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“Contagious Co-Motion”: Student Voices on Being Change Agents

Vicki L. Reitenauer, Tetiana Korzun,
Kimberly Lane, and Melinda Joy Roberts

Abstract

Designed in response to students’ requests for a capstone where they could form their own individual partnerships in the communities of their choosing, Effective Change Agent offers a structure for community-based learning that allows for high levels of student choice-making and agency. In this article, the authors describe the course; connect it to literature on grassroots change-making, integrative learning, and service-learning; and, through the inclusion of student authors, allow the sharing of insights in the students’ own voices.

From the earliest days of the capstone program at Portland State University (PSU), a trickle of students would find its way to the program director’s office to ask how they could work with their own community partner as part of their capstone. Some students wanted to parlay longstanding volunteer connections into their capstone, while others had new partnerships in mind that they wanted to pursue. The director would explain that capstones are courses, not independent study opportunities, and that each course came with a pre-selected community partner and a project furthering the mission of that community partner already in place. The director would acknowledge each student’s commitment to working for positive change in their community of choice and encourage the student to continue that engagement, while assisting the student to find a capstone course that would be a fit for their interests.

After several years of fielding these requests, the program director had an idea: She would recruit and support a faculty member to propose a course that would allow students to form their own partnerships and complete projects connected to those partnerships while participating in a course populated with other students doing the same. Collectively, the students would investigate theories and perspectives on change-making, drawing on their individual experiences as places of knowledge-making, and would collaborate on a class-wide project. In this way, the Effective Change Agent capstone was created.

In this article, a longtime capstone faculty member contextualizes Effective Change Agent within other capstone course offerings, offers information about the structure and approach of the course, and reviews relevant literature (including a text used within the course) associated with both the content and the import of this course. Then, three students from Effective Change Agent share about the challenges, the joys, and the takeaways from their experiences in the course. The faculty member then returns with concluding thoughts.

The Effective Change Agent Capstone

Offered each term since 2005, the Effective Change Agent capstone currently carries this course description:

This course is for students interested in being effective change agents for the public good. Students are given the opportunity to create meaningful relationships with a specific community organization/partner of their choice and work towards effecting positive change within their working environment. Students are supported and challenged to develop skills in building relationships and coordinating action grounded in evidence and deep personal understanding. Through volunteering, class discussions, practices, reading, and self-observations, students explore the meaning of their work and the impact on both themselves and their community. Service opportunities are structured to promote a sense of civic and social responsibility, provide exposure to diverse populations, implement effective communication practices, instill critical thinking skills, and present an opportunity to apply classroom learning with real world activities. (Petzold 2015)

During class sessions, students co-create the collective learning experience through completing presentations which address the underlying social context and meaning of their chosen work with their community partners, the histories and missions of their agencies, their community partners' multiple stakeholders, and the impact of their service on those stakeholders, including themselves (Petzold 2015). Students also contribute their own blog and photos to a course website (<http://ecapdx.weebly.com/>) that has operated since early 2014 and serves to connect students of the course (and other interested visitors to the site) over space and time. Students working in small multidisciplinary groups also develop collaborative presentations in which they connect their growing expertise in community engagement with the university's general education goals (communication, critical thinking, appreciation of the diversity of the human experience, and social and ethical responsibility). The class-wide project requires students to work in multidisciplinary teams to complete a final product that is beneficial for capstone students to produce and useful for the community to receive (as with all capstone courses). Class projects in Effective Change Agent have included the establishing of a computer lab and lending library at an agency providing support to persons experiencing homelessness, creating a community garden at an elementary school and community center, and making critical improvements to a toy room at a program that serves children undergoing chemotherapy.

Relevant Literature

A variety of texts are incorporated into the Effective Change Agent capstone, including the book *Walk Out Walk On* by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze (2011). In this book, the authors provide case studies of seven communities around the world in which community members have “walked out” of oppressive ideological perspectives rooted in structural inequities and “walked on” to new ways of relating to the challenges within their communities in order to transform them (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 4).

Chapter titles suggest to the reader what sorts of perspective shifts Wheatley and Frieze will ask the reader to make: “From Scaling Up to Scaling Across,” for instance, invites the reader into the community of Unitierra, Mexico, and considerations of how small changes become large ones. For example, the authors focus attention on the Red Autónoma para la Soberanía Alimentaria (RASA or, in English, the Autonomous Network for Food Sovereignty), whose members collaborated in the invention of a bicycle-powered water pump that is helping to irrigate rooftop gardens throughout the region (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 26). The growing of food apart from mass-marketed production chains allows community members to practice food sovereignty as they plant, grow, and then eat what they choose to, rather than what is made available to them through sources beyond their sphere of influence. In keeping with the spirit of the invention, the spread of the water pump occurs through curiosity and shared interest, rather than through force. As the authors say,

What RASA is up to is *co-motion* rather than *promotion*: spreading ideas through contagion rather than pushing people in a particular direction. Co-motion is walking at the pace of the other, rather than at whatever pace you want to go. It is a horizontal movement that begins with being rooted in your own purpose and place, and then connects with others who are rooted in theirs. There is no monolithic approach to this work, there is no centralization of power, there is no ownership of ideas. Instead, the network is engaged in continuous creation and re-creation, in self-discovery, and in adaptation. (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 26)

This description of RASA’s philosophy aligns with the approach of the Effective Change Agent capstone. While students in the course may be serving with organizations that represent a wide variety of ideological and organizational perspectives on change-making, within the community of the class there is a decided emphasis on “co-motion” and the sort of “contagion” it can engender.

In order to participate in this sort of contagious co-motion, students must enter a course either with a sense of self-efficacy already intact or with opportunities within a course to build it. The authors of *The Learner-Centered Curriculum* assert that “most difficult to recognize and perhaps the most powerful belief that affects learning is the student’s belief in his or her ability, or self-efficacy” (Cullen, Harris, and Hill 2012, 16). While some students certainly enter Effective Change Agent as seasoned, self-identified, and self-aware leaders, many others must discover their capacities for leadership through fresh experiences offered by the class on multiple levels (i.e., within the communities from which they come, the communities in which they serve, and the learning community created within the course) and through reflection on those experiences. The authors of this book note the importance of reflective practices in the learning process by referring to the work of Jerome Bruner (1996) and Donald Schön (1983) and quoting their commenter David Scott (2008), asserting the primacy of a curriculum that is “an interactive process of assimilation, with the capacity of the human agent to reflect on what they receive from their environment and in the process change it” (Cullen, Harris, and Hill 2012, 70; Scott 2008, 115). In the view of these

authors, curricula composed of “community-building strategies, sharing power with students to develop learner autonomy, and ongoing assessment to monitor growth and to make learning an intentional activity” are best positioned to further students’ integrative learning and position them for their future endeavors (Cullen, Harris, and Hill 2012, 62).

In the service-learning literature, Theresa Ling Yeh presented results from a qualitative study that examined the service-learning experiences of six low-income, first-generation students and asserted that service-learning empowered these students to “develop self-efficacy and autonomy by providing opportunities to engage in self-defined and self-directed projects” (Yeh 2010, 59). For instance, some students reported that their service-learning experiences “enhanced their knowledge and learning in the classroom, enabled them to further develop academic skills, and linked them to new educational opportunities” (Yeh 2010, 55). Others said that “their service-learning experiences helped to bring their academic studies ‘to life’ by enabling them to personalize theories and concepts” (Yeh 2010, 55). Many of the students described how their service-learning experiences helped them to learn about themselves, their values, and their motivations, namely through the acts of engagement and reflection on engagement, and served as a turning point in their education (Yeh 2010, 55-56). Yeh contends that the service-learning courses the students completed may well have contributed to their persistence in college (2010, 50).

Students Reflect on Effective Change Agent

In the following sections, three students from the Effective Change Agent capstone lend their voices to this conversation. In analyzing and reflecting on their service experiences, these students share how they entered Effective Change Agent from within specific communities, how they came to recognize new opportunities for their community-based efforts at making change, and how they emerged from those experiences at course’s end.

As a framing device for their work, we have selected principles of effective change-making from *Walk Out Walk On* as the titles of their sections. First, biology and Russian language major Tetiana Korzun’s experience tutoring students in the Russian language immersion program at Lane Middle School speaks quite literally to Wheatley and Frieze’s assertion that successful change-makers “start anywhere and follow it everywhere” (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 220). Next, Kimberly Lane, a child and family studies major, addresses how operating from a sense that “we have what we need” (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 221), “working with what is present, instead of what’s absent” (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 92), and walking out of “a problem-based approach...and...on to a place-based approach to problems” (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, p. 94) allows us to experience abundance in both material resources and in human connection. Finally, health science and community health education major Melinda Roberts shows us that “the leaders we need are already here” (Wheatley and Frieze 2011, 222)—and not only here, but are each and every one of us.

Start Anywhere, Follow It Everywhere: Tetiana Korzun and Lane Middle School

My learning journey started in June 2006, when my family arrived in Maryland from Ukraine, and continued as we made our way to Portland in 2012. My six years of working closely with Baltimore's Slavic community always reminded me about my roots and made me feel closer to home despite the difficulties and obstacles I faced. The Slavic immigrants I met after I moved to Portland exposed all the pitfalls of living far away from my native land. Here in Portland, I clearly saw how Russian and Ukrainian immigrants and their children were and are progressively losing connections with their roots. The large and old Slavic community of Ukrainian, Russian, Romanian, and Belorussian refugees and immigrants in the Northwest was struggling to maintain its bicultural identity as it forgot its language and traditions. Parents, having come to the United States as refugees, usually didn't speak English. Working in jobs requiring hard labor, and having few skills to communicate with the larger community, they became secluded in small Russian native-speaking enclaves, literally isolated from the outside world.

With so much of their own communication made through translators, lawyers, and other language-related service providers, parents pushed their children to be receptive to the English-speaking environment. In turn, I witnessed children, ashamed by their parents' illiteracy in English, becoming even more separated from their families. While children became better English speakers at school and enjoyed a greater sense of being open to the world (compared to parents that stayed in the closed communities), their children's lives at home suffered a lot. As their communication with parents lessened, their emotional connections and the intimacy that comes from those connections often got lost. Based on my experience and observations, it seemed that the first immigrant generation struggles to adjust to everything new and the second generation fights to forget the past.

Having started there—as a Ukrainian immigrant to the United States curious about how those in the Slavic community navigate change across the generations—I started volunteering as a tutor in the PSU Russian Flagship Program, a four-year undergraduate program that permits students to receive a certificate of advanced proficiency in the Russian language while completing a degree in any other discipline. There I met many students who were considered Russian heritage speakers, but who, in fact, had poorer language skills than American students who had just started learning Russian.

When I became aware of the possibilities to pursue my own community partnership in the Effective Change Agent capstone, I developed a project in conjunction with Portland Public Schools and, specifically, Lane Middle School, which offers students a dual-language program in Russian and English. Ethnically diverse Lane Middle School is an educational home for 40% white, 25% Latino, 17% Asian, 10% African American, and 5% Native American students, with roughly 80% eligible for free or reduced lunch. The school, serving a large number of historically underserved students

and immigrants from the states of the former Soviet Union, already has two classes of sixth- and seventh-grade students participating in Russian immersion, making it a perfect setting for my project.

In my role at Lane, I worked on school projects that prioritize learning about Slavic culture and language, as well as strategic long-term planning focused on the expansion of the Russian immersion program and its integration with the Russian Flagship at PSU. On a daily basis, I created presentations and assignments, helped with homework, and set up group and individual mentoring projects to encourage students to stay in the immersion program and continue further education. In particular, the “Think College” mentoring project exposed students to diverse perspectives and experiences on the pursuit of higher education, enhancing their confidence to navigate their futures.

Toward the end of the school year, I worked with students on a class project dedicated to the seventieth anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War. Students were asked to interview members of their families and community and to collect unique war stories and photographs, which were then featured in a poster exhibition and presented in class. About three-quarters of the students interviewed their own elderly family members who had experienced wartime. These students shared how they had researched and developed projects that centered on personal family histories, rather than just presenting dull memorized facts from a history book. These presentations of the stories from the past heard by today’s young people tightened family connections and built new bridges across existing communication gaps.

Volunteering at Lane was exciting and rewarding, but there were serious obstacles to overcome. One of them, the clash of Russian and American cultures, raised questions about the diminishing of one culture while protecting another. This challenging tension showed me that multiculturalism and its opposite, assimilation, both have their own cultural costs. Secondly, the immersion program, while having positive effects on the Russian-speaking community by ensuring successful and sustainable development of bilingual students, was also a site of conflict involving both culture and religion, as public education came up against Orthodox Christianity. A large majority of students’ parents, who had been religious refugees in the United States, tended to be representatives of the more closed-off community revolving around the church, and they expressed concerns about the teaching of ancient world history and culture, including Greek and Roman mythology. These issues required an enormous amount of debate and discussion with parents and adaptations to the curriculum, and they have left many unanswered questions for me, questions that I will pursue as my studies and my community engagement continue.

My capstone experience didn’t stop with getting a grade in the class. From where I stand at this moment, I see the opportunities of further engagement with Portland Public Schools’ immersion program, which offers immersion education in Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish, in addition to Russian. As PSU has majors in each of these languages, I intend to pursue the facilitation of further partnerships between PSU

language undergraduate students and Portland Public Schools. I'm not exactly sure where that facilitation will lead, but I'm prepared to "follow it anywhere."

We Have What We Need: Kimberly Lane & The Confederated Tribes of Siletz, The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and the communities of people experiencing homelessness in West Salem, Oregon

I never knew I would become a social worker. I never knew I would become a domestic violence and sexual assault victim advocate. I never pictured myself standing in front of groups of people armed with PowerPoints full of statistics and my own powerful perspectives.

I started this journey with big ideas and feelings about oppression. Over the years I have grown closer to my own identification as a Siletz tribal member and that really ignited my desire to be an agent of social justice education. I originally expected to volunteer with a Portland-based organization like Dignity Village, a self-determined community of persons experiencing homelessness. But then my partner Alex and I moved to West Salem, a suburb in northwest Salem, Oregon, and immediately began experiencing implicit segregation via explicit classism, racism, and ableism. As we settled into our new community, we witnessed several instances of social injustice, identified the effects of gentrification, and encountered xenophobia.

I brought those experiences with me into my capstone, where I chose to focus on tribal communities, communities of people experiencing homelessness and displacement, and communities experiencing gentrification and the resulting forms of oppression through the displacement and segregation caused by gentrification. The organizations I began my work with were my own tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz; the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde; and the community residents and people experiencing homelessness residing in West Salem.

I started out meaning only to volunteer at these organizations. By the end of the capstone, my relationship to the Confederated Tribes of Siletz had changed from volunteer to contracted employee. My internship at the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde resulted in an expansion in the projects and issues I addressed, including the prevention of domestic and sexual violence and the support of Two Spirit persons. And my endeavor to start a community garden in West Salem along the Willamette River at Wallace Marine Park resulted in developing not only a garden, but also a food pantry and community board within my own apartment complex to gain support and build alliances in my continued effort to provide people with access to healthy food. Through the remainder of this reflection, I will focus on the food pantry, but information about my other projects is accessible through our course website (<http://ecapdx.weebly.com/community-gardens-and-food-shares-domestic-violence-and-sexual-assault-prevention-program-two-spirit-support-group.html>).

Alex and I have been those people who could not afford real food at certain points in our lives. At the time, we felt ostracized by community gardens in our area because they were religiously affiliated and we were not. We felt like we shouldn't have to exchange our identities as non-spiritual people in order to obtain access to a community-based resource. Also, it felt like charity to have to ask to join a garden rather than being invited. We believed that many of the people in West Salem also felt this way, and it turns out we were right.

Alex and I have no money. But we had lots of seeds and a bunch of corkboards lying around. So we put up a community message board and a sign jotted sloppily on white copy paper in permanent marker that read "Food Pantry: Take and Leave Food." We left some canned and boxed foods we had lying around in a storage bin. It didn't look like much, but it was all we had. But within an hour there were about fifty pounds of donated food overflowing the storage bin. Within another hour most of the food was gone, along with our bins. (Lesson learned: Make a sign about the bins *not* being up for grabs!)

As I reflect on the meaning this course has had for me, I realize that what really drew me to it in the first place was the aspect of self-determination. I have always felt like volunteering was a great cause, but that doing it for short stints and letting others do the heavy work of identifying problems, problem-solving, and instigating change wasn't true community action. Taking on an injustice can feel intimidating and make working toward effective change seem impossible. This class allows students to try this out on their own while having grounded weekly support. Hearing other people discuss their projects and causes was inspiring. I think we can often feel very alone in our causes and being a part of a group really combated those feelings.

This experience allowed me to initiate several agendas within my own communities and to push for expansion within organizations I was already affiliated with. In this work, I was inspired to address not one but several issues in communities where members of target identities—indigenous, economically disadvantaged, Two Spirit—encounter oppression, identify the source of the structural inequality, and formulate a plan to enact change and incite awareness around these issues. Taking on a task of this magnitude was scary for me, as it meant having to be self-disciplined in my time management, trust in my education and intellect, and interact with professionals as their equal.

At the end of our course we were asked what metaphor comes to mind in relation to being an agent of change. I couldn't think of an inspiring or creative metaphor. I couldn't really think of a metaphor at all. What I *did* think of is what it feels like to be a genuine and true citizen. At times I felt like the Queen of Red Tape, and other times I felt like a workhorse. Mostly, though, I felt things changing. My outlook on life was changing. My partner and I were becoming just that—true partners—in every sense of the word. Other people were starting to listen, share, and reach out, and we practiced listening, sharing, and reaching out, too.

Having gone through this capstone and having the chance to initiate projects as I went along gave me a real sense of what it means not only to be an agent of change, but to be someone who works from their own moral center to effect that change. It is hard to move on from this class. A grouch by nature, I will genuinely miss what came to feel like a center of mutual support for so many good causes, so many examples of effecting positive change in our world.

The Leaders We Need Are Already Here: Melinda Roberts and the Portland State University Student Alliance for Ending Rape

A leader is just a fancy title for someone who isn't satisfied with the status quo and refuses to be defined by it.

In a way we're all trying to change "what is" to what we think "should be." Who am I to change society? I believe Desmond Tutu put it best when he said, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (Brown 1984, 19). To me, choosing not to act is tacit approval of society's inequities. Through the Effective Change Agent capstone, I expanded my role as a leader on campus to further develop the skills I need to be an effective health educator, community organizer, and ongoing agent of change, particularly around issues related to sexual violence.

A cisgender biracial woman of Native American heritage, I grew up poor and spent time in foster care. I am a first-generation college student who independently took on the decision—as well as the debt—to pursue my education. As a feminist, I am committed to asking different questions in the work to end sexual assault: that is, how can we stop perpetrators from victimizing others, rather than blaming the victim and assuming it's a victim's job not to be assaulted.

For my capstone project, with the help of my community organization and pulling from my education as a health promoter and my role as a senator within student government, I developed a campus sexual assault prevention toolkit for student advocates and campus leaders. This toolkit reflects my experience as a student organizer to highlight specific issues surrounding prevention efforts and the need for policy reform. In the course of doing this work, I had countless conversations with individuals from all walks of life, and I met hundreds of survivors who told me about their experiences and the barriers they had faced as survivors, allowing themselves to be vulnerable in the hopes of preventing sexual violence from happening to someone else. Hundreds participated in our campus events, signing cards and petitions, offering words of support, pushing for cultural competency training around sexual assault services, and participating in the review of PSU's sexual assault policy and the drafting of new recommendations.

The sense of common cause I experienced within our class meetings led to incalculable benefits to my sense of well-being. It begins with a committed instructor who takes genuine interest in students' individual projects, someone who can encourage people to participate in conversations and can teach how to facilitate those

conversations in the field. Students need a sense of ownership, but they also need to feel the support of an instructor who is actively involved. The feedback, evaluation, and mentorship professors impart are extraordinarily beneficial; to be effective change agents, we need instructors who can help us process a diversity of topics and perspectives and develop the capacity to act.

Ground rules are critical. If the class doesn't have them, it's impossible for individuals to hold each other accountable, and that makes it harder to remain interested and invested. In every possible way it is important to maintain an atmosphere of learning while not tolerating hate. Respect, understanding, and forgiveness go a long way to creating an atmosphere where we can explore concepts openly, without fear of reprisal, while also challenging oppressive views.

In hindsight, I realize that in a lot of ways I was already a leader long before I thought of myself as one. I had started out my college career as a seemingly ordinary student who refused to accept the dominant culture's support for domination and sexual violence. As I became more aware of the dynamics of interpersonal violence, I became more passionate about protecting my rights and the rights of those around me. We are all part of the human community, and, while injustice threatens us all, justice benefits just as many.

As a result of working on this project, I learned about my capacity to empower myself and deepened my sense of self-determination. It's easy to feel like one in an ocean of many and to allow that thought to dissuade us from attempting to change; in working on this project, however, I've seen actual success and that has positively affected my self-esteem. I gotten really good feedback from friends I developed along the way and felt supported by, as I supported the issue and them in return.

At the same time, within the community, I've developed real connections with survivors, public officials, teachers, administrators, other student activists, and community organizations—a truly diverse set of stakeholders and individuals. These connections will benefit me, but, equally importantly, these connections make up a network that will continue to build and strengthen a community-based response to sexual violence, with or without me.

Conclusion

The Effective Change Agent capstone constitutes a place where grassroots change-making; personal, academic, and professional skill-building; and integrative learning meet. As our authors attest, the investment made by students in course settings where their actions have consequences—not only to each of them individually, but to their learning communities, as well as to the larger communities to which they belong and which they serve—yields powerful dividends in many ways. For individual students, dynamic learning occurs at many points of intersection: in the integration of past experience with present forms of engagement and with future aspirations; in the recognition of the many teachers and forms of instruction offered by both the

community and the academy; and in the encounter between one's own desire to make positive change and the recognition of the leadership skills that have been waiting to be put to use all along. For learning communities, courses like this serve as containers for both action and reflection, and as real-time examples of how the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For the communities lived in and served by our students, the Effective Change Agent course centers a vibrant experiment in "walking out and walking on" that makes real differences in our individual and communal lives.

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Tetiana Korzun grew up in Cherkasy, Ukraine, and graduated from Cherkasy Lyceum of Humanities and Law. At Portland State University, Tetiana double majors in biology and Russian language with a chemistry minor and serves on the faculty of the department of World Languages and Literature as a peer-to-peer volunteer tutor. She also volunteers at PeaceHealth Hospital Emergency Department, serves as a research and academic volunteer at Oregon Health and Science University in the Northwest Clinic of Voice and Swallowing, studies the cognitive neuroscience of second language acquisition and bilingualism, and builds relationships and working connections within the Slavic community.

Kimberly Lane now works as a domestic and sexual violence advocate for the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. She and her fiancé Alex continue to keep in contact with the West Salem Apartments complex.

Melinda Joy Roberts is originally from the southern Oregon coast. She graduated from Portland State University in 2015 with degrees in health science and community health education in the College of Urban & Public Affairs' School of Community Health. As an engaged student on campus, she held two leadership positions: the first as the administrative liaison for the PSU Student Alliance for Ending Rape, and the second as a senator with Associated Students of Portland State University.

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