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Transformation and Resistance in the Interfaith Classroom: Reflections on Teaching in the Canadian Context

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ABSTRACT

Although Canada is a religiously plural society, interfaith theological learning remains uncommon. This reflective paper explores the experience of team-teaching at Emmanuel College's Master of Pastoral Studies Program. The Master of Pastoral Studies is a professional degree with Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist streams that trains students to become chaplains, psycho-spiritual therapists, and spiritual care providers in the Canadian context. Using anecdotes from our classroom experiences, this paper reflects on three values central to inter-religious learning: cultivating a vulnerable "open stance" in dialogue, understanding interfaith teaching as active resistance that contributes to spiritual transformation, and placing ourselves as instructors as the "guide within the group." Interfaith learning calls us to risk and courage, believing that spiritual transformation happens as we encounter difference with openness and humility. As teachers, we model for our students how to engage with one another to build peace in response to individual and societal trauma and discord.

KEYWORDS

interfaith, interreligious, peace building, spiritual care, role-play, facilitation, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam

Introduction

This reflective paper explores the experience of team-teaching in an interfaith program with Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist streams.¹ Toronto is one of the world's most diverse cities, with 51.5 percent of residents identifying as visible minorities in a 2016 government census (Statistics Canada Survey 2017). Although Canada is a religiously

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plural society, interfaith theological learning is relatively uncommon. The [Toronto School of Theology](#), the “largest ecumenical consortium for theological education in Canada” is comprised of seven member colleges. Emmanuel College, where we are PhD students in practical theology, is the only college within the Toronto School of Theology that offers inter-religious learning.

Alongside Dr. Pamela Couture, we team taught a course in the Master of Pastoral Studies (MPS) program: a professional degree that trains students to become chaplains, psycho-spiritual therapists, and spiritual care providers within the Canadian context. In the MPS program, we have students who are seeking to provide pastoral counselling within their specific faith context as well as those seeking accreditation with the provincial college to practice psychotherapy as a registered health professional.

The dynamic and diverse group who made up the fall 2018 Introduction to Counseling and Spiritual Care Practices class included twenty-four students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, gender identities, and self-identified disabilities. It is worth noting that they belonged to a range of faith communities including religious and cultural margins. The classroom was approximately one-third Muslim, one-third Christian, and one-third Buddhist and non-religious. We had an Imam, a Quranic scholar, two Buddhist monks (Tibetan and Shinto), a doctorate in Tibetan Buddhism, an ordained Presbyterian minister, and two Masters of Divinity students in the process of seeking ordination. The majority of students were people of color and cultural minorities. Their ages ranged from mid-twenties to late-sixties.

As a result, the classroom was a site of active resistance and peace-building where we invited students into an “open-space space” in order to learn from one another through listening, dialogue, and role-play. Reflecting on our personal experiences, responses, and actions over the twelve weeks we walked alongside these students, we have come to believe that interfaith learning calls teachers to a stance of openness and bravery, believing that spiritual transformation happens when we encounter difference with humility. Through this, instructors move from teaching students what to believe to modelling for students how to engage with one another in order to build peace in response to individual and societal trauma and discord.

Fostering Transformation through Ritualized Role-Play

On our final day of class, we invited students to bring an item that symbolized their learning over the twelve weeks we had spent together. Each person had the opportunity to share what they brought and what it represented to them. One student brought his Quran and shared that at the age of fifteen, he had memorized the Quran in its entirety. Though he knew the words, he told us, he didn’t necessarily understand their meaning. He went on to spend seven years studying the meaning of the Quran; after this, he felt he was able to speak confidently about what the Quran was saying. “But now,” he concluded, smiling, “I read the Quran and there is a whole new layer of meaning! I see the human dimension of it in a way I didn’t before! First, I learned the words, then I learned the historic interpretations, and now I am exploring it for today.”

After several other students shared, another Muslim student, who had come to Canada specifically to take this course of study, spoke up. “I am so thankful to be here, because I have never before been in a space where I could discuss these sorts of things. At home, I worked for an interfaith charity, but even though we were friends, we could not talk about these things. I could look up some things on the internet, but I have never been able to listen to different perspectives and ask questions like I can here.”

Building on Pamela Couture’s framework from “Ritualized Play Using Role Play to Teach Pastoral Care and Counseling” (1999), our twelve-week course spent five sessions engaged in role-plays. Students were divided into two groups of twelve with attention to religious diversity within each group, and we facilitated role-plays for the same groups of students throughout the semester. Each three-hour session included one hour of active role-playing and two hours of structured debrief. The debrief always began with the students’ emotional response to the characters they had been invited to play before moving to naming what the spiritual care providers did well, and then to a discussion of the ways different religious and spiritual frameworks would affect care provision in the given scenario. Our scenarios for the fall semester included: an aging parent with post-surgery complications in the hospital; a non-suicidal student self-injuring in a university residence;

first-responders to a violent attack on a faith community; a mental-health hospitalization; and a gender-transitioning young adult. Students were invited to be “co-constructors” of the role-play narrative (Couture 1999, 100), finding their voice as the narrative progressed and building on their experiences from one role-play to the next. As instructors, we genuinely did not know how the role-play would unfold; the students held the scenario in their hands. Role-plays also allow for the sobriety of spiritual care to be balanced by a certain amount of playfulness (Couture 1999, 101); shared laughter was encouraged as it recognizes that the role-play *is not real* and allows for the release of emotional tension. Debriefing moments of laughter help students identify moments of anxiety and to build bonds with one another.

Our role-plays were intentionally designed to complement and explore the ideas presented in the course texts, and student assignments included a written debrief of their own emotional engagement with the role-play as well as book reviews that integrated textual concepts with the themes and dilemmas experienced in the role-play (Couture 1999, 99). This partnership of theory and embodiment leads to insights that cannot be found simply through book-based learning. In debriefing one role-play, a student exclaimed, “I read the book and really liked it, but as soon as the role-play started, everything I read flew out of my head! I couldn’t recall any of the strategies!” The written assignment following the role-play helps bring these two learning experiences together and integrates the pre-reading with the experience as it unfolded in class. Participation in well-structured role-plays, in short, fosters a deeper way of knowing than simply reading and discussing theories. In our situation, it also sets the groundwork for more substantial, embodied experiences of field education and supervised chaplaincy placements (i.e., Clinical Pastoral Education).

What Is an Open Stance? Safety, Bravery, Resilience, and Valuing Difference

As teachers in training, we are very interested in the current conversation in North America regarding safe spaces and brave spaces. Arao and Clemens define “safe spaces” as learning environments where students can expect to be able to engage with one another in dialogue over controversial, difficult, or sensitive issues with honesty, sensitivity, and respect (2013, 135). Safe spaces have recently come under scrutiny by members of the academy and students alike as students have blamed their schools for “bombarding” them with discomfiting or distressing viewpoints that necessitate the creation of a literal safe space, away from the “scary ideas” of the classroom, where they could recuperate (Shulevitz 2017). Indeed, what happens when classroom dialogue leaves the polite sphere, and moves towards a more provocative space?

According to Arao and Clemens, what is needed are “brave spaces.” Brave spaces shift towards “emphasizing the concept of bravery instead, to help students better understand—and rise to—the challenges of genuine dialogue on diversity and justice issues” (2013, 136). As a teaching team, our pedagogical framework emphasized the need for courage within the classroom space. Boost Rom (1998, 405) argues that this shift from safe to brave spaces is key as we ask students to journey with us into spaces that are often precarious and uncertain:

We have to be *brave* because along the way we are going to be “vulnerable and exposed”; we are going to encounter images that are “alienating and shocking.” We are going to be very unsafe. Bravery is needed because learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things (as quoted in Arao and Clemens 2013, 141).

In order to create a brave space, Arao and Clemens recommend establishing “ground rules” for the classroom (2013, 143–149). Their ground rules (or common rules) for brave spaces use a collectivist approach, allowing all participants to dialogue together and shape group norms. This demonstrates that facilitators are open to learning from participants and disrupts the common expectation that all knowledge flows from the teacher or facilitator. Two of their most foundational ground rules are:

- *Agree to disagree.* Some of the richest learning occurs when students are willing to explore conflict and seek to understand opposing viewpoints. This means that we as facilitators must welcome disagreement and encourage students to offer contrasting viewpoints, not to retreat from conflict and discomfort.

- *No attacks.* Attacks are most often defined as forms of extreme disrespect. A helpful question for clarification around personal attacks is: what is the difference between a personal attack on a person and challenge to an individual's idea or statement of belief? Challenges are not necessarily attacks although they may lead to uncomfortable experiences or defensive reactions, which can then be explored by students.

In class, Dr. Couture emphasized the importance of clarifying key language choices: the language of brave space and the ways in which bravery are often conceptualized as a masculine, warfare-related stance of pressing onwards despite opposition, rather than one of vulnerability, peace-building, and mutual reception.

Given the potential for bravery's potentially violent associations, [Rahuldeep Singh Gill's \(2017\) work on "resilient places"](#) is worth noting. Gill believes that Arao and Clemens' work on safe spaces is important and he stands in solidarity with them, but he also believes it is important to push farther than safe spaces in order to create places of resilience. According to Gill,

resilience [is] the ability of an individual to adapt to and overcome harmful stimuli in healthy ways that lead to good outcomes. Resilient people can bounce back from traumatic events. They bend but they do not break. They absorb. They retain. They have the ability to take in others' viewpoints. (2017, 204)

Individuals, institutions, facilitators, and organizers of the learning context need to be resilient as well as the learners within the classroom context. Gill's suggestions for creating resilient spaces on campus include:

1. Seeing the institution as responsible for providing a resilient context for individuals, while also acknowledging that individuals must take responsibility for their own actions as they act out the institution's mission and values.
2. Using a model of "interfaith cooperation" which moves us from our own individualistic worldviews (which he defines as "an inclusive term standing for faith, religion, or secular identities" [Gill 2017, 203]) and challenges us to think about the larger "us" of the collective order, working towards a common good, building stronger communities, and preventing civil strife.
3. Anticipating how individual worldviews affect and complicate how we engage with other social groups. For example, how can a Muslim Student Organization with conservative members work with an LGBTQ+ group on campus? Gill maintains that it is the quality of our relationships across areas of disagreement that form the basis of our resilience, moving us beyond stereotypes and misconceptions.
4. Encouraging individuals to draw on their own worldviews for resilience as they are "repositories of values, practices, and profound meaning" (Gill 2017, 205). In a diverse society, we have a responsibility to know about one another's resilience systems because these systems enable us to bring deep meaning to the collective, decreasing the scope of future conflict and increasing mutual understanding.

Gill argues that interfaith work that stretches across worldview boundaries provides the context for participants to commit to coming back to the table to interact with one another, acting courageously even when they may disagree on issues of ultimacy (Gill 2017, 205–206). Gill's image of interfaith dialogue taking place at a table where all are welcome and brave enough to be themselves in order that rich cooperation may take place is a vivid picture of what we desire in our classrooms. In such a space, participants make a commitment to return to the table even when interactions are difficult and wounds may be sustained that are caused by erroneous assumptions about one another. In these resilient spaces, discussion, dialogue, healing, and transformation can take place.

Gill cautions that a focus on individual resilience runs two risks. First, "members of already oppressed or derided groups face unfair burdens and risk" (Gill 2017, 204). Gill reminds us that inequities of power are present in cross-cultural engagements, and we must keep this truth in the front of our minds as we engage with one another in the interfaith

classroom. Second, he points to the stressful environment of the university that can grind down students and teachers alike as the semester advances and work piles up. It is key that we do not forget our purpose, which is to facilitate interfaith dialogue, learning, and cooperation with integrity and compassion throughout the academic year.

One way that we can help create the context for resilience in our classroom is by asking our students to adopt an open stance in all our dialogues. An open stance refers to the way in which an individual approaches dialogue or conflict, and can best be understood in contrast to a closed stance.² On any given issue, the same belief can be held with an open stance that provides space for dialogue and seeks mutual understanding, or a closed stance that shuts down conversation and is uninterested in learning about alternate perspectives. A simple example can be seen in the age-old debate, “Which makes a better pet: a cat or a dog?” The same perspective, that dogs are superior companions, can be communicated in two very different ways:

- Open stance: “I have always been a dog person, myself. I wonder why someone would choose a cat.”
- Closed stance: “Dogs, absolutely. There’s really no question there.”

An open stance assumes that dialogue and difference are welcomed and valued. In the classroom context, we have found that how a belief is communicated may have a greater effect on the conversation and the emotional response of students than the perspective itself. By facilitating a classroom policy of an open-stance approach to dialogue, we hope to help students cultivate vulnerability and curiosity towards one another and towards worldviews that differ from their own. This creates space for the meaning-making work that is central to our classroom endeavours.

Interfaith Teaching as an Act of Resistance

One role-play in particular caused the class to grapple with the difficult task of meaning-making. Two weeks after the mass shooting of eleven people at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, the teaching team decided to create a role-play that asked the students to wrestle with the complexities of this act of violence and its impact on first responders to the scene. Students played the roles of paramedics, fire-fighters, and members of the police force as well as the chaplains who were asked to provide care to the first responders two weeks after the incident took place. The students inhabited their roles with authenticity and grappled with the horrors of the shooting.

Following the role-play, students gathered to debrief and discuss their thoughts and feelings. Students expressed sadness and feelings of despair regarding the broken and violent state of the world. It was comforting to hear the wisdom that Dr. Couture shared with the class about interfaith learning: we were in fact *not* doing nothing in that moment; the very act of sitting together that morning in class was an act of resistance. Coming together in solidarity from various faith traditions was a bold act. Hope existed between the words we spoke to one another, hope existed in the act of listening to one another and, at points, crying together. Dr. Couture’s words situated what we were doing in the classroom into a larger socio-political context. For people who question the importance or relevance of theological education, here was concrete evidence that it *is* meaningful.

In one role-play group, the experience of being “triggered” by a sensitive issue brought further opportunities for individual and communal peace-building. As a Muslim student reflected upon the experience of playing a Muslim first responder in the role-play, who had fears about his physical safety in the United States, he was visibly shaken from the emotional toll the role had placed upon him. The student remarked that in daily life he is afraid to take the subway to school in Toronto and to walk around on university campus as he is visibly Muslim, which he fears makes him a target for harassment and violence. The class respectfully listened to his comments and empathized with him.

² The concept of “open” vs “closed” conflict stances belongs to Dr. Wanda Malcolm from Wycliffe College, and came to us via a personal conversation with Elizabeth in 2017.

Amy³ has a Muslim partner who also has fears about safety and travel, and she invited the students to share times when they may have felt similarly and were afraid because of their faith. The group ended up having a lively discussion that seemed to strengthen friendships between students.

This classroom experience prompted us to seek out resources concerning triggers within the classroom. Kathy Obear's (2013) article, "Navigating Triggering Events," identifies multiple "roots" that may help social justice educators explore the intrapersonal issues that influence triggered reactions for both themselves and their students, including current life issues and dynamics, and unresolved past issues, traumas, and wounds. It is important that as facilitators we reflect upon our feelings as we enter the classroom. When we are feeling centered, rested, joyful, well fed, and healthy, we are less likely to feel deeply triggered. Obear explains that daily demands such as illness, relationship problems, financial concerns, challenges at work or school, and stress over national or world issues "deplete our ability to shield ourselves from the impact of comments and behaviours" (2013, 167). As facilitators, we can also ask ourselves if the triggering situation reminds us of any past traumas. Recognizing that our "current reactions are fueled by unresolved old wounds helps [us] to disentangle [ourselves] from the retriggered roots and focus on what's really going on in the present moment," Obear writes (2013, 167).

These triggering events should not be considered signs of weakness or signs that we cannot handle difficult conversations in the classroom. Triggering events can lead us to seek out paths to healing as we courageously and honestly "explore the past and identify unfinished business and unhealed wounds" (Obear 2013, 170). We have a responsibility to work for our own healing so that we can journey alongside others in their own transformation.

Peaceful resistance like this moment of vulnerability and solidarity with our Muslim student are pivotal in the spiritual transformation of both students and teachers. Marginalized voices and those from positions of power are all in the process of transformation; sometimes, this comes out in ways that are difficult to manage or insensitive to the experiences of others in the room. Operating from an open stance moves an individual from a defensive position to one of vulnerability, where they begin to articulate the fears, anxieties, and assumptions that may undergird verbal "attacks." As the facilitator, it can be tempting to shut down difficult conversations by disallowing certain language or perspectives, but this can also short-circuit the growth of both individuals and the learning community. Instead, an important part of our own transformation as teachers was to become vulnerable by relinquishing an authoritative position within the classroom. Utilizing role-plays and class discussions as major components of classroom learning inevitably affected our position as instructors.

This is the beginning of peaceful resistance. Being present to another's emotions, their grief, and their fears moves interfaith dialogue from the realm of the theoretical or political into the relational. By refusing to hold the "other" at arm's length, we are equipping students to engage with difference peacefully, hopefully, and personally.

The Teacher as a "Guide Within the Group"

Contemporary conversations on the primary function of educators propose many images and frameworks. Erica McWilliam advocates for the addition of "Meddler in the Middle" to the more established models of "Sage on the Stage" and "Guide on the Side" (2009, 281). While the "Sage on the Stage" is obviously not an appropriate fit for our context, McWilliam critiques the "Guide on the Side," saying that it can become "an excuse for passivity" in which the instructor sits "at the margins of the physical, mental, and emotional activity" in the classroom (2009, 287). Her alternative model, the "Meddler in the Middle," describes an "active interventionist pedagogy in which teachers are mutually involved with students in assembling and/or dis-assembling knowledge and cultural products" (2009, 288). While this is a helpful image for the classroom setting she describes, in which the highest value is creativity, theological space is centered on the value of transformation, and to us, "meddling" suggests a coercive interfering with the students' process of growth and integration. We propose that as theological instructors, we act as a "Guide Within the Group."

³ Our classroom used first names for everyone, whether professor or student (including ordained students and those with other titles), as a way of challenging the power structures that are often implicit in the use of titles, and to establish that respect and vulnerability co-exist in our learning space.

Rather than being relegated to the side lines of the classroom, we view the theological teaching profession as a calling that attends not only to the academic learning of students, but to their spiritual development as well. Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes, “the fact that practical theologians teach the actual practice of practices implicates the teacher” (2012, 192) to be engaged in self-reflection alongside their students, committed not only to the analysis and deconstruction of belief and practice for both student and instructor, but also to their “post-deconstruction reconstruction” (204). We are perpetually engaged in the deconstruction and reconstruction of practices as we encounter both the human and Divine Other; embodying an open stance alongside students is essential to transformation within the classroom.

The story of the class’s final role-play, which explored the story of a trans-masc (female to male gender identity) young person whose parents were not supportive of their transition, illustrates the complexity and importance of guiding from within the group. As one group reached the debrief question of how providing care for this character might look in each of the faith traditions represented, one student said, “The Bible is clear that homosexuality is not okay.” Three seats away from them sat another student, who had shared previously that they left their conservative Christian faith community because they were gay and could no longer live in denial or despair regarding their sexual orientation.

As the classroom facilitator, Elizabeth was instantly aware that she needed to navigate this conversation with extreme care. She began by pausing the student who cited the Bible and reminding them of a distinction she had made earlier in our debrief: there is a difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. She asked them to focus on the presenting dilemma of a transgender person. She then gave them space to speak again, while directing them to speak from their own experience rather than on behalf of all of Christianity. As they strayed from the specific question of how they would provide care, Elizabeth asked them to articulate what spiritual care would look like in the context of the beliefs they were sharing with the class. Meanwhile, she was aware that the gay student had quietly left the room (we had established and reiterated throughout the semester that if students needed to excuse themselves for their own self-care, they were welcome to do so).

Cognizant of the gay student’s discomfort and also the importance of bracketing her perspective and emotional reaction, Elizabeth invited other students to respond to the first student’s perspective. A student from a more liberal Christian denomination spoke up to advocate for alternate interpretations of biblical passages often used to deny the morality of non-heterosexuality.

With only ten minutes left for the debrief, Elizabeth was concerned that this, rather heated, exchange would deny space for other religious perspectives to be voiced on the core issue of our role-play. So, she calmly interrupted to say: “I recognize that this is a conversation that has a lot of emotional weight for many people in the room, but because of our time limitations, I want to shift away from the question of what is a ‘Christian perspective on homosexuality’ to hear from the Buddhist and Muslim students about how they would approach caring for a transgender individual in their community context.” Students from both traditions spoke up, the student who had left the room returned, and at the end of the allotted time, Elizabeth thanked everyone for engaging in dialogue around what she knew to be a sensitive and complicated issue in many religious spaces.

As students dispersed for a break, Elizabeth took a moment to gather herself. She felt shaky and sweaty, and she knew that her responsibilities were not quite done. Once she felt more grounded, she sought out the student whom she had initially redirected.

“I just wanted to check in and see how you’re doing,” she said to them, “I know that conversation was quite intense, and I really pushed you to stay within a specific focus.”

“It was intense,” they replied, “and it was hard to explain myself. But listening to [the Muslim students] really helped me and gave me something to think about.”

Elizabeth was surprised and delighted. She knew she had contributed little content to the conversation, but she recognized that her facilitation choices had done what was needed by holding space for other voices. In that particular situation, it was not her perspective as a person of power and a person within the student’s faith tradition that gave the student new insights to consider, but the voice of a peer and an “other.” Elizabeth told the student how pleased she was to hear they had found the other students’ perspectives helpful, and that if they wanted to talk further about the range of Christian

perspectives on sexual orientation, she was available and happy to do so at a time that worked for them. They thanked her for checking in with them, and initiated giving her a hug, which Elizabeth interpreted as their way of communicating that they felt comfortable with her and with how she had handled the situation.

Elizabeth also made a point of checking in with the student who had left the room, saying, “I want you to know that I noticed you had left, and I’m glad you did what you needed to take care of yourself.” She asked if there was anything they would suggest she do differently in a similar situation: “How can I care for you or someone in a similar position when I’m facilitating a conversation around sexual orientation and faith?” The two had a rich conversation about their spiritual journeys, and Elizabeth left feeling that a relationship of trust and mutual respect had been maintained.

This story encapsulates the difficulty and the delight of transformative teaching in an interfaith context. The ritual of role-play set the groundwork for what we expected would be a vulnerable conversation. As the Guide within the Group, Elizabeth was actively involved in navigating conflict with attention to the diverse voices and emotional experiences of the students. Her obligations did not end when the class discussion concluded because the goal of spiritual transformation invites her to give pastoral attention to the emotional and spiritual needs of our students. By embracing an open stance, she took the risk of giving space to voices she could not control rather than speaking a corrective or definitive perspective, and she made herself vulnerable by giving the two students who were most obviously affected opportunities to provide feedback. Together, the class resisted the socio-political narratives of being consumed by argument and debate, the temptation to ignore voices that differ, and the assumption that spiritual insights must come from within one’s own tradition.

Next Steps and Conclusion

We recognize that we speak from a place of privilege within Canadian society, and that our teaching team—exclusively cis, white, female, and Christian—does not reflect the diversity of our student population. While we deliberately brought our own life experiences around disability, gender, sexuality, interfaith relationships, and encounters with suffering to the classroom learning experience, we also reflect on our limitations and shortcomings, and in the process of writing this paper, we have identified two important shifts we want to include in next year’s course.

One, we want to include the students in a conversation on classroom guidelines at the start of the semester in order to establish conversation parameters in a more collaborative manner than has previously been the case. Creating classroom guidelines together provides the opportunity for students to co-create the learning environment as a place where each of them feels welcomed and posits instructors as co-learners alongside them. It also opens the door to discuss what happens if someone does not adhere to the agreed upon guidelines, which helps to prevent and diffuse the tension generated in difficult moments.

Two, we also believe that we have a responsibility to more fully address the religious violence that has occurred (and continues to occur) in Canada, especially with regards to Indigenous peoples and their oppression. Some students (mostly, but not exclusively international students) were unaware of the historical genocide of Indigenous people in Canada, the more recent Residential Schools that removed Indigenous children from their homes, or the disproportionate representation of Indigenous peoples in contemporary Canada’s penal system and records of missing and murdered women and children.

Teaching for transformation in an interfaith context is no simple task. We cannot remain aloof from the difficult work of vulnerability, humility, and opening ourselves to encountering the Divine in the “other.” We experienced that personally and communally in our fall 2018 classroom. We believe that the ripple effects of the twelve weeks we spent together will be seen and felt throughout the lives and communities of our two dozen students, and in our own academic careers.

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