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Education

The Collective Work of Building Individual Agency

Building a shared sense of responsibility at Miami Dade College begins with empathy, reflection, and closing the gap between students and staff.

By Sandra LaFleur | Jun. 29, 2020

(Illustration by iStock/Feodora Chiosea)

"What do you mean you're not going??"

Jacob had just told me he wasn't attending the upcoming weekend's justice hackathon, a community-wide challenge to improve relationships between communities of color and law enforcement. I had assumed Jacob—one of our founding changemaking student ambassadors— would be excited to attend and get involved in the movement towards justice and better policing.

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"No way I'm going! I'm a young Black man. Why would I want to be in a room full of police officers?"

"But that's exactly WHY you need to be there!" I said.

Then we sat in silence, staring at one another and considering the weight of the expectations and experiences coming through our words.

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Ashoka's call for a "world in which everyone is a changemaker" might seem straightforward: to thrive in these times of exponential change, our students must play engaged roles in how the landscape is shifting around them. For them to take action in building more equitable and sustainable communities —and to avoid being left behind—they need to believe that change is possible and that they have a critical and active role in creating it.

But how does this mental model of changemaking agency develop in each of us? Can one just *will* it into existence? In too many of our communities, many hear messages that they don't matter, they have no power, and they can't (or won't) be heard. Can it be simply self-determination that transforms us into changemakers?

At Miami Dade College, we don't think so. At its core, "changemaking" is a collective task that requires a shared sense of responsibility. It requires mutual action that can help even those farthest from the proverbial table to step into the collective work of changemaking. Living out our *collective* responsibility in changemaking means respecting and encouraging each *individual's* power of agency as they manifest it, in their own way and on their own time. If we don't see and accept this as a shared responsibility, then we risk placing the burden of changemaking only on those most impacted by societal structures of oppression, scarcity, and voiceless-ness. In other words, becoming a changemaker is not a solo act, but a very *social* one.

For this reason, changemaking pushes us to exercise our abilities of empathy and reflection. In listening deeply, we come closer to understanding how experiences shape our emotions and perceptions of "the other," and through reflection we come to examine how our beliefs and actions may intentionally or unintentionally contribute to their realities. In practicing empathy and reflection as changemakers, we contribute to a cycle that can then perpetuate additional change by engaging others in processes that empower us all to act.

However unintentionally, my first reaction to Jacob was to dismiss his words and his decision. In that moment, I undervalued his understanding of what it meant to be a changemaker. In that conversation with him, my narratives were telling me that changemakers "got in the ring," and "spoke their truths" in

order to "show up for others" and a host of other clichés. But there was a gap in our conversation, and while that silence was only a moment—just an instant in time—it represented that void of understanding, of curiosity, of acceptance for *his* narrative.

Fortunately, Jacob and I shared a strong bond, one forged by many prior conversations. Silence didn't scare us. Instead, it was in that silence that he was able to open up, and things could become clearer. Jacob shared a narrative about personal safety and about needing to stay out of trouble. He related his mother's pleas to stay away from law enforcement—to make himself invisible in order to be safe—and the lens through which I saw the situation suddenly cracked. In that moment, I felt the weight of his burden, juggling multiple roles and responsibilities against this single construct of race. The issue of agency wasn't so simple to deconstruct.

For me, listening deeply and without judgement was the first step towards understanding how I could better support Jacob as he did the work of constructing new meanings for his past experiences and in order to choose different ways of responding to today's world. This process of building his changemaking agency required effort from both of us: the collective work needed in order to have him realize the power he *could* have in such a moment at the justice hackathon.

Leveraging Context to Build Strategy

At Miami Dade College, we work alongside our students throughout their journey as part of the shared responsibility to build changemaking agency. As the largest public institution of higher education in the US, we represent "Democracy's College," and our open-access policy introduces us to students from all walks of life: 89 percent of them representing ethnic/racial minorities, 78 percent of them working while attending school, 61 percent of them attending school only part-time, 51 percent of them being first-generation college students, and nearly 60 percent of them living below the poverty line.

For institutions of higher education, the work of changemaking education requires intentionality, integrating strategy with the community context and culture (especially when, as in our case, as a predominantly two-year institution, our efforts to engage students have a shorter pathway than in four-year schools). We stand strong on the belief that the very individuals whose life experiences are often most impacted by the many social and environmental challenges we seek to fix are those most valuable in the efforts to design solutions. Instead of viewing our student demographics and shorter academic pathways as barriers to our changemaking commitment, therefore, our strategy is to leverage them as assets. Talent is universal, but opportunity is not, so our design principles for embedding changemaking across the College focus on accessibility, inclusion, and clarity. How can any student,

regardless of academic pathway or discipline, be given the opportunity to learn about and exercise changemaking? How can we engage as many College stakeholders as active agents in the broader work? And how can we simplify and focus the call to action to focus on the specific changemaker attributes that can be integrated across the spectrum of learning experiences?

Most of all, our collegewide strategy is designed to address the kind of gap I saw emerge that afternoon with Jacob, the gap between knowing what could be done and moving into action. This can be a gap for our students as much as it can be for us as educators.

As a commitment to all of our students, regardless of their background or pathway to MDC, our strategy begins by recognizing how elements of our students' experiences may keep them from stepping into changemaking: counter-narratives or experiences that signal you don't matter or that you can't make a difference, never hearing the power in your own voice while you share your own story, or not understanding how any career pathway can still be associated with positive social or environmental impact. MDC's strategy became the broad invitation to all its students to engage with relationships and experiences at MDC that will teach (or remind) you that "you and your ideas for change matter."

Prioritizing Inclusion to Achieve Clarity

To build our strategy for cultivating changemaking agency, we began by engaging all of our stakeholder groups to understand their perspectives. In speaking with students, faculty, staff, and administrators, we learned what inspired them about embracing changemaking education and also what kept them from fully engaging with it. This not only helped bring us to a common understanding of what changemaking education meant to MDC but we were able to discover what motivated different groups to engage with it. In turn, this process allowed us to construct an operational framework that signals MDC's commitment to our students' education as changemakers.

Once past the initial work of assessing the landscapes of meaning and motivation, we continued to leverage the diversity of roles to sustain the work. We established a distributed and diverse college ecosystem, a "team of teams" model whose structure reflects our intentional accessibility. Our eight campuses have "change teams" composed of different members of the various campus departments to ensure college-wide representation of every discipline and department. This broad cross-representation also reminds us of the different groups of students with whom we all work, keeping *their* experience at the center.

With our strategy set and our teams in place, our next phase aimed to identify the clearest call to action. An interdisciplinary team of faculty and program administrators began the detailed work of identifying MDC's set of changemaking attributes, the essential skills and mindset that would be at the center of the learning journey at MDC, which would help us ensure consistency and alignment in designing and offering learning opportunities for all students. After an 18-month process that involved many of feedback loops and iterations, the workgroup landed on the four attributes of empathy, reflection, resilience, and action. This seemingly simple set was intentionally selected based on the design principles of our strategy and meant to reaffirm our commitment to closing that gap towards agency for our students by leveraging the power in each of their stories.

Relationship as Tools for Transformation

"If objectives are only good intentions they are worthless," as Peter Drucker has put it; "They must degenerate into work." While it has been essential to build frameworks, cultivate the right skills and attributes, and prepare for the curricular and co-curricular experiences of our students, the most effective tools in delivering this work are the relationships we build with our students. The people powering the educational experience for our students at MDC are often the most significant factor in helping them understand and internalize the lessons. Our educators at MDC look much like our students, both in terms of demographics and life experiences: with almost 83 percent of our total employees representing Black or Hispanic origins, we share similar stories with them, not just stories of challenge, hardship, and transition, but also stories of rich cultures, values, and cherished beliefs.

The challenges of being an "other" are also mixed in with the joys of diverse experiences. When our faculty, staff, and administrators are willing and able to be vulnerable in sharing their journeys with students, what transpires through this social currency of empathy is powerful. This deeper connection allows for the cultivation of agency in a way that can change people's own lives first, leading them down the path for more impact. As Diana Wells explains, "Leadership in Ashoka's Everyone A Changemaker world requires recognizing and enabling agency directed toward the good of all. It is this foundation from which people can change their own lives and the lives of those close to them in an authentic, trust-based way. Trust inspires trust and enables ordinary people to do extraordinary things."

Our faculty, staff, and administrators serve the critical roles of allies and mentors, paired with the trust that Wells describes. Mentors support as equals, offering guidance but listening empathetically in order to understand context. They believe in their students' potential and abilities, even when the students do not, and they can serve as pillars to ground students, ladders to help them reach new heights, or bridges to connect them to other people and experiences. Allies leverage their positional power to help bring

equity to a group that has not been afforded the same positional power. Allies help others be seen, heard, and understood, signaling in different ways that they belong. In changemaking, our role as allies can help students experience opportunities where they can exercise their agency, and especially feel that their voices are not only welcomed, but needed. The allies our students find at MDC help them by scaffolding towards a different mindset so that the collective framework can shift.

Changemakers in Their Own Time

"Are you going to be there?" Jacob asked.

I had been planning on attending the hackathon, but I cemented my commitment the moment he asked. We talked about what the day might look like and what he might expect.

That morning, Jacob came and sat next to us for the morning welcome and when we learned that we'd be split up into different groups, I reassured him he had everything he needed to be successful that day. "Just do you," I said.

Along with a fellow MDC student, Jacob and his team of law enforcement officers and attorneys won first place for their solution, an empathy-based virtual reality app for training/educating both police officers and local citizens to better understand the "other side" of daily exchanges. Their live demo of this at the hackathon created a stir within the audience, garnering palpable excitement and hope. While debriefing over some mac and cheese later that evening, he shared that despite some of his initial concerns, he felt proud of what they had accomplished together. He also admitted being surprised by the different misconceptions he had had about the potential experience in general, namely that people were "just real" like him and that everyone was really trying to collaborate. He was struck that others would actually listen to him, especially those in position of power who were willing to expose the flaws in their own thinking and doing. That day, for all of us, was eye-opening.

For me, this experience with Jacob represented the potential we see in our students to become active agents of change as well as the gaps we don't see that can prevent it. That moment in my office had me wondering how often it happened, how many moments we miss listening to the stories of our others because we aren't asking the right questions, because we're too busy, because we assume we know the answer, or because we wouldn't know what to do with their realities if they were shared with us. But what a teachable moment it was for us both. Supporting changemakers is more than just a matter of skill-building and participating in the right opportunities. The collective work of changemaking

highlights our shared responsibility to change our own mindsets, too, and to be trustworthy in supporting the entire process.

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