

**CARIBBEAN CREATIVITY IN THE NORTH AMERICAN CLASSROOM:
DEPLOYING DIFFERENCE AND INGENUITY FOR COMMUNITY-ENGAGED
PEDAGOGY**

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***Abstract:** Since Fall 2013, students enrolled in Corporate Communication courses at Clayton State University have learned about public relations and advertising through community-engaged learning. Working in a mock student agency, formulated, named and administrated by the students, this experience brings real-world clients into the classroom. Each semester, clients include non-profit organizations or community start-ups, whose communication goals require astute strategic thinking and some technological competence. Through autoethnographic investigation, this paper describes how one professor's professional background in Caribbean advertising and public relations is brought to the benefit of North American students faced with these challenges. The analysis asserts that students benefit specifically and tangibly from the cultural flows from Trinidad and Tobago expressed through facets of personal, professional and academic experiences. While perspectives imported from the Caribbean persuasion industries help guide students in their development of grassroots campaigns, the more profound pedagogical value of this cultural interrelationship includes the adaptation of sophisticated communication strategies, appreciation of diversity within the experience, and the manifestation of an interdisciplinary and transformative experience for both students and community partners.*

***Keywords:** Caribbean, pedagogy, creativity.*

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Context: Caribbean Culture and Ambiguation

The flow of cultural and intellectual influence from the Caribbean to North America has been documented extensively, through the analysis of such artefacts and phenomena as food, music and entertainment, including Caribbean Carnival celebrations, from Caribana

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in Toronto to the Labor Day Parade in Brooklyn, and Miami Carnival. In the introduction to her book *Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones*, Carol Boyce Davies (2013) considers the complexity of these flows by examining the diversity of artefacts that make up the spaces of Caribbean diaspora. This diaspora includes locations that are identified “re-creations of Caribbean communities following migration” (p. 2). Simply put, Caribbean people migrate and take their culture with them. These communities become influential sub-cultures and forces of cultural influence in their host communities. Boyce Davies also sets forth with the project of moving “between explorations of Caribbean culture in a variety of locations (spaces) to a larger imagined geographical Caribbean space...” in which she embraces the Caribbean diaspora as an imagined whole, disparate in locations, but unified by movement of people and culture among the component locations within the diaspora (p. 6). Boyce Davies also attempts “a move between the autobiographical and the conceptual, the experiential and the theoretical, in order to disrupt the logic of exclusionary academic discourse that often denies the personal” (p. 6). This denial of the personal and individualized flows of culture effectively truncates our understanding of Caribbean spaces to consideration of “sizable demographic shifts in the population” (p.1), thereby overlooking important consideration of more particularized and individual flows of culture. This article seeks to examine these more individual flows of Caribbean culture by considering the particular flows through academic discourse and influence.

Much less has been written about the flow of culture through the migration of scholars from the Caribbean to North America, despite the existence of notable examples of the calibre of Caribbean intellect that has been represented in classrooms in the United States alone. In a section devoted to “Caribbean Intellectual Space”, Boyce Davies points to work that “allows us to study the Caribbean on its own terms and from our best thinking”, including the work of Martinican Frantz Fanon, George Lamming from Barbados, V.S. Naipaul, Eric Williams and C.L.R. James from Trinidad, Marcus Garvey from Jamaica, and Antonio Benitez-Rojo from Cuba (pp. 8-9). Also immeasurable are the far-reaching and profound impacts of these interactions, as knowledge is passed from Caribbean professor to North American student. In the broad realm of the Arts alone, Caribbean intellect and creativity are represented by Nobel Prize-winning poet and playwright Derek Walcott, who was Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the University of Alberta, and who then taught at Boston University from 1981 until he retired in 2007 (Davies-Venn, 2017). This list includes Trinidadian playwright and screenwriter, Michael Anthony (Tony) Hall, who was Artist in Residence and lecturer at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and International Guest Artist at California State University, Northridge (Hall). Antiguan-born novelist and essayist, Jamaica Kincaid has taught in the English, African and African-American Studies Department at Harvard University since 1992, while Edwidge Danticat of Haiti taught creative writing at both New York University and University of Miami.

Acclaimed author, Curdella Forbes of Jamaica has also worked as professor of Caribbean Literature at Howard University since 2004.

This selected list includes world renowned artists, directly connected through their identity or work to the Caribbean, who were also full-time or part-time academics. This initial list does not recognize the broader consideration of scholars who count the Caribbean as their place of origin or as part of their heritage, who teach in North American classrooms, and who teach curricula that may or may not connect to their Caribbean identity, or to a broader Caribbean focus. This broader list includes St. Lucian Professor Barry Gaspar, who teaches in the History Department at Duke University and Professor Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, who counts Jamaica as contributing to her cultural heritage, and whose work itself examines identity and memory-making methodologies used by Caribbean diaspora communities and the relevance of race for the theory and practice of the humanities.

This paper begins with the project of considering the implication of this less tangible flow of culture that takes place from the Caribbean through the academic work of Caribbean intellectuals and scholars in areas other than Caribbean Studies. In other words, what does it mean that a Professor of Biology might be born and raised in Barbados? The questions that motivate this writing include whether and how my identity as a Caribbean professional has translated into knowledge transfer to my students of Corporate Communication at North American universities. What significance is brought to bear by the fact that I am a professional who has worked in the Trinidad and Tobago creative industries and who identifies culturally as a “Caribbean” academic, and that year after year I teach students in a North American classroom?

Despite my self-identification as “Of Trinidad,” my cultural identity is far more complex. In the article, “Ambiguation, Disjuncture, Commitment: A Social Analysis of Caribbean Cultural Creativity”, Huon Wardle (2002) recognizes Caribbean society as being defined “largely if not entirely, by its mobility” (p. 496). I start by recognizing mobility (my own, and that of my parents) as an integral part of my own identity, namely that I was born in Nigeria where my father himself worked as a Professor at the University of Ibadan; that I was schooled in England and Trinidad, enrolled in university for one year at the Mona, Jamaica campus of the University of the West Indies, then completed my studies at universities in Oswego, New York and Atlanta, Georgia. My two siblings were both born in Jamaica. My mother was born and raised in Dunfermline, Scotland, and my husband was born in Italy, but considers himself to be Venezuelan culturally.

It is understandable that to people in my present, immediate environment, my cultural identity is interesting, and that the countries to which I’m connected speak to a diversity

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of geographical experience. Yet, the broader reality is that in the Caribbean, the hybridity of this cultural experience is far more the norm than it is a point of difference. The Caribbean cultural identity is one in which “world citizenship” is not an uncommon construct. Wardle goes on to consider cultural identity as situational in character, and as circumscribing a “multitude of minor and major communicational acts, elevating some of these to the level of statements-of-identity” (p. 502). As Wardle also suggests, identification of one’s self as being mostly identified by a single territory, or even a single nation-state is a “synoptic assessment” (p. 505). Having recognized the collage of culture and experience that makes up my complete cultural identity, for the purpose of this writing, I focus synoptically on the Caribbeanness of my identity, and the years I spent as a creative industries practitioner in Trinidad and Tobago.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND THE EFFACEMENT OF SELF

It’s 2019 and I’m writing about myself in ways that make me uncomfortable, for reasons I’m at first unable to identify. I am, after all, a writer by profession, and self-reflective by nature. Discomfort is an integral component of this analysis, which must be considered both an obstacle to overcome and an irritant that should catalyze deeper analysis. Much has been offered, by way of critique and criticism, about the tendency of autoethnography to verge on self-indulgent navel-gazing (Holt, 2003). Uncomfortable as I am writing about myself, I assuage and transcend this discomfort for a few reasons. First, I hope that this analysis, as part of this wider volume and discussion, and others in volumes like this, will encourage other Caribbean academics to foreground their Caribbean identity as important in their expatriate classroom experiences, toward a diasporic understanding of what constitutes Caribbean pedagogy. Second, I seek to highlight the positive outcomes of this cultural exchange, for the benefit of students who have gained, and those who will continue to gain from it. Lastly, I hope that through this analysis, I’m able to increase my own awareness about how the uniqueness of personal, cultural identity intersects with lived pedagogical experience.

I also transcend this discomfort and fear of conceit by thinking of myself as “text”. At the outset of my research and analysis, I make the active decision to separate my self as autoethnographic analyst from my self as ethnographic subject. As I reflect on my past experiences, I document moments in my professional career and seek ways to draw links between the Caribbean basis of my experiences and the content and pedagogical approaches I have adopted in the classroom. At times, this means jotting down memories and reflections that are somewhat uncomfortable or unclear in their significance. In such instances as these, I allow a few days between initial capture of the memory and further unpacking of the significance of a past event, relating it to teaching experience. My ethnographic writing is intentionally in the present tense, to capture the collapse

between the timeframes of past, professional experience and more recent academic experience.

In her article, "Easier Said Than Done: Writing an Autoethnography", Sara Wall (2008) recognizes the difficult undertaking that is autoethnography, because of the intimate and personal nature of this qualitative method (p. 39). Guided by Reed-Danahay's assertion (1997), this autoethnography will place an analysis of my Trinidadian creative professional identity within a social context of Caribbean cultural flows into North America through intellectual interface. The purpose of this autoethnography is to explore the intersection between personal and pedagogical, and answer questions regarding Caribbean identity and lived experience, and the social implications of that identity within an engaged learning classroom. While the project of higher education strives for some degree of standardization through the rigours of syllabi, learning outcomes and assessments with accreditation bodies, for instance, the reality is that the individual experiences of students vary from class to class, section to section and professor to professor. Autoethnography can present significant insight into how these individual experiences are influenced by the cultural perspectives of professors who lead those interfaces.

It's 1993 and I've called a production company in Trinidad to speak to a colleague to ask her about after work arrangements for us to walk that evening around the Savannah. A receptionist answers her extension and as she takes my request to speak to my colleague, she says, "Some foreigner or freshwater Yankee on the phone to you". As I waited for my colleague to take my call, I feel a pang of anxiety mixed with disappointment and annoyance. Years later, retrospectively, I came to understand that these feelings stemmed from a desire to belong, and to blend in with the majority. As a child in England, being a racial minority, and the only black child in an otherwise white primary school, I was easily identifiable as "other". Moving to the Caribbean, this one aspect of my identity moved from periphery to centre. Physically, I looked more like a large segment of the Trinidad population, defined by its racial hybridity. Culturally and particularly audibly, I was still the "other." I sounded very different from the average Trinidadian and recall, that because of this, I sought ways to heighten the expression of my Trinidadianess, learning idiomatic expressions and their correct use or pronunciation.

Still, wherever I go, I am always a foreigner. In many ways, this reflection and perception of my cultural identity affects the ways in which I interact with my students, the degree to which I wear my Caribbean identity outwardly, and my awareness of how my Trinidadian experiences affect the everyday realities of my pedagogy. Students seem mostly intrigued by the hybridity of my identity, and somewhat tentatively risk impoliteness by asking, "Where are you from?" following which, at times, a sort of

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guessing game ensues. The reality is that no matter where I am in the world, people ask this question. When I visit England, people sense the familiarity of a long-ago Manchester dialect, accented by Caribbean influence. In Trinidad, the “freshwater Yankee” label is used as a pejorative term, which suggests the pretense of someone who has travelled abroad only briefly, and who returns with an accent to differentiate one’s self as being “from foreign” (Caribbean Dictionary, 2019). When I’m in North America, people ask whether I’m from Australia or South Africa, perhaps relating more to the strangeness or hybridity of my accent, despite its common English root. I’ve also been assumed to be Latina, from Puerto Rico or Dominican Republic because of my physiognomy. “Te pareces a una puertorriqueña”. I have grown through these experiences of being “othered”, in early years feeling embarrassment at my difference, to latterly feeling a sense of honour at having an opportunity to share my unique perspectives with others. I also take the time to learn about the identity of the person who has used my perceived difference as a portal to connect and, therefore, ultimately discover both distinction and similarity.

It’s 2002 and I’m standing in front of a production class at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia, teaching students a course called “Directing the Actor for Camera”. It’s my first experience as a graduate teaching assistant in a North American classroom. Along with my preoccupation with the complexity of teaching students of both theatre and film the intricacies of blocking for camera and communication dynamics between directors and actors, I’m also preoccupied by my own difference. I will sound like an outsider to them, and I wonder whether they will understand what I have to teach them, and whether the production phrases and terms I use will be the same terms that they have been taught in their prerequisite courses. Before the semester begins, the thought of this difference raises anxiety for me. I was similarly anxious when I stepped before a continuing education classroom in Trinidad: would the students perceive me as pretentious, or as a “freshwater Yankee”? In this first semester of teaching at Georgia State, I make the active decision to wear this difference openly, and check with students for confirmation that they understand my “vernacular” or my dialect, which is in fact a hybrid of dialects.

I am perhaps nowhere more aware of my identity as “stranger” or “other” than in the classrooms in which I teach advertising and public relations, using engaged learning strategies. In these classrooms, my identity is dually other, belonging to more than one world, but never being wholly accepted in either place¹. In her insightful article, “The practice of postcoloniality: a pedagogy of hope”, Jennifer Lavia (2006) considers the “Third World” academic as facing a “crisis of duality”, in which she feels the struggle of

¹ See W.E.B. Du Bois’ discussion of double consciousness, which he describes as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his tow-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

the coloniality of her Trinidadian roots to be “articulated with the academic space from within the western academy” (p. 280). As a Caribbean academic in a North American classroom, I am dually other because of the geographical turns expressed in my identity. I am also other because the foundation of my experience, which I bring to the classroom, is not North American. My concerns about being an outsider are further reinforced by stories shared by colleague professors from other lands, whose students evaluate them as speaking sub-standard English, despite their perspectives that they speak English that might be deemed similar deviations from so-called “standard English” as compared to some of their North American students. Even as I seek to negotiate the difference between my own cultural experiences and those of the students I teach, I also recognize that to them I am still perceived as foreign, and as being from “somewhere that isn’t here” or “somewhere that is not where we are from”.

Soon after the start of the semester, after initial discussion of my cultural identity, and as I simultaneously learn about the cultural backgrounds of those enrolled in my class, student awareness of my difference fades quickly into the background. To an extent, my cultural difference unites students who identify as North American in the similarity of their experiences. Notably, the hybridity of my identity also serves as a bridge to international students who themselves may experience *otherness* through their own cultural difference. By the second or third week of the semester, the collective focus shifts from the specifics of my cultural background, and from those of other *others*, to the student desire to learn from my professional experiences and my desire to teach students the fundamentals and best practices of the persuasion industries.

COMMUNICATION, COMMUNITY, CLAYTON AND THE CARIBBEAN

The project of engagement is seldom simply accomplished. Literature addressing engagement on university campuses points to multiple factors leading to institutional commitment to community engagement. Explicated in a study by Nancy Franz, Jeri Childers and Nicole Sanderlin (2012), for universities, the adoption of engagement strategies is as complex as any organizational change. Therefore, it does not guarantee that faculty will embrace the practices of engaged learning, nor does it secure the success of the overall initiative. For Clayton State University, community engagement was adopted as a central and defining characteristic of the institution, with this focus becoming an explicit part of its strategic plan. The vision statement outlined in the strategic plan is for Clayton State University “to become a national model for university-based community engagement and for equipping students with the knowledge, skills and motivations for learning and success”. The mission statement notes, “Through teaching, scholarship and service, we provide an environment of experience-based learning, enriched by active community engagement that prepares an increasing number of

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students from all walks of life to succeed in a diverse society” (Clayton, 2019). This commitment to community engagement is brought to life through the establishment of the university’s “PACE” initiative, which stands for Partnering Academics and Community Engagement. Through PACE, faculty receive training, awareness of best practices, and support in several different areas. These include certificates for inclusion in faculty promotion and tenure portfolios, preparation of a community-engaged syllabus, brainstorming around how to reach community partners and the best way to define community partnering. In addition, faculty members are also given access to mentoring, and guidance in the preparation and signing of Memoranda of Understanding with the community clients (PACE, 2019).

The engaged learning project of the student agency is set against the broader philosophical context that pedagogy should be transformative, with the learner as active participant in an experience that enacts social change, and that is performative. Paolo Freire (1972), in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, asserts that education is transformative and must drive the student to rise above oppression. bell hooks (2003) in *Teaching community – A pedagogy of hope*, positions the learner as active participant in the educational process. While the focus in this writing is on the Caribbean influence in my teaching, it’s also important to recognize both the philosophical underpinnings and university-level strategy that inform my teaching.

It’s 2010 and as a new, full-time Professor, I’ve been tasked with the responsibility of building a Corporate Communication Program at Clayton State University. My vision for the programme, immediately embraced by my colleagues and university administration, is for engaged learning, through which students will gain practical experiences, even as they learn the fundamentals of advertising and public relations. This includes a classroom-based student agency in which students serve in job-specific roles, producing actual deliverables for real-world clients. For Clayton State University students, this will bolster their competitiveness as they enter a job market to tread water with graduates of larger, more readily recognized universities. This curriculum fits perfectly with an evolving strategic direction at Clayton State, which focuses on engaged learning initiatives.

In order to make this meaningful, engaged learning, I have to tap into my own professional experiences in agency settings, all of which are in Trinidad and Tobago. It’s undeniable that because of both my professional and academic background, I have a lot to offer the students. I have taught in higher education for twenty-six years, including seven years in continuing education, four years as a graduate teaching assistant, four years as a visiting/adjunct instructor and ten years as a university professor. During these years, my teaching has included courses across the communication curriculum, including a survey course on the history of human communication and an introduction to

communication theory, public relations and advertising courses, interpersonal communication and public speaking courses.

Parallel to this academic experience, I also have a total of twenty-seven years of professional experience in the persuasion industries, having spent two years as co-owner of a film and video production company, serving advertising and public relations agencies. I have also spent four years as a writer in a public relations agency, and four years as a creative director at an advertising agency. Added to this, I've spent 17 years as an independent consultant, including two years in Trinidad and fifteen in the United States. While I've done production work and worked with teams from Haiti, Barbados, Jamaica, Venezuela and Guyana, most of my work in the Caribbean centered on Trinidad. The following observations, while true to much of the Caribbean, mostly focus on Trinidad's context.

In the early days of my North American classroom experience, my major concern was not a matter of lacking experience, but rather a reflection of the disjuncture between the geography of my identity, and the cultural experiences of my students. Questions came to mind as I considered the relevance of my teaching. Would my Caribbean-dominant professional background diminish the relevance of instruction I had to offer students at a university in the United States? Would the realities that govern experience in the Caribbean communication industries be relevant to the realities of what students are likely to encounter once they graduate? The problem with the very posing of these questions is that they essentialize my Caribbean identity and position my students' North American experience as monolithic. More pointedly, my concern for the transferability and relevance of my Caribbean experience places emphasis on the imagined distinction between the North American industry and Caribbean communication industry reality.

The structural context for my observations in this section comes from Carole Boyce Davies' consideration of *seeing*, *reading* and *imagining*, as three frames of engagement for understanding and analyzing contemporary Caribbean culture and the specifics of Caribbean subjectivity (p. 34). In this framework, *seeing* refers to having high-level vision, and interpreting "into the past, in the present, and into the future", while *reading*, builds on "active engagement with all textualities (oral, scribal, performative, carnivalesque, literary, scholarly) that emanate from the spaces we call the Caribbean". Finally, Boyce Davies uses the term *imagining*, to refer to the process of engaging in transformative processes. In this way, this autoethnography seeks to build a high-level, intertextual understanding of the transformative nature of the Caribbean facets of my pedagogy.

It's the year 2000, and I'm working at one of the top advertising agencies in Trinidad and Tobago, and in the Caribbean, at the time. I'm part of a team of creative professionals who

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conjure images and wield words from client concept to mediated messages with professionalism and swift strategy. I'm part of a team of creative directors, copywriters, graphic designers, audio-visual producers, and media planners. I'm part of a team that receives a request from a major client for a complex media campaign on a Friday evening, and through intense brainstorming, strategizing, and a weekend in-office *lime*-retreat² is able to present dissemination-ready deliverables just two days later, with a complete multimedia campaign ready to publish and air in media by the morning of the third day. I am part of a team for whom weekends are sacrosanct, and yet who give up the entirety of that weekend to transcend challenges of sleeplessness, the tensions of absence from family and working against the clock, to deliver excellence. I am part of a professional world and industrial environment that is highly formalized in its ritual patterns and rules of communication and engagement, yet simultaneously, comparatively casual in the modalities of its production.

Reflecting on the years I spent working in Trinidad advertising and public relations agencies, I consider them to be marked by four characteristics: *sophistication*, *diversity*, *interdisciplinarity* and *transformativity*. In the years I worked in Trinidad, I worked shoulder to shoulder with agency workforces including a highly trained and immensely creative talent pool. The human resource on which the industry is built includes university graduates, among whom are people who have completed post-graduate study, along with veteran industry workers who have worked their way from post-secondary employment to become senior management and executives within agencies. During the years I worked in this industry, from 1993 to 2001, it was common for members of these agency teams to use technology that was maintained on par with, if not ahead of, larger market agency counterparts. Agency personnel also maintained currency and relevance in their professions through local, regional and international training and certification.

Diversity can be seen in Trinidad and Tobago creative agencies in the cultural heritage of the personnel in the agencies, a direct relationship with Trinidad's own culture of hybridity. This diversity is also measurable in terms of the clientele within an agency's service area. Trinidad agencies for whom and with whom I worked would serve clients throughout the Caribbean, and their regular clients included companies, representative of the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanic and Dutch Caribbean. Lastly, this diversity can be considered in terms of client industry and size. In a single agency in which I worked, clients included those from the energy sector, food and beverage manufacturers, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, cottage industry start-ups and family businesses, government agencies and ministries.

² To "lime" in Trinidad is to socialize and hang out.

The work of the Trinidad creative agency is also characterized by interdisciplinarity. In truth, because of the inherent need for efficiencies, it's not uncommon for personnel within the persuasion industries to get called into multiple areas of endeavour. As a creative director, in addition to receiving client briefs, and guiding the creative team, I was often called on to perform all of the following: writing advertising copy, scripts, and news releases, writing and producing jingles, producing television and radio commercials and assessing media placement plans. Indeed, while I was not part of the event management team, when large-scale events required it, I would work alongside the event management team. The expectation was always that you contribute in meaningful ways to the creative and strategic processes, even if that meant transcending your formal job description, either vertically or horizontally. In Trinidad, the renaissance creative professionals thrive. Perhaps because of a contextual landscape in which theatre, music, and dance are accessible as carnivalesque street performance, the arts thrive as an integral part of Trinidad cultural expression. Trinidad creative professionals are specialists, but we also wear many hats. Culturally, we are of fluid enterprise.

The work of Caribbean advertising and public relations agencies is, across many realms, transformative. Working in agencies in Trinidad as a full-time employee, and as an external consultant, I was called on to strategize communication on behalf of clients small and large. Often, because of larger "bread and butter" clients, the agency is able to put its wealth of resources to work for the benefit of smaller, less profitable clients. Agencies will also often do pro bono work brought in through affiliations of its personnel, work that at times is for non-profit organizations who perform important community work through youth, cultural, sporting, faith-based, or healthcare related activities.

In a later section, I return to each of these four areas – *sophistication*, *diversity*, *interdisciplinarity* and *transformativity* – to examine the specifics of the student agency that align with each of these characteristics. Before that, I want to consider the structure of the student agency, and the roles in which students perform their work and functions.

It's 2013, and three years after my start as a full-time faculty member at Clayton State University, three curriculum committees (departmental, college and university) have given their approval for the Corporate Communication courses whose proposals I have been instrumental in writing. Despite my hesitance, in the very first semester of teaching one of these courses, I'm teaching it as an engaged course, a year before Clayton State launches its university-wide community-engagement initiative. In many ways, my course that semester would serve as a precursor to the university's evolving strategic plan and engagement platform. The student agency functions within classroom experiences in three of my courses at Clayton State, including Introduction to Advertising, Introduction to Public Relations and Principles and Practices of Public Relations. In the two

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introductory courses, students self-nominate first into four Talent Teams, including: leadership, account executives, creative writers, and visual designers. Once divided along lines of agency roles, Client Crews are then formulated. Each crew includes one or two account managers, two or three writers, and two or three visual designers. In the advanced course, students operate as independent consultants. The very structure of the student agency is built primarily from the realities of my experience in Trinidad, augmented by my interactions with North American agencies. Clients are usually selected from a list of potential clients, and for the most part, I'm able to honour student preferences. Once clients are selected, their representatives will visit the classroom to provide a communication or creative brief. Students meet with the client on a weekly or fortnightly basis, throughout the semester. Then, with my supervision and guidance, students strategize and produce creative responses based on the needs of the client.

This engaged learning model builds on transposition of sophistication from the Trinidad and Tobago agency. In a single semester, students are required to achieve a steep learning curve, moving from learning the fundamentals of the history and theoretical background of the advertising and public relations industries. Each semester, the coursework requires building from scratch a small but intensive agency, teaching and training personnel in both hard and soft skills, including everything from how to write a news release, to the importance of reliability, accountability and clear communication within the creative agency. Fuelled by the interests of students, I continue to build sophistication into the student agency experience with the addition of new courses, including most recently a course in corporate communication design and advancement of the student access to the technological facilities that advance their learning. The reality of the Trinidad and Tobago agency experience dictates that agency practitioners must have multimedia literacy and ability to express strategic messaging through a diversity of media channels. It was the quest for this higher level of sophistication that motivated my pursuing addition of the Corporate Communication Design course, in which students learn about building corporate identity through visual identifiers, using colour, graphic expression and textual interfaces toward expressing an integrated corporate image.

Much like in the Caribbean agencies in which I worked, in the student agency at Clayton State University, experience is also characterized by diversity. While most of the students who enroll in advertising and public relations courses are Communication and Media Studies majors, they arrive in the courses with a broad cross-section of cultural experiences and even levels of maturity. At times, the cultural and disciplinary diversity of students presents challenges for communication and productivity. As was the case when I served as creative director at agencies in Trinidad, I've mediated these communication challenges to help students learn the importance of how those experiences and communication styles can be leveraged to benefit the work they will do for the clients. The key, as I learned in my professional life in Trinidad, is not to force

consent and agreement, but to foster appreciation for difference and to find ways to use diversity as a tool to bolster creativity.

In a very real way, my ability to encourage students to bring their own unique cultural identity to bear on their work within the student agency hinges almost completely on my own recognition and acceptance of the importance of my cultural *otherness*. It is as a result of my individual growth and personal awareness that I have become comfortable with bringing my cultural identity into the foreground of my teaching, rather than attempting to subsume my difference into the background. By so doing, I'm able to speak with authenticity and sincerity when I encourage students to "bring themselves" to the work that they do, and to appreciate the diversity that can be both immediately apparent and often hidden in the environments in which they work. This helps the students to embrace the differences that they readily perceive. It also helps them to explore differences that require the work of dialogue and discourse to uncover.

Students enrolled in student agency classes are also engaged in interdisciplinary work. The semester begins by drawing attention to the different areas of students' disciplinary focus. By the time of their enrolment in the course, students have studied and taken a variety of courses within the Visual and Performing Arts curricula including, for example, theatre, film and video, writing, persuasion and music. An example of this interdisciplinarity was the student production of a flash mob to raise awareness for a lecture event in which some students strategized the communication, other students wrote the script for the performance, and still others performed the flash mob as live performance. As in my Trinidad agency experience, in the student agency I also ensure that interdisciplinarity is allowed to evolve in response to client needs as I call on students to shift their focus and responsibilities, depending on deadlines and workflow. Students come to appreciate areas of their own personal backgrounds that they may have assumed were irrelevant to their pursuit of degrees in Communication and Media Studies. Students who have been quieter or seemed less interested or sure when enrolled in more theoretical courses under my tutelage, sometimes come to life as a result of this environment that celebrates multi-talented people and interdisciplinarity. In retrospect, great benefit is brought to bear by adopting the creative liberty that typifies the Caribbean agency. Indeed, there is intellectual freedom that comes with transcending the silos of disciplines, and that freedom fosters deeper, more meaningful creativity and productivity. This discovery is apparent in the enjoyment expressed by students about this learning environment, and their own reflections about realizing the importance of their interdisciplinary experiences and the relevance of their cross-disciplinary learning.

On many levels, the work that students complete during a semester spent in one of my engaged learning classes is transformative in ways that parallel the work of the agencies

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in which I was employed in Trinidad. As with agencies in the Caribbean context, some of the work of the student agency has been transformative at the community level. In part, this is directly attributable to the existence of the agency under the umbrella of the Clayton State University strategic initiative, Partnering Academics and Community Engagement. Generally speaking, the links formed among community partners have been strengthened through their involvement with the student agency. Students have also helped community partners to achieve or get closer to achieving their communication objectives. One example of this are the communication strategies that students produced for the community non-profit, Hearts to Nourish Hope. The work completed by students for this community partner will help the organization to communicate its mission more clearly, through the redesign of its logo, and by linking the rationale of that logo to its communication tactics. This non-profit's mission is to help community youth who may not have completed their General Education Diploma and high school to attain other certification, or access career and business counselling services. Through their work for this non-profit, students themselves undergo a transformative experience, as they learn the value of their community connections, strengthening the community of which they are becoming productive members. Students also make connections between the communication skills that they are acquiring and the betterment of the community, through the work that they do in helping non-profits and start-up businesses to reach their targeted audiences. In more recent semesters, I have encouraged students to think about and, if comfortable, share their own unique experiences with issues that circulate around the non-profit, which, I note, can help them to step into the shoes of those audiences being targeted by the client organization.

The pedagogical value of this engaged learning initiative is also measured in the transformative value it has for the individual students themselves. Through the process of engaged learning, students learn valuable lessons about advertising and public relations. But, perhaps even more importantly, they learn the value of being readied for a competitive job market, earning portfolio samples and building their competence as corporate communicators. Students are also transformed by the significance of building on each other's strengths and complementing weaknesses and by learning the value of an interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving. They also learn how, even through their local work, they can contribute to a transformative community experience. Lastly, students experience the transformative nature of this engaged learning by stepping into the understanding that by *doing*, instead of learning about doing, they have realized their abilities and, oftentimes, overcome self-doubt.

CONCLUSION

It's 2019 and the mechanics of the student agency are in full swing and have come full circle. Five years after the first semester's offering of engaged Corporate Communication

classes, an alumna who landed a competitive position on graduation in part as a direct result of her engaged learning in the student agency, has returned to speak to students enrolled in the course for the first time about what she gained from her classroom experiences. The meaningfulness of the student agency as a pedagogical approach is manifesting in the successes of the students and, ultimately, their ability to help future generations of students enrolled in the same courses that helped them to attain their career goals.

In addition to the *sophistication, diversity, interdisciplinarity* and *transformativity* that students in North American classrooms are learning and experiencing as a direct result of my pedagogy that builds from my Trinidad experience, I'm also teaching students the intangible ethos of Caribbean professionalism. Working in an agency environment in Trinidad can be a high-stress experience, involving long hours and multiple simultaneous responsibilities and deadlines. A key component of my pedagogy in these courses is to instill in students a great sense of the yin and yang of Trinidad agency life: to step up to the responsibilities of reliably presenting strategically relevant deliverables on time, while remembering, as a former supervisor reminded me repeatedly, that our productivity is even more important than the urgency of immediate deadlines. In other words, it is important to allow the stress to propel you to sometimes unexpected greatness, but never to allow it to destroy your sanity, your professional relationships or your sense of the bigger product.

The multiple levels through which learning takes place in this engaged environment evolves through a complex web of interdependent practices, modalities and awareness, including, but not limited to, interpersonal group work, visual, linguistic and logical. Woven throughout these practices is the influence of my Caribbeaness as I guide students through the praxis of their classroom experience. Lavia (2006) considers the four broad conceptualizations of what constitutes the Caribbean – the island chain; the Caribbean basin; the ethno-historic zone; and a transnational community. In this analysis, I have been most interested in thinking of my Caribbean identity as being rooted in the island chain and my experiences there, and that my teaching contributes to the Caribbean as transnational community. In her conclusion, Lavia calls on Caribbean educators to have more conscious engagement with their own practice and to engage in critical professional practice, in which one makes sense of self and society, and to adopt a stance of hopefulness and outspokenness (p. 291). While her analysis focuses on the professional practice of Caribbean educators on home soil, the broader conceptualization of Caribbean educators also should be considered. Further, the specifics and uniqueness of personal, cultural identity are best considered in relation to its influence on lived pedagogical experience, and the ways in which an academic's cultural background affects the learning experience of students. Through a more inclusive accounting of the

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transnational community of educators, scholars and academics who identify as part of the Caribbean, a deeper understanding can be achieved of the space that continues to be redefined through influential flows of Caribbean culture.

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