Rashné R. Jehangir challenges her students and herself to engage with tough issues like class, race, gender, disability, and homophobia. How does she help them learn from, and even embrace, the conflict that inevitably arises? Read on to find out.

By Rashné R. Jehangir

Conflict as a Catalyst for Learning

IT IS THAT INEVITABLE TIME IN THE SEMESTER when I walk into the classroom and become aware that today the honeymoon period will come to an end and a time of disagreement and challenge will ensue. In my classroom, this shift usually occurs around the third or fourth week of the semester, just as we begin discussing racism. As the semester progresses, this negotiated disequilibrium has peaks and valleys that deeply shape the nature of our learning together. I refer to this as "negotiated disequilibrium" because I have come to value conflict as a catalyst for heightened engagement and deeper learning when the teacher and students work together to create a safe place for meaningful engagement with ideas.

I have engaged with this theme of conflict as a teacher and a researcher mostly in the context of multicultural learning communities, but I find that I am applying what I have learned in those settings to all of my classroom contexts. Oscar Lenning and Larry Ebbers note that every classroom is a "learning community," particularly when we can create space for "reflection, responsibility, relationship and respect" (p. 29), which are essential to engaged conflict. But how do we do this? It is messy work, but there are ways to intentionally foster what Parker Palmer so eloquently describes as the ability to "hold tension in life giving ways" (p. 3). How do we accomplish this? What are some ways to scaffold, nurture, and capitalize on the inevitable conflicts that come out of asking difficult questions in the classroom? This is the story I want to share here.

My primary context for this work has been in teaching within a Multicultural Learning Community (MLC) with two other faculty members between fall 2001 and spring 2007. These communities included three classes that required concurrent registration by a cohort of first-generation college students and allowed faculty to design a curriculum that was integrated around the themes of identity, community, and agency.

While learning communities are defined in many ways, they can, by way of design and structure, invite students to see how different disciplines and lived experiences offer alternate and complementary views of the world. One useful definition of essential components of learning communities offered by Faith Gablenick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith suggests that they are:

> a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses—or actually restructure the material entirely—so that students have

Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com).
© 2012 by American College Personnel Association and Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
DOI: 10.1002/abc.21073

While learning communities are defined in many ways, they can, by way of design and structure, invite students to see how different disciplines and lived experiences offer alternate and complementary views of the world.

opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and have more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise. (p. 19)

In our learning community, we focused on the social, cultural, and cognitive bridges that enabled students to see the intersections of their lived experiences and higher education. These intersections were designed to allow our students to support and challenge each other in their learning, to apply diverse theories of multiculturalism to their lived experiences, to examine relationships among various mediums of expression and ways of knowing, and to find their own voices as agents of social change. Each instructor took a different approach to teaching. In my Multicultural Relations course, students worked within a seminar format and in small groups to examine issues of class, race, gender, disability, and homophobia in America. In Professor Pat Bruch's Writing Lab, students helped each other strengthen their abilities to participate in and reflect upon the processes of academic writing and to understand how their writing locates them in relation with others. In Professor Pat James's Creativity Art Lab, students collaborated in the creation of a final project, either a performance or a mural that expressed the themes of identity, community, and agency. This intentional linkage of courses from different disciplines allowed students to connect multicultural perspectives and their narratives, along with collaborative instruction.

In addition to these intentional linkages, my research focused on capturing and examining the *processes* by which this Multicultural Learning Community might impact students' learning experience during their first year of college. Students were asked to complete weekly writing assignments that asked for reflection on their experiences in the learning community. This reflective writing has been a central source of data for my research. A central theme that emerged from this research is *conflict as catalyst*.

Rashné R. Jehangir is a faculty member in the department of postsecondary teaching and learning at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development. Her teaching and scholarship is focused on learning communities, critical pedagogy, access to college, and self-authorship of first-generation low-income students, and includes her new book: *Higher Education and First-Generation Students: Cultivating Community, Voice and Place for the New Majority*.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Jean M. Henscheid (aboutcampus@pdx.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.

Conflict as Catalyst

THE TERM *LEARNING COMMUNITY* might suggest that the experiences involve consensus, agreement, and perhaps even some level of group-think. We've all seen the glossy brochures with photographs of students in the grass talking and laughing together as the instructor looks on with a gratified grin. As it turns out, though, community is somewhat elusive; it does not just happen, and even when it does, developing into an engaged community involves conflict, compromise, and the capacity to really listen to one another. In my analysis of students' experiences in the MLC, this struggle took on many shapes and was the concept that most consistently appeared across dimensions of identity, community, and agency.

Grappling with disequilibrium, both cognitive and affective, has been addressed in depth in the work of Marcia Baxter Magolda, Jane Pizzolato, and Vasti Torres and Ebelia Hernandez, whose research has demonstrated that "provocative situations" that create discomfort are essential catalysts to shifting one's understanding of self and others. In my 2010 book and an article coauthored with Rhiannon Williams and Judith Jeske, I argue that the nature of the struggle often involves a push-and-pull process as students struggle with new concepts or challenging social issues at a cognitive level, while they also experience them affectively, either internally or externally.

With regard to identity, students most often expressed a sense of personal conflict or dissonance as they worked to define their sense of self. Part of this conflict was expressed in the ways that students faced the question "Who am I?" The feelings of conflict were different for each student, depending upon their level of enculturation or acculturation in this college community. Shani, an African immigrant, described what she felt as she tried to engage in the process of *becoming* herself:

> Throughout this semester I learned that I don't exactly completely know myself—and this is okay. I'm constantly changing my views, I'm learning new things, and I'm trying to make sense of everything that's going on around me. I surprised myself a lot this semester. I always felt that I had a perfect image of what kind of person I was, and now I realize that I can do this only to an extent, but I've also got to open up a little and explore my horizons. I can't always have set rules in my head and expect everything to follow through according to certain personal beliefs I have.

Anna Ortiz argues that enculturation occurs when a student's academic experience provides an opportunity to become more engaged with the history of his or her own cultural group. Simultaneously, acculturation is the process of attitudinal or behavioral change that occurs when people of multiple cultural groups are put in close contact with one another. Depending on their own identity development, students in the MLC were going through both enculturation and acculturation at varying times. This intersection between identity and adjustment resulted in intersections and points of separation that were both empowering and challenging.

Jennifer, an Asian American, expressed her perception of this struggle in light of communication with peers. She wrote:

> You could feel lots of tension in the room when people started sharing their opinions and views with the others. There was tension there because sometimes one person won't agree with another. I could also feel fear. There were people who were afraid in the room. Those who were afraid of one another.

For another student, Janet (an African American), this push to engage with peers and to recognize differences served to reinforce her sense of self-identity. She began to understand that disagreement and conflict are part of the learning process.

> I really liked how X wasn't afraid to disagree with someone if she felt differently about a certain subject. I also found that you [the instructor] did the same thing and it gave me the push I needed to be myself. It enabled me to see that we are all part of this class and it's ok if we disagree on things. That's what makes it a discussion and that's what makes us a community . . . our differences.

With regard to community, conflict was expressed first in the ways that students struggled to create a consensus about what it meant to be a *learning* community and how to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other. Given their different perspectives and levels of academic maturity, topics like racism and homophobia resulted in group conflict. After a particularly heated discussion on the nature of racism, an African American male student named Davu wrote:

> People were being hardheaded and it made me mad that people were not willing to show what we had learned. They would not get off the idea of race or skin color for many class days and we could not move anywhere. We would try to keep moving, but find ourselves back to that same place the next day. I think that people's true self started to come out in that time and that it destroyed the whole idea of what it means to be in a small learning community, working together.

With regard to identity, students most often expressed a sense of personal conflict or dissonance as they worked to define their sense of self. Part of this conflict was expressed in the ways that students faced the question "Who am I?"

While the process of reexamining self was a challenge, most students commented on how the disequilibrium they experienced allowed them to question themselves and create a more clearly defined and deeper sense of self.

Another topic of dissension was homophobia. After a rather animated debate on gay rights, Jenny, a biracial student, wrote:

> I was really disappointed that my classmates believe there is a difference between violence against Black people and violence against gays. Overall I was glad that we discussed about it but at the same time I was disappointed by some people and their close mindedness. They were so quick to comment about racism and discrimination but when it came to this topic they were being hypocrites.

Even though the conflict was neither pleasant nor easy, as is clear from the comments above, it did appear to have a central role in moving students closer to understanding self, others, and issues of social change. With regard to identity, while the process of reexamining self was a challenge, most students commented on how the disequilibrium they experienced allowed them to question themselves and create a more clearly defined and deeper sense of self.

Diane, a Hmong American, wrote about finding a more confident sense of academic identity:

> As I understand more and more I've built a comfort level. I could see this comfort level was slowly making me feel it was okay to contribute to class discussions more and more. That has always been a problem and fear of mine. I was slowly overcoming it. My fear of saying the wrong things has led me nowhere. My curiosity just grows when I don't know about something. I was too dependent on others to learn. I would always wait because I knew if I waited someone would ask a question similar to what I wanted to ask or discuss about. Slowly I was trying to pull myself out of that mode and speak for myself. I still think I need to work on it but now I'm aware of why I do it. I was another step ahead of myself.

Beverly Tatum's research on identity development in multicultural courses demonstrates that multicultural curriculum and process-oriented teaching does not necessarily push students through all the stages of identity development, but it does bring them closer to understanding who they are.

Working through the conflict within a learning community pushed students to grapple with what it means to learn in collaboration with others and how to use the strengths rather than the weaknesses of the community in the process. From an affective perspective, conflict encouraged students to learn to use their voices to express their needs and frustrations, but also to find ways to work collaboratively with others despite disagreement. The early establishment of ground rules, several community-building exercises, and required group assessments and check-ins are important conduits to arriving at new learning through conflict. From a cognitive perspective, students learned to become more comfortable with dissent, disagreement, and inclusion of multiple perspectives in their learning.

John, a white student, reflects this engagement in the process of conflict:

> This week's discussions were huge! I felt VERY engaged in with what was happening, especially when we were talking about Jefferson. It was heated, on the edge of your seat action. Half of the class was getting mad, some bored, and some were really into the discussion on why he did not even free his own slaves. I thought it was really interesting because none of us ever knew him in person, and we can't really know how he thinks, we can only infer. So it was crazy to see everybody defend what they "think" Jefferson was doing when in reality, none of us know, and never really will, all we have is little clues.

Referring to the phenomenon of "constructive controversy," David Johnson, Roger Johnson, and Karl Smith argue that helping students use conflict as

Working through the conflict within a learning community pushed students to grapple with what it means to learn in collaboration with others and how to use the strengths rather than the weaknesses of the community in the process.

a tool for learning puts them in the driver's seat and increases curiosity, critical thinking, and the ability to examine complex problems creatively. Students in the MLC repeatedly mentioned how disagreements played a positive role in their learning, once they became accustomed to engaging in a trusting, respectful discourse with peers.

Nekisha's (an African American) comments reflect the way conflict enhanced her thinking and learning:

> I remember sitting in class thinking: "Damn this is boring, who cares about this @#$%?" Now I think about how interested I was when we actually had classroom discussion and everyone participated and had something to say. What really made things interesting was when someone would have a difference of opinion with another person. It showed the true passion that each person had behind that specific issue, and I learned to appreciate those differences. I've also learned that even though someone is speaking on an issue, and being heard, doesn't mean that you need to agree with them. Disagreements are where the interesting debates come in anyway.

Clearly seeing conflict as a catalyst for learning has both negative and positive aspects. The challenges of the negative aspects, such as strained group dynamics, could have outweighed the positive impacts, had they not been managed and facilitated first by the faculty and then by a collective sense of ownership of students in the learning community.

Harnessing the Power of Conflict as a Catalyst for Learning

CONSTRUCTIVE MANAGEMENT OF CLASSROOM CONFLICT begins with creating a cooperative learning environment that allows for the building of trusting relationships and the differentiation between disagreeing with an idea and disliking the individual who holds that idea. Certainly establishing ground rules and revisiting these ground rules periodically during the term makes for a more authentic sense of community. Creating ground rules collectively at the beginning of the semester set the stage for how we would engage with each other. Rather than a large group discussion, students first worked in groups to reflect on both negative and positive experiences they had had working with others. We then spent time examining these narratives before arriving at a collective set of statements that could guide our community. One component of this exercise is to draw students' attention to seemingly contradictory goals and invite students to discuss this further: for example, "How do unity and leadership survive together?" In a learning community, ideally all instructors could be present for this exercise and perhaps even interject to facilitate the discussion in ways that demonstrate to students that each instructor brings a different vantage point to their work together.

Another means of checking on group expectations and norms is to do a short course evaluation during the fourth week of the term. The evaluation I use is a series of open-ended questions that invites students to comment on my teaching, their participation, and their experience with their peers. The results are summarized and shared with the class for a discussion that often reveals misperceptions or, better yet, highlights how much students value engagement with their peers. In a learning community format, this evaluation can reveal the extent to which curricular and social integration is thriving and where there are gaps that can be bridged to make connections across the courses more explicit or meaningful to students.

Using conflict creatively also requires that we openly acknowledge that conflict exists and that it is valued. Students often confuse a cooperative learning community environment with one that is conflict-free. Dispelling this myth at the outset and creating opportunities for simulated conflict via role playing or case studies can serve as important building blocks to stu-

dents' understanding of conflict as critical and useful to their learning.

Creating opportunities for managed debate where students work in groups and are required to contest the point of view of other groups is a useful means of scaffolding the merit of alternate points of view. In the learning community format, it is also particularly useful for instructors to consider how exercises in each of their classes impact each other and how the outcome of particular disagreements in one course might provide an impetus or restrain discussion in other classes.

Another means of drawing on the strength of conflict in the classroom in relation to students' learning is to create multiple opportunities and formats for reflection on this dissonance. This can be in the form of journals, one-minute papers, or, as in the case of our learning community, creative projects like a photo montage, a digital story, or a performance. Thilia, a Chicana student, described the value of having the time and alternate medium to reflect on some of her conflicts of identity in this way:

> I think that there are some connections between the two classes in the way that we get to learn about other people in our class and we can also learn about the way we are and the way we feel and think in the art class. The photo-montages have showed me parts of me that I had never seen and in some way those photo montages lift a burden off my back little by little.

Students need time to think about disequilibrium in order to create space for new realizations in ways that "winner takes all" debates do not. A curriculum that reflects students' lived experiences or encourages them to intentionally find application between their lives and material studied in class also provides a richer context for students to build meaning from the conflict they may be experiencing. In the quote that follows, a Vietnamese-American student, Long, describes how the dilemmas of a central character in a short story allowed him to normalize his own identity and name and understand the discomfort he felt about being a relative outsider in his own community.

> The story about the girl that was mixed with many different cultures felt a lot like me. I may be Vietnamese, but I don't speak Vietnamese that well, so people don't think I'm a full blooded Vietnamese person sometimes.

Finally, students are at different levels of emotional maturity and identity development. These variations, coupled with a blend of personalities, can sometimes lead to conflict that is unproductive and negatively impacts the class as a whole. Talk with students about this reality when they are developing ground rules. Share concrete and specific examples of how verbal and nonverbal behavior can impact creative conflict.

Conclusion

THE ROLE OF CONFLICT AS A CATALYST in learning raises important questions for pedagogy and practice in learning communities and all classrooms. In an article about his work on the book and PBS documentary entitled *Declining by Degrees,* John Merrow writes that one theme he has seen in higher education is that "many instructors and students have arrived at an equivalent of a non-aggression pact—Don't ask for too much of my time because I have research to do and I won't ask much of you but will see that you still get a decent grade" (p. 10). While some of us may bristle at this, others might acknowledge that it holds some truth, especially given professional pressures, such as publication for tenure at major research universities. One response is to look to our teaching for new scholarship and to find ways to engage leaders at research universities in a renewed examination of the value of the scholarship of teaching. As Min-Zhan Lu puts it, "we need to gather more oppositional and alternative accounts from a new generation of students who can

Constructive management of classroom conflict begins with creating a cooperative learning environment that allows for the building of trusting relationships and the differentiation between disagreeing with an idea and disliking the individual who holds that idea.

Creating opportunities for managed debate where students work in groups and are required to contest the point of view of other groups is a useful means of scaffolding the merit of alternate points of view.

speak about the successes and challenges of classrooms which recognize the positive uses of conflict and struggle" (p. 910).

Notes

Baxter Magolda, M. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Gablenick, F., MacGregor, J., Matthews, R. S., & Smith, B. L. (Eds.). (1990). *Learning communities: Creating connections among students, faculty and disciplines*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

James, P., Bruch, P., & Jehangir, R. (2006). Ideas in practice: Building bridges in a multicultural learning community. *Journal of Developmental Education, 29*(3), 10–18.

Jehangir, R. (2010). *Higher education and first-generation students: Cultivating community, voice and place for the new majority*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jehangir, R., Williams, R., & Jeske, J. (in press). The influence of multicultural learning communities on the intrapersonal development of first-generation college students. *Journal of College Student Development*.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2000). Constructive controversy. *Change, 32*(1), 28–37.

Lenning, O. T., & Ebbers, L. H. (1999). *The powerful potential of learning communities: Improving education for the future*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

Lu, M. Z. (1992). Conflict and struggle: The enemies or preconditions of basic writing. *College English, 54*, 887–913.

Merrow, J. (2006). My college education. *Change, 38*(3), 9–15.

Ortiz, A. M. (2000). Expressing cultural identity in the learning community: Opportunities and challenges. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 82*, 67–79.

Palmer, P. (2011). Higher education and habits of the heart: Restoring democracy's infrastructure. *Journal of College and Character, 12,* 3. doi:10.2202/1940-1639.1823

Pizzolato, J. E. (2003). Developing self-authorship: Exploring the experiences of high-risk college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*, 797–812.

Tatum, B. (1996). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity development theory in the classroom. In C. Turner, M. Garcia, A. Nora, & L. Réndon (Eds.), *Racial & ethnic diversity in higher education* (pp. 150–169). Needham Heights, MA: Simon and Schuster.

Torres, V., & Hernandez, E. (2007). The influence of ethnic identity on self-authorship: A longitudinal study of Latino/a college students. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*, 558–574.