

***Practicing Pluralism: Interactive Theater, Campus Climate and Academic Freedom  
at Portland Community College, Portland Oregon***

by Jeannie LaFrance and Dr. Jan Abu Shakrah

The lone African-American student in a classroom sinks lower in her chair as the class watches a movie about the history of racism against African-Americans in Oregon. As a racist cartoon image appears on the screen the class erupts into laughter. The laughter quickly subsides to an uncomfortable silence while all eyes turn to the African-American student who hastily gathers her books and leaves the room. The teacher chases the student and awkwardly apologizes. “Stop!” yells someone from the audience. The audience? The scene is actually Portland Community College (PCC) students participating in the Illumination Project – a theater program that tackles issues of oppression through interactive classroom and community performances. Members of the project – a central aspect of PCC’s Ford Foundation Difficult Dialogues Grant – write original interactive plays depicting incidents of oppression in student’s lives.

The goal of *Practicing Pluralism* is to create a campus environment where controversial topics can be discussed in an atmosphere of open academic inquiry with respect for diverse people and perspectives. The project will facilitate a college-wide approach to promoting pluralism at an increasingly diverse college and will build on PCC’s innovative Illumination Project (IP) – a year-long academic and interactive theater program that fosters a climate of equality, justice, and respect for all people at PCC.

Historically, Oregon has been home to a predominantly white, Christian population. However, in the last several years, the Portland metro area’s religious and racial diversity has increased significantly, as has debate over the connection between sexuality and

religion. Between 1990 and 2000, the area's ethnic minority population increased 119%, more than four times the rate of increase in the overall population during the same time. Over 20% of the Portland area population is now minority and over 80% of immigrants who arrive in Oregon each year come to Portland.

Portland has become a place of dichotomies: The cradle of the Patriot Movement and a white supremacist Christian-identified movement (*NW Coalition for Human Dignity*), as well as one of the most welcoming havens for transgendered people (*Willamette Week, 2/6/02*). While Multnomah County, which encompasses most of Portland, was one of the first U.S. jurisdictions to offer same-sex marriage licenses, Oregon has an extensive history of legal attempts to deny civil rights to the sexual minority community, with over 25 local and statewide ordinances and ballot measures proposed over the past 17 years (*Basic Rights Oregon, 2000*), culminating with a 2004 amendment to the Oregon Constitution outlawing same-sex marriage. The rise of these dichotomies and the growing diversity within our community has increased the debate within our college environment about religion, culture, and homophobia and accentuated the need for our faculty, students and staff to enhance their ability to engage in constructive dialogues.

PCC is the largest postsecondary institution in Oregon and one of the largest community colleges in the country, enrolling over 91,000 students in 2004-05. It is a public, two-year college with three comprehensive campuses (Cascade, Rock Creek, and Sylvania) offering lower division college transfer, professional-technical programs and adult, community and developmental education. PCC is the most racially and ethnically diverse college or university in Oregon, with over 25% students of color.

The College's mission is "to provide education in an atmosphere that encourages the full realization of each individual's potential, by offering students of all ages, races, cultures, economic levels, and previous educational experience opportunities for personal growth and attainment of their goals." PCC cannot achieve this mission if students and faculty do not feel comfortable discussing controversial issues. As a community college, PCC serves a large number of students who have been historically underrepresented in higher education: not only are 25% students of color; but nearly 60% of the degree-seeking PCC students are first-generation college students; 5,000 are enrolled in PCC's ESL and ENNL programs; and one out of every five attending PCC at least half-time is low-income. Creating an educational environment where religious and cultural pluralism flourish will help traditionally disenfranchised students feel more supported and continue their education.

The centerpiece of *Practicing Pluralism*, the Illumination Project (IP), was founded in 2001 to address issues of racism and gender oppression on campus by Deborah Evind, coordinator of the PCC Sylvania Women's Resource Center; Claire Oliveros, coordinator of the PCC Multicultural Center; and Jeannie LaFrance, founding director of Act for Action – a nonprofit organization dedicated to the use of theater for education and social justice.

IP's goal is to create a campus climate that is inclusive of a variety of people and ideas and promotes equal access to education. IP annually trains 20 Student Educators who in turn educate the college community. Student Educators take a three-term course sequence covering issues of race, class and gender, community building, conflict resolution and civic engagement. They then write and perform plays reflecting topics

such as anti-Arab/anti-Muslim bias in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> U.S., hate crimes against sexual minorities, date rape, “coming out” as a sexual minority, or race and class issues for first-generation college students. By the time they begin their performances, students are prepared to provide education and leadership around difficult issues.

IP performances are based on a style of theater known as Theater of the Oppressed, a nontraditional theater style used to promote community-centered problem solving. During performances, IP Student Educators perform a play once without interruption. The audience is then invited the second time around to stop the action when they see an act of oppression, substitute themselves for members of the cast and start the action again- this time with the intent of finding a way to deal with the situation effectively. Cast members and audience members alike improvise the new situation as it develops. The intended result is a new understanding among everyone about how to recognize, confront and resolve oppressive situations as they occur. “Our theater really engages the audience,” says Jeannie LaFrance, project co-coordinator. “We invite the audience to become part of the solution to problems our community is facing.”

After each intervention a facilitator debriefs with the audience member, the actors and the rest of the audience, and then the play continues to the next “intervenable” scene. In a realistic yet safe atmosphere actors and audience members rehearse situations in order to build communication skills and understand alternatives. By allowing large numbers of the campus community to participate in problem-solving and to act on their empathy, IP creates a unique, experiential foundation for teaching and learning about difficult issues. Since its inception, IP has reached over 4,500 audience members, approximately 95% of whom felt the performances prepared them to take action during difficult situations and

to create a more inclusive academic community. “Personally when looking at racism I had my opinion on how things were, and I didn’t really think there was anything I could do about it,” states IP Student Educator Chauntey Cruz who played the African-American student in the play “The Only One,” described at the beginning of this piece. “Race used to be something where I’d hope it wouldn’t come up in conversation. But in doing the Illumination Project I know there is something I can do about racism. I can talk to my friends. I can have open discussion with anybody.”

Faculty members enthusiastically support the work of the IP. Dr. S. Rowan Wolf states, “I have taken most of my classes to the Illumination Project plays and they are a tremendous learning tool. The plays open up dialogue and get students thinking about oppression in their lives and environment. The project is a tremendous service to the college and students. A student shared during class, ‘Over the weekend I had a situation in my apartment complex. I stepped forward and stopped the conflict. The Illumination Project presentation really encouraged me not to stand silent.’”

*Practicing Pluralism* builds on this support for IP, by extending its influence and integrating its principles in a range of new initiatives. The Illumination Project will add a focus on religious pluralism and academic freedom, perform at more venues on PCC’s various campuses, and involve more faculty members to broaden the project’s impact and support greater institutional change. New features introduced by

***Practicing Pluralism*** include:

- Campus-wide forums on academic freedom and religious and cultural pluralism

- Pre and post performance curriculum to accompany Illumination Project performances
- A website in order for faculty to download curriculum materials and have easy access to links and resources on the topic
- Additional workshops at the Teaching and Learning Center on the themes of academic freedom and religious and cultural pluralism
- Learning Communities focused on religious and cultural pluralism

The enhancements to IP's capacity will remain after *Practicing Pluralism* has been completed. IP will have cemented a stronger relationship with faculty, through their active engagement in the development and use of IP-related curriculum and Learning Communities and their attendance at faculty-focused IP performances and TLC workshops. Faculty will improve their skills in facilitating diverse opinions and difficult conversations and ensure that the issues and competencies addressed by IP performances are reinforced in the classroom. Curriculum on religious and cultural pluralism developed through *Practicing Pluralism* will be available to faculty through a website that will be maintained and updated after the grant ends. It will also provide links to resources for staff, students and faculty to gain more information and support on issues of pluralism and academic freedom. The IP connection to other PCC campuses will also be firmly established. Similarly, IP staff will continue to work with the TLC Coordinators to offer IP-related workshops.

In order to increase capacity of other institutions to replicate IP, PCC will develop a training DVD and guidebook on how to replicate the IP model, disseminate these materials to other educational institutions, develop a website so that others can access

updated IP/*Practicing Pluralism* curriculum and resources. We will also be taking *Practicing Pluralism* performances and materials to local high schools and colleges in the Portland area and local, regional and national conferences.

*Practicing Pluralism* is co-coordinated by Jeannie LaFrance and Dr. Jan Abu Shakrah. As the Illumination Project coordinator Ms. LaFrance also has over 20 years experience using theater as a vehicle for constructive community dialogue. She holds a BA in English and Theater from Lewis and Clark College. Dr. Abu Shakrah is the faculty chair of the PCC Sylvania Economics, Political Science and Sociology Department and the Muslim Student Association staff advisor. She has been a leader on peace and conflict resolution in the Middle East and Portland. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

PCC expects *Practicing Pluralism* to affect institutional change, in particular an improved campus climate supportive of different religions, cultures, and academic freedom. Anticipated long-term changes include fewer incidents of bias and censorship and increases in the number of student unions and clubs reflecting a variety of cultures and religions. Furthermore, evaluation of *Practicing Pluralism* activities will inform the ongoing work of the PCC President's Diversity Committee.

“I have seen the difference the Illumination Project has made to many audience members who come to watch our plays and participate in them. I truly feel that through this type of theater we can work together towards making a positive difference.” - Kirthie Bookhan, Student Educator