life. Activism is not new to me but it was for my peers. I needed to meet them at a place of compassion. It was energizing to see them want to take part in this. Even the white students that were not down with this project started to see why it was needed. Not just for me, but for the campus. This was powerful. (Latinx identified, CIS gender female, working class, undocumented, first-generation student)

I saw changes. In me. In my peers. I am sure I am not the only one who was doubtful when you first informed us of this project. I wouldn't be surprised if I am the 10th, 15th, or 40th reflection letter you have read where a student wrote exactly that. It was clear that you had intentions of what we should learn from this project. But I don't know if you realized what this project would teach us beyond learning objectives. This project changed me...but it also changed us. I now see how what I am learning links to the changes people are capable of. It was as much about looking at the course material differently as it was about the action. None of this was easy. I think if you had given us a choice between this and writing a 20 page paper, we would have taken it. But to do this—the walkout, the collaboration, the meeting with administration—we *did* something. (White identified, CIS gender, middle class male military veteran)

The Practical Activism Project was transformative in terms of pedagogy and our individual identities. It required decentering everything we had come to accept in regards to education: dominant narratives, institutional systems, class projects, instruction, and ways of knowing (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013). It was at times emotionally taxing and exhausting; despite this, it changed us as students. For many of us, this was our first walkout. We learned what activism looks like and what is required of intentional allyship. We learned that in order to change the community, we first must become a community through listening and valuing our intersecting identities. We learned the difference between performing “being down” and actually doing the work to be “down” by being agentic in our actions and words. We learned how to question and now have tools to carry us forward in our chosen professions. It has transformed our views of education and

facilitated our sense of empowerment as individuals and as a collective.

#### The Professor's Reflection

As I mentioned earlier, the Practical Activism Project served two purposes: to disrupt dominant narratives of education and to challenge students through collaboration. Aligned with decolonial pedagogy, this project was intentionally designed to be a liberatory process that aimed to decenter the classroom (Cruz & Sonn, 2011; Portillo, 2013; Tejada & Espinoza, 2003; Villanueva, 2013). Disruption and organizing were central to my goal of creating a classroom space where students could work toward social justice.

To determine what students found educationally and personally useful in this project, I decided to analyze their final reflection letters. Using inductive coding techniques (Emerson et al., 1995), four common themes emerged—collaboration, intersectionality, power & privilege, and social action. Forty-one students spoke about the 45 person collaboration process and how it taught them the importance of collective action when working toward social change. Twenty-eight mentioned how this project allowed them to bring their whole selves and their voices into the classroom. Many wrote how decentering themselves was a much needed (and difficult) lesson on power and privilege that really illustrated to them the institutionalized oppression. Lastly, forty-three students mentioned how this project brought social action to life through their actual actions. It was evident in their reflection letters that decolonial pedagogy can shift a classroom into the transformative space needed for students to perform extraordinary work.

This class' Practical Activism Project and the coinciding walkout have transformed our campus. Following the walkout, campus administration held several town halls and open forums on the topic of a Diversity Center. Students continued to ask for the center through activism. In response to their efforts and those of their peers, past and present, our institution developed a five-year campus Diversity Action Plan with a commitment to open a Diversity Center in seven years. In May 2017 we opened our temporary Diversity Center, with students from this class and other student activists serving on the committee. The students' demand for a campus Diversity Center is becoming a reality.

#### The Potential of Decolonial Pedagogy: Concluding Thoughts

In the two years since the first Practical Activism Project, two more classes have also attempted to create collective

action. The second class failed in their attempt, leaving me to intervene and dismantle the project after it became clear that some students were being verbally hostile toward others. Although they did not perform an action, these students still wrote individual reflection letters on why they believe the project ended before it began. Interestingly, students did not blame me for dismantling the project but focused on what they had learned about collaboration, valuing diversity, and social change from our texts. The third class also selected UWB as their institution and wanted to raise awareness of the need of a Health Center on campus. Collaborating with student groups and our School of Nursing and Health Studies, the students collected signatures of support and developed a binder with research on our campus, the larger Bothell community, health needs, and addressing why this was a critical issue for our institution. Based on their efforts, administration established an Advisory Board to further research the possibility of a Health Center. Three students from that class are serving on the board.

Decolonial pedagogy can help facilitate students' sense of empowerment, their understanding of collective action, and the importance of decentering oneself in order to work toward social change. It challenges dominant paradigms by lifting marginalized voices that are often absent in the classroom. This process relies heavily on raising students' critical consciousness about social issues through reflection and action. Theoretically, it seems like the ideal approach to transformative education. However, it requires a significant amount of work for all involved. For the faculty member, decentering yourself is a difficult process. It requires relinquishing control of the classroom and trusting your students. For faculty from marginalized groups, this can be more difficult, since your authority might already be in question based on your visible identities. As a first-generation, Latinx, CIS gender female, tenure-track faculty member, I knew what I was risking in this process. As the student reflection letters suggest, students did question my rationale in this course. In classes where students have succeeded in their activism and even when they have not, students have respected by pedagogy. I contribute this to the significant amount of time I justify my pedagogical choices in the classroom. As I have become known as the professor "that makes you work with everyone", students can choose to take this course with me or with someone else. Regardless, this process requires a critical understanding of the risks you are taking, the support you have from your department, and the rationale needed to justify a project of this scope.

With our temporary Diversity Center having opened during 2017, I believe that decolonial pedagogy and projects such as the Practical Activism Project can work to decolonize institutions. It can teach students the importance

of collaboration, hone their skills to challenge dominant narratives, and can facilitate their sense of empowerment. As Laura Rendón (2009) suggests, decolonizing pedagogies that are informed by "wholeness and consonance" (p. 21) through collaboration, action, and understanding difference can be a powerful tool for students to be transformed intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. For marginalized students, decolonial pedagogy can play a critical role in their learning process. For students from dominant groups, it is a lesson on power, privilege, and has the potential to teach them about allyship. Pedagogies and projects that seek to decolonize institutions and disrupt common expectations have the potential to educate students' about themselves in ways absent in a typical classroom.

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## Appendix 1: Description for Institutions & Social Change Practical Activism Group Project

### The Basics:

There have been several iterations of this assignment in my 304 course. Often students work in small groups, sometimes in pairs on a topic of their choosing. A class built on the idea of what social institutions are and how to facilitate social change, the one time I have witnessed students engage in social change in this course was during the 2014 Seahawks Super Bowl Win in an effort to cancel the course midterm. No, it did not happen, and no, it will not happen this year. What I learned from that class is that although four people can create an interest in change, it often takes a larger group to see a project/goal/objective through. This quarter, you will be working as a class—yes, all 45 of you—where you will focus on a particular social institution and the contestation surrounding it, exploring these issues in more detail. Project work will include further research, mapping the historical and contemporary points of contestation surrounding your chosen social

institution, conducting PRACTICAL ACTIVISM, and a presentation with invited guests of your choosing. Each of you will also *individually* write a medium-length paper to consider the topic in more depth.

Familiarize yourself with a social institution. What social institution? *The class will have to decide this as a group*. You can choose to use consensus, majority rules, or debate to determine what your institution is. Keep in mind that the institution you select **MUST** be one that you can do either one practical activist or several practical activist components on or at. *It should be an institution you all have access to and/or have shared knowledge about and be significant to all of you, in some way, shape or form*. You may have to do additional research to learn about the selected institution. *My advice is to keep it practical*. Many changes can happen where you currently reside.

I am giving you two full class periods to brainstorm your practical activism components. What is Practical Activism? For CP folks, think of it as being a “pragmatic realist”. What I am asking is for you to take your institution and the issue that you have identified and **DO SOMETHING**. However, be realistic. You cannot expect to eradicate poverty in 10 weeks (but you can try!); you can think of creative ways you can work with your community or the UWB campus to raise awareness and create activism that is knowledgeable, problem/situation focused, sustainable, open to divergent ways of knowing & issues of diversity, and is practical. I am really asking you to do something. Work together on this. Use the internet to see what others have done in other countries and in United States. You do not have to create a revolution—you just have to elicit a spark, but a spark that has the potential to light a fire. Practical activism does not mean putting fact posters up around campus or your community (think of how many flyers get left on your windshield and how many you see littered in the parking garage). Be reasonable and feasible. *Be inclusive* of all members of our community so they can participate in multiple ways. Be anarchists. Just do not get arrested. (“Practical activism”—brought to you by the students of UC Santa Cruz).