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“Be a Liberation Whatever”: Social Justice Literacy in a Living-Learning Community

Faith Kurtyka

Abstract: *This article describes an assessment of a living-learning community—part residence life, part community service, and part academics—to understand how students learn “social justice literacy.”*

Living-learning communities, on-campus communities where students live together and take classes together, have been shown to lead to higher grades, higher retention rates, and more positive perceptions of college (Voss). Ideally, a living-learning community can become “a twenty-four-hour-a-day setting for intellectual engagement” (Schoem, “Sustaining” 132). In addition to these positive academic outcomes, living-learning communities are particularly interesting to scholars with expanded perspectives on learning because they blur the boundaries of the educational institution and students’ daily lives to create a more holistic educational model. In effect, the classroom, residence hall, and the students’ service sites all become what Vajra M. Watson calls “sites for soulful learning,” because they are “both analytical and emotional; scientific and spiritual; theoretical and practical” (17).

In the Cortina Living-Learning Community (a.k.a “Cortina”) at Creighton University, students live together, do three to five hours of service in the Omaha community together, and engage in a weekly formation time as well as semi-annual retreats. With an emphasis on faith, service, and justice, students take general education classes together every semester throughout their freshman and sophomore year, with an opportunity to continue involvement in the program via leadership opportunities in their junior and senior year. Rebecca Dora Christensen studied a similarly themed residential learning community—the Michigan Community Scholars Program—on the campus of the University of Michigan and found that students who participated in the community better understood their own positionality in society, cared more about social justice issues, and were more likely to find ways to carry out concrete actions that furthered the goals of social justice. David Schoem’s study of the same community also found that “The agency and empowerment students feel about making a difference in the world is palpable” because individual students’ excitement gets translated into a “contagious collective energy” (“Relational” 92).

While Cortina shares many of the same goals of the Michigan Community Scholars Program, Cortina emphasizes faith and spirituality as a necessary component of social justice work. The following goals for students in Cortina, developed by a coalition of faculty and residence life staff who administer the program, demonstrate how Cortina seeks to create a holistic, social-justice oriented, embodied, spiritual, and communal learning experience, and helps students develop mutually beneficial and compassionate relationships with people who suffer injustices:

- Demonstrate awareness of local, national, and global social realities.

- Engage with and think critically about questions concerning the meaning of justice and causes of injustice.
- Reflect and act in the context of a faith that does justice.
- Grow in their understanding of what it means to live in community. (“Cortina Vision Statement”)

These goals are less reminiscent of the Bloom’s taxonomy goals we might typically apply to an academic course (e.g., “Students will be able to analyze...”) than reflective of an attempt to assimilate students into what James Paul Gee terms a “Discourse” of social justice. Gee defines “Discourses” as “ways of being in the world . . . forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (526). Gee situates his definition of “literacy” within this idea of a “Discourse”: becoming literate is the mastering of a Discourse. Applying Gee’s definition, Cortina is doing more than attempting to “teach social justice.” Rather, Cortina aims to cultivate a social justice literacy or “way of being in the world” via being in relationship with people facing oppression, being aware of social structures that give rise to inequality, and taking concrete actions motivated by one’s understanding of these injustices. Cortina does so through a living-learning structure that aims to integrate students’ life experience, academic learning, spirituality, community, and connection to the world outside the university.

The Cortina Community draws its spiritual identity from its namesake, Fr. Jon Cortina, SJ, a Jesuit priest and engineering professor at the Universidad Centroamericana El Salvador during the civil war in El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1989, six Jesuit priests in this community were killed because of their social justice teaching and activism during the war. While Fr. Cortina was traveling at the time, he continued the Jesuits’ mission at the university and globally. Central to the Cortina Community’s identity is the following quote from Fr. Cortina: “The main thing is to accompany people, and to be with them. And you [can] do liberation engineering, liberation theology, liberation . . . whatever. Just be with them. Accompany their struggle for life. And that’s it” (Doll). “Be a liberation whatever” appears on the group’s promotional materials and social media and seeps into the way students talk about the program, as my data below will demonstrate. Fr. Cortina’s emphasis on “being” aligns with Gee’s definition of a literacy, expanding our perspectives on learning based on the transmission of knowledge to include ways of being present to others. For Fr. Cortina, as it was for Gee, learning is not simply a transmission of knowledge, but a *way of being* in the world.

This way of being also encompasses a mindful, aware presence, what Fr. Cortina calls “accompany[ing] people.” Rather than trying to fix people or society’s problems as a function of a white-savior complex, the goal is awareness, presence, or mindfulness of the suffering of others in an unjust society. Paula Mathieu argues that “awareness” is “a necessary addition to the intellectual training we give to student writers and teachers of writing” because awareness fosters reflection, introspection, and the ability to observe one’s own thinking (15). Mindfulness is just as useful for writers and writing as it is for citizens engaged in social justice work.

If being a “liberation whatever” is the Discourse students must master, “social justice literacy” is the process of the mastery of this Discourse through a community, pro-

grams, and academics that work together. Having taught a composition class for Cortina for five years, I wanted to know the ways in which the program cultivated “social justice literacy” to help students become a “liberation whatever” and to what extent its hybrid nature—part academic, part service, and part residence life—enabled it to achieve its goals. I first describe how I used a grant from Creighton University’s Center for Undergraduate Research and Scholarship to train four undergraduates in conducting one-on-one interviews and coding and analyzing interview data. Drilling down into four emergent codes from this data, I demonstrate what students learned from such an encompassing program. The Cortina Community is certainly an idealistic model; however, it still offers important insights into how we might be able to foster social justice literacy in just the time we have with students in our classrooms, regardless of the specific university setting.

I came into contact with Cortina because I teach composition, and in 2013 the director of Cortina asked me to develop a composition course specifically for first-year students in the program. The goal of my course was to introduce students to the main tenets of Cortina and work in conjunction with the living-learning aspects of the program. After discussing my method of assessing the program, I discuss the actual assignments I used in my composition class as a way of dovetailing with what students were learning elsewhere in the program. I want to note that the assignments I offer here are not merely teaching tips or techniques. Parker Palmer writes that “to teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced” (90). By “the practice of the community of truth,” Parker means the various practices that a community engages in to find its truth, such as certain methods of gathering or analyzing data. These assignments are intended as a way to “make space” for the practices of being an engaged citizen acting upon social justice issues in a community.

Method and Methodology

I have been teaching first-year students in the Cortina program for five years, and so I wanted to know how all the different parts of the program were contributing to students’ learning social justice literacy, in particular what parts of the program were most meaningful to students. In the spring of 2017, I received a grant from my university’s Center for Undergraduate Research and Scholarship to train four undergraduate students (not in the Cortina program) to conduct storytelling interviews one-on-one with students in the program (see the interview questions in Appendix A).¹ After we received the interview transcripts, I worked with the undergraduate student researchers to develop a coding scheme using grounded methodology (see the full set of codes in Appendix B). We coded one half of one interview together, discussed our results, refined the coding scheme, and then each student coded one interview on their own using the Dedoose qualitative analysis software. I met with each student individually after their coding session to answer questions they had or review segments that they found confusing. I met with the whole group one last time to discuss which codes they believed

1. This research was made possible through a grant from the Creighton Center for Undergraduate Research and Scholarship. I am grateful for the research assistance of Isabelle Senechal, Carly Rademacher, Mariam Abiyou, and Garret Fox.

were most significant for our findings, and these are the selected codes I will elaborate on below:

- Characterizing Cortina—Speaker makes a generalization about what Cortina is like or what it does, including values, beliefs, or functioning of the group.
- Elevating Cortina—Speaker describes something special about Cortina that sets the group apart from other people or groups, typically expressing positivity and excitement.
- Attributing Something Good Happening to Cortina—Speaker attributes growth, change, or learning to their participation in Cortina, including gratitude for an experience. Speaker makes a claim about something that happened in Cortina (negative or positive) having a positive larger meaning.
- Challenging Cortina—Speaker questions or challenges a common practice of Cortina.

We selected these codes because they explain the meaning of Cortina to students, what makes Cortina special, what makes Cortina great, and how students think critically about the program.

“You Can’t Escape These People”: Learning the Social Side of Civic Engagement

University instructors sometimes struggle with the idealistic notion of community formation, which can feel forced in the brief span of a quarter or semester and inauthentic when compared to a city or neighborhood community. In “Classrooms as Communities: At What Cost?,” Roxanne Mountford writes, “In the classroom, students see themselves not as ‘joining’ a cause or group or community but rather as joining a coincidental grouping of individuals who are developing skills for future employment or self-interest” (306). In his review of the research on the concept of “community” in rhetoric and composition from 1980-2010, Paul Butler finds an imprecision in the use of the word “community,” and that scholarship on community has “tended to blur the distinction between classroom communities, discourse communities, and other communities beyond the classroom (e.g., sites of service learning)” (24).

Cortina’s learning community, however, seems to work precisely by uniting students around a passion for social justice issues and then blurring the lines between the usually distinct spaces of “classroom” and “service site” and “residence hall.” While we might typically think of a community in terms of commonality, in the segments coded “Characterizing Cortina,” students described Cortina as a space where they were challenged to encounter people different from themselves, both at their service sites and the students with whom they lived. One student noted the parallel between building relationships with people at the service sites and the challenge of living with people with different views: “[Cortina means] having had relationships with these service sites and with these people in Cortina that’s going to facilitate [making] new relationships with new communities and with new people. And learning to understand someone who’s—they have a completely different view on a subject than me.”

I was surprised when students talked about “disagreements” among the community members because my sense of the students who signed up for the program was that they were all oriented toward social justice and service, and in my opinion, left-leaning in their politics. The student interviews, however, demonstrated that there existed enough variation in students’ background experiences that students disagreed on the cause or root of many of the social justice issues they faced in their service sites: “I don’t think there’s a single person in Cortina who believes the same things about every issue. So, it’s kind of interesting to see where everybody’s coming from because a lot of the time people’s opinions are the same. They’re both like, ‘This is bad, but why is this bad?’ They are coming from two different places.”

These nuances in the beliefs of different community members spurred students to think about different explanations for causes of social injustices and how groups across the political spectrum account for large-scale issues like poverty or racism. Students also learned how to get along with people *because* they were in proximity: “Literally, you’re living next to these people. You can’t escape them. You’re forced to interact [with] them, which can be amazing, and can also be a big pain in the ass. I think the living part is you do life together. You go on those late-night Sonic runs. You cry about breakups together. You’re there for one another when tragedy happens at home.”

I characterize the learning here as more significant than just learning to get along with other people, which students could learn in many types of living environments. While students may learn from Cortina how to be an active citizen in traditional ways (by volunteering or voting), the community does a particularly good job with the *social* side of civic engagement via explicit and inexplicit community formation strategies. Cortina puts people in close enough proximity to each other with just enough disagreement that students learn to engage with each other civilly. As Nate Mickelson and Molly Makris write, civic engagement is often left out of outcomes for learning communities (LCs), but “structuring LCs around civic learning can enable students to develop academic skills while at the same time building new understanding of themselves as active citizens and potential change makers in larger communities.” Students learn to talk and to listen, they grapple with difficult issues as a group rather than isolating themselves with like-minded individuals, and they approach each other with humility and respect. As Palmer writes, “The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that *reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it*” (95). Rather than seeing community as a space, structure, or organization, students in Cortina get in touch with “reality” via a web of interpersonal relationships because “community is the essential form of reality, the matrix of all being” (Palmer 97).

One student says that Cortina allowed her the space to admit when she didn’t know something and the experience of learning about herself by learning about others:

Asking people what they believed about stuff and not being 100% confident in what I believed, and I kind of came [to college] with a need to kind of explore things. I knew I didn’t necessarily completely believe in the Christian faith, and being able to have discussions with people that are so firm in their faith, and have conversations with people who aren’t at all, or have no faith, or are Muslim, or are Buddhist, or are this or that, you really can then develop your own spirituality. You can develop your own opinions, and whether your

opinion changes to that of another, it's strengthened either by the fact that you learned a new truth, or you were corrected....[And] you can stay til 4:00 a.m. because your room is right down the hall.

Cortina, then, might provide a different kind of model for a community for scholars of rhetoric and composition. By creating spaces *in between* and *outside of* the prescribed spaces of classroom or residence hall or service site, Cortina offers opportunities for students to engage in not just the motions and actions but also the social relationships that characterize effective and meaningful civic engagement. This outcome parallels Christensen's finding that "dialogic conversations" in co-curricular spaces like residence halls influenced their acquisition of social justice outcomes (253). These moments of civic engagement happen at the group's weekly "formation time," where the group comes together to discuss social justice issues, or during the van ride on the way home from a service site visit, or at 4:00 a.m. in a residence hall. To return to the concept of "social justice literacy," then, students in Cortina learn diverse ways of approaching social justice issues and learn to form their own opinions in dialogue and in listening to others.

Cortina's model fulfills several important tenets of community formation. In daily life in the residence hall, in classes, and in their service groups, students move through several small groups that contribute to the larger good of the community. Peter Block writes that to create a true "structure of belonging" that encapsulates individual's gifts and talents for the betterment of the whole, communities need "citizen-to-citizen engagement that constantly focuses on the well-being of the whole" (178). This one-on-one contact ideally happens in the context of small groups which are more effective than larger groups in valuing individuals' unique qualities. Block believes that small groups are "the unit of transformation" for a community because "small groups produce power when diversity of thinking and dissent are given space, commitments are made without barter, and the gifts of each person and our community are acknowledged and valued" (180). The smaller relationships that occur in Cortina, informally in the residence hall and formally in the service groups, become the units of transformation that allow individual students to be themselves while bearing in mind the social justice aims of the larger group, allowing for dissent and individuality within the larger community. Schoem notes the same phenomenon happening in the Michigan Community Scholars Program: "ongoing informal discussions of issues related to the program's mission and classes take place day and night" ("Relational" 92), creating a "unique 24/7 living dialogic community" (93).

To practice civic engagement in my composition class for Cortina students, we take a field trip to the Benson neighborhood, an up-and-coming diverse neighborhood to the north of downtown Omaha. Though a booming area in the 1950s and 1960s, Benson fell into disrepair in the 1970s and 1980s, with an increase in empty storefronts and run-down bars. In the last decade, and particularly the last five years, however, Benson has experienced a resurgence with a growth in restaurants, bars, shopping, and coffee shops. Over the course of one class period, we travel to Benson, and in groups of three to four, students complete the following assignment:

Benson Neighborhood Assignment

Complete one per group

Instructions:

1. Select one space in this neighborhood to map—it could be the inside of a business, an outdoor space, or a full block of houses or businesses. You're free to narrow or expand the map as much as you want, but the area should be something you can sketch a map of in about 30 minutes and should have at least one person you can talk to who is using the space.
2. You must talk with *at least one stranger* who uses this space and ask them 3-5 questions about how they and/or other people use the space.
3. Observe the space for 10 minutes or so. In the space below, sketch a map of what you believe to be the more important features of the area to the people who use it. Make notes on the map about notable features of the space.
4. Based on your limited time in this space . . .
 - How does this community use this space?
 - What does this map show about the community?
 - How accurately does this map represent/reflect the community?
 - How does this map represent the community's identity (or not)?

The goal of this assignment is to teach students a brief and non-intimidating form of civic engagement. They learn that you can't learn everything about a space just by googling or looking up Yelp reviews; you have to actually talk to people and visit places in person. Talking to members of the Benson community, like people walking their dogs or small business owners, helps students to practice the social side of civic engagement, as they listen to people talk about the way they define their space. Such conversations have led students to think about the forces of gentrification, the importance of local businesses, and the benefits of community organizing. They learn how to thin-slice a community to understand its values, the way one might have to make a quick judgment of a new neighborhood, workplace, or potential future in-laws. I emphasize that the goal is not to make snap judgements, but to work with the data available to make a tentative assessment of a community's situation.

“It's Kind of Like an Always Instead of Just a Sometimes”: A Consistent Thread of Social Justice Through Students' Daily Lives

As a faculty member, I'm often struck by the disjointedness of students' daily lives: at 8 a.m. they are biologists in lab, at 10 a.m. they are swiping IDs at the rec center, at noon they are lunching with their sorority sisters, and at 3 p.m. they are rhetorically analyzing podcasts. This discontinuity is emphasized even more deeply when students work more jobs, live off-campus, or have families and other responsibilities. Such “institutional disconnects,” as Julia Voss terms them, can be detrimental because many campus spaces may have similar goals and could benefit from “communication and coordination.” As Palmer writes, “True community in any context requires a transcendent third thing that holds both me and thee accountable to something beyond ourselves” (117). In the

segments coded “elevating Cortina,” students discussed what they thought set Cortina apart or made it special; notably, these segments showed that Cortina created *continuity* or *fluidity* among the disparate aspects of everyday student life, what Palmer might identify as the “transcendent third thing.” As one student says:

In Cortina you go home and you are around people who think [about social justice issues] instead of just when you go to service. It’s kind of like an always instead of just a sometimes. . . . It’s more than just, service [once per week] or a service trip for one week. It’s a year where you’re doing service, reflecting on that. Learning new things about the world but you’re also living with people who are going through the same thing.

While we can and should think about our classrooms as places where we can create continuities between students’ everyday lives, living-learning communities provide spaces that we can use as a model for such integration. This coordination is a central mission of Jesuit Catholic higher education. Students “seek to resolve the feeling of disconnect in their lives. We need to develop appropriate processes that will facilitate the kind of intellectual, ethical, social, and religious integration that Jesuit and Catholic education has long espoused” (Society of Jesus 184). This integration is similar to Erin Penner Gallegos’s concept of the “literacy landscape.” Using the spatial metaphor of the “landscape,” Gallegos offers the term “literacy landscape” as a means of considering how students’ “lived literacy experiences—as well as their social, historical, economic, and cultural identities” can be incorporated with their academic identities, ideally so that “the classroom becomes contiguous with other places of comfort and becomes a place where students feel invited and authorized to speak.” By creating a holistic space that continually links reflection on and practice of social justice, students become “authorized to speak” and act in the different social justice literacy landscapes of the university and their community.

I was surprised at how many students said that their most meaningful experiences in Cortina were not the classes, the group activities, or the service, but instead were individual conversations they had with others, often conducted in residence halls or during “late-night Sonic runs.” In fact, I doubt that students would even identify these experiences as “learning.” Cortina creates these meaningful learning experiences by pulling a thread of social justice through students’ daily life experiences. One student described it articulately as a “blanket”: “I feel like [Cortina is] just a blanket that comes around social justice and says, ‘We’re not just learning. We’re having these discussions in community. We’re having these discussions in class but we’re reflecting on our own experience. And then we’re putting that into action.’”

Cortina provides what Kris Gutiérrez and Joanne Larson call “expansive learning,” a concept coined by Yrjö Engeström to refer to learning that takes place in informal, non-school settings. In these settings, “the knowledge and skills people acquire have a *highly positive social value because they are bound to practices and valued relationships with people in teaching roles*. And because learning is not the primary reason people participate in their everyday practices, *learning is continuous with experiences encountered in everyday life*” (Gutiérrez and Larson 70). This learning emerges from organic experiences, where people are trying to be a part of a community and have a genuine desire to learn the

practices of that community. By offering students space to reflect both interpersonally and socially as well as communally and collectively, Cortina knits together the disparate threads that fray as students move through the spaces of their lives. Students' informal conversations are not to be dismissed but must be seen as examples of "expansive learning" that create continuities between students' learning experiences that thus lead to social justice literacy. These conversations form the connective tissue among the learning experiences of a living-learning community.

Gutiérrez and Larson stress that it's important to not just co-opt students' everyday literacy practices into the classroom, and it's important to me to not force students to have an "informal" conversation. I do, however, want to teach them that informal ways of communicating matter deeply and are worthy of analysis. In the assignment below, which comes at the beginning of the semester, we look at the specific practice of "code-switching" as a means of exploring the hidden values behind everyday conversation. Students read "How Code Switching Explains the World" (Demby), "Five Reasons Why People Code-Switch" (Thompson), and the NPR blog called "Code Switch" to understand some of the background of code switching.

Code-Switching Analysis

In this assignment, you'll examine the way you code-switch between two communities to understand how language connects to these communities' practices, beliefs, and norms. Below are the parts of this assignment, though you should choose an organization that makes sense for you:

1. Explain the most important characteristics of the two communities to which you belong.
2. Offer 2-3 different specific examples of how you code-switch between these two communities. When I say "specific," I mean that I want you to tell specific stories about how your language changes in these two different communities.
3. Analyze what the language use says about the *values* of these two different communities.
4. Analyze the effect of this code-switching on you. What does it say about your identity?

Reading and writing about code switching enables students to articulate the power dynamics of different social situations—an essential part of social justice literacy—and how their Discourses change in social situations. By drawing attention to this dynamic of everyday life, students learn to be attentive to their informal conversations and learn a new tool for understanding these conversations.

"I Don't Fix the Problems": Learning Humility in Service in Cortina

Many students come to Creighton and to Cortina with a background in doing service in high school; for some students, it's the *reason* they come to the university. Creighton conducts service trips on fall break and spring break throughout the US and has an entire center dedicated to service and justice. Residence halls, student organizations,

and fraternities and sororities are also committed to service groups and projects. Cortina, however, seems successful at getting students to question the purpose and motive behind their service by encouraging them to see the big-picture social justice issues that play into their service sites. In the segments labeled “Attributing Something Good Happening to Cortina,” students talked about the feelings of community and openness described above, but also attributed a newfound humility about service to their experiences in Cortina. Rather than checking off a box or padding a resume with service, students learn in Cortina that being present to people in their service sites is the most important “action” they can take. One student, “Angela,” says: “One of the things that motivates me the most is I am a perfectionist and I like to fix things. I like to fix people’s problems . . . but I also know I can’t. . . I know I’m not going to be the one to do anything. I’m just hopefully getting us on track towards that so somebody else can.”

While we often talk about helping students “find their voice” and “taking action,” social justice literacy also encompasses a humble acceptance of one’s own positionality and limitations in the context of issues that cannot be solved with weekly service site visits. Angela, quoted above, is frank with her interviewer about these limitations. Once a week on Thursdays, Angela and another student meet students on campus and drive them down to the local homeless shelter where the students share a meal with the residents at the house, most of whom are experiencing homelessness as well as struggling with drug and alcohol issues.

Interviewer: Do you find yourself, in your times on Thursdays, do you think that you are meeting a need?

Angela: No.

Interviewer: No?

Angela: No. I’m doing nothing.

Interviewer: What do you—

Angela: You look shocked.

Interviewer: Yeah, what do you mean by that?

Angela: I’m not doing anything for anybody. I’m not meeting a need. The only need I think there is, and I don’t know if I’m fulfilling it or not, I guess you can ask some of those guys. . . For me, those are my friends. Those are the guys I go and see every week. I think there is a need to be heard, but I don’t know if I’m fulfilling that. I’m not going to say I am. I’ll say no before anything because for me, I’m just there. I’m listening to the story and I’m not benefiting anybody else.

Significantly, many students noted that this view of service is a *departure* from their service experiences in high school, which were largely about racking up as many service hours as possible for their college applications. What is it about Cortina that allows for learning this type of humility and perspective? The regular service in Cortina combined with opportunities to reflect on their role in that service while learning about larger social inequalities seemed beneficial in understanding their position as “helper” or “server.” Reflection, of course, is a best practice of service-learning pedagogy, allowing

student “to make connections between their academic knowledge and skills and real-world situations,” and as a best practice of service learning, reflection “should take place throughout the service-learning process” (Hanover Research 17). As James Dubinsky writes, “Creating reflection assignments that help students see the bridge they build as they participate in the social activity created through service learning enables them to ponder and evaluate their experience, consider its value, and transform it into knowledge they will use later as writers and citizens” (310).

Reflection, however, is well-tread territory, particularly at my Jesuit university. I believe Cortina demonstrates the outcomes of effective reflection, leading to social justice literacy, which encompasses an understanding of one’s strengths and limitations in a service capacity and understanding the evolution of this identity as one’s motivations for service change. For one student, “Harriet,” becoming social-justice literate means realizing her expectations in a service setting and narrativizing a service experience in a way that makes sense of her new role in a service setting. As Harriet describes her service experience:

I went to the Boys and Girls Club and each week, well I remember the first week I came in, I was like, “Okay, I gotta play with kids. I have to get in there and do this.” Well, I noticed after like the first four weeks I started just watching TV with this kid every time. I remember looking around going, “I’m not serving. I’m watching TV. What am I doing?” And I can’t remember who I had this conversation with. I told them, “I really don’t feel like I’m doing service.” And they said, “Harriet, have you ever just thought like the fact that you’re sitting there with the kid and letting him tell you about the show and having a discussion with him about it, have you ever thought about just your presence there and listening to him? Ever thought of that being a service, of that meaning something to someone?” I was like, “I never thought of it like that. I thought service was really getting in there and doing something. But the smallest actions of service and love can just mean so much to someone. But yeah, every week. I’d walk over and he’d be like, “Let’s watch it again!” “Okay!”

Harriet displays here a critical shift in her definition of service from “doing service” to “the smallest actions of service and love” and, more specifically, “presence” and “listening.” Part of Harriet’s social justice literacy is a stance of humility as well as what Kendall Leon et al. call an “embodied awareness” (48). In the context of service learning, this means that one is aware of one’s relations to others in space. Likely, Harriet’s previous service experience involved “doing” and “action” and her embodied awareness in the context of service and social justice literacy involves being at peace with the presence of her body in the physical space of another person.

Successful reflection in Cortina is also characterized by a healthy criticality. Suzanne Kesler Rumsey and Tanja Nihiser write of their frustrated attempts to find any publications about “failed” service learning projects because publications about service learning amount to a “plethora of overly-positive published experiences” (147). Rather than ignoring the missteps of service learning, they argue that mistakes and problems are an inherent part of the learning process: “[Service learning] expects things to go wrong. And it assumes that when things do go wrong, which will indeed happen, learning is

still possible. Moreover, the learning that all participants gain – students, community participants, and faculty alike – is the sort of learning that service learning continually purports: experiential, hands on, “real life” learning” (147). To theorize the process of failures in service learning, Rumsey and Nihiser articulate “a continuum of what we’re calling *expectation, reality, and rectification*” (136). Both students and community partners have sets of expectations for how service learning will go, but encountering the reality of collaboration and communication across boundaries of school and community challenges them to “find equilibrium” between their expectations and reality to “rectify” the partnership (136).

To acknowledge the messiness of service learning, I want to read the segments labeled “Attributing Something Good Happening to Cortina” alongside the segments labeled “Challenging Cortina” to see how students move through this process in the context of Cortina. In addition to humility and embodied awareness, the “Challenging Cortina” segments show how part of social justice literacy is a critique of systems and structures of privilege, not just those that affect underserved populations in service sites, but also those that affect anyone in daily life.

One student, “Mark” became frustrated with “top-down” decision making in the Cortina community:

I would say I have frustrations sometimes about the decisions that they make and the fact that the rest of the program necessarily doesn’t get a voice. We kind of get told that things are happening. Especially, not all of the time, but sometimes some of the people are very disconnected because they don’t have a service site that they lead. They are just in that position so some of the decisions they make are disconnected from where the freshman and sophomores are in the program. Whereas, I feel like, often times I’m more plugged in than they are.

Mark does not specifically connect the injustice of the Cortina leaders not listening to the voices of the rest of the students to the inequalities he sees at the service sites, but the critique remains. Mark’s critique is also a part of social justice literacy: students learn to see injustices not just in prescribed locations but in their daily lives. Cortina enables this literacy by setting up circumstances where students can clearly see injustices at work and incorporating reflection that also allows them to see injustices existing in other spaces they move through, including the community itself.

For their final assignment in my class, students create a scripted, researched argument with a partner about a social justice issue to ultimately turn into a podcast.

Podcast Assignment

Now that you have become more aware of the way that words have power and the way that spaces make arguments, it’s time to use your own words to make your own argument. In this unit, you’ll work with a partner to create an argumentative podcast to be posted to Cortina’s SoundCloud. Your podcast should bring attention to an issue that people don’t know a lot about and should, in some way, be related to social jus-

tice. Consider Creighton students your audience. You may even select a topic related to Creighton and campus life

Your podcast will be a *scripted argument* between you and your partner. Your script should be written in a conversational style that is an “argument” between you and your partner. You and your partner arguing back and forth about this issue should make your audience more informed about the issue.

- Your podcast should be 8-10 minutes. This means your script will probably be around 5-7 pages, depending on how slow or fast you speak.
- Each person needs to find and use *at least two scholarly sources* to support their side of the argument. Any other sources are up to you.

This assignment combines the power of everyday conversation, civic engagement, research, and identifying and deconstructing a social justice issue. Rather than fearing argument, students are encouraged to dive in and engage in a researched argument with the goal of making their audience smarter. We use as examples the podcasts “Left Right Center” and “Intelligence Squared” as examples of researched arguments. They learn to identify and articulate a wide variety of social justice issues, including those that occur on our campus.

A Comprehensive Picture of Social Justice Literacy

Cortina offers opportunities for students to engage in not just the motions and actions but also the social relationships that characterize meaningful civic engagement, preparing them to be active and engaged citizens encountering people with whom they disagree. One fruit of these social relationships is informal, everyday conversations which help them see connections between the different aspects of their lives and social justice issues. Being social-justice literate means engaging in these informal conversations but also, through reflection and embodied awareness, being aware of one’s own positionality when in a service situation. Social justice literacy also encompasses an awareness that injustices are not limited to what occurs at service sites but that power differentials exist everywhere in daily life.

From Cortina, we see the importance of encouraging students to relate social justice issues to events on campus or in the news, using “everyday conversation” as connective tissue between social justice issues. Students should be encouraged to reflect specifically on their physicality and implications of their body in the space of a service site, neighborhood, or other community space and how they relate to others in the space. Coming from a high school environment, especially one that emphasized attending college, students may see service more as resume-building than thinking about the complex relationships with those whom they serve. Reflecting on their past conceptions of and experience with service will help them form a more nuanced and authentic view of what it means to serve others as an adult and a community citizen. To become a “liberation whatever,” students should be asked to look at the world through a social-justice lens to identify a variety of injustices in their everyday lives.

Appendix A—Interview Questions

5. How did you first get involved in Cortina?
6. What appealed to you most about the community?
7. Tell me about specific moments in your time in Cortina that were meaningful to you.
8. What does being in a living-learning community mean to you?
9. Tell me about moments of personal growth in Cortina for you.
10. Have you held a leadership position in Cortina? What was that like?
11. What have been some of your frustrations with Cortina?
12. How would you describe what it means to be a member of Cortina?
13. What is your vision for the future of Cortina?

Appendix B—Codes

Mark as a segment pieces of data where the speaker is responding to “What kind of a place/thing is Cortina?” Throughout the codes, “Cortina” refers to both the people and the program.

Reminiscing about Cortina

- Speaker expresses a positive opinion about a past time in Cortina, which could be nostalgic or romantic
- Speaker wishes something were true that is no longer true about Cortina

Elevating Cortina

- Speaker describes something special about Cortina that sets the group apart from other people or groups, typically expressing positivity and excitement

Attributing Something Good Happening to Cortina

- Speaker attributes growth, change, or learning to their participation in Cortina, including gratitude for an experience
- Speaker makes a claim about something that happened in Cortina (negative or positive) having a positive larger meaning

Characterizing Cortina

- Speaker makes a generalization about what Cortina is like or what it does, including values, beliefs, or functioning of the group

Explaining Cortina

- Speaker offers factual (non-debatable) information about what Cortina is or does or something that happened in Cortina

Challenging Cortina

- Speaker questions or challenges a practice of Cortina

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