

## Teaching and Learning Social Change

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Article abstract

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## Teaching and Learning Social Change

**Amie Thurber, Helen Buckingham, Jordenn Martens, Rebecca Lusk,  
Darrylann Becker, Stacy Spenser**

**ABSTRACT** How can social work courses prepare students to be scholars of social movements, and *also* to act in solidarity with movements for social justice? How can graduate programs reimagine the professional socialization of social work students from aspiring for expertise toward a stance of life-long learning? How can instructors more deeply leverage our teaching practice to advance justice in our communities? This paper traces one attempt to answer these questions through a three-quarter graduate social work course designed to deepen students' skills and knowledge in practices for social transformation, while amplifying existing social justice movements. Drawing on reflections from the instructor and five students, course artifacts, and insights from other students and community partners, this case study offers a model of community-engaged teaching that centers solidarity, reciprocity, and justice.

**KEYWORDS** Social work education, community-engaged learning, social justice, community practice

Social work has long been implicated in the 'states of exception' that authorities manufacture to legitimize oppression and violence that would otherwise be considered illegal, unethical, and/or immoral (Gray & Webb, 2014). In this version of the adage, *desperate times call for desperate measures*, those with the power to do so claim exigent circumstances as the cause to render some people and places dispensable, undeserving of protection, and/or unworthy of basic rights or decency. And it is often in these everyday zones of exception that social workers are employed.

As Gray and Webb (2014) note, "the practice of social work inevitably operates within a 'grand tension' of refusing the dominant order, while at the same time being contaminated by and maintaining this order" (p. 336). Where do future practitioners learn not simply to grapple with this tension, but to actively resist oppression and injustice? Though the field of Social Work has long-held values of social justice and social change, as noted by Reisch (2013), "the emphasis of neo-liberalism on individual rather than structural transformation has shifted the focus of social work practice away from resistance and change to adaptation, resiliency and compliance" (p. 718). Social work education mirrors this shift, as does field education, which has long served as the discipline's 'signature pedagogy' (Wayne et al., 2010). Given that many social work organizations operate from a charity or medical model (Finn, 2016; Mehrotra et al., 2018), students are more likely to be prepared to serve/surveil those deemed undeserving

of a full host of rights and privileges than to transform societal inequities (Kivel, 2005). While this gap certainly has implications for social work's model of field education—and many are taking up this charge (see George et al., 2013; Levine & Murray-Lictman, 2018)—we draw another conclusion: if we want to prepare social work students to both provide social services and to engage in social change then we need to reimagine educational settings that make that learning possible.

In their call for a 'New Left' within social work education, Gray and Webb (2014) write, "Importantly, for social work students, inculcating a critical approach to politics means *becoming involved* in public controversies around issues of local and regional significance that can take on global proportions" [emphasis added] (p. 330). This suggests the need for a model of community-engaged teaching that attends to the limitations of traditional 'service learning' (for discussion, see Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Sheridan & Jacobi, 2015) and directly involves students in local change efforts as part of the coursework. Feminist principles of community engagement can inform the development of such courses. In their introduction to *Feminist Community Engagement: Achieving Praxis*, editors Iverson and James (2014) identify the following themes, echoed across critical feminisms and community engaged scholarship:

- Relationality: Feminist community engagement seeks reciprocity of teaching, learning, caring, and doing among students, instructors, and community members.
- Border-crossing: In resisting false binaries such as campus/community and expert/novice, feminist community engagement reimagines where or with whom engagement occurs, as well as how and to what ends engagement takes place.
- Reflexivity: Feminist community engagement emphasizes a commitment to ongoing critical examination of how one's interests, assumptions, and perspectives inform the approach to and experience of engagement, and particular attention to power and authority (Gringeri et al., 2010).
- Disruptive pedagogy: Feminist community engagement is explicitly political and activist in orientation, equipping students with knowledge and skills to participate in movements for collective liberation.

Drawing on these principles, it is possible to imagine community-engaged coursework that deepens social work students' ability to contest states of exception through involvement in grassroots transformative change efforts. To consider the possibilities afforded by such an approach, this paper offers an in-depth case study of a graduate social work course sequence. While broadly directed towards educators seeking to build more meaningful solidarities between their classrooms and social movements, we hope this paper has particular value within schools of social work.

## Study Context and Methods

The Portland State University Master of Social Work (MSW) Program admits an average of 300 students each year. Students select a concentration area and complete a specialized three-course sequence related to their concentration. This paper focuses on the course sequence for the Practice and Leadership with Communities and Organizations (PLCO) concentration. Whereas the clinical concentration option equips students for direct practice with individuals and families, this concentration attracts students who seek to participate in community responses to social problems, policy practice, and organizational leadership.

In fall 2019, I (Amie) became the lead instructor for the PLCO concentration and piloted a new course structure with the 21 enrolled students. A key change was the development of a team-based *Social Justice Movement Project* where students engage with a local justice-oriented campaign over nine months in order to develop increased knowledge in social movements while amplifying the efforts of a local campaign.

Early in the first quarter, students were introduced to the Just Practice Framework, a social work practice model rooted in feminist and critical social theories (Finn, 2016). The Just Practice Framework integrates thematic areas of inquiry with social work processes. The five areas of inquiry—history, context, meaning, power and possibility—provide “a foundation for posing critical questions and for imagining other possible realities and pathways for practice” (Finn, 2003, p. 72). The Just Practice Framework encourages social workers to engage these areas of inquiry iteratively, and reimagines social work practice from a medical approach (i.e. diagnosis and treatment) to an ongoing processes of engagement; teaching and learning; action and accompaniment; and reflection, evaluation and celebration (Finn, 2016). Twenty-one students applied the Just Practice Framework to the *Social Justice Movement Project* (syllabus available upon request).

In the second week of the fall quarter, students broke into four self-selected social movement groups: Immigrant Justice, Mass Incarceration, Foster Care Reform, and Climate Justice. In the subsequent weeks of the term, each team studied its topic through the lenses of history, context, meaning, power, and possibility. They developed a partnership with a local campaign or community group, and closed the quarter with an assessment of their topic and a proposal to assist their partner. Given that students were taking classes and completing a 500-hour internship while in many cases also balancing other work and care responsibilities, teams were encouraged to propose a modest yet meaningful scope of work, which was grounded in the capacity of each particular team. After soliciting partner feedback, in winter, students revised and began implementing their plans. The start of spring quarter coincided with the onset of Covid-19, which required reimagining the class and projects within new constraints. Throughout the year, teams evaluated, documented, and shared their work through group reflections, progress reports, end of quarter papers and presentations, and culminating in an evaluation with their community partner.

The following is a collaborative account of the *Social Justice Movement Project*. The purpose of this qualitative case study (Simons, 2014) is to explore the learning that was made possible, foreclosed, and troubled by the project. Representatives from each student team participated as

collaborating authors and member checked their work with their peers. The writing group met during the academic year and deepened analysis through conversation and independent writing over the year following the class. Authors drew from course artifacts (such as the syllabus and assignments), their individual assignments from the course, and their reflections over time. Nine other team members offered additional quotes and reflections (used here with permission). The writing team collaboratively analyzed each author's written accounts to understand through-lines and distinctions in their experiences. Drafts of each student's work were circulated with their team members and their community partners for review. Seven additional students and all community partners offered feedback thereby increasing the accuracy of these reflections. Though 14 of 21 students contributed insight to this paper, we assume that other students would have invariably emphasized different aspects of their experience.

### **Student Reflections**

Following the Just Practice processes (Finn, 2016), this section begins with students' *engagement* with one another and their social movement, then explores the *teaching and learning* processes that informed their assessment process. Next, students examine the *action and accompaniment* phase of their work, and close with a discussion of their team's *reflections, evaluation, and celebration*. In each phase of work, we endeavor to make visible how we grappled with feminist principles of community engagement—*relationality, border crossing, reflexivity, and disruptive pedagogy* (Iverson & James, 2014). By tracing student's experiences chronologically across the three-course sequence, we hope to make salient the core aspects of the course design that may assist readers in discerning aspects of transferability to other community-engaged courses.

### **Engagement**

***Relationality*** is the essence of engagement. As described by Janet Finn (2016), “engagement is the process through which the social worker enters the world of the participant(s) in the change process and begins to develop a working relationship. It entails entry into both context and relationship” (p. 181). Course activities to support engagement included discussion of what members brought to and hoped to gain from each group; the creation of accountability commitments within each team; and the requirement that each team member conduct a stakeholder interview to gain insight into the history and context of their social movement.

***Immigrant Justice (Stacey)***. When our group first formed, we discovered that some members were already heavily engaged with immigrant justice, while others—like me—were very new to the topic. Three members are Latinx women with direct immigration experiences: one member immigrated to the United States without documentation and is temporarily protected from deportation through a policy called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and two have undocumented family members. The remaining three members included one Latino heritage man, and two white women whose families immigrated to the U.S. four or more generations ago. We were collectively outraged by the increased xenophobia of the Trump administration and shared a passion to combat the oppression and criminalization of

immigrants and refugees. For the white members, we were also mindful that we were novices in the area of immigrant justice and had a lot to learn. As a team, we committed to work with and alongside those with direct immigration experiences and to honor the expertise of those already doing immigrant justice work.

To begin, we interviewed people with different connections to immigration. One member, Vania, interviewed a fellow DACA recipient, a champion for immigration rights who organizes in her community in spite of uncertainty over her immigration status. As Vania noted, “my interview was very emotional to me because of my personal connection to the DACA community. That being said, it felt great to learn more in depth about what people are doing locally.” In all the stories, interviewees expressed fear and uncertainty as well as strength and determination. Many recounted the challenge of navigating the immigration system. An attorney we interviewed explained that the starting cost of legal representation in a deportation removal case—\$12,000—is a significant barrier for folks facing deportation. The attorney suggested that as a next step we go to immigration court to better understand the process.

*Mass Incarceration (Helen).* We were the last group to quiet down before responding to our instructor’s introductory prompt: Why did we choose this topic? One by one, the other four members recounted their immense work experience in juvenile justice, child welfare, and a women’s prison. As they spoke, I kept repeating in my head: “Say it, say it: ‘I am formerly incarcerated.’ Don’t let them know how hard it has been to release the shame and regret in order to say this with strength and purpose.” After all, it was the most important contribution I had to offer.

From the get go, it was apparent we shared a deep commitment toward interrupting the institutional and systemic racism, which has fueled the exponential growth of the U.S. prison population. Our team found common ground in the heartfelt frustrations of having to work within these unjust, overtly racist systems, and having to suffer patiently while the communities we belong to are disproportionately impacted and, in my case, to have experienced the hardship firsthand. But we had conflicting orientations toward solutions, with some of us oriented toward reform and others firmly committed to abolition.

I can only assume that the fierce conviction expressed by each member reflected their lived experience, but we passed over our personal stories. I shared very little about my experiences in jail and my group members did not ask. I noticed that the only two Black students in class chose this group, as did the only veteran, but I did not ask how their respective experiences with racism or the military informed their commitment to end mass incarceration. In retrospect, I have grieved the loss of these stories, which barely surfaced during our nine months working together.

We did, however, seek stories from others. To understand how criminal justice affects youth, one member interviewed a juvenile court counselor who shared, “the criminal justice system is quicksand—the system...has its own innate ability to trap young people.” Other members interviewed a city employee, people working in abolitionist movements, and a person who registered voters in jails. As members were selecting their interviewees, my instructor

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encouraged me to share if I was also willing to be interviewed. My team member Amelia interviewed me, and later reflected, “I knew Helen was formerly incarcerated, and the thought did not enter my mind to interview her until she gently reminded me.”

Ultimately, the collection of interviews deepened our understanding of how the national crisis of mass incarceration was unfolding in our own community, and led us to partner with Oregon District Attorney (DA) for the People (<https://www.oregondaforthethepeople.com/>), a coalition-led campaign that “aims to decrease the everyday impact that the criminal legal system has on communities of color, while building community power to self-determine what safety and healing look like.”

***Foster Care (Darrylann & Rebecca).*** Our group connected almost immediately. Four members were employed as child welfare caseworkers/supervisors, and the rest worked in organizations that served children and families impacted by the foster care system. Additionally, one member was also a foster parent for her grandson. Each of us had witnessed the devastating effects of a child welfare system that fails many children and families, and we spent much of our early sessions sharing our outrage alongside our belief that the whole system needed to change. Figuring out where to start in a nine-month project was challenging.

Interviews were a key part of our discernment process. We heard many stories of young people’s resilience and also of the unique challenges foster youth face, particularly the abrupt end to mental health and other support services for youth who age out of foster care at age 18. Our team member Elisha interviewed the program director of Oregon Foster Youth Connection (OFYC), a statewide advocacy program led by youth 14-25 who are currently or formerly in foster care. Over the last two years, OFYC has been working through the Oregon Legislature to increase funding for Independent Living Programs (ILPs), which provide some foster youth with the knowledge and skills to assist in the transition out of foster care. However, the program is woefully underfunded, and OFYC youth are committed to expanding these resources. Although Elisha had worked with OFYC for years, she was still impressed to learn more about their work: “the youth as a collaborative make the decisions about what they want to collectively change in policy, so this group is genuinely a representation of the youth voice... This is brilliant on the part of the OFYC.” We decided to partner with OFYC’s upcoming legislative agenda.

***Climate Justice Team (Jordenn).*** When I joined the climate justice team I was a little apprehensive as I had zero experience with the topic and did not have strong relationships with the other group members. I quickly learned that we shared a lack of experience with climate justice, but also a sense that this is a pressing issue. In that first meeting we identified the strengths of each group member and committed to being accountable to one another, practicing excellent communication, and remembering we are all learners in this field.

To generate a foundational understanding within our group, we interviewed a climate scientist, an environmental attorney, and several people involved in local community organizing. A key takeaway was the gaps in our knowledge. My team member Olive observed, “before



my interview, I was using terms like *environmental justice* or *environmentalism* without really understanding the very different meanings these terms hold.” Olive’s interviewee explained, “What climate justice is trying to do that environmentalism does not [is to] argue that the connection between the changing earth and our systems of oppression are intimately related.” Clarifying our definition of climate justice was essential to the development of our team, yet it also surfaced new tensions for us related to our identities and potential roles in the movement. As Olive wrote in an end-of-quarter reflection: “as a group comprised of 80% white women, I found myself wondering where to best ‘plug in’ to this current work in a way that is actually meaningful, and does not repeat the same history of erasure of the work people of color have done in Portland.” With this in mind, we began searching for a way to partner with local climate justice efforts.

### **Teaching and Learning**

In the Just Practice Framework, “teaching-learning is a participatory process of discovery and critical inquiry. In part, it entails data collection, assessment, and interpretation and reframes them as collaborative activities. Teaching-learning connotes a two-way street” (Finn, 2016, p. 181). In this way, teaching and learning always involves *border crossing*. In addition to teaching-learning efforts that each team undertook independently, this phase of the project was supported by in-class media analysis and timeline activities, as well as power- and systems-mapping activities designed to deepen students’ analysis of their respective social issues. Each team concluded the first quarter with the development of a proposed action plan.

*Immigrant Justice (Stacey)*. Following the recommendation of one of our stakeholder interviews, our team spent a day in immigration court. We were shocked that asylum seekers were asked to retell traumatic stories of the circumstances that forced them to flee their country, yet were not provided any resources (such as access to a victim advocate, as is provided in criminal court). We watched, stunned, as the judge addressed Spanish-speaking immigrants in English after the translator had left, demanded that all evidence be presented to the court in English, and chastised a mother and son for not printing evidence on the “right” kind of paper. In only one of the observed cases did an asylum seeker have an attorney present. Shockingly, it appeared perfectly acceptable to hold immigration court in which those detained were unable to understand the proceedings and lacked legal representation. As we witnessed, those without representation had no power in the courtroom, and were treated without regard for basic standards of human decency and respect.

As we huddled outside the courthouse that afternoon, we determined to focus our efforts on increasing access to legal representation for immigrants facing deportation. We soon discovered Pueblo Unido, a Latinx-led organization that provides legal services navigation to immigrants. After researching the organization, our team met with the co-founder and executive director, Cameron Coval. Cameron reiterated that cost was often the most significant barrier to representation, and thus one of the organization’s greatest needs. We were disappointed to learn that one of the few legal translation services—offered by fellow social workers—charged



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fees that made these services inaccessible to many. At Cameron's encouragement, we decided to organize a fundraiser for Pueblo Unido. Though we had spent the first quarter learning about the experiences of immigrants, now we had to learn about fundraising: where and when to host events, how to recruit attendees, and how to inspire people to support financially an issue they may not have thought much about. Our hope was to raise money while also engaging more people in our community in local immigrant justice efforts.

***Mass Incarceration (Helen).*** Oregon DA for the People was extremely welcoming to our efforts to join their campaign. We continued our research, attended organizing meetings and candidate forums, and quickly learned that the District Attorney has significant decision-making power to shape plea bargains, police and prosecutorial practices, jail and bail amounts, sentencing, and more. It was shocking to realize how little we knew, as social workers, about the power this one person has on the entire system of justice and punishment. Oregon DA for the People challenged all candidates for the upcoming District Attorney race to agree to a six-point platform to increase justice for Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Immigrant communities, individuals with mental health conditions, youth, people experiencing houselessness, and those engaged in sex work or drug use. By promoting a platform rather than a candidate, the coalition hoped to shape the public conversation surrounding the campaign and force commitments from each candidate that they could later leverage with whomever was elected. Oregon DA for the People asked us to create educational materials detailing the powers of the District Attorney and to get more people involved in the campaign.

***Foster Care (Darrylann & Rebecca).*** We had a lot of work to do to educate ourselves about OFYC's history and current legislative work. Since 2009, the group has helped to introduce and pass seven bills that have improved the lives of foster youth throughout the state. This year, OFYC was reintroducing a bill to add \$2 million in funding for ILPs via HB 4120. OFYC hoped to stabilize the lives of youth aging out of the foster care system through increased access to services that help them transition into adulthood.

OFYC is committed to amplifying the voices of youth with lived experience in foster care, and as adults and professionals we were still figuring out how to best support these efforts. We proposed a number of action steps to educate and engage those within our sphere of influence about the campaign, and to provide OFYC's youth with tools to assist in their advocacy efforts. OFYC welcomed our proposal, so we got to work.

***Climate Justice (Jordenn).*** We quickly found 350PDX—a local climate justice volunteer-led organization—and learned that its Fossil Fuel Resistance Team was in the midst of a campaign to halt the expansion of Portland's largest crude oil storage and export facility (owned by Zenith Energy Management), with a long-term goal to dismantle the corporation (Center for Sustainable Economy, 2019). An estimated 1.1 million barrels of crude oil pass through this facility annually, the majority of which come from the Canadian tar sands and the Bakken Formation (Center for Sustainable Economy, 2019). Zenith is located in Portland's Northwest

Industrial district, making it an environmental justice concern for low-income communities and communities of color in North Portland, as well as Indigenous communities who continue to be exploited by the extraction of fossil fuels (Center for Sustainable Economy, 2019). We were struck by how accepted it has become for low-income and BIPOC communities to be dumped on, to suffer pollution and significant health biohazard risk, or to be completely eradicated.

We committed to educating ourselves, being transparent about what we could offer, and prioritizing tangible contributions to 350PDX's campaign. We analyzed background reports and began attending meetings and events with 350PDX. While our goal was to learn how we could support the campaign, we also learned a good deal about effective organizing. As team member Katie noted, "I have not had a lot of experience with [community organizing] in the past, so I am very grateful to have had an opportunity to link with an organization that values its members, recognizes oppression and privilege, and disrupts systems to create positive change." After getting involved, 350PDX provided access to a spreadsheet detailing campaign tasks. We identified those that aligned with the strengths and capacity of our group, and developed a concrete proposal of action items to support the Fossil Fuel Resistance Team.

### **Action and Accompaniment**

Finn (2016) describes action as "the process of carrying out plans and sustaining the momentum" and accompaniment as "the actual people-to-people partnerships through which action is realized" (p. 182). While some course content supported students' efforts (such as readings related to legislative advocacy and strategic communication), by the time teams reached this stage, their work was highly tailored to their particular projects. Supported by a *disruptive pedagogy* that prioritized community needs, each team set their own goals, determined the strategies and tactics to achieve them, and navigated unexpected challenges that complicated their efforts.

*Immigrant Justice (Stacy)*. Our initial goal was to raise \$2,000 at an in-person fundraising event. We created timelines, explored venues, and assigned each team member tasks that aligned with their skills and interests. We quickly learned that fundraising events often require a budget—which we did not have—and faced difficulty finding a venue that would feel welcoming to immigrant communities, BIPOC folks, and LGBTQIA+ people. And then, just when we had finalized the logistics, the COVID-19 pandemic reached our state and the Governor issued a stay-at-home order. In addition to throwing our personal lives into turmoil, we needed to quickly re-strategize. We lowered our fundraising goal to \$1,000 and worked with Pueblo Unido to develop a week-long online fundraiser.

Each group member was responsible for creating social media content for one day of the week. We distributed the posts on social media and encouraged Pueblo Unido and others in our networks to repost the campaign. Much to our surprise, by the end of the week we raised \$3,330 and generated a number of new monthly donors for Pueblo Unido. We were also inspired by the reach of the campaign: Rosa's video post reached 3,000 people on Facebook alone, and several donors started their own fundraising efforts for Pueblo Unido, further expanding our effort.

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***Mass Incarceration (Helen).*** We decided to focus on increasing awareness of the Oregon DA for the People campaign on our campus. The goals of our project were to inform students of the candidates, to encourage voting, and to help students understand the power of voters to reduce mass incarceration. We developed a curriculum and a facilitator's guide for an experiential learning module that included a mock trial where students would experience the power of the district attorney and the role of implicit bias in the legal system. We planned to lead workshops the following quarter, prior to the election. Instructors began signing up for sessions, and we capped off winter term by testing out our curriculum with our peers.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic happened, and we were thrust into remote learning and had to reconceptualize our curriculum in a digital format. With input from Oregon DA for the People, we created a Prezi presentation with a voiceover recording that could be easily distributed online. We shared the link with instructors and offered to facilitate a class discussion during their remote course. One instructor took us up on this offer. Additionally, we posted a link to the video on a twitter thread that garnered national recognition. However, we were disappointed by the shifts caused by the pandemic and also distracted. Some of our team members were furloughed, one expected to work overtime, and my household struggled through illness, job losses, and threats of eviction. All of this tested our team's cohesion and resilience, and limited our ability to stay engaged with each other and Oregon DA for the People.

***Foster Care (Darrylann & Rebecca).*** Our actions were focused on amplifying OFYC's efforts to pass HB 4120. We wrote and distributed an op-ed letter to educate the general public about the need for additional funding for youth aging out of foster care, created and posted an infographic about HB 4120 on social media, and mobilized fellow students, colleagues, and friends to advocate for passage of HB 4120. We sent drafts of our materials to OFYC, which they reviewed for accuracy before dissemination. We also developed an advocacy template for OFYC youth to use as they contacted their legislators and attended OFYC's lobby day at the capitol.

As a bipartisan bill, HB 4120 received considerable support from both parties. However, near the end of the session, the Republicans in both the House and the Senate staged a walkout in protest of an unrelated environmental bill, and HB 4120 (along with many other bills) died. We felt an overwhelming sense of loss: for OFYC, the youth that had such a personal investment in the bill, and for ourselves. The walkout underscored the systemic abandonment of youth in foster care by the state's policy-makers. We wondered about the impact of the walkout on the youth. Had the youth been prepared to have elected officials turn their backs on them? Was this retraumatizing for youth that have already experienced trauma? Were we complicit in that? The electric momentum we felt entering the new term and the new year were gone in an instant.

***Climate Justice (Jordenn).*** Our action projects included creating a social media campaign aimed at increasing awareness both about 350PDX and the Zenith Energy Terminal, and organizing a walking tour of the Zenith Energy Terminal. Each member of our team invited others to join the tour, and Melanie, our mentor at 350PDX, hosted. Melanie began with an acknowledgement that the land we were on was stolen from the Multnomah, Kathlamet,

Clackamas, Cowliz band of Chinook, Tualatin Kalapuya, Molalla, and many other tribes. She explained how Zenith Energy Terminal stores crude oil and the risks the facility poses to area residents. Getting to experience Zenith through sight, smell, and sound—and in community with colleagues, friends, and our mentor—was intense and solemn. Seeing how close Zenith was to my neighborhood, and understanding the scope of harm that would result from an earthquake or a crude oil spillage was both heartbreaking and activating. One teammate’s husband filmed the tour and created a brief educational video for 350PDX to use. The tour also provided additional context needed to produce quality print and online tools to help amplify the Fossil Fuel Resistance Team’s campaign. As the pandemic forced both our class and our work with 350PDX to move online, we missed the opportunity to spend time in physical-community with 350PDX, reflecting on the year and sharing in our new formed friendships.

### **Reflection, Evaluation, and Celebration**

In the Just Practice Framework, reflection is understood as the process of “learning together from our experiences,” evaluation is an ongoing process of “assessing the effectiveness of our efforts,” and celebration entails “commemorating the successes, big and small, in the process of change” (Finn, 2016, pp.182-183). These processes were supported by quarterly reflections on the group-work process, team outcomes and learning edges, and the expectation that teams seek feedback from their community partner. While the course design encouraged *reflexivity* throughout the process, it was particularly evident in this phase.

*Immigrant Justice (Stacey)*. After we completed the fundraiser, we asked Pueblo Unido’s Executive Director, Cameron, for feedback about our collaboration. He expressed gratitude for our clear communication throughout the project, how we had listened to the needs of the organization, and how our campaign strongly aligned with Pueblo Unido’s mission. He appreciated that we were respectful of the organization’s constrained resources, and made a meaningful contribution to their work while requiring a minimal investment of their time. He also offered recommendations to improve any future online fundraising. We valued both his appreciation and suggestions, and were grateful that our work was beneficial to Pueblo Unido.

As the year ended, our group came together over a final Zoom call to reflect on the nine months we spent together. We expressed pride in our individual and collective work, and recalled the initial tension between those group members with lived experience with immigration and those who were learners. We recognized that the differences in social location impacted the group in a variety of ways. Although all members were impacted by the inhumanity of the immigration system, the emotional impacts of the project were compounded for members that were also navigating those systems themselves. As Vania noted:

I persevered despite facing this pandemic with my family as undocumented and often thinking about dropping out to figure out how to best support them...Despite being emotionally drained most of the time, I supported my team members in pulling off an amazing fundraiser for Pueblo Unido.

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We appreciated the way we had grown together—through shared experiences at the courthouse, practicing vulnerability with one another, and actively encouraging one another—and also honored the different lessons we were taking from the project. For the Latinx members of the group, the project offered an important affirmation of members existing knowledge and expertise. Rosa shared:

Who knew that I would know more of what it means to be a macro practitioner than what I thought? I may not have the paper trail experience of an Executive Director, but I do have community leadership and fund development experience that reflects my passion and strengths.

For the white members of the group, the project modeled a way to join in solidarity. At the start of the year, I was curious, excited, and felt like I wanted to *lead* social movements. I now truly value being a novice in a movement and learning with a community, following the lead of organizations doing the work, and educating myself and others on valuable ways to contribute.

***Mass Incarceration (Helen)***. The final phase of our project required us to complete a comprehensive paper and present an overview of our project to our peers. Our group struggled through decision-making and in engaging with one another during this time. In truth, this had been challenging all along. Our group was passionate, yet we often discussed the issues of mass incarceration abstractly rather than what it meant to us personally. We rushed to make decisions quickly rather than slowing down to understand each member's perspectives.

Two weeks before our final class presentation, George Floyd was murdered. In the days that followed, members of our group spent nights in the streets protesting as racialized police violence became the center of a national conversation. And while our group's passion around this topic was shared, the trauma of the moment landed differently for the two Black members of our team, Danielle and LeMont, who seemed to withdraw from our team. Even when physically present, they had limited energy to engage with our remaining tasks. The white members of the group—myself included—did not initially grasp the severe impact that George Floyd's murder had on our Black peers. As our awareness of their emotional load grew, we did what we could to complete the final paper and prepare our team presentation. When we showed up for the final presentation online, none of us fully knew what others on our team would share. In the end, each member of the group was able to give voice to their experience to the larger class, even though we had not been able to do so with one another.

LeMont reflected on the difficulty of being fully present and in the moment, and the struggle to find words to describe his attachment to George Floyd and so many countless others killed by police violence. Danielle noted that her MSW experience had been “bookended by police murders of Black men,” reminding peers that on the first day of the program two years prior there had been a walk-out to honor Jason Washington, a Black man killed by Portland State campus police, and now she was grieving the murder of George Floyd upon graduation. It struck

me as the first time that we had collectively engaged with the focus of our nine-month project—eradicating systems that lead to mass incarceration—in personal rather than abstract terms.

We were proud of the curriculum we created and pleased that we were able to educate some students (though not as many as we had hoped) on the importance of voting and the role that the district attorney plays. In the end, my greatest learning came from the process of struggling together. I learned—through trial and error—to draw power from our minds and our hearts, to develop patience with each other and with the process, and to find ways to show up for my peers, even when I too feel stretched to my emotional limit. I remembered the power of my own story and the importance of seeking and honoring others.

***Foster Care (Darrylann & Rebecca).*** After the Republican walk out brought our work with OFYC to an abrupt close, we took greater time to consider what our work had and had not accomplished, and our areas of growth. We did not achieve our primary goal to support OFYC in achieving the passage of HB 4120. However, we did develop materials that could be easily modified to promote a subsequent bill (introduced in 2021). In accompanying OFYC youth members at their lobby day, we affirmed their wants and needs. Our community partner expressed appreciation for these contributions, sharing, “supporting youth to be in OFYC was amazing! The Op Ed was great. Thank you for letting us review for accuracy and then doing the work of sending it off.” However modest, these seemed to be meaningful additions to OFYC’s campaign.

We are taking from this experience increased knowledge and abilities in legislative advocacy, and greater insight about the micro-skills involved in sustained, collaborative, community-led work. We came into this project knowing each other and our community partner, and feeling some degree of expertise in our field. In part, because of this familiarity and confidence in our skills, we jumped over important steps of formalizing our communication and accountability practices, and at times found ourselves scrambling to complete tasks at the last minute. Our community partner noted this as well, observing: “overall, it would have been great to have more clarity, earlier, about what youth needed as support and what you were able to do when” and “be sure to engage who you are supporting more in your work, getting reflections or feedback along the way.” It was critical for us to remember that *professional experience* in child welfare is not equivalent to *lived experience* in foster care. To be good partners in ongoing efforts to reform or transform foster care, we must center the needs and desires of current and former youth, show up organized, and clearly communicate our capacity. We came to deeply appreciate both the competence of our team members and the support we offered one another as we processed our disappointments. Together, we are carrying forward greater perseverance, sense of community, and dedication to serving foster youth.

***Climate Justice (Jordenn).*** Although we had to rethink the final aspects of this project, we were still immensely proud of the work we put out and the ways we all grew individually and as a team. We started out as novices in the area of climate justice, and all felt that we learned a great deal. As reflected by my team member Norzom that learning expanded far beyond Zenith: “It made me much more aware of decisions I make that affect climate justice, such



as things that I purchase.” Most prominently, we were struck by the *absence* of attention to climate justice in our social work education. It is not an accident what neighborhoods and communities are stripped, dumped on, and/or exposed to toxins. If we are not learning about this as social workers, we are less likely to be paying attention to the disparities occurring around us and risk being complicit in ongoing environmental injustice.

The experience of working together over nine months deepened our experience in applied collaborative work. The pandemic accelerated this growth, as we needed each other in different ways. Our team member Katie struggled to attend to her school, work, and family responsibilities and as the team was facing a deadline:

I was honest about my capacity and the team fully supported me... Learning to recognize and be honest about my capacity is something that I want to carry into my career. It requires transparency and trust of those around me. If I can continue to grow in this area, I believe it will help keep me in this field for the long term.

350PDX provided positive feedback regarding our deliverables, and continues to use the documentary, infographics, and brochure that we created. We invited our community partner and mentor Melanie to our final online-class, where we would be presenting our work to our classmates. When the day came, we were delighted to see that a number of 350PDX members logged in; a testament to the relationships we had built.

At the beginning of this project, our professor shared an image from her first sweet potato harvest, and described her delight at discovering the abundance below the soil after months of tending above ground. She encouraged us to imagine ourselves as gardeners, and this analogy helped us conceptualize engaging in community practice. We planted the slips, which involved doing the research and engaging in a process of self-education. We tended the soil by building sincere relationships with our community partners, attending meetings, and working within our own constraints. We also had to care for the spreading vines and follow through on our action projects, making sure our deliverables were helpful to our partner agency. Once the work was done, we got to dig in and harvest, evaluating our work with our partner agency and reflecting on all the skills we learned and relationships we nurtured. Having done this project, I now know that engaging in community work does not just grow overnight; like any good gardener, you have to invest for the long-term and trust the process.

### **Through-Lines, Lessons Learned, and Limitations**

Each of the four social movement projects confronted zones of exception: the structures and processes that lead to the dehumanization of undocumented immigrants, the cruel quicksand of the criminal justice system, the abandonment of youth in foster care, and the intersecting violence against land and people by crude oil extraction. Students were charged with entering these zones, knowing that the challenges predate and would outlast their efforts, and yet finding ways to join with others in striving for change. Along the way, they confronted ways that social



work is often complicit, for example by creating barriers to accessing needed services, and through omissions in the education of future practitioners.

The student reflections above suggest that this community-engaged project successfully achieved the twin goals of helping students to deepen their knowledge and experience in advancing social justice movements while meaningfully contributing to a local campaign. The reflections offer rich evidence of learning, scaffolded by the integration of the Just Practice Framework and feminist principles of community engagement into the course design. Emphasizing *relationality* and a purposeful period of engagement and learning prior to social action helped students experience the value of slowing down their practice and assessing the needs and desires of the community and their team. Students demonstrated a shift from a politics of location (as reflected in the common practice of offering positionality statements) to a politics of relation (Rowe, 2005). As described by feminist theorist Aimee Carillo Rowe (2005):

I am advocating a shift from a notion of identity that begins with “I”—as does the inscription “I-identity,” which announces “I am...”—to a sense of “self” that is radically inclined toward others, toward the communities to which we belong, with whom we long to be, and to whom we feel accountable. (p. 18)

This deepening relationality was supported by the intentional *border-crossings* integrated into the class. Students’ peers, community partners, and community engagement experiences became critical sources of learning alongside course materials. Students built their capacity for social action through developing educational, fundraising, and advocacy tools for and with their movement partners, and also learned—through legislative walk-outs and the onset of the pandemic—that the best laid plans can quickly be upended.

The frequent opportunities for students to reflect on how their lived and professional experiences impacted their engagement with one another and their community partners integrated *reflexivity* into the course. As students grappled with the ways they were differentially situated in their chosen social movements, their awareness of their own learning edges sharpened, and their appreciation of one another deepened.

The depth of student learning was enabled by the overall design of the course: a rare three-quarter sequence with the same student cohort that is undeniably unique in many educational settings. Yet this too is an important insight: teaching and learning social change takes time. It is not possible to research a social justice issue, assess local resources and needs, develop a community partnership, and implement and evaluate a community-engaged action plan in a 10-week course, but it may be possible in 30 weeks. With a commitment to *disruptive pedagogy*, we can prioritize a feminist praxis that is “openly political, connected, and involved in liberatory actions” (Gringeri et al., 2010, p. 393), and create multi-course sequences that enable this kind of robust community engagement.

As the instructor, the course required me to carefully curate the curriculum and activities that supported student learning. I relinquished a significant portion of course time to group-work, and offered myself more often as consultant than instructor. I suspended attachment to

fully-formed, predetermined learning outcomes and trusted in the emergent nature of learning-through-doing. The team- and community-directed nature of the projects meant that students learned different things; some gained more experience in policy practice, others in popular education, for example. Indeed, students saw themselves change, although, as illuminated by Rosa's growing recognition of her expertise and Stacey's increased comfort at being a learner rather than an expert, they changed in different ways. While their individual learnings varied, all students gained experience engaging deeply with and following the leadership of grassroots community groups.

While designed to be pedagogically disruptive, we are mindful of the norms that were not disrupted within this class. In particular, despite building in activities that attend to relationality and group process, students have been socialized within academia and the profession to prioritize deadlines and deliverables in ways we had trouble shaking loose. We wonder if this contributed to some of what students recognized as missteps along the way, such as Helen's reflection on the consequence of having "passed over our personal stories" in her team's formation, and Rebecca and Darrylann's recognition that they had, at times, equated their professional expertise with lived experience. In reflection, Helen wondered if the instructor could have more explicitly communicated the expectation that teams balance their emphasis on deliverables with investments in co-learning. Somewhat paradoxically, leveraging greater instructor authority in setting this expectation might have more effectively disrupted professional norms than the gentle encouragement provided did.

A community-engaged course such as this one does not resolve the fundamental tensions in social work nor is it designed to. Social work students are working themselves into—not out of—jobs, many of which remain firmly embedded in systems that both harm and help. Yet this case study offers one way to live into a model of social work education that prepares students to both provide social services and engage in social change while equipping them with tools and experiences that center solidarity, reciprocity, and movements to advance social justice.

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