

Partnership in Teaching and Learning: Combining the Practice of Critical Pedagogy with Civic Engagement and Diversity

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Estoy comenzando en Español para traer enfrente una tema especial: la importancia de desarrollar unidad entre nuestros colegios y la comunidad. Yo comienzo muchas de mis presentaciones en Español para demostrar el poder del lenguaje y para enseñar como algunas de nuestras comunidades han sido excluidas. Si no entiende el lenguaje de mi comunidad, como puede entender todo de lo que soy y lo que a sufrido mi comunidad? Al mismo tiempo, hay la necesidad de entender el lenguaje de ustedes y de sus comunidades para entender sus historias y quien son ustedes. Si no podemos hallar el puente para quitar lo que nos silencia y la ignorancia, no podemos unirnos en desarrollar un futuro mejor.

I will stop here, before some of you stop reading and turn the page. I have actually had some students walk out of my classes when I have used Spanish to demonstrate the power of language and to show how the simple denial of language and culture can be used as a form of oppression. My message, nevertheless, goes beyond language to the issue of translation. In order to translate each other's worlds, we must first understand each other. The connections between the classroom and community-based learning are all about translation. In looking for ways to help my students understand communities outside of themselves and to become engaged interpreters, I have been transforming the pedagogy in my classroom, extending the boundaries of the classroom, and rethinking the methods and purposes of undergraduate research. In this process, the academic world and its relation to its neighboring communities have become more central to the academic life of the students.

Students in my classes have been transformed as learners through community-based participatory research and through the social responsibility ethos promoted at Pitzer College. In my "Rural and Urban Social Movements" class, for example, students spend the first half of the semester learning about Cesar Chavez, the history of farm workers dating back to the early 1900s, and contemporary efforts to build unions. During their spring break, the students travel to the headquarters of the United Farm Workers to work alongside all the historic figures they have read about in their books and to listen to stories spoken in the workers' own language. Throughout the semester, students gather field notes and write final research papers based on these experiences. Some of these students have used their research as foundations for community grant proposals, as presentations at undergraduate conferences and national associations, and as thesis papers for honors.

In using hands-on research to find creative solutions to compelling problems, these kinds of experiences help students develop as participant translators. By making connections between the academy and the community, my students and I have been involved in translating silence into critical consciousness.

The Pomona Day Labor Center

In 1997, the city of Pomona passed an ordinance to fine day laborers \$1,000 and six months in jail for seeking employment on street corners. Because of their experiences, my students understood that the academy and the community of Pomona were not bifurcated but interrelated, that the worlds of the day laborers and their worlds as students were not separated but part of one whole. Subsequently, the students and day laborers packed city hall to protest the ordinance, carried out research on how other cities had dealt with the issue, and applied for and received \$50,000 to start the Pomona Day Labor Center, a non-profit organization funded through city and private funds. The students and I have been partnering with this community-based organization ever since.

Presently, the students are continuing with their research and implementing various projects to empower the day laborers. In addition to holding language and computer classes every morning, the students have been instrumental in ensuring worker representation on the organization's board. In response to the city council's decision to minimally fund the Center in the future, we have utilized surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups to establish the amount of resources that the workers have and to explore how they can be maximized. Our collaborative research with the workers has resulted in grants from area foundations that have sponsored the development of health referrals, immigration rights, language acquisition, computer training, and job preparation programs. The establishment of weekly leadership training meetings has also resulted in worker/employer conflict resolution sessions and pickets (led by day laborers) to retrieve wages from employers who have refused to pay.

Overall, the Center partnership represents the new kind of hybrid organizational/educational/civic space that is emerging around the edges of some of our college campuses today. It promises to be a transformative borderland where new forms of translation can occur that integrate the academic world with civic purpose, learning with action, theory with practice, and reciprocal research with collective social change.

Not Just Service Learning

The formation of the Pomona Day Labor Center is not an isolated example at Pitzer College; it reflects the ethos of many programs that have emerged and taken off in the last few years. This ethos is rooted in the advancement of intercultural and interdisciplinary understanding as well as in the ideal of democracy translated as social responsibility. It is rooted in the idea that, through campus-community partnering, our students and faculty can engage in acts of collaboration that go beyond the charity or project paradigms. Keith Morton (1995) characterizes this as going beyond the charity model, with the provider in control of services, to a model of social change that builds partnerships of equality between all the participants, that gets at the root causes of problems, and that focuses directly or indirectly on political empowerment.

Further, this ethos is rooted in the concept of "community-based partnering," according to which research and action are carried out not merely for the benefit of academia but for the benefit of the community-based organization and its members in both the short- and the long-term. It joins the idea of service-learning with the long-term goal of reciprocity. That is, service-learning is part of a larger program meant eventually to empower the participants, to develop their

leadership, and to develop the foundations that will allow them to function as active participants in the larger world of policymaking.

The Center for California Cultural and Social Issues

This kind of community-based partnering is a cornerstone of the Center for California Cultural and Social Issues (CCCSI). Created in 1999, CCCSI supports research and education that contribute to the understanding of critical community issues and enhance the resources of community organizations. As part of its mission to be a genuine partner in communities rather than to dispense so-called “expert” solutions to pre-defined needs, the Center supports numerous innovative community-based projects by offering research awards and technical training to faculty and students at Pitzer College. In addition, the Center has developed a small number of core partnerships with community-based organizations that last no fewer than four years.

The CCCSI also is linked to an external studies program that is based on participatory learning and on understanding different cultural perspectives. It is involved in cooperative projects with local community-based organizations in Nepal, China, Venezuela, Turkey, Italy, and Botswana. Some of the students from this program return to use their newfound language skills through external-internal programs. The community-based Spanish program, for example, develops partnerships between students and their Spanish-speaking host families and the Pitzer in Ontario program. Students immerse themselves in a multi-ethnic community that is undergoing dramatic demographic transformations. Through classes, fieldwork, internships, field trips, and participatory action research, students learn firsthand the processes of everyday life in suburban communities like Ontario and the effects of globalization and technological development on them. Through partnerships with local community-based organizations, students learn the principles of asset-based development and gain an awareness of sustainable development practices.

An Equal Relationship

In bringing students and faculty together with community-based organizations, all of these partnerships use the strengths of diversity, critical pedagogy, participatory action research, and service-learning to work on common issues and to create social change. These collaborative efforts are examples of community-based models that require faculty and students to immerse themselves alongside community participants to collectively develop theories and strategies and to achieve common outcomes.

An essential component of this style of learning and research is its commitment to promoting an equal relationship between the interests of the academics and the community participants. Traditionally, academics have had a tendency to “parachute” into a community or workplace for their own research interests without developing the kind of long-term relationship and collaboration that it takes to create concrete change. In working to move beyond traditional research models, participating students and faculty collaborate in what Kenneth Reardon (1998) has described as “intentionally promoting social learning processes that can develop the organizational, analytical, and communication skills of local leaders and their community-based organizations.” We have found that it is essential for faculty members to make a long-term

commitment to the sites and communities where they have placed their students. Although students can only commit for a semester or until graduation, faculty participants are in a better position to sustain campus-community partnerships.

As these long-term partnerships are developed, students and faculty become a political force in their communities. They no longer are placed in the role of travelers passing by. Instead, they see themselves as participants with a stake in the decisions being made.

Conclusion

This type of civic engagement takes into consideration the meaning of community—which, as a whole, is made up of many competing interests. Those who are corporate growers, developers, and polluters call themselves part of the “community,” although their profit-making interests often place them in conflict with “quality of life” initiatives. The “communities” to which I refer are very diverse geographical, political, and spiritual places. They have different power relations, backgrounds, ideologies, and levels of stratification. These communities are facing inequality or are trying to improve their quality of life. Hence, the research and learning described above focuses on the sources of inequalities and on what can be done about them. While the dominant understanding of inequality tends to blame the “individual” for his or her “inadequacies,” other theories and explanations focus on the historical and systemic foundations of inequality. The practices I have described stand with the latter. They challenge students and faculty to find common grounds of collaboration with community institutions, unions, organizations, and neighborhood leaders to invoke social consciousness and long-term structural change.

References

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