

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

Brandeis Labor Coalition Design Lab

Brandeis University

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, one of which was in collaboration with the Brandeis Labor Coalition (BLC).

BLC is a student group on campus whose efforts include working with the dining staff to address employee concerns and help create a safer, more tolerate environment for all Brandeis employees. In Spring 2015, BLC launched an initiative to have university administrators agree to implement the Just Employment Policy, which ensures that employers are held responsible to employees when work conditions are not satisfactory.

Part of BLC's organizing strategy for this initiative was to raise awareness, not just about the policy, but also about the lives of the workers themselves in attempt to humanize them to the rest of the campus community so as to garner support for the policy. Five students in the Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation course (CAST 150b) were tasked with assisting with this process. Their duties included interviewing members of the dining staff.

The idea for this design lab emerged from several meetings between Cynthia Cohen, the CAST 150b professor and Director of the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, and Andrew Nguyen, a member of BLC, at the beginning of the spring semester.

Explanation of CAST 150B:

The Introduction to Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation course 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:

Though the students from the CAST 150b class made many attempts to reach out to dining workers to get interviews, they were met with hesitation and resistance from most of the workers. It seems that this was a result of a lack of trust—many of the workers had never met the students before—and a shortage of adequate support from BLC members. The lack of support was a result of a series of internal communication issues within BLC that made those in charge of helping secure interviews unsure of their role. In total, students were able to gather about 3-5 interviews and it was determined that this was too small of a sample size for which to base an entire project off of.

Participants:

The design lab's intention was to have as participants several members of BLC, the five students from the CAST 150b class, student artists, and potentially a few faculty and staff members trained in various art and performance disciplines. The purpose was to take the stories of the workers collected from the interviews and create a plan for presenting them to the Brandeis campus in a creative and effective way, potentially through an arts medium.

Key Learnings:

In the future, if this type of project were to be attempted again, it is clear that it would have to take place over the course of an extended period of time in order to generate enough trust between the students and the workers for them to feel comfortable sharing their stories. It was also suggested that instead of a one-way interview process, the project could become more of an exchange of stories—between students and workers or amongst workers. The idea of putting on a play focused around labor issues at a different university or organization that workers would be especially invited to attend was also discussed as a way to open up the space for conversations about worker's concerns. Additionally, it was mentioned that students could gather information about worker's interests outside of work as a way to connect with them. One student, Marcelo Brociner, had success connecting with one worker by discussing music-making with him. A link to a video of the two of them performing together can be found at the end of this document.

Next Steps:

Currently, there are no plans to pursue this project any further. However, if any student, faculty, or staff member becomes interested, they should refer to the Key Learnings section of this document.

Links:

http://www.brandeis.edu/programs/cast/news-events/2015_05_MarceloBrociner-Performance_CAST150b.html