

Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation (CAST) Presents:

Portraits of Purpose Design Lab

April 28, 2015

2:30pm - 5:30pm

African American Master Artists-in-Residency Program-- AAMARP

76 Atherton Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

Summary Report

Introduction:

A design lab is a process for bringing together various constituencies related to a problem, issue or possibility to think in creative ways and to design structures, processes, or expressions that lead to a more just, peaceful, resilient, and vibrant communities. In the spring of 2015, the minor in CAST supported four design labs. In this design lab, a total of seventeen contributors including students, experts, scientists, and artists participated in a candid discussion about how to use Don West's "Portraits to Purpose" exhibit to initiate conversations about race and other pressing social issues faced by people of color on college campuses and beyond. The exhibit intends to shed light onto the positive work of minority group leaders, aiming to celebrate and represent minority groups. It was made into a book, but Don West and his partner, Libbie Shufro, are hoping to extend the reach of the project as far as possible. The theme of the project is CommonGood Conversations: Plant the Seeds of Justice. The mission of this initiative states:

"Use the arts and education as tools to provide a stimulating environment that challenges the mind and inspires the heart to open a conversation on race, and to connect and engage with others to tackle issues of equity and inclusion in our schools, workplaces, and communities."

Additionally, the project (according to its information packet) hopes to achieve the following goals:

- Create a safe environment for candid conversations about how we experience race and the related "isms" in our lives.
- Teach about systematic racism and how it sustains itself, as a precursor to address racial and socio-economic disparities.
- Hear diverse community voices and perspective from the frontlines of contemporary issues.
- Educate about "Pathways of Purpose" and options for engagement to advance equity and inclusion in our schools, workplaces and communities.

Participants in this design lab included Brandeis undergraduates and graduate students, Brandeis staff, the co-founder and the executive director of Beyond Conflict, local Boston artists, and a representative from the Institute for Policy Studies. This report summarizes the proceedings

of the design lab, participants, key learnings, discoveries, ideas, recommendations, concerns, and questions that arose from the design lab.

Key Questions:

How can the resources of Portraits of Purpose support:

1. The struggle for dignity and human rights emerging from within the African American community at the current moment?
2. Dialogues that constructively address divisive issues and nurture respectful, inclusive, just and diverse communities?
3. Artists working to amplify less-heard voices and to contribute to less violent, more just communities?

Explanation of CAST 150B:

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation explores how to use art as a means in moving toward social change and reconciliation. The course explores several forms of creativity and expression including oral history, the visual arts, music, dance, theater, and storytelling. In studying these art forms, students learn how to build peace, mitigate conflicts, and establish social justice. In the class, students study works by authors ranging from Mary Marshall Clark, John Paul Lederach, and Salomon Lerner-Febres to Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. The class lays out a framework for the Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor, but it is also for students who study politics, peace and conflict studies, international and global studies, and the arts.

Explanation of CAST Minor:

The Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation minor encourages students to study the intersection of the arts and theory and practice of social change and peacebuilding. Students in the CAST minor will learn about how to impact change on society by thinking critically about the arts and developing their own projects that contribute to building peace. The CAST minor will challenge students to consider aesthetics and story when it comes to building peace by encouraging them to engage in written, visual, oral, and performing arts.

Explanation of Assignment/Roles Students Played:

Three students in the Spring 2015 CAST 150B class were assigned to assist in the creation of the design lab. The students of the present design lab group decided to examine how the “Portraits to Purpose” exhibit could initiate conversations about race and other pressing social issues faced by people of color on college campuses like Brandeis University and beyond.

To prepare for the design lab, the students of CAST150b perused West’s collection of portraits and thought about where their community (Brandeis and beyond) needs improvement. The students were inspired by West's work and wrote a concept paper exploring the possibilities of a Brandeis version of “Portraits of Purpose.”

The design lab students also came up with a document with the contact information of professors and libraries from Boston area schools. This information may be used to get copies of West's book purchased or included on book lists for photography classes, African American Studies classes, or Peace and Conflict Studies classes. Before the design lab met on April 28, 2015, the three students gathered with Professor Cohen, Libbie Shufro, and Don West as well as with guests, Fatu Gayflor and Toni Shapiro-Phim, to discuss the goals for the design lab and what everyone hoped to achieve. This was a good way for everyone to meet and define goals.

Participants:

- Lisette Anzoategui, (Brandeis, Graduate student; Documenter)
- Gloretta Baynes (AAMARP, Chair of Artists)
- Alexandra Bordona (Brandeis, Undergraduate student; Documenter)
- Ina Breuer (Beyond Conflict, Executive Director)
- Tracy Bindel (Institute for Policy Studies, Jamaica Plains Forum Coordinator)
- Cynthia Cohen (Brandeis, Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, Director; Facilitator)
- Rachel Geller (Brandeis, Undergraduate student; Documenter)
- Gail Jackson (Gail Jackson Communications, Founder and President)
- Jenn Largaespada (Brandeis, Undergraduate student; Documenter)
- Tim Phillips (Beyond Conflict, Co-Founder)
- Christle Rawlins-Jackson (Jacra Design, Proprietor)
- Joelle Rebeiz (Brandeis, Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, Intern; Documenter)
- Libbie Shufro, (Portraits of Purpose)
- LaShawn Simmons (Brandeis, Undergraduate student; Documenter)
- Don West (Portraits of Purpose)

Key Learnings:

Creating a platform. POP can provide a natural platform for storytelling and dialogue about the legacy of the civil rights movement and its relevance to urban politics of inclusion and diversity today. To build an inclusive and effective platform, listening must be mapped at the beginning and set as a norm. There is a need to differentiate between sharing and dialogue to facilitate learning and eventually, a common vision.

Neuroscience and bias. All humans have bias. People who develop bias and prejudice in environments of threat, trauma (perceived or real) they are more deeply embedded than if not. Neuroscience elucidates that people fall into group identity when conflict circumstances are heightened such as when there are incidents of aggression or criminality. Evolution tells us that human beings process threats on an unconscious level before it even happens on a conscious level. Most of the biases can get triggered in a way that is completely unconscious. Neuroscientists are bringing new and emerging thinking on social conflict and unconscious bias to shift policies and approaches that can be incorporated to this work.

Perspective of young people. The young activist generation represented by the Brandeis University students shared their perspective on current race issues in their daily life. The conversation surrounded barriers youth who seek to use knowledge to change policy encounter, and the kinds of strategies that have been and are likely to be effective in overcoming these

barriers in the future. Key barriers included polarizing politics, lack of understanding of unearned privilege and racism, arm chair/superficial activism, and lack of inter-generational activist support. The arts and cultural work was discussed as important avenue to create safe spaces, increase awareness, dialogue, uplift underrepresented voices and give direction to emotion.

Engagement. A discussion regarding the challenges of engaging key players included issues such as lack of a shared vision and ensuring that this does not become an exclusively “black/white issue”. Possible solutions included mentoring, building together, networking, radio/TV interviews, art, connecting cultural work groups, highlighting stories across race lines.

Trust. An important challenge in this work is building trust across age, race, income etc. Learning is better done in a context of trust. One option is to build an inter-racial and inter-generational team who go through different sessions together. This will allow teams to have time to come together, process, have dialogue, build a platform and plan an action.

Ideas/Recommendations:

The ideas that were brought up on how to extend the impact and reach of Portraits of Purpose are as follows:

- Feature people’s stories on a radio spot or television show,
- Creation of a website and blogs that allows people from a community to share their stories,
- Organizing groups of activists and artists who could serve as mentors in the community,
- Hold PoP exhibits in different cities around the nation, and
- Bringing the arts to young people in urban schools.
- Workshops and strategy sessions should surround public events
- Two important pieces to incorporate is public engagement and big name artists/activists contributing to current dialogue
- There should be a cultural arm to whatever organizing movement young people develop

Further questions identified:

- How can PoP nourish the world, but also the people who created it?
- How can we differentiate PoP from other works about social change or social justice?
- How can PoP break through the thousands of books that are published every day?
- How do you bring together communities that do not normally collaborate?
- How can we avoid falling into the same patterns of prejudice?
- How do we make PoP more than a book? Who is the target audience? What can benefit all groups without anyone feeling excluded?

References:

<http://www.beyondconflictint.org>

<http://portraitsofpurpose.us>