

Fostering Social Change through Storytelling and Community Collaboration

with Antoine Coulombe (UBC School of Social Work) and Lama Mugabo (Building Bridges with Rwanda)

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee

0:05

This is the Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast highlighting community-engaged partnerships within and outside the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. This episode features Lama Mugabo who is a community planner and the Founding Director of Building Bridges with Rwanda and one of the Founding Directors of Hogan Alley's Society. As well as Antoine Coulombe who is an Assistant Professor of Teaching at the UBC School of Social Work. As a social worker, educator and community organizer, his interests include queering social work education, equity, inclusion and accessibility in social work education and community-engaged learning, and community organizing. In this podcast, Antoine and Lama talk about a range of topics related to community organizing and their work together, including how Lama's sharing of experiences in the classroom sheds light on untold African histories, and the use of storytelling as a tool to educate as well as to empower future community organizers and leaders.

Lama Mugabo

1:11

Yes, my name is Lama Mugabo. I'm a community planner. I'm a founding director of Building Bridges with Rhonda, a non-profit organization based in Vancouver. BBR's mission is to empower communities by facilitating cross cultural exchanges of reconciliation knowledge, fostering understanding, healing, and unity. And I'm also the one of the founding directors of Hogan's Alley Society, another non-profit dedicated to advancing the social, political, economic, and cultural well-being of people of African descent in Metro Vancouver. My research interest focuses on exploring ways to meet the needs of Vancouverites regarding the history of people of African descent while also creating content that broadens perspectives and enriches professional practices.

Antoine Coulombe

2:14

Bonjour. Hi, everyone. My name is Antoine Coulombe. My pronouns are he and they. I serve at the School of Social Work as an Assistant Professor of Teaching. And also, I'm the chair of the Bachelor of Social Work. I'd like to say that I'm a social worker. I'm a community organizer. I'm an educator, and I'm learning to be a researcher now in my career. A significant portion of my work focuses on teaching social work, and I also lead different initiatives, which address topics around queering social work education, exploring issues around equity, inclusion, and accessibility in teaching and learning social work.

And in my teaching, I also try to include more and more community-engaged learning, where I create a connection with community partners, which I find is very beneficial to our students to understand real life applications of social work and community organizing. First time I reached out to Lama Mugabo, we were right in the middle of the pandemic. I was meeting with students online and I knew I needed to bring people in our classroom to make the experience more interesting. At

that point, I was teaching community organizing and I have a lot of experience as a Francophone and as a queer community organizer, but my experience is also limited. So, I wanted to reach out to one of our community leaders in Vancouver and I learned about Lama Mugabo's, work and I reached out to him and we had our first conversation and that's how our partnership began. I believe that was four or five years ago actually.

Lama Mugabo

3:47

Yes, it does. Yes, when Antoine contacted me, it was refreshing because of the subject matter and what his interest was, but also connected with him in terms of culture. You know, we're both Francophone. I come from Rwanda, which was former Belgian colony and I grew up speaking French. I also live in Montreal, Montreal North, where Antoine lived. So, we connected very well and I was pleased to come and speak to his students and I've done a lot of community engagement. So, for me coming back to UBC, my alumni. That was, that was a treat, and I've really enjoyed working with Antoine since.

Antoine Coulombe

4:34

Right at the beginning, Lama asked me to think about how we were creating the partnership, and that was an important question, that I wanted to also embrace because as we work with community partners in academia, I think it's important to learn how we build relationships with community that are reciprocal and respectful and, that can be meaningful on both sides. So that was really an important part of how we created our partnership and being intentional.

Lama Mugabo

5:04

Yeah, I believe that students greatly benefit from my lived and professional experience as a community planner in Vancouver, especially considering the limited representation of African history and experiences in BC education system. So, my experience, my presence in the classroom fills a vital gap, offering students a unique insight into the rich, yet often overlooked contributions of black communities.

Antoine Coulombe

5:37

Yeah, that's an important part for me of, I guess what motivated me at the beginning is, I have experience as a social worker and community organizer in a diversity of contexts, but my experience is also limited by those contexts. Often, I needed to recognize my expertise, but at the same time, the limits of my expertise. So having a guest speaker who has your experience, and it was just so meaningful because your story in many ways, completed my story does giving students a fuller understanding, but I guess the unexpected benefit that I ended up having from it is we ended up having a lot of conversations throughout the years where you were sharing with me stories from your perspectives, your experience, and I was sharing with your stories from my experience as well. And we embarked on this journey of curiosity, of questions and answers. So, I guess I had growth at the same time through that experience as well.

Lama Mugabo

6:40

And I must say, you know, working with students has been a very enlightening for me, because they ask questions about the work I do, and through our conversation, I believe they learn valuable



insights, because I talk about the downtown side, this, you know, neighborhood in Vancouver, which is considered to have the poorest postal code in Canada.

A neighborhood that has really been neglected or misunderstood by all three levels of government focusing on housing or lack of housing. We're experiencing housing crisis and so we're talking about rent eviction, gentrification, and tactics that people who are vulnerable are using to fight back the power. And also coming from Rwanda and living in Vancouver has really opened me up in terms of understanding the power that citizens have to change when they're confronting decision makers and the tactics they use. And of course, the victories that have resulted out of this, so it's very enriching. I realize that these students are studying, they're getting theory, so the community offers them the practice. And so, it's been really a win-win situation.

Antoine Coulombe

8:15

Yeah, storytelling plays a big part on how to learn community organizing. And maybe we can summarize community organizing as a profession that strives to work with groups at, you know, building power of thinking, but also power of taking action in one's community and these concepts can be quite abstract when you're not familiar with social movements or projects that are being built. So really having a storytelling approach, which is one of the main roles that Lama you've played in teaching is you bring in real life stories to our students and share those stories through different ways with them to enhance their learning.

Lama Mugabo

8:54

Absolutely, I'm a big believer of storytelling as a planning tool. Because I bring stories of, you know, from Rwanda, from downtown East side. I tell the story of Hogan's Alley, a black neighborhood that most Vancouverites have no clue that existed. There used to be a black community in Vancouver, which unfortunately was displaced through the urban renewal policy, a practice that was done across North America where municipalities were targeting inner city communities using capital projects like viaducts or highways. And also, as a community planner, this is very important for me to share stories that people have no idea about. And so, when I take people on a walking tour, they become enlightened and they never walk the streets the same way because they learn about the history of these streets. So, it's very powerful.

Antoine Coulombe

09:58

Yeah, it was powerful for me, Lama, to hear those stories as well because it, it really helped me understand what happened to our Black communities in Vancouver. And in some ways, I was more informed, more aware, and in some ways, I hope it's making me a better ally in understanding what's happening. And it brought in so many questions about what can we do as social workers now? What is our role with when a population has been, I would say erased so much by policy and political decisions in the city of Vancouver. So, I'm very thankful about that.

Lama Mugabo

10:36

The erasure. It's a really powerful word and it's, it really illustrates what, what happened or what's happening. Because when you don't tell the story, when you don't teach African history in elementary school, in secondary school, post-secondary, people don't know. And when they don't



know, they make uninformed decisions. And you see this through relationship with the police high rates of street checks, or carding, or you know, when they stop you and they ask you questions because they're racial profiling you.

And so, storytelling has been really useful when I go to schools, elementary and post-secondary schools, secondary schools, to talk with students. And this has paid off because I remember during the pandemic, there was a, you know, the tragedy that happened in Minnesota where George Floyd was publicly lynched. Where this really engaged a lot of people, not only in, in the U.S., but in Canada and Europe, people began to question and actually helped understand the word, the expression, Black Lives Matter. Because Black Lives Matter is not a slogan, it's a reality. So, right here in Vancouver, at the height of this national reckoning, or racial reckoning, young people in Vancouver East, set up a blockade on the viaducts for two days and two nights. For me, that's really allyship because these young people in their 20s have so much to do. They could have done other things, but they chose to give us the time, put their lives on the line in our support. And for me, I'll never forget that. So, I like to share that story because I see those students in the classrooms today and the questions they ask, and they have thirst of knowledge. They want to learn. They want to hear the story. I appreciate this collaboration.

Antoine Coulombe

12:56

We feel a certain, I would say, maybe responsibility of, training a new generation of people who know how to organize communities, build leadership because a lot of social movements we've been involved with, they need that renewal constantly. So, one of the things that brought us a bit together is we both have that wish, I guess to support younger generations in building leadership. And the way we do this is actually by teaching, and by engaging with them in class, and offer them opportunities to build real life projects and engage in experiences of leadership.

Lama Mugabo

13:33

Absolutely. Younger generations are more open. They're wiser than we are, I think, because they're less, I would say less prejudiced. I see a lot of intermarriage across the class and race. And, it's really powerful to see how they engage differently from us, our generation. The example I just gave about Vancouver East youth who put their lives on the line is characteristics of these young people who are different from their parents and who are going to now step into the professional life. So, engaging them in classroom, sharing their stories, empowers them to actually be stronger leaders than we are. And so, it gives me pleasure to work with you and the students.

Antoine Coulombe

14:27

I think we started first as inviting you as a guest speaker. And then, the following years, we were able to secure some funding from the Center for Community Engaged Learning at UBC, which really have been helpful in different ways. And if I recall, you were invited at that point to, yes, come in and, do a talk, but also support one of the teams in their projects. Would you like to share some, one of those projects perhaps?



Lama Mugabo**14:54**

Absolutely. Yeah, so students were interested in learning about how they could support the work we're doing in the community, specifically Hogan's Alley. And, they had to, you know, because they live in Vancouver, they knew people in the community, they've heard about it. And so, questions they were asking and the support they wanted was very fluid. And I recognize that our interaction was very useful in that it, it answered their questions, but also gave them tools to become Players in the community in the future. So that was very beneficial.

Antoine Coulombe**15:35**

Yeah. Wonderful. And one of the teams, if I recall, ended up building a tool for us at the School of Social Work to improve how we include anti-racism into our teaching. It was quite useful as well. And this year we had the opportunity to build a bigger and stronger partnership because, again, of funding from community Centre for Community Engaged Learning. And I was so excited because the project was actually to invite you as a community collaborator in the classroom for the whole semester. And that's been an amazing experience because as we teach the topics from the book, from community organizing and the theories, you can tie in examples from your experience. But at the same time, you also design new material on how do we approach community organizing from an anti-racist perspective again grounding it in your experience here in Vancouver. So, I just want to thank you. It's been an amazing experience this term working with you.

Lama Mugabo**16:35**

I thank you. And I'm glad you mentioned the Center for Community Engaged Learning. I came to our workshop here at UBC in 2019 before the pandemic and I learned about the Center and what they were trying to do. They were saying that the university is an academic, has an academic setting. They need to learn or engage people who live in the community. So, tying, academia, community work and students. It was very valuable and I remember in 2019, the Center funded a project for by Building Bridges with Rwanda where we did a workshop here at UBC showcasing how Rwanda, my country, use traditional knowledge to, rebuild the society after the horror of 1994 where in 100 days a million Tutsis were slaughtered for just being Tutsis.

And so, what has learned, what have we learned from Rwanda? So, we try to show the successes of Rwanda and looking at the progress that we've made in terms of becoming the leaders in the world in terms of female representation in the legislature. Rwanda, a small country in Africa, is leading the world. Being able to reconcile ethnic groups that were fighting at the time, and now building a model country that others emulate. Looking at the power of incorporating young people in decision making. And in fact, as it turns out, I'm going to speak tonight about how Rwanda has used homegrown solutions to transform the society. But that workshop we did really resonate with the community and the students. And we began to realize that knowledge doesn't necessarily flow from North to South, but it can also flow from South to North.

Antoine Coulombe**18:46**

Definitely.



Lama Mugabo**18:47**

That was very powerful. Well.

Antoine Coulombe**18:49**

Yeah. Wonderful. I spoke at the beginning of the podcast about the value of reciprocity when building a relationship with a community partner like yourself, Lama, and I was so excited this term because you invited me to also be part of one of your projects as a member of a community advisory board. And this is so exciting for me because it's giving me new opportunities of experiences that I will benefit because I will learn from them new things that can enhance my teaching afterwards and enhance me as a social worker and community organizer. Would you like to speak a little bit about this wonderful project you're putting together in New Westminster?

Lama Mugabo**19:27**

Thank you. The timing could not have been better because Building Bridges with Rwanda received a seed grant from the Center for Addictions and Mental Health. They're doing a national project engaging young people in participatory action research. And we're focusing on telling the story of African, giving the power for young people, newcomers from Africa, to tell the story of the experience when you're looking at, you know, homelessness, climate change and poverty. We're going to do a video, a 30-minute video to raise awareness of these challenges that people face. And as a community collaborator, I invited you. And I, we realized also that students can benefit. So, our students are going to be part of this project. And so, I'm very delighted about this collaboration.

Antoine Coulombe**20:30**

Yeah, wonderful. Me too. I'm excited to see what's going to happen next. I sometimes describe our relationship as a meander process, where we don't exactly know what we'll be doing and working on the following year. So, one of our rituals is we usually have coffee, somewhere in June or July and discuss how the partnership went last year and what ideas we have for next year. And so I think this is part of how we build our partnership – it's that right mix of reciprocity, but also flexibility or what we like to call our meander process.

Lama Mugabo**21:05**

I guess research, it's supposed to meander because you don't know what's going to happen, but you follow data, you, you know, in this case, the story, and you see where you land. So, it's always exciting because you don't know the end results, but you follow this meandering process. It always works out. I'm very excited, actually, particularly to work with you and the students. And see what we can do to produce this video, which we hope can be a teaching tool, both in the classroom and in the community. And these young people, are African descent, they're newcomers, and they're going to work together to produce this video, which we hope will really shed a light on, on the challenge of housing crisis today. The city of New West is very interested in this because we're building on the work that we've done in the past. New Westminster is the first municipality to build housing for black and indigenous families and so they realize the importance of this work. And they're very excited about it. So, yes, it's very, very exciting to be able to work with young people and produce something that can, we hope, will be useful.



Antoine Coulombe**22:32**

I just wanted to thank you, Lama, for this long-term partnership in many ways you helped me really better understand the history of the Black communities in Vancouver and the stories of perhaps repression and others. But also, you helped me see the beauty of our Black communities in Vancouver. Everything that they enhanced in Vancouver, the culture, the experiences and the important role they played in Vancouver. So, for me, I'm very thankful to have had this experience because it really opened my eyes on better understanding. And I know my understanding is still very limited and so I look forward to continuing our conversations on these topics and building projects again.

Lama Mugabo**23:16**

On November 15th, I'm going to take a group of students and hopefully faculty on a walking tour to really learn about the history of Hogan's Alley. It's a Black neighborhood I talked about in East Vancouver that was displaced. And it's always wonderful to take people along and tell them, share stories and hear their questions. And you know, I learn a lot when I do this work. So, I'm excited and really looking forward to this walking tour on November 15th.

[Outro Theme Music]**Dr. Barbara Lee****23:58**

Thanks for listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! This podcast is a University of British Columbia Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholars initiative funded by the UBC Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange unit. I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the School of Social Work, podcast host, and executive producer. Michelle O'Kane is the podcast producer. Cathy Jiu and Qian Zhou is the podcast producer and editor. Podcast cover was designed by Cathy Jiu. Podcast music is open source, called Motivational Day, Audio Coffee by Denis Kyshchuk. Thanks for listening!

