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**On Wrestling with Alienation and Producing More Progressive Mental
Conceptions that Remake our World: Doing Democracy**

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Given rapidly increasing economic, environmental, political, and socio-cultural changes in what might be called a New Global Era, we examine the possibilities and challenges of democracy-in-action through education. We focus on empowering students to embrace justice and realize democracy-in-action by discussing civic-minded pedagogies and modeling student-centered techniques. Our primary aim is to engender discourse on teaching and learning social justice through student-centered pedagogical approaches that employ dialogic interaction and experiential learning to stimulate critical reflection and empower students.

Recently, Christine Sleeter¹ argued, “Teachers who are committed to democratic teaching are faced with two tasks: negotiating increasingly undemocratic systems in order to find space for democratic teaching, and critically examining what democracy is, including gaps between its ideals and actual practice.”¹ We agree. As the educational terrain, mirroring other social institutions like media, government et al, tips toward what Sleeter terms “corporatocracy,” and away from democracy, we maintain there are few other locations beside schools and its resident workers and students, which have the power to tip the balance in the other direction. Well, it is at least one of the few *non-violent* and more constructive and hopeful options we have.

And, frankly, there is little time to waste. Our work in this essay occurs at two levels. At one level we deal with teacher education. What are the democratic experiences and possibilities that we need to promote which ensure a teacher force poised to reenact such experiences and possibilities in their own classrooms? The K-12 classroom represents the second, but no less important, level of focus.

While we certainly treat these issues, practically, we position them against a theoretical backdrop in order to bring the whole picture into sharper relief. Along with the multi-level consideration of teacher education and K-12 classroom, we frame the struggle for democratic teachers and teaching with the notion of (1) alienation and (2) the formation of more progressive mental conceptions of the world.

In other work Adam Renner, along with Milton Brown,² offer their construction of the “hopeful curriculum,” which is anchored by a belief that the perpetuation and

¹ Christine Sleeter. “Teaching for Democracy in an Age of Corporatocracy.” *TC Record Online* (2008). Accessed January 12, 2010. <http://www.tcrecord.org/content.asp?contentid=14562>.

² Adam Renner and Milton Brown. “A Hopeful Curriculum: Community, Praxis, and Courage.” *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 22 (2006): 101-122.

proliferation of social injustice is foundationalized by a breakdown of community. That is, as we focus more on the individual and less on the collective, more on getting ahead than getting together, we travel an inexorable path toward chaos and conflict.

Alienation, then, is the extent to which our community is broken down. It is the condition in which we find ourselves dislocated from self, society, and the environment mentally, emotionally, and/or physically. Barry Padgett³ divides alienation in the contemporary society into four parts: (1) The relation of the employee to the product of labor; (2) The relation of the employee to the activity of production; (3) The relation of the worker to humanity writ large; and (4) The relation of individual employee from every other worker. A few examples that bridge Padgett's notion of the gap to schooling and the lives of students and teachers might help.

Given alienating forces in our lives as students, we experience existential dislocation by the very nature of more utilitarian and technical forms of education, by the promotion of the economic purposes for getting an education, by competition for perceived scarce economic resources through testing, by competing against classmates for grades and scholarships, by surveillance technologies that inform students that someone is always watching, by vying for entrée into 'good' schools, and by the yoke of student loan debt.

Likewise, as workers/teachers, we are alienated by the constant threat of job/benefit loss; the distancing of us from our students by artificial and scripted curricula; as well as mediating discussion technologies like Live Text, Blackboard, etc.; and the distancing of us from colleagues by the mechanism of merit pay.

Finally, we experience alienation as citizens. We see this trend in the amplification of nationalism, in the relatively banal choices of our theatrical federal elections for which we choose the one who may oppress us the least, in the rather unconscious drive to consume—whether we need the products or not and/or whether or not we might go into debt purchasing them, and in the disconnection from the natural world as we continue to live out of sync with the rhythm of our planet.

Patrick Shannon, providing a specific school example, puts it this way:

Alienation is the process of separation between people and some quality assumed to be related to them in natural circumstances. This process can be consciously recognized (subjective alienation) or be beyond the control of the individual (objective alienation). If you begin with the assumption that reading, teaching and learning are human processes, which are natural

³ Barry Padgett. *Marx and Alienation in Contemporary Society* (New York: Continuum, 2007).

qualities of teachers and students, then, the rationalization of reading instruction requires both types of alienation. The script's standardization of teachers' actions requires that the totality of teaching someone to read is "divided, fixated and synchronized," objectively separating teachers from teaching reading. The definition of learning as test scores separates students from the totality of their learning. Reducing teachers and students to factors in the scripted system of test score production requires that they lose, at least officially, emotional, cultural, and social attachments to the process of teaching and learning and to each other. Such detachments demand a subjective separation of teachers from teaching and students from learning. This does not mean that alienated teachers are uncaring or that alienated students lack engagement. Rather it means that the nature of that engagement is subsumed under the process of rationalization and the possibilities of teaching and learning are artificially directed and severely restricted.⁴

Given all of the proceeding, if we do not arrive at a renewed consciousness about the nature of reality, then our very existence is up for grabs. We are easy fodder for the alienating forces. Our search for truth is short-circuited or replaced with other's truth. Our search for meaning and self-actualization is reconfigured to suit the profit motives of capitalists, convinced by corporate schools and media to pursue a path of least resistance.

Teacher education must help our students come to better grips with the alienating forces in their lives. Students often live at the vortex of the student-worker-citizen identity. Thus, they may most easily be poised to notice and come to grips with a more liberating way to learn, teach, and live. However, this will take a deepened consciousness in order that more progressive mental conceptions of the world might emerge. In the *German Ideology*, Marx submits:

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.⁵

⁴ Patrick Shannon. "A Marxist Reading of Reading Instruction." *Cultural Logic* (2000). Accessed January 12, 2010. <http://clogic.eserver.org/>.

⁵ Karl Marx. "The German Ideology." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1978), 172.

In place of mystical explanations or postmodernist apologies for injustice, we must widen the possibilities toward an apprehension of material reality and reason. Rather than ‘natural’ conceptions of difference and the presumed fear that ensues about the ‘other’, we must consider instead how difference is socially constructed and see, historically, how manufactured difference has been used to divide and conquer. Additionally, we must interrupt the distortion of reality offered by the ruling class and their corporate media, which produces meaning based on consumption (profit for the media shareholders) or spectacle (so-called reality TV that distracts citizens from true material reality). As a consequence, we may have a chance to conceive of more hopeful possibilities for transformation and liberation from the present crisis.

Of course, what prompts this alienating tendency and more restrictive/dogmatic mental conceptions of the world is capitalism. Coming to grips with this reality is a necessity to ultimately overcome alienation, to deepen our consciousness, and to finally work toward community and democracy. We must find our connections to others. We must come to more constructive conceptions of reality and truth. Else, we will live other people’s truths. And, we will complicate any possibility for community and democracy.

We will need to act decisively and with conviction. Therefore, our interest is in *doing* democracy. This is sort of an anarchist position; one that promotes the notion of pre-figuration. That is, if we want peace, justice, democracy, then we will have to live (that is, teach) peacefully, justly, and democratically. In the examples to follow—the Teaching and Learning Studio at the University of Kentucky, the international service learning work in Jamaica, and the more critically-literate research approach at Plattsburgh State University—we explain how we have taken to this democracy work in our respective locations. We talk about them in light of the two levels we want to address: teacher education and K-12 schools. And, we consider to what extent they reduce alienation and foster more fluid and agency-inducing mental conceptions of the world. To these ends, we allow the following questions to drive our examination: How do we overcome alienation? What analytical tools are necessary? What school experiences are critical? And, what are the signs of real hope (i.e., how will we identify the turning points and what will we be prepared to do when we notice them)?

Fostering Democracy

In her research on teaching for democracy, Sleeter (2008), again, points out one of the many contradictions happening in the classrooms of teachers she taught, observed, and interviewed. In the case of Nancy, who was to spend a class introducing a unit on ancient Greece by covering the five forms of government, her former student was caught between the place of teaching *democratically* and teaching *about democracy*:

There is a profound irony in what happened during those 45 minutes. The textbook and content standards Nancy was to follow teaches that the U.S. is based on democracy, and that U.S.-style democracy is the world's best form of government. But despite that message as well as Nancy's commitment to participatory democracy, she was told to follow directions from others over what to teach, transmitting content to students they would be able to reproduce on tests. In other words, the context of teaching had become distinctly un-democratic, an irony that was not lost on her. Further, neither the standards nor the textbook offered extensive analytical tools for examining power and decision-making as it *actually* functions, particularly connections between political processes and the economic structure.

Sympathetic to Nancy's plight and Sleeter's frustration, we offer the following possibilities from our locations of local control, spaces we have carved out either programmatically, pedagogically, or personally. They are, at best, imperfect and, almost certainly, works in progress. They are a testament, however, to what is actually happening; what is possible when we commit to undoing the impacts of alienation and helping form more progressive mental conceptions of the world.

Dialogues of respect: The Teaching and Learning Studio at the University of Kentucky

There are major distinctions between teaching students to think for themselves and teaching them to achieve high scores on standardized tests; between improving existing systems of education and rethinking the foundations of those systems; and, as has been suggested, between the rhetoric of *better education for all* and the realities of public education in a pluralist participatory democracy. Indeed, there is no other form of government that so thrives on citizens thinking for themselves. Standardization of thought, knowledge, or performance does not serve such a democracy but rather an authoritarian, totalitarian or fascist structure. Yet, standardization is too often touted as a measurable prescription for improving *education for all* in the United States. Were we to learn from history, our own as well as that of other nations, we might know better. Were we to pay attention to our own history of public education, our rich legacy of educational research, and the knowledge of experienced teachers, we might better understand that standardizing educational outcomes for the purpose of measurement and ranking is more authoritarian than democratic. For purposes here, we define democratic education as teaching and learning primarily aimed at gaining knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to participate actively in a pluralist and participatory democracy. While there remains some debate about how we interpret our form of democracy in the United States, this work hinges on membership in our diverse society and citizenship in a country designed to be governed *by the people for [the common good of] the people*. Furthermore, Choules suggests that promoting reflection on issues of power and privilege

in education is “an important strategy to engage people to act for social change.”⁶ Most of us, however, have had little reason to think critically about the ways their own socioeconomic and cultural privileges may be complicit in maintaining social injustices. As a result, we may remain at a comfortable distance from *different others*, viewing them as spectacle rather than community partners. Without modeling reflective practice and collaboration, our pre-service teachers are likely to resort to reproduction of the ways they were educated. They are more likely to view themselves as normal and different others as deviations from an assumed norm.

Recall Maria Montessori, grounded in medical science, deeply religious, and herself a victim of the Italian Fascism of Mussolini, suggested we should prepare teachers by cultivating the spirit “rather than toward mechanism.”⁷ Likewise, John Dewey⁸ insisted that teachers respond to the natural interests of the child rather than weakening intellectual curiosity or suppressing initiative through prescribed subject matter. In 1932, George Counts argued that teachers should reach for power in determining what and how children learn in our public schools. He spoke of teachers representing “the common and abiding interests of the people, not the interests of the moment or of any special class.” Counts believed that teachers would not “act as selfishly or bungle as badly as have the... politicians, the financiers, the industrialists.”⁹

In teacher education, it seems our choices are clear, teach teachers to employ standards and teach children to achieve high scores on standardized tests in service of the goals of politicians and corporate interests or educate teachers toward “the common and abiding interests of the people.”¹⁰ The latter liberates learners from serving corporate or political whims and supports democratic ideals. Educating toward common and abiding interests of the citizenry is also consonant with widely accepted epistemological views that revolve around knowing as a matter of constructing meaning in concert with others. Such epistemological perspectives, however, are rarely implemented in pedagogical contexts that facilitate integration, interaction, and collaboration. More often, both teacher education and P-12 schools attempt to employ liberating student-centered pedagogies in contexts designed for teacher-centered instruction. In elementary teacher education we often emphasize the benefits of collaborative learning, interdisciplinary approaches, and integrated curriculum rhetorically, while teaching separate content-based

⁶ Kathryn Choules. “The shifting sands of social justice discourse: From situating the problem with Them, to situating it with Us,” *The Review of Education Pedagogy & Cultural Studies*, 29 (2007), 478.

⁷ Maria Montessori. “The Montessori Method,” . in *The Curriculum Studies Reader*, ed. David J. Flinders et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 25.

⁸ John Dewey. “My Pedagogic Creed,” in *The Curriculum Studies Reader*, ed. David J. Flinders et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 34-41.

⁹ George Counts. “Dare Schools Build a New Social Order,” in *The Curriculum Studies Reader*, ed. David J. Flinders et. al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

methods courses in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. We often do so to protect pedagogical content knowledge from elimination in school curricula, as though its rhetorical existence assures preservation of its conceptual understandings.

Although this model has dominated education, particularly at the postsecondary level, it originates from theoretical perspectives that no longer reflect what we know about teaching and learning. For instance, traditional *stand & deliver* instruction is based on assumptions that teachers possess essential knowledge and can deliver it both verbally and textually with the expectation that students will be able to remember, understand, and articulate it as delivered. This one course/one instructor model requires limited space, students produce no artifacts or products unless those are done elsewhere, and students rarely, if ever, collaborate. Most instructional interactions involve a single instructor and one or more students. Students' interpretations and ideas are judged against the instructor's perspective. Literally, all construction of knowledge occurs, individually. The ongoing learning process is obscured because most students' products are rarely seen by anyone other than one instructor, resulting in curricular alienation discussed earlier. In teacher education, course products, such as papers, lesson plans, unit plans, behavior charts, and presentation materials are assigned by one instructor, evaluated by the same instructor, and rarely subjected to public critique or formative feedback, except when coinciding with field experiences.

As an alternative, the University of Kentucky Teaching and Learning Studio (UKTLS) is designed to align *what* we teach pre-service teachers with *how* we teach them. It is a more democratic approach to teacher education and more consonant with social constructivist epistemologies. It is designed to be a collaborative learning environment where teacher education students more often work together to design, develop, and evaluate instruction with an emphasis on interdisciplinary connections. In the UKTLS model, students employ critical thinking and reflective application of educational research in the design of authentic P-5 learning experiences in Literacy, Social Education, and STEM disciplines. It is an effort to reach beyond the confines of the traditional one-teacher/one-class model to provide students with opportunities to interact with and learn from their peers, as well as multiple faculty members, practicing teachers, clinical staff, and doctoral students. It is based on the belief that teacher preparation should employ the most effective instructional approaches, facilitate learning communities in socially just and democratic ways, and emphasize both human and disciplinary connections. It is designed as an environment where theoretical and practical discussions among faculty take place openly and students are invited to participate when appropriate. Within the studio, faculty teaching responsibilities are collaborative and integrated such that instructors are individually responsible for the pedagogical content in their areas of expertise, while also co-teaching seminars on content integration, learning technologies, and applications of theory and research. As one student remarked, "I like the ability to hear and experience different views of theory and their applications from a wide array of professors."

As the program develops, there is evidence of promising outcomes, particularly in relation to building collaborative teaching and learning communities. The extent to which students are doing so is evidenced in the ways they talk about their experiences in the UKTLS. For example one student said, “We collaborate a lot; we work in groups a lot; we are like what are you doing for this assignment, and okay that makes sense.... I depend on them [peers] a lot.” Additionally, in the former model undergraduate students were rarely seen in the department when not attending classes or voicing concerns. At present, students in the UKTLS spend most of their day in the department, meet in inquiry learning groups over lunch and discuss pedagogical content informally, as well as during formal class meetings. One student commented that it was nice to see faculty collaborating during weekly meetings in the studio space. Another voiced satisfaction that studio faculty had to do as much or more work than students. Of course, faculty had always worked quite hard but much of their effort was not visible to the students. Whether or not this is relevant for other programs of study, in teacher preparation it seems especially important for students to see ongoing collaboration among their instructors. Indeed when asked to reflect on their experiences in the teaching and learning studio, students often comment on the ways they depend on each other. One said, “It made me open my mind and think I don’t have to be set in this one way. It’s just a lot different and I feel more confident that I can be creative.” Another spoke of her personal development in the program as follows.

That’s something that I’ve learned this semester too. I’m never going to know everything. I’ve learned that I’m just going to have to not be backward about it and shy and go I need to know this, I need help with this. It’s okay. You learn as you go. ...this has made me be just a little more relaxed.... And you need to be that way as a teacher.

A phenomenon that has occurred during both faculty planning meetings and in the integrated sessions is faculty disagreement or divergent perspectives, particularly related to issues of theoretical stance, research methodology, and content appropriateness for elementary learners. For instance, a science education professor objected to a social studies faculty suggesting that religion might be appropriate to discuss with young children. Following the objection, the science faculty provided evidence of his own experiences teaching elementary students, describing a case in which a student made an inappropriate comment about religion and parents complained about his teaching. The social studies faculty countered with an argument that social education, particularly history, might be difficult to teach without including some discussion of religion. In this case, pre-service teachers observed faculty disagreeing, supporting arguments with real-world evidence, understanding opposing viewpoints, yet maintaining individual perspectives. As one student wrote, “It was nice in the afternoon classes that there’d be two professors from completely different classes [disciplines] that would come together. Really neat [because] you’ve got completely different viewpoints.” In the more traditional model, students may have experienced divergent perspectives without being

privity to important discourse among faculty. In that case, students would have observed opposing views and been left with little to stimulate deeper thinking about the issue. In that case, what would have been missed is what Greene calls the in-between or dialogic space that she argues is necessary for an *ideal education*.¹¹ In a real sense, the UKTLS may be replacing dualisms of public and private, self and others, what is and what ought to be with dialogue aimed at understanding differing perspectives. Such dialogic space can exist externally in conversations among learners or internally between new insights and pre-existing understandings thereby achieving more expanded mental conceptions of the world. According to Freire dialogic interaction involves, among other things, critical thinking, a sense of equity that consists of both self-efficacy and humility, and mutual trust.¹² As faculty model critical thinking, mutual respect, and equity, students relax and respond with comments like the following. “You don’t hold anything back. You’re not shy to answer questions or give your opinion, and so that was awesome.”

Educating new and practicing teachers to be knowledgeable leaders in the art and science of learning is far more complex than training them to follow prescribed instruction and standardized assessment. It requires teaching them to think critically and reflectively about their practice, to know their students, to assess students’ needs, and to respond to cultural and learning differences. As a social process that is enhanced by interaction and dialogue (Hatano & Inagaki; Jonassen; Vygotsky),¹³ learning can be constrained by educational settings that have institutionalized positivistic pedagogies to effect didactic instruction.¹⁴ In teacher education, restricting interaction among learners may limit the very understandings that are necessary for teaching and learning in novel, varied, or unexpected situations so common in the real world of public education. The UKTLS provides a platform to prepare new teacher candidates to address the needs of diverse learners and provide them with skills necessary for full participation as citizens of our democracy. Rather than focusing on political whims and continually changing

¹¹ Maxine Greene. *Releasing the imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).

¹² Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

¹³ G. Hatano and K. Inagaki. “Desituating Cognition through the Construction of Conceptual Knowledge,” in *Context and Cognition: Ways of Learning and Knowing*, ed. P. Light et.al. (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1993) 115-133; D. Jonassen, “Objectivism Versus Constructivism: Do we need a new philosophical paradigm?,” *Educational Technology Research & Development* 39 (1991): 5-14; Lev Vygotsky. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ U. Ruf and N. Badr Goetz. “Problem-based and Dialogic Learning in Complex Learning and Teaching Environments in Upper Secondary Education,” Accessed September 8, 2006. <http://www.research-projects.unizh.ch/p3070.htm>.

standards and assessments, teachers are taught to ask questions, to be critical consumers of packaged instruction, to build among themselves a community of practice, and to be reflective about the education of their own students. So, while managing the impositions of high-stakes testing or other corporate models, the aim is to prepare teachers to teach well, to inspire in their students the hope for a better world, and insure they possess the skills and efficacy to work for “the common and abiding interests of the people.”¹⁵

International service learning: Education for liberation or domination

Service learning has enjoyed a nice run in the academy and in K-12 education, especially in the social studies, providing a critical and reflective enhancement beyond traditional community service projects.¹⁶ But, like its predecessor, service learning is losing some of its critical edge. In many spaces, it has become little more than check-in-the-box-sign-off-on-the-sheet service projects in which students engage the community through traditional ‘server’ / ‘served’ roles, providing charitable work for those ‘in need’.

Launching from David Miller’s conceptualization of “solidaristic partnerships” in democratic theory, Nel Noddings’s theory of care, and Seyla Benhabib’s notion of the “generalized and concrete other,” Adam Renner crafted a theoretical frame for service learning that considers the formation of a caring solidarity between ‘server’ and ‘served’, merging individualistic notions of care with structural considerations of social justice.¹⁷ This caring solidarity, seeks to (1) overcome boundaries, (2) promote transparent and transformative dialog, (3) build trusting, reciprocal relations, (4) seek long term effects, (5) bridge the gap between the structural/theoretical and the individual/practical toward more critical consciousness, and (6) democratize server/served roles. These emergent notions provided the backdrop against which a partnership with Jamaican schools and social service agencies began in 1998. And, that work continues to evolve.¹⁸

As part of this evolution, a course on international service learning was most recently taught at Bellarmine University with two critical colleagues in 2009. Titling their

¹⁵ Counts, “Dare Schools,” 45.

¹⁶ A good history of community service and the emergence of service learning can be found in Carolyn O’Grady’s (2000) *Integrating Service Learning and Multicultural Education in Colleges and Universities*.

¹⁷ David Miller. *Principles of Social Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Nel Noddings. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Seyla Benhabib. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism* (NY: Routledge, 1992); Adam Renner. “Butterflies, Boundaries, and Breadfruit: The Shared Story of a Service Learning Experience in Jamaica” (PhD diss., The University of Tennessee, 2002); Adam Renner, “Caring Solidarity: Evolving a Theoretical and Practical Agenda for Service-learning and Pedagogy,” *Kentucky Journal of Excellence* (2005): 19-39.

¹⁸ For some background on the history of the developing partnership in Jamaica, see “A decade of work in the Global South: Social service or social change?” at http://www.richgibson.com/rouge_forum/2008/decadework.htm, by Gina Stiens and Adam Renner, and the North-South partners blog at <http://northsouthpartner.wordpress.com>.

interdisciplinary course, “Education for Liberation or Domination?” they explored the possibilities of a more critical education experience, which helped extend a more authentic partnership with their Jamaican partners. The class, in fact, explored the complexities of power relationships, such as those between the teacher/student and the global north/south. Questions examined included: What is education? Why do we need it? Who benefits from education? And, what would a truly solidaristic and liberatory relationship look like?

The class pursued a social justice agenda foundationalized in community and recognized that their lives were intimately intertwined with the lives and conditions of the Jamaican partners. While a good deal of theory contextualized the course experience, one example of the theoretical framework may suffice to illustrate the path they followed.

Paul Farmer, “a medical doctor and an anthropologist, conceives of work with the disenfranchised/marginalized/oppresed as falling into one of three categories: charity, development, or social justice. In terms of charity, Farmer suggests that the ‘server’ operates *on* the ‘served’ using a deficit model--‘they’ are intrinsically inferior. This approach presupposes there will always be those who have and those who have not. Freire asserts, similarly, “In order to have the continued opportunity to express their ‘generosity,’ the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well.”²⁰ In other work with Matt Masucci, Renner calls this an *evangelistic* approach to service in which the ‘server’ essentially *serves one’s self*.²¹ Even more provocatively, perhaps, Eduardo Galeano suggests, “Charity consoles but does not question. ‘When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint,’ Brazilian bishop Helder Camara said. ‘And when I ask why they have no food, they call me a communist.’ Unlike solidarity, which is horizontal and takes place between equals, charity is top down, humiliating those who receive it and never challenging the implicit power relations. In the best of cases, there will be justice someday, high in heaven. Here on earth, charity doesn’t worry injustice, it just tries to hide it.”²²

In terms of development, this approach implies that ‘they’ too can share ‘our’ standard of living (while ignoring, of course, that *our standard depends on their substandard*). This approach tends to blame the victim—that is, it places the problem with the poor themselves, rather than on the structure that forces them to live a particular

¹⁹ Paul Farmer. *Pathologies of Power* (NY: Routledge, 2004).

²⁰ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NY: Continuum, 1970.

²¹ Matt Masucci and Adam Renner, “Reading the Lives of Others: The Winton Homes Library Project—A Cultural Studies Analysis of Critical Service Learning for Education,” *The High School Journal* 84 (2000): 36-47.

²² Eduardo Galeano. *Upside Down* (NY: Henry Holt, 2000).

way: *the growth of poverty is dependent on the growth of wealth*. Masucci and Renner call this a *missionary* approach to service for which ‘servers’ *serve perceived needs*.²³

Lastly, in terms of social justice, work begins from a premise that *the world is deeply flawed*. ‘Servers’ believe that the condition of the poor is not only unacceptable, it is the result of structural violence that is human made, perhaps self-made. Relative to this notion, Fr. Juan Segundo offers, “The world that is satisfying to us is the same world that is utterly devastating to them.” Thus, we are all implicated in the creation or maintenance of structural violence so a posture of penitence and indignation is critical. This sort of approach implies not a working *for*, but a working *with*—a humble, more contextual, more connected approach.

Ultimately, then, ‘servers’ seek something more just, more democratic, what Staughton Lynd and Andrej Grubacic liken to “accompaniment.”²⁴ Accompaniment often involves the pairing of the relative privileged with the relative oppressed in a Freirean sort of “dialogical action.” In this action, the theoretical knowledge of the relative privileged (of the system and how to navigate it) is connected with the lived experience of the relative oppressed. Though service-learning is fraught with problematics and, in its most cynical analysis, is exploitative, the intention in the more than ten years of this work has been to join the work of others, leveraging their privilege for the benefit of others toward some liberatory goal. Lynd says it this way: “The idea of working side by side with another [is] a common journey. The idea is that when a university-trained person undertakes to walk beside someone rich in experience but lacking formal skills, each contributes something vital to the process. Accompaniment presupposes, not uncritical deference, but equality.”²⁵ It is at once mutual aid and revolutionary practice. While the work remains far from the liberatory goal and only touches the fringes of a transformative sort of practice, they consistently witness this struggle from as emic a perspective as possible and continually hone their analytical capabilities toward more critical action in the future. To this end, Lynd considers the length of this journey, “Sometimes all you can do for another person is stand in the rain with him/her . . . I feel the need for a trade. I feel the natural way to relate to others is by unselfconsciously offering a service of unquestioned usefulness” (p. 177). So, sometimes we wait for the sunshine, and act the best we can while it’s raining.

Course experiences at Bellarmine, then, included multiple performative assessments which included group preparation of lessons to be taught at the Jamaican school. In fact, since 1998, the work has better involved the teachers at the Jamaican

²³ Matt Masucci and Adam Renner, “Reading the Lives of Others: The Winton Homes Library Project—A Cultural Studies Analysis of Critical Service Learning for Education,” *The High School Journal* 84 (2000): 36-47.

²⁴ Staughton Lynd and Andrej Grubacic, *Wobblies and Zapatistas* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2008).

²⁵ Lynd and Grubacic, *Wobblies and Zapatistas*, 177.

school such that all partners *co-construct* the lessons. The particular course at Bellarmine University also contained a large participatory element, which evaluated students on their engagement of the theoretical components early in the semester as well as their engagement with the Jamaican partners. Finally, students were assessed on their reflective capabilities, demonstrating, praxistically, how they had woven the theoretical and practical pieces of the experience together.

By way of wrapping up this section, let's consider what has happened practically in terms of these student reflections on the trip, the responses of the partners in Jamaica, and in the K-12 classrooms of some of the students who have completed this work.

Prompted by the theoretical examinations, the experience in Jamaica, and a collection of poetry selected by one of the instructors, students offered the following, which are representative of student responses. One student reflected, "I can honestly say that this course was a liberating experience for me...I want to own my life and my work and that is where this experience has taken me. Education for liberation is about owning yourself and your experience. Thank you all for making this a democratic class and allowing, even pushing us to own the experience in Jamaica." Another commented, "I really have been searching inside myself to figure out who I am since we've returned. While I have not come to a conclusion, I hope that I never completely do. I hope that I continually grow, change, and question who I really am... Challenging myself to become more knowledgeable, to use critical literacy in the classroom, and to start taking action for the community is what evolved from this trip." And another asserted, "I have many more questions now, after returning and reflecting. And for me, that is an extremely uncomfortable position to be in. I enjoy having answers and solutions. And the issues we were exposed to in Jamaica are far too complex to be able to have finite answers. The overwhelming nature of the work is daunting but the rewards of dialogue and understanding are far greater than I ever imagined."

From the Jamaican side, tremendous strides were made toward a more horizontal, democratic partnership in 2009 at a community dinner, hosted by the US team. Wanting to simply break bread and talk about their lives as teachers, the staff of the school along with a few prominent Jamaicans were invited to dinner to discuss one generative theme: education, particularly the purposes of education. The Jamaican partners generated an impressive and provocative list of reasons, topped by (1) to prepare individuals to enter the society and wider world; (2) to gain knowledge about emotional, social, and spiritual selves; (3) to acquire good financial sense; and (4) to learn skills, not just for occupation, but also ones that help us to live in families, work in communities, and operate within the government. (Talk about progressive mental conceptions of the world!) The teacher candidates making the trip learned much from their Jamaican peers. As well, the Jamaican partners finally felt enough confidence to begin directing the US team as they made preparations for subsequent visits. The Jamaican partners suggested that the US team begin to build plans around the Jamaican curriculum, such that the lessons brought

might merge with what they already teach. This way, they can model instruction for each other and “grasp the most valued things,” as Mrs. Althea Kaye, a teacher at the Jamaican school suggests.

Finally, these experiences in Jamaica have impacted the teacher candidates in terms of their own pedagogy in K-12 schools. Modeling much of what they learned in the course and in Jamaica, students have implemented a much more intentional critical literacy approach in the social studies classes at their student teaching placements. Their cooperating teachers and university supervisors have been most impressed by their immense and concentrated efforts to prepare and enact a more democratic curricula in schools, even as inexperienced teachers. Because of their experience with a more constructive and democratic approach to pedagogy in at least one university class and because of their willingness to grapple with alienating forces and form more critical mental conceptions of the world, they have been able to translate this into more progressive pedagogical possibilities in K-12 schools.²⁶

Researching our lives: Toward a more critical literacy

Related to alienation driven by the hidden curriculum, Freire and Macedo note,

Curriculum in the broadest sense involves not only the programmatic contents of the school system, but also the scheduling, discipline, and day-to-day tasks required from students in schools. In this curriculum, then, there is a quality that is hidden and that gradually incites rebelliousness on the part of children and adolescents. Their defiance corresponds to the aggressive elements in the curriculum that work against the students and their interests.²⁷

Our most essential task is to recover those elements in the curriculum that help young people to develop the skills they need to become effective learners, and citizens. If we do our work successfully our students will be able to identify and shape good questions about issues, problems, and concerns they have, to gather information about those questions from relevant sources, to critically analyze the information gathered, and

²⁶ The evolution of this experience continues. What started as a high school service learning experience in 1998 later developed into this interdisciplinary university course. Now, back in the K-12 classroom at the June Jordan School for Equity in San Francisco, CA (www.jjse.org), author 1 endeavors to develop the international service learning experience with high school students once again. What is also important to note is the number of US participants over the last 13 years who remain a part of the experience either through their financial assistance or as adult leaders for new groups of students who participate.

²⁷ Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 121.

to act on what they have found. They will be able to critically evaluate information and claims that others are making, and to recognize the flaws, inaccuracies, and inconsistencies in them. How else do we prepare our students to become responsible and involved citizens if we do not help them to gain and to practice the skills they need to make a difference?

A story might suffice.

When Somalia teenagers were in the news in the spring of 2009 for hijacking a US ship and holding the captain, there was virtually no coverage on the context in which the event was taking place. No mention of Somalia's history, of the colonization and piracy that has been going on for a very long time, no mention of the dumping of nuclear and other hazardous waste off the waters of the country once the government virtually disappeared, no mention of the over fishing of those same waters by countries from around the world, and no mention of the fact that these young men were viewed by their communities as a volunteer coast guard, acting in the absence of a functioning government to protect the resources of the country.

So, Doug Selwyn introduced his students to articles that presented some context, some background information about these young people who were/are approximately the same age as his university students, and the account gave some historical background. All well and good, and the students were all over it. It was not evident, though, that they were any more thoughtfully "all over it" as they had been all under it before the additional articles. They trusted the articles introduced because they basically trusted the teacher, and assumed he wouldn't lie to them. That's not good enough, and we should work to do better. How can we help our students to approach the world with a critical and skeptical eye that leads them to look for context, evidence, and a deeper understanding of issues rather than to blindly accept the analysis of someone else? If we simply replace "their" information (texts and the canon) with "our" information, we are not doing much of value, because we are just preparing them to mindlessly follow the next sales pitch, the next snake oil salesman who tries to sell them a bridge, or a war....

While it may be true that many of our students have been trained away from their own questions and interests and critical thinking, it's not our intention to curse the damage that has been done. Instead, we have to teach them how to function differently. Our focus is on identifying what we do want for our students, and how we will help them find their way to their power and strength, so they won't get fooled again, and again, and again, to quote Mr. Townsend.

So, we want to talk a bit about some research [author 3] has been doing about what goes into an effective research task in the classroom, and then provide a couple of examples, to get us talking about how we might do this well.

Selwyn interviewed researchers and classroom teachers to find out how they approach their own questions and concerns. He wanted to find out how they pose questions and pursue them in hopes that it might help to suggest how we can do this work in our classrooms. Those interviewed were clear that each researcher has to work in ways that suit him or her. None were willing to provide a fool proof recipe that would apply to everyone. Having said that, there was considerable overlap about what they had to say, and those areas of agreement are listed below. While the nature of the list may seem simplistic, or obvious, we can't say that we see it happening in many classrooms, on either coast, at university or in public schools.

So, here are some basic elements of an approach to conducting research that might guide us as we consider assignments in our classrooms. These elements certainly guarantee nothing, but they improve the odds of students succeeding in gaining the skills and some content knowledge they can take with them as they move out into K-12 classrooms. Again, with another brief apology for the modesty of these points, here they are:

- Do something that matters.
- Know that behind the headlines there are the real stories, of the real people and the work that has been done. Often history looks at what is dramatic, violent, what makes good pictures, what captures the moment. But behind those moments were the bedrock stories that more accurately communicate about who we are and how we got here. It takes time to do research. If there is an interest in surfacing the voices not commonly heard, it requires other sources, other ways of accessing information than what is commonly available, or commonly used. How you communicate is intricately linked to what you want to communicate and to whom. What is the purpose and what are your skills and interests, and what do you want to have happen as a result of your work?
- Having a well formed question that you keep revisiting, with a “what do I know now, what do I need to know and how can I find out,” runs the process.
- A crucial set of questions centers on asking how do we know about others, how do we tell our stories and how do we learn to hear the stories of others? How do we stand in the shoes of others and understand their lives and their questions? What does it mean to understand something, to know about it beyond a surface level?
- We have to be clear about our intentions, and know that our worldviews and beliefs shape how we approach our work. This is not a problem, but it is something we have to be aware of if we are to truly ask our questions and pursue them.

- Pursuing questions means moving past artificial boundaries, and going where we need to go to answer the questions.

In pursuing his research, Selwyn brought the following assumptions. First, schools are currently organized around the needs of the adults, or more properly the systems and governing agencies of our local, state, and national governments. These systems are less interested in individuals or in justice than they are in being able to say, with some confidence that the schools they are administering are functioning well, and that they are able to continue feeding off the fat of the land.

Second, many children in our classes are marginalized in many ways throughout their school careers. What they learn in our schools is that they are not really part of American history, and that their future is really destined to be on the margins of society. They don't matter, and the schools are not really for them. They will not go to college, they will not be leaders, and they will not be a part of history.

Third, students are strongly encouraged to learn to do what they are told. They learn not to question teachers, texts, tests, or the essential history they are taught. They are not to do anything that will slow down the train.

Fourth, students learn that their own interests, experiences, culture, family, questions, and ways of knowing have no place in school. They are more likely to cause problems, and their task is to learn how to perform according to school culture.

And, fifth, the primary purpose of schools is to socialize students so that they can enter into the current society in the least disruptive way possible. The largest percentage of students are trained to serve in menial positions, to be ruled and managed by the few.

We also assume that the above list, as cynical as it is, is the antithesis of what education should be, and a negation of what we hope to advocate for through the social studies. We want the following for our students, for all students:

- That they feel loved, honored, capable, and included in what we do at school, in how we are as a learning community, and in what we study.
- That they become aware of themselves as learners in their current context. They learn about who they are, where they come from, how they view the world, and to appreciate that others view the world according to their own contexts. One is not better than the other, nor is it worse.
- That they learn how to learn. They learn how to question, to read critically, to reason, to argue and debate, to listen to others, and to come to their own understandings based on evidence, on experience, and on information. They learn to identify and challenge their own assumptions and the assumptions made by others, to engage in the kind of revisionist scholarship that leads them to revisit

and move past what they've been taught, in search of the deepest understanding they can come to.

- That they learn to live in a way that brings honor and justice to themselves and others.

The subtext attached to this set of assumptions and practices is that those who are most likely to succeed are those most like those in power, for whom the system is designed to work. And, in fact test scores around the country bear this out. Those who are most likely to succeed on standardized tests share some or all of the following characteristics: They are white, they are from families whose home culture is similar to that of school culture; the primary language spoken at home is English; their family income places them in what we might call the middle class; and their parents, especially their mothers, are educated. These are primary predictors of success, and none of them have anything to do with what goes on at school. The dice are loaded, and that's no accident.

Overcoming alienation and producing more progressive mental conceptions of the world: Doing democracy

So, how do we unload the dice? We finish the discussion here by reconsidering the questions we posed at the outset:

How do we overcome alienation? Examples provided show how the UKTLS connects faculty and students in a dialogical space and connects students to the curriculum as they conceive of it with their professors. As well, the international service learning experience connects students with their world, helping form a more global consciousness.

What analytical tools are necessary? At Plattsburgh State University, they are undertaking an evolved approach to research, which intimately connects the students with that which they research. Similarly, through the Bellarmine service learning course, intensive theoretical study and an international experience pushed students out of their comfort zone to work with partners on a joint educational experience across broad chasms of race, class, and nation.

What school experiences are critical? Learning that how we see our world and how we investigate it matters is an important consideration at Plattsburgh State. Likewise, at UK, students witness the formation of curriculum so that they may understand the process that will be necessary in their future schools. Moreover, it is hoped that the process learned here may lead to such co-development of curriculum with the future students of these teacher candidates.

And, what are the signs of real hope? From the reflective comments of the students at UK, we can see that they are learning the value of such a studio model. In the international service learning experience, these are seen in at least a couple of ways. As was mentioned, the teacher candidates who have made the trip abroad have been using more progressive pedagogies in their student teaching placements. For example, one candidate, following the lesson suggestion of *Rethinking Schools* had the courage to put Columbus on trial with her 5th grade social studies students during the week of Columbus Day. Also, a majority of the students who made the last service trip to Jamaica continue to meet on a twice-monthly basis to break bread and discuss not only plans for next year, but more local work that can be taken up immediately.

These examples, of course, provide only a sample of what is possible. We hope that they provide some roadmap toward possible consideration in other's classrooms. We have witnessed the reduction of the alienating tendencies often found in education and have begun to see the production of a more critical consciousness, which we continue to nurture.

Note: Portions of this paper are adapted from *Following the Threads: Bringing Inquiry Research in the Classroom*, by Doug Selwyn, published by Peter Lang, 2010.

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