

# Building Community from Chaos

By Linda Christensen

Over winter break, I read a book on teaching that left me feeling desolate because the writer's vision of a joyful, productive classroom did not match the chaos I faced daily. My students straggled in, still munching on Popeye's chicken, wearing Walkmen, and generally acting surly because of some incident in the hall during break, a fight with their parents, a teacher, a boyfriend or girlfriend. This year, more than ever, they failed to finish the writing started in class or read the novel or story I assigned as homework. Too often, they were suffering from pains much bigger than I could deal with: homelessness, pregnancy, the death of a brother, sister, friend, cousin due to street violence, the nightly spatter of guns in their neighborhoods, the decay of a society.

For too many days during the first quarter, I felt like a prison guard trying to bring order and kindness to a classroom where students laughed over the beating of a man, made fun of a classmate who was going blind, and mimicked the way a Vietnamese girl spoke until they pushed her into silence.

Each September I have this optimistic misconception that I'm going to create a compassionate, warm, safe place for students in the first days of class because my recollection is based on the final quarter of the previous year. In the past, that atmosphere did emerge in a shorter time span. But the students were more homogeneous, and we were living in somewhat more secure and less violent times. While students shared the tragedies of divorce and loss of friendships, their class talk was less often disrupted by the pressure cooker of society — and I was more naive and rarely explored those areas. We were polite to each other as we kept uncomfortable truths at bay.

Now, I realize that classroom com-

munity isn't always synonymous with warmth and harmony. Politeness is often a veneer mistaken for understanding, when in reality it masks uncovered territory, the unspeakable pit that we turn from because we know the anger and pain that dwells there. At Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon, where the interplay of race, class and gender creates a constant background static, it's important to remind myself that real community is forged out of struggle. Students won't always agree on issues, and the fights, arguments, tears, and anger are the crucible from which a real community grows.

Still, I hate discord. When I was growing up, I typically gave up the fight and agreed with my sister or mother so that a reconciliation could be reached. I can remember running to my "safe" spot under my father's overturned rowboat whenever anger ran loose in our house.

Too often these days I'm in the middle of that anger, and there's no safe spot. My first impulse is to make everyone sit down, be polite, and listen to each other, a great goal that I've come to realize doesn't happen easily. Topics like racism and homophobia are avoided in most classrooms, but they seethe like open wounds. When there is an opening for discussion, years of

anger and pain surface. But students haven't been taught how to talk with each other about these painful matters.

I can't say that I've found definitive answers, but as the year ended, I knew some of the mistakes I made. I also found a few constants: To become a community, students must learn to live in someone else's skin, understand the parallels of hurt, struggle, and joy across class and culture lines, and work for change. For that to happen, students need more than an upbeat, supportive teacher; they need a curriculum that teaches them how to empathize with others.

## Sharing Power and Passion

Before I could operate on that level, I had to find a way to connect with my students. Ironically, violence was the answer. This year none of the get-acquainted activities that I count on to build a sense of community worked in my fourth block class. Students didn't want to get up and interview each other. They didn't want to write about their names. They didn't want to be in the class, and they didn't want any jive-ass let's-get-to-know-each-other games or activities. Mostly, our 90-minute blocks were painfully long as I failed daily to elicit much response other than groans, sleep or anger. It's hard to build community when you feel like you're "hoisting elephants through mud" as my friend Carolyn says. I knew it was necessary to break through their apathy and uncover something that made these students care enough to talk, to read, to write, to share — even to get angry.

My fourth block class first semester was Senior English, a tracked class where most of the students were short on credits to graduate — as TJ said, "We're not even on the five year plan"

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— but long on humor and potential. They came in with their fists up and their chins cocked. They had attitudes. Many of them already had histories with each other.

To complicate matters, our year opened with a storm of violence in the city. The brother of a Jefferson student was shot and killed. Two girls were injured when random bullets were fired on a bus. A birthday party at a local restaurant was broken up when gunfire sprayed the side of the restaurant. So violence was on the students' minds. I learned that I couldn't ignore the toll the outside world was exacting on my students. Rather than pretending that I could close my door in the face of their mounting fears, I needed to use that information to reach them.

In the first days, the only activity that aroused interest was when they wrote about their history as English students — what they liked, what they hated, and what they wanted to learn this year. Many of these students skulked in the low track classes and they were angry — not against tracking, because they weren't aware that another kind of education might be possible, but against the way their time had been wasted on meaningless activity. "The teacher would put a word on the board and then make us see how many words we could make out of the letters. Now what does that prepare me for?" Larry asked. But they also hated reading novels and talking about them because novels "don't have anything to do with our lives." The other constant in many of their written responses was that they felt stupid.

For the first time, they got excited. I knew what they didn't want: worksheets, sentence combining, reading novels and discussing them, writing about "stuff we don't care about." But I didn't know what to teach them. I needed to engage them because they were loud, unruly, and out of control otherwise. But how? I decided to try the "raise the expectations" approach and use a curriculum I designed for my Contemporary Literature and Society class which receives college credit.

During those initial days of listening to these seniors and trying to read



KATHY SLOANE

In order to build community, teachers need to build on students' strengths.

the novel *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, by Ruthann Lum McCunn, I discovered that violence aroused my students. Students weren't thrilled with the book; in fact they weren't reading it. I'd plan a 90 minute lesson around the reading and dialogue journal they were supposed to be keeping, but only a few students were prepared. Most didn't even attempt to lie about the fact that they weren't reading and clearly weren't planning on it.

In an attempt to get them involved in the novel, I read aloud an evocative passage about the unemployed peasants sweeping through the Chinese country-

side pillaging, raping, and grabbing what was denied them through legal employment. Suddenly students saw their own lives reflected back at them through Chen whose anger at losing his job and ultimately his family led him to become an outlaw. Chen created a new family with this group of bandits. Students could relate: Chen was a gang member. I had stumbled on a way to interest my class. The violence created a contact point between the literature and the students' lives.

This connection, this reverberation across cultures, time and gender challenged the students' previous notion



Kids need to feel they belong.

that reading and talking about novels didn't have relevance for them. They could empathize with the Chinese but also explore those issues in their own lives.

This connection also created space to unpack the assumption that all gangs are bad. Chen wasn't born violent. He didn't start out robbing and killing. Lalu, the novel's main character, remembered him as a kind man who bought her candy. He changed after he lost his job and his family starved.

Similarly, kids in gangs don't start out violent or necessarily join gangs to "pack gats" and shoot it out in drive-bys. Because the tendency in most schools is to simultaneously deny and outlaw the existence of gangs, kids rarely talk critically about them.

A few years ago, scholar Mike Davis wrote an article analyzing the upsurge of gang activity in L.A. He found it linked to the loss of union wage jobs. I hadn't explored Portland's history to know whether our situation is similar to L.A.'s, but I suspected economic parallels. When I raised Davis's research, kids were skeptical. They saw other factors: the twin needs of safety and belonging.

Our discussion of gangs broke the barrier. Students began writing about

violence in their own lives and their neighborhoods. TJ explained his own brushes with violence:

"[T]he summer between my sophomore and junior years, some of my friends were getting involved in a new gang called the Irish Mob. ... My friends were becoming somebody, someone who was known wherever they went. The somebody who I wanted to be. ... During the next couple of weeks we were involved in six fights, two stab-bings, and one drive-by shooting. We got away on all nine cases. The next Saturday night my brother was shot in a drive-by. The shooters were caught the same night."

Kari wrote that she joined a gang when she was searching for family. Her father lost his job; her mother was forced to work two jobs to pay the rent. Kari assumed more responsibility at home: cooking dinner, putting younger brothers and sisters to bed, and cleaning. While at middle school, Kari joined the Crips. She said at first it was because she liked the "family" feel. They wore matching clothes. They shared a language and nicknames. In a neighborhood that had become increasingly violent, they offered her protection. She left the gang after middle school because she was uncomfortable with the violence.

Students were surprised to learn that Hua, a recent immigrant from Vietnam, was also worried about her brother who had joined a gang. Her classmates were forced to reevaluate their initial assessments of her. While she had seemed like an outsider, a foreigner, her story made a bond between them.

At first, I worried that inviting students to write about violence might glorify it. It didn't turn out that way. Students were generally adamant that they'd made poor choices when they were involved in violent activities. As TJ states in his essay, "I wanted to be known wherever I went. ... But I went about it all wrong and got mixed in. ... It was nothing I had hoped for. Sure I was known and all that, but for all the wrong reasons."

More often students shared their fears. Violence was erupting around them and they felt out of control. They

needed to share that fear.

Through the topic of violence I captured their interest, but I wanted them to critique the violence rather than just describe it. I had hoped to build a community of inquiry where we identified a common problem and worked to understand it by examining history and our lives. That didn't happen. It was still early in the year, and students were so absorbed in telling their stories and listening to others it was difficult to pull them far enough away to analyze the situation. I didn't have enough materials that went beyond accusations or sensationalism, but the topic itself also presented practical and ethical problems, especially around issues of safety and confidentiality.

I want to be clear: bringing student issues into the room does not mean giving up teaching the core ideas and skills of the class; it means I need to use the energy of their connections to drive us through the content.

For example, students still had to write a literary essay. But they could use their lives as well as Lalu's to illustrate their points. Students scrutinized their issues through the lens of a larger vision as James did when he compared the violence in his life to the violence in Lalu's:

"Lalu isn't a gang member, but some of the folks, or should I say, some of the enemies she came in contact with reminded me of my enemies. Bandits in the story represented the worst foes of my life. In some ways bandits and gangs are quite similar. One would be the reason for them turning to gang life. Neither of them had a choice. It was something forced upon them by either educational problems or financial difficulties. It could have been the fact that their families were corrupt or no love was shown. Whatever the reasons, it was a way of survival."

Finding the heartbeat of a class isn't always easy. I must know what's happening in the community and the lives of my students. If they're consumed by the violence in the neighborhood or the lack of money in their house, I'm more likely to succeed in teaching them if I intersect their preoccupation.

Building community means taking

into account the needs of the members of that community. I can sit students in a circle, play getting-to-know-each-other games until the cows come home, but if what I am teaching in the class holds no interest for the students, I'm just holding them hostage until the bell rings.

### A Curriculum of Empathy

As a critical teacher I encourage students to question everyday acts or ideas that they take for granted (see "Unlearning the Myths," p. 8 and "Standard English: Whose Standard?" p. 142). But I also teach them to enter the lives of characters in literature, history or real life whom they might dismiss or misunderstand. I don't want their first reaction to difference to be laughter or withdrawal. I try to teach them how to empathize with people whose circumstances might differ from theirs. Empathy is key in community building.

I choose literature that intentionally makes students look beyond their own world. In the class I teach with Bill Bigelow, we used an excerpt from Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror* about Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan. Bulosan wrote, "I am an exile in America." He described the treatment he received, good and bad. He wrote of being cheated out of wages at a fish cannery in Alaska, being refused housing because he was Filipino, being tarred and feathered and driven from town.

We asked students to respond to the reading by keeping a dialogue journal. Dirk, who is African-American, wrote, "He's not the only one who feels like an exile in America. Some of us who were born here feel that way too." As he continued reading, he was surprised that some of the acts of violence Bulosan encountered were similar to those endured by African Americans. In his essay on immigration, he chose to write about the parallels between Bulosan's life and the experiences he's encountered:

"When I was growing up I thought African Americans were the only ones who went through oppression. In the reading, 'In the Heart of Filipino

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America' I found that Filipinos had to go through a lot when coming to America. I can relate with the stuff they went through because my ancestors went through sort of the same thing."

Dirk went on to describe the parallels in housing discrimination, lynching, name calling, being cheated out of wages that both Filipinos and African Americans lived through.

Besides reading and studying about "others," we wanted students to come face to face with people they usually don't meet as a way of breaking down their preconceived ideas about people from other countries. For example, during this unit, we continued to hear students classify all Asians as "Chinese." In the halls, we heard students mimic the way Vietnamese students spoke. When writing about discrimination, another student confessed that she discriminated against the Mexican students at our school. Our students were paired with English-as-Second-Language students who had emigrated from another country — Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Eritrea, Mexico, Guatemala, Ghana. They interviewed their partner and wrote a profile of the student to share in class. Students were moved by their partners' stories. One student whose brother had been killed at the beginning of the year was paired with a student whose sister was killed fighting in Eritrea. He connected to her loss and was amazed at her strength. Others were appalled at how these students had been mistreated at *their* school. Many students later used the lives of their partners in their essays on

immigration.

Besides making immigration a contemporary rather than a historical topic, students heard the sorrow their fellow students felt at leaving "home." In our "curriculum of empathy," we forced our class to see these students as individuals rather than the ESL students or "Chinese" students, or an undifferentiated mass of Mexicans.

A curriculum of empathy puts students inside the lives of others. By writing, interior monologues (see "Promoting Social Imagination," p. 110), acting out improvisations, taking part in role plays (see "Role Plays: Show Don't Tell," p. 114), and creating fiction stories about historical events, students learn to develop understanding about people whose culture, race, gender or sexual orientation differs from theirs.

"Things changed for me this year," Wesley wrote in his end-of-the-year evaluation. "I started respecting my peers. My attitude has changed against homosexuals and whites." Similarly, Tyrelle wrote, "I learned a lot about my own culture as an African American but also about other people's cultures. I never knew Asians suffered. When we wrote from different characters in movies and stories I learned how it felt to be like them."

### Sharing Personal Stories

Building community begins when students get inside the lives of others in history, literature or down the hallway, but they also learn by exploring their own lives and coming to terms with the people they are "doing time" with in the classroom. Micere Mugo, a Kenyan poet, recently said, "Writing can be a lifeline, especially when your existence has been denied, especially when you have been left on the margins, especially when your life and process of growth have been subjected to attempts at strangulation." For many of our students their stories have been silenced in school. Their histories have been marginalized to make room for "important" people, their interests and worries passed over so I can teach Oregon history or *The Scarlet Letter*.

To develop empathy, students need

to learn about each others' lives as well as reflect on their own. When they hear personal stories, classmates become real instead of cardboard stereotypes: rich white girl, basketball-addicted black boy, brainy Asian. Once they've seen how people can hurt, once they've shared pain and laughter, they can't so easily treat people as objects to be kicked or beaten or called names. When students' lives are taken off the margins, they don't feel the same need to put someone else down.

Any reading or history lesson offers myriad opportunities for this kind of activity. I find points of conflict, struggle, change, or joy and create an assignment to write about a parallel time in their lives. We've had students write about times they've been forced to move, been discriminated against or discriminated against someone else, changed an attitude or action, worked for change, lost a valuable possession. Obviously, losing a treasured item does not compare to the Native Americans' loss of their land, but telling the story does give students a chance to empathize with the loss as well as share a piece of themselves with the class.

When I was a child, my mother took me to the pond in Sequoia Park on Sundays to feed the ducks. They'd come in a great wash of wings and waves while I broke the bread into pieces to throw to them. I loved to watch them gobble up the soggy loaf, but I began noticing how some ducks took more than others. In fact, some ducks were pushed to the side and pecked at. I've noticed the same thing happens in classrooms. Students find someone who they think is weak and attack them. In my fourth block class, the victim was Jim. He'd been in my class the year before. I'd watched him progress as a writer and thinker. In his end of the year evaluation, he drew a picture of himself as a chef; his writing was the dough. In an essay, he explained how writing was like making bread. He was proud of his achievements as a writer.

In both classes, Jim was a victim. He was going blind because of a hereditary disease. It didn't happen overnight, but he struggled with terror at his oncoming blindness. Because he was

steadily losing his eyesight, he was clumsy in the classroom. He couldn't see where he was going. He knocked into people and desks. He accidentally overturned piles of books. Students would respond with laughter or anger. Some days he cried silently into the fold of his arms. He told me, "I know the darkness is coming." Several male students in the class made fun of him for crying as well. One day, Amber was in a typically bad mood, hunched inside her too-big coat and snarling at anyone who came near. When Jim bumped her desk on the way to the pencil sharpener and her books and papers tumbled on the floor, she blew up at him for bumping around the room. Jim apologized profusely and retreated into his shell after her attack.

A few days later I gave an assignment for students to write about their ancestors, their people. First, they read Margaret Walker's poems, "For My People" and "Lineage" and others. I told them they could imagine their people as their immediate ancestors,

their race, their nationality or gender. Jim wrote:

### To My People With Retinitis Pigmentosa

*Sometimes I hate you  
like the disease  
I have been plagued with.  
I despise the "sight" of you  
seeing myself in your eyes.  
I see you as if it were you  
who intentionally  
damned me to darkness.  
I sometimes wish  
I was not your brother;  
that I could stop  
the setting of the sun  
and wash my hands of you forever  
and never look back  
except with pity,  
but I cannot.  
So I embrace you,  
the sun continues to set  
as I walk into darkness  
holding your hand.*



Building community is a year-long process.

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Students were silenced. Tears rolled. Kevin said, "Damn, man. That's hard." Amber apologized to Jim in front of the class. At the end of the year she told me that her encounter with Jim was one of the events that changed her. She learned to stop and think about why someone else might be doing what they're doing instead of immediately jumping to the conclusion that they were trying to annoy her.

My experience is that, given a chance, students will share amazing stories. Students have told me that my willingness to share stories about my life—my father's alcoholism, my family's lack of education, my poor test scores, and many others, opened the way for them to tell their stories. Students have written about rape, sexual abuse, divorce, drug and alcohol abuse. And through their sharing, they make openings to each other. Sometimes a small break. A crack. A passage from one world to the other. And these openings allow the class to become a community.

### Students as Activists

Community is also created when students struggle together to achieve a common goal. Sometimes the opportunity spontaneously arises out of the conditions or content of the class, school, or community. During Bill's and my first year teaching together, we exchanged the large student desks in our room with another teacher's smaller desks without consulting our students. We had forty students in the class, and not all of the big desks fit in the circle. They staged a "stand in" until we returned the original desks. One year our students responded to a negative article in a local newspaper by organizing a march and rally to "tell the truth about Jefferson to the press." During the Columbus quincentenary, my students organized a teach-in about Columbus for classes at Jefferson. Of course, these "spontaneous" uprisings only work if teachers are willing to give over class time for the students to organize, and if they've highlighted times when people in history resisted injustice, making it clear that solidarity and courage are val-

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ues to be prized in daily life, not just praised in the abstract and put on the shelf.

But most often I have to create situations for students to work outside of the classroom. I want them to connect ideas and action in tangible ways. Sometimes I do this by asking students to take what they have learned and create a project to teach at nearby elementary or middle schools. Students in Literature and U.S. History write children's books about Abolitionists, the Nez Perce, Chief Joseph, and others. After students critique the media (see "Unlearning The Myths That Bind Us," p. 8), they are usually upset by the negative messages children receive, so I have them write and illustrate books for elementary students. They brainstorm positive values they want children to receive, read traditional and contemporary children's books, critique the stories, and write their own. They develop lesson plans to go with their books. For example, before Bev read her book about John Brown she asked, "Has anyone here ever tried to change something you thought was wrong?" After students shared their experiences, she read her book. Students also created writing assignments to go with their books so they could model the writing process.

Students were nervous before their school visits. As they practiced lesson plans and received feedback from their peers, there was much laughter and anticipation. They mimicked "bad" students and asked improper questions that have nothing to do with the children's book: Is she your girlfriend? Why are your pants so baggy? Why does your hair look like that?

When they returned, there were stories to share: children who hugged their knees and begged them to come back;

kids who wouldn't settle down; kids who said they couldn't write. My students proudly read the writings that came out of "their" class. They responded thoughtfully to each student's paper.

James, a member of my English 12 class, was concerned by the number of young children who join gangs. He and several other young men wrote stories about gang violence and took them to our neighborhood elementary school. He strode into the class, wrote "gangs" in big letters on the board and sat down. The fifth grade class was riveted. He and his teaching mates read their stories and then talked with students about gangs. As James wrote after his visit:

"For a grown person to teach a kid is one thing. But for a teenager like myself to teach young ones is another. Kids are highly influenced by peers close to their age or a little older. I'm closer to their age, so they listen to me. ... Some of these kids that I chatted with had stories that they had been wanting to get off their chest for a long time. ... When I came to class with my adventures of being a gangster, that gave them an opportunity to open up. Spill guts. [No one] should object to me teaching these shorties about gang life, telling them that it's not all fun and games. It's straight do or die. Kill or be killed."

The seriousness with which the students understand their lives was in sharp contrast to the seeming apathy they displayed at the year's beginning. Through the year, I came to understand that the key to reaching my students and building community was helping students excavate and reflect on their personal experiences, connecting it to the world of language, literature, and society. We moved from ideas to action, perhaps the most elusive objective in any classroom.

Community and activism: these are the goals in every course I teach. The steps we take to reach them are not often in a straight path. We stagger, sidestep, stumble, and then rise to stride ahead again. □

*Linda Christensen teaches at Jefferson High School in Portland, Oregon and is a Rethinking Schools editorial associate.*

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