

Democracy's College

Episode 18: Bronx Community College's Democracy Project

- Heather Fox:** Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu. In this episode, Fredrick Douglass Dixon from OCCRL talks with Dr. Mara Lazda, Professor of History, and Dr. Lisa Amowitz, Professor of Art and Music, about Bronx Community College's Democracy Project.
- Fredrick:** If you'd introduce yourselves.
- Mara Lazda:** I'll start. My name is Mara Lazda. I'm an assistant professor in the history department at Bronx Community College and have been here for about 6 or 7 years.
- Lisa Amowitz:** I am Lisa Amowitz, and I'm a full professor in the art and music department. I'm the deputy chair of the art department, I'm the curriculum coordinator for our digital arts program, and I have been here for 20 years.
- Fredrick:** If you'd just give me your thoughts on what sparked the Democracy Project, and how did you get started?
- Mara Lazda:** The spark came in the fall and winter of 2015, to connect the events, because there are several events that pointed to a growing division in American society. Just to name a few, the numerous incidents of police shootings of African Americans, the terrorist attacks in San Bernardino, but what was most concerning was really the language that came out of these events, the stereotyping, the misinformation, and the racism. When this became a part of the presidential campaign, it was really, we felt, a time to act. The first step was the founding of a conversation series that was sponsored by the Office of the President, President Isekenegbe, at the Bronx Community college.
- Over a few semesters, we created several student-centered conversations on topics like Islamophobia, mass media and stereotyping, grassroots activism, and so on.
- Lisa Amowitz:** For me it was, what I was saying to Mara before, was that it was like we were walking different paths parallel to each other, reacting in our own ways to the events before the election. A lot of it was invisible to me what was going on in this campus. I was having a lot of conversations with my students. There was a lot of angst; there was a lot of anxiety. After the election, the president held a forum that was incredibly well attended. I mean, the room was packed,

hundreds of people, and I just wanted to do something. I wanted something more visible on the campus. I felt that, like Mara said, there was a lot of misinformation, a lot of anxiety, a lot of students feeling endangered in some way, and there didn't seem to be anything visible on the campus.

So I spoke up, and I said, "We should do something. We should create a flyer, whatever." I didn't know, and that's when Mara approached me, and she said, "You know, we should talk." That conversation that we had was where our paths crossed, and we suddenly were in the same space, and we said, "Well, let's move forward," and then we started to draw people into whatever we thought it might be. At that point, it sounds like it was all planned, but it was very organic.

Fredrick:

One thing we'd like to discuss is the mission and the goals of the Democracy Project.

Mara Lazda:

I can tell you the overarching goals, and then I think Lisa can give you a sense more specifically about what one of the central events looks like. One of the goals of the Democracy Project is to coordinate civic engagement initiatives. One of the things that we learned from these conversations and these forums, that people were organized, and they were reacting, but not in a united manner. Really, the Democracy Project hopes to be an umbrella organization for civic engagement. Secondly, we also want to strengthen the connection between the academic curriculum and students' professional and personal experiences.

All the events that we have ask students to engage with questions on democracy, of participation in civil society, and so really we hope that these events will reinforce to students how what they do in class, whether it's in history, or criminal justice, or math, or in art is connected to their work, their lives, and their communities outside of the college. We also hope that faculty will integrate the events into their curriculum, and the last and overarching goal is to build an inclusive campus community. Democracy Project events really emphasize diversity, whether it's ethnic, or socioeconomic, or political.

And so, we anticipate that building this kind of community will also contribute to student success and retention, and there's plenty of scholarship on that as well. When students are more invested, and they see the effects of their work, they also draw larger connections to their professional goals as well.

Fredrick:

Thank you, both of you, for those answers. I know that you have very distinct activities, ones such as We the People, which is an interactive art program. How did you go about creating that, and did you fulfill what you thought was a desired goal through that project and others like that?

Lisa Amowitz:

When you sit here in the studio, it all sounds very methodical and very organized. It was really born of a passion, and a need, and a way, and an

exploration. How do we fill this need? From my point of view as an artist and a designer, I felt like nobody felt really comfortable talking about all the things that were on their mind. I just had the sense of students walking around with this incredible anxiety. I had students just shaking with fear and dread, and I had an interaction in one of my classes with a Muslim student where this fear came out. We have a lot of Muslim students; we have a lot of undocumented students; we have immigrant students. I am Jewish. We have students of color. We just had everything, and I just thought, "God, are we talking about this?" I didn't feel we were. I just said, "Well, how?"

So when Mara and I had this conversation, I also started having conversations with certain core students that I really related [to] well. As a matter of fact, this is something I think we can talk about. Two of my students, after the election, came in to me, and we started to talk. They said, "Our professor told us about authoritarian governments, and World War II, and all of this stuff." Do you know who the professor was? It was Professor Mara Lazda. So those students were already informed by her, and those were the students that became the core of We the People.

There was a student by the name of Stephanie Martinez, and we started to meet on the side. We met as a group, and we were all starting to try to fit. Stephanie's point of view is, "How do we get my peers, my fellow Millennials, to understand that they have a stake in all of this?" That was her question, and that's the question we asked of her. When we all started to meet, she said, "It has to be interactive." This was the student. She goes, "People have to participate." And at the same time, her boyfriend was at City College, and they have an expression wall there, just like the one in Union Square Station in New York City, where people would post their thoughts down.

Somehow we all like that. We go, "Wow, that's cool. How do we do something like that?" This young lady, really, she went home and she said, "I think it should be where we all write our thoughts, and the implement we write our thoughts with becomes something else." It just grew out of that. She wanted it to be the Statue of Liberty, so the We the People installation is a giant, 20-foot sign with the words, "We the people, out of many, one." And you write your thoughts on a post-it note, and with that pencil the sign is perforated. You put your pencil in the sign, and in a way for us it became, "Out of many, one." That was the whole crux of it. That's We the People.

Mara Lazda:

It's this art installation, but it's transformed the space itself. This is in the lobby of a building that hadn't been used that much, but since we have this commitment to civic engagement and to the community, there have been other debates held, other talks held, and it's something that we really look forward to developing.

Lisa Amowitz:

Now, it's still there, and students can just go hang out there. It's a lounge, but there's a lot of people that seem to be planning events in that space.

Fredrick: Can you tell us a bit more about any other novel and engaging features of this initiative?

Mara Lazda: In addition to having this visual statement on a commitment to recognizing diversity, and out of diversity we are community, we see this as an information space. For example, we march [on] Constitution Day on September 19th, this fall, and as a part of the Constitution, it was really a reflection of people's rights, of individual rights. As a part of the information component of that event, we have local activists come and talk to the students about "know your rights." Specifically with encountering members of law enforcement, but also, more broadly, knowing what your constitutional rights are, and how to protect those rights.

The second event that we had was, in New York, we had a vote on a constitutional convention.

Lisa Amowitz: For the New York State Constitution.

Mara Lazda: For the New York State Constitution, working with the New York Public Interest Research Group, who really organized this event. We held a debate that was also moderated by a student at BCC, right? We're trying to transform this into an information space, so that people who are seeking out information, they know where to go.

Lisa Amowitz: We're trying to be careful to keep it civic and not political, per se. I'm pretty engaged politically outside of here, but I'm walking a fine line to make sure that I don't take a political stand. It just seems like it's becoming pervasive now, because there's a visible space for it, and that's what we want it to feel. We don't want it to feel like, "Oh, it's like a special event." We want it to just be there all the time, part of the fabric of the college itself, civic engagement.

Fredrick: It sounds as if what you have pulled together with the Democracy Project has been transformational in space, and time, and attitude. Can you tell us how this has been received, how the Democracy Project has been received by students, faculty, staff, and administrators?

Mara Lazda: I think, as the word implies, what democracy implies, it really has been a participatory event, and we have received and sought out support on several levels. We began with conversations among faculty, but the college president, President Isekenegbe, has been enthusiastic and supportive from the start.

Lisa Amowitz: And comes to our events.

Mara Lazda: And comes to our events and provides some of the necessary financial support. Also, as you said, the visibility, and the unity of seeing this as a college-wide initiative, this is our central goal. This is student driven, right? You can't have democracy from above, as it were. Students form the center, the core audience

of all of our events, and they drive our commitment to this project. At every event we try to get their feedback, because we're always thinking about what the next event can be, what's the next event that the students want. Let me just share two of the reactions that we've had.

For example, one of the events we had last year was in grassroots activism where we had local Bronx NGOs and organizations come and talk about becoming active in your community. One of the students afterwards said, "What I learned today is that we all have power." You can just start with you, you can start with a friend, but you just need to start with a small group, and that power grows. In addition to that, at every single event, one of the main comments we have is, "You need to have more events like this." Really, it has been a positive reaction on all levels.

Lisa Amowitz:

Yeah. And for me, I think what's really important about it is, I just feel like, I don't think either of us want to feel like we're in the position of force-feeding information to our students, like from on high, as Mara said. We want them to feel just that it's theirs. We want them to have ownership of it. We want it to feel friendly, and welcoming, and that it's theirs, not ours. I'm a way older person; who wants to hear it from me? I just feel like if it's there, and something for them to interact with, and voice their own thoughts, they're going to be more likely to embrace this.

That's my theory. My approach is always to make things visible, approachable, attractive, immersive, because I don't think people want to have stuff forced down their throat. They want to feel like they're being invited, and not forced.

Fredrick:

Has there been any pushback, or major struggles and fault lines in implementing this type of social justice educational program at the college?

Mara Lazda:

As far as struggles, I would say maybe the challenges are ones that are practical, that many community colleges face. That is, as Lisa already indicated, limited time and resources. I mean, faculty have heavy teaching loads. Our students have incredibly busy lives: family responsibilities, work responsibilities, other socioeconomic challenges. Faculty also do have to cover the material in their curriculum. That's the one challenge, is to find the time for both faculty and for students. One of the ways that we try to address that is to really make it a part of the curriculum. Students have said that as well: "I'd like to participate, but if it's not part of the curriculum, I can't participate."

Lisa Amowitz:

Exactly.

Mara Lazda:

I mean, that's a challenge. It's little by little, step by step, and that's maybe one of the reasons we haven't grown as quickly as we'd like. That's a very practical and real challenge the community colleges have to consider. As far as pushback, we have received a comment about pushback. It's pushback in the sense that, on an individual basis, I have received emails from students who question

whether they are really included in this conversation. I mean, in other words, we are very ethnically, socioeconomically, religious, and politically diverse, so there's been some pushback from students who want their conservative views, to make sure that they're welcome, or people who are pro-life, or any one of those political positions.

But it's not quite pushback, I would say. I would say that's what drives us. What we do in those instances, we say, "Please come to those conversations," because that's what we want to be able to do, is to open up a space, as Lisa said, that's not political in the sense that it's partisan. It's political in the sense that it's civic, that we need to know how to talk to each other and how to listen to each other's experiences.

Lisa Amowitz: Yeah.

Fredrick: Going forward, where do you guys envision the Democracy Project, let's say in the next 5 years?

Mara Lazda: Well, my main goal is the institutionalization of civic engagement at BCC. In other words, creating an intellectual and organizational structure for the long term. As we've mentioned throughout this conversation, that we've had support across campus, but it's largely right now still driven by . . .

Lisa Amowitz: Ad hoc.

Mara Lazda: Yeah. Well, it's driven by interested individuals. And I think my promise, and our promise to students in many of these events, is that this is not one event that you've attended, but rather this is a change. This is an opportunity and conversation that we will continue. That is one, institutionalization, and so what I envision is really the establishment of a civic engagement program that would become better integrated into the curriculum.

Lisa Amowitz: Yeah. Just the way the college talks about global citizens, I feel like we need to be local citizens. People need to understand that they need to know what's going on at the local, grassroots level, and to engage all stakeholders, to break down. I think I did mention before, but we felt that there were a lot of silos on the campus where people were doing many things but not communicating with each other. I think Mara and I are of one mind when it comes to this. We want to see it all bleed together and become part of one movement.

Fredrick: What call to action or advice would you share with our listeners, relative to fostering student agency, cultivating socially just educational environments, and promoting civic engagement on community college campuses?

Mara Lazda: I think that it, really, in order to engage students and engage the community, this has to be student-centered. You can't dictate student engagement, or define it along one party line or one issue line, but rather you try to engage

across many levels. The second piece of advice I would say is, think ahead, in a practical way. If you're developing a program, each event should already be linked to the next one. I see it not as a civic engagement event, but rather as a civic engagement movement. What are you thinking for the long term?

Lisa Amowitz:

I think also, it's almost like we have fertilized the soil. We've created a good climate for this kind of environment to grow, while swimming together. I don't know if that makes it clear, but I feel like we're just starting, and we can do more and more, and more are joining in and moving along with us.

Mara Lazda:

I think also, a final piece of advice, knowing Lisa provides the passion, is the practicality that I think if you want people to participate, then think about this accessibility. Give them the space, give them the time, and think about how to make it happen, not just the passion they have.

Lisa Amowitz:

Right. I find myself in this position a lot with the different organizations that I'm involved with, that design, people don't really understand that design is about taking ideas and messages and making it accessible and reaching people's hearts. It's almost like you have to brand it. I don't know how to put it any other way. It becomes a brand, like the Democracy Project has literally become a brand. I look at it from a design point of view that I wanted to create a brand for it, that people would see colors that we use, they would see the graphics that we use, and every time we do something, there it is again.

I just feel how it's working for the people who are involved. We all, it pulls us together. It unites us, and we just think of democracy, of having a brand here at BCC.

Mara Lazda:

It's a banner for people to fly.

Fredrick:

I just want to salute you, because I think that it's very important the way that the outcomes have been participatory, and you have seen an inclusionary vision, through your students, through the faculty, all the way up to the president, is a reminder that what you guys are doing is very important. Before we go, I want you guys to have a chance to give us some final thoughts, something about a vision in the future.

Mara Lazda:

At the community colleges, and the experience our students bring, the skills they bring are sometimes not valued enough. In other words, what really drives this project, I think, goes back to the students and the very sophisticated sense of social justice that they bring with them to campus. My final thought would be encouraging people to think about the richness that the community college actually offers, and students offer, for civic engagement.

Lisa Amowitz:

Yeah, absolutely. For my part, I want our students to feel like they have a stake in things. I want them to understand their own power, and that's something sometimes I don't see, and sometimes it's a conversation between students.

Some feel it, some don't, some take this sort of nihilistic attitude like, "Oh, what's the difference?" It's all kinds of points of view. I will end with one particular student who bemoaned what she felt to be the really unmasking of all this racism that she feels has been there all along, and I said to her, "Are you worried about that?" She said to me, she goes, "No, I'm not worried. I'm not worried because it's been there all along, and now everybody sees it, and now we can really work on it." I thought, "Wow, that is an outstanding point of view," and that's a voice from her, and I want to hear her voice, and I want to hear everybody's voice. I know this particular lady; there's no way anybody is going to keep her quiet and not get her engaged. I want more and more people to feel like she does. She has a voice, and she has power, and she's doing it with her art, but she is also doing it with her role. That's what I want to see.

I want to see people's voices out there. I want them to feel if they join together there's power in that. I want to develop a bunch of very fierce graphic designers with civic conscience, from my point of view.

Fredrick: This has been very informative, and we thank you so much.

Lisa Amowitz: Thank you.

Mara Lazda: Thank you.

Lisa Amowitz: Bye bye.

Heather Fox: For more information about Bronx Community College's Democracy Project, we recommend that you visit the [Democracy Project web page](#). For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrll.illinois.edu/democracy, or send in via Twitter @OCCRL. Tune in next month, when Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL talks with Dr. Z Nicolazzo, an assistant professor of adult higher education and a faculty associate in the study of women, gender, and sexuality at Northern Illinois University, about the use of transgendered community to further wedge politics. Background music for this product is provided by Dub Lab. Thank you for listening, and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.