

A student's take on the BC class

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Whenever I mention that I'm taking a Public Policy course called "Border Crossing," people usually assume I am in a class about immigration issues. In fact, the Border Crossing class attracts students interested in a great deal of issues, of which immigration is just one (or could be one). What distinguishes the class is that instead of examining these issues from a distance – through a lens or discipline such as history or sociology – we are meant to find within them a relevance to our own lives and our future work in attempting to create social change. The absence of identifying markers draws people in who are not just looking to advance in a specific field but are hoping to gain some new perspective that needs to be sought elsewhere.

No one in the class would label themselves experts in what they came to learn. On the contrary, Border Crossing students – future SOL students – are inquisitive. They are interested in social change. They come from a diverse set of interests, majors and backgrounds. The class wouldn't work without all of these things, because although we're given books and handouts, we – the students – are the material. The subject matter or the 'lessons learned' from the readings are secondary to our reactions: how we decide to relate them back to our own experience, and how we choose to convey them to the rest of the class during discussion.

As a class, we are given a lot to do. However, minimal technical expertise is required. We are encouraged to find a way to make use of existing resources and rely on our own wits. For example, every Border Crossing class features a 4-week group research project for a community organization. In our year, our task was to research strategies for seeking affordable housing policies. Few of us had backgrounds in public policy studies, economics or any related subject, but we were dedicated to getting the job done. After some crunch-time meetings, some of them in dorm rooms, we were able to search in every direction to find creative (if rather unorthodox) solutions.

Discussion is the central activity of the course. On many occasions, the professor divides us into pairs or small groups so that we can gain a sense of someone else's perspective on the reading. When we reconvene, we have a better idea of how we want to influence the discussion. This is what makes Border Crossing a leadership course – a designation that, initially, I did not understand. Leadership can be practiced in group discussion by steering the conversation in a direction you feel has value. Letting others know your point of view is also useful to other classmates in their development as leaders. The first obstacle is finding something that one feels needs to be said. The second is summoning up the courage to say it. Upon arrival to class, it is our responsibility to be prepared to do both.

The notorious, much-fretted over "point-of-view" assignment (or POV) brings together developing and communicating a perspective. Simple instructions – argue a point of view on a reading in a short essay to be shared with the class – befuddle many. In the past, most of us learned "communication skills" as being the elements of strong writing – sound evidence, good organization. Here, the goal is not just to write well, but to bring forward an insight that is surprising and provocative.

While the POV assignment takes a while to master, what is immediately satisfying about the course is that it brings together a collection of students with diverse interests but similar goals of influencing the world. We fell into natural discussion during class about controversial events on campus – such as coverage of the adhan (or call to prayer), the Chapel Hill shooting and talks on Martin Luther King Day. Being together with this group made systemic change at Duke seem the slightest bit more possible.