

Role of reflection and praxis in community-based learning & social justice work

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*"In community-based education, reflection is learning, everything else is just doing."*³

Practical liberal education should prepare students to participate as leaders and productive citizens in a diverse, democratic society. Building an engaged citizenry begins when students wrestle with real-world dilemmas, moving between theory, action and reflection on action. Over the past two decades, campuses have developed numerous community-based learning programs for students. The seeds for this movement grew out of a concern about student learning and active learning strategies. As statistics⁴ show a steady decline of involvement of students in the democratic process, the interest in community-based learning has shifted to embrace the notion of civic engagement as well. We have begun to ask the question, enhanced student learning for what purpose? For many, the response is, for a more engaged citizenry and just society.

Often, however, programs that include community-based learning find it difficult to build reflective practices that can move students beyond volunteerism to examined engagement. Community-based learning appeals to many students; as aspiring activists, they want to 'help' or 'do.' However, there are dangers inherent in this kind of service activity if it does not include carefully planned reflective activities. If their experiences and perspectives remain unexamined, students can simply reinforce and reify all their stereotypes. As Elizabeth Minnich laments,

An epistemological chasm remains, making the relation between what is done in class, or intellectually, and what is done in the world, or experientially, difficult to comprehend and, so also, to justify. (1999, p. 8)

In order to capitalize on the power of this interaction between experiences in the community and theories studied in the classroom, thoughtful reflection is an essential part of the dynamic. Reflection and praxis are necessary elements to transform community-based field experiences from simple volunteer activities into deeper learning. To be engaged citizens, students need "the ability to conceptualize and solve problems that entail abstraction (the manipulation of thoughts and patterns), systems thinking (interrelated thinking), experimentation, and collaboration."⁵ Reflection is a key element in developing these abilities.

Reflection

The words 'reflection' and 'reflective practice' have multiple meanings when we talk about the ways we work with students in our colleges.⁶ Reflective practice is nothing new. Educational theorists familiar to

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⁴ Elyer, Janet & Dwight Giles. *Where's the learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1999.

⁵ Marchese, Ted. *The Search for Next-Century Learning: An Interview with the director of an international project to better understand how humans learn and then to redesign the education system accordingly - to deliver students prepared for 21st Century challenges.* AAHE Bulletin, March 1996, pp. 3-6.

⁶ Process that leads to thoughtful mediated action. Knowledge from external authority (theory) reflected on and put into practice. Contemplation leads to deliberate moves/action in order to apply theory or research in particular environment. The knower uses knowledge to *direct* practice. (Cruickshank, D. R. (1985) *Uses and benefits of reflective teaching.* Phi Delta Kappan 66(10). 704-706.) 2. Process of deliberating between conflicting or competing theories, anticipating outcomes and choosing. Knowledge is seen as relativistic. Reflection is used not to *direct* practice but to *inform* it. Attention to the context of events and the idea that reflecting about the outcomes of these events in context (Schwab, J. (1969) *The practical: A language for curriculum.* Washington D.C.: National Education Association. & Zumwalt, K.K. (1982) *Research on teaching: policy implications for teacher education.* In A. Lieberman & M. McLaughlin (Eds.) Policy making in education. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.) 3. Process of reorganization or reconstruction of experience. Source of knowledge is in the setting and in the personal knowledge. Dialectical. Knowledge is emergent. Continual reframing, recasting, reconstruction of past understandings. Knowledge includes personal experience and the applied situations, all are used to transform understanding. Fresh appreciation of

us, such as John Dewey, David Kolb⁷, Donald Schön and Benjamin Bloom were writing about the connection between reflection and learning a long time ago. They understood that "reflective observation" is essential to build understanding, and that the kind of learning that leads to synthesis and self-development is distinctly different from the acquisition or understanding of objective, factual content. Reflective practice is a complex and rich way to open the door between theory and application in order to foster a deeper kind of learning.

Reflection in the Social Change Series

If reflection is an interpretation of the unknown through the lens of the known, students will reflect in the only way they know, which often means applying stereotypes, repeating clichés, and describing their emotions. The emotions are often the most intense aspect of an unfamiliar situation and so students frequently focus on them. We can develop all the writing and discussion exercises we like in our attempts to encourage students to achieve a deeper level of knowledge, but if we do nothing to disrupt familiar narratives, we merely reinforce existing patterns of thought. To achieve a complex understanding of the unfamiliar, it is necessary to break with these comfortable frameworks of interpretation.

Well, for me it was like I think I came into the class naively looking for answers to questions I had and then I just came up with more questions which gave me more answers to ask more questions and it just kept going and going and going. (Mary-Jayne – interview)⁸

If we are to encourage students to challenge comfortable old orthodoxies, they must be prepared before they engage with the community and learn new conceptual tools and receive relevant substantive information continually. As Jack Mezirow notes, “We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions....” These are powerful and tenacious truths that come from “cultural assimilation” and “primary caregivers” (Mezirow 1997)”. It is very difficult to challenge the apparently coherent and unquestionable authority of home, church, and state. Reflection *per se* does not necessarily require that we critically evaluate our assumptions. Moreover, in our consumerist, often anti-intellectual culture, pragmatism trumps philosophy. “Just do it.”

All this social change work I had done prior to [the social change series] had really been ...just ... getting in these organizations that...told me what to do and I went out and did it. (Mary-Jayne – interview)

The greatest part of this class for me was the praxis work, and having a space, both oral and written to reflect, analyze, and evaluate the actual, real life work that I was doing. Without the built in opportunities to reflect I don't feel like I would have done that for many of my activities, and when you don't reflect on your work, you miss a great many chances to learn from your mistakes and your successes...I have the tools to look at any situation and analyze it, which I was not very capable of doing before. (Ashley SE 310c)⁹

Nor is it a question of simply giving alternative information to students. Information is not knowledge; it is merely data. Knowledge, in all its epistemological clarity, is a synthesis of thought. Thus the goal of the social change series was not to politically reorient students but to facilitate a self-learning

puzzlement. Rethinking assumptions on which initial understandings of a problem were based. (Van Manen, M. (1987) *Human science and the study of pedagogy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Hamilton, Ontario)

⁷ Kolb, D. *Learning Styles and Disciplinary Differences*. in A.W. Chickering & Associates. (1981) *The Modern American College*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

⁸ At the end of the third term, Toby Smith and Marie Eaton conducted a group feedback session with the students. A transcription of this session provided many of the student quotes used to illustrate the ideas in this paper.

⁹ Students at Fairhaven College are required to write a Self-Evaluation for every course. This quote, and others designated SE were taken from those narratives.

situation where students themselves evolve an ethical thoughtfulness and evaluative intelligence which transcends allegiance to authoritative voices and through which they achieve their own knowledge of the world.

When I started out the first day and we were building this analytical framework, I thought oh my god I didn't realize that this is what it's all about....I've never thought about half these things and so I'd have to go through some major....sorting out....just to apply it to the case study. And by the time I got out into the community I felt like I was almost asking so many questions that I was afraid to talk and ask, you know I just started analyzing the group dynamics and...different [aspects]...it was good because then I could apply it...for the rest of my Fairhaven career... One thing is developing a language with which to talk about it – I had no language and I had no support network, and the class sort of offered me, gave me a language to talk about it and gave me people to talk about it with and so its influence has sort of transformed me – so I would say I'm a totally different person on that level. (Mary-Jayne – interview)

Everything I have studied and learned from being a part of this class has expanded who I am, by challenging some old patterns of behavior, beliefs, expectations and judgments, while simultaneously, validating what has brought me to this point. (Regina SE 310c p5)

The kind of reflective practice aimed at in this social change series was the kind of transformation of consciousness in the tradition of Paulo Freire and John Dewey and explored by educators such as Jack Mezirow, Ira Shor, and Max Van Manen.¹⁰ It required the integration of, not the application of, analytical and evaluative thought and engaged a dialogue between theories and the stories of personal experience to build deeper understanding. In this type of reflective practice we reframe, recast, and reconstruct our past understandings as we move back and forth between what we know and what we do, between text and our lives.

The praxis notebook was an effective learning vehicle because] It was a way in which I was forced to process my work in depth. Also to have my work documented is helpful in looking back and gaining perspective. After writing an entry, I often had much more insight and clarity about my praxis work. (Emily SE 310c)

Praxis

In the social change series, the concept of praxis was chosen as the organizing framework because it required student to develop an intellectual relationship to their activism. Praxis, simply put, means action informed by theory. However, praxis as a concept has a long genealogy. In Greek it simply means action. While the term was used earlier by Plato, it is Aristotle who developed praxis as a more precise and directed concept. Aristotle defined it as one of the three basic activities of humans: *theoria*, *poiesis* and *praxis*. These correspond with three distinct ways of gaining knowledge, with *praxis* as a way of achieving knowledge through action.

Others (Hugh of St. Victor, Francis Bacon, D'Alembert, John Locke, Emmanuel Kant) have also used the term and what comes down to us is a certain consistency in meaning that acknowledges a dialectical relationship between thinking and acting. While many thinkers have separated thought and action, others described human activity in which we apply theory, then re-adjust our theoretical knowledge from reflection upon our actions. Thus a reciprocity between what we do in the world and what we think we are doing, why we are doing it, and how we should change our actions in light of new understandings is developed. Or, as the students themselves put it:

¹⁰ Van Manen, M. (1987) *Human science and the study of pedagogy*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. Hamilton, Ontario

[Take] this activism and this intellectual world and then [claim] the grey area between it...they don't have to be diametrically opposed...that gray area has always been there and it's time to claim it.... (Erin – interview)

Sometimes it feels so much like there is no place in which intellectualism and activism meet. In our class we created this space.... (Lex SE 310c)

Built into this symbiotic relationship between theory and practice can be a moral imperative. In G.W.F. Hegel's view, praxis was an ability to act in accordance with one's beliefs in such a way that these actions represent oneself as a moral agent. Thus our acts reveal us; they expose us. Moses Hess, a 19th century Hegelian philosopher writes of praxis as a coming together of spirit and action. In this way, our actions are not separated from who we are and our connection to community. Marxists have used the term in a similar way; theory and practice are necessarily underwritten by ethical beliefs.

In education, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* takes praxis as the vehicle through which we evaluate our own position in the world and through which we transform not only our material conditions, but also our consciousness. As Jack Mezirow writes, this kind of praxis implies change. Reflection becomes a recursive cycle, leading to a re-evaluation of theory and a reassessment of the actions that grow from theory, so that change for the common good can occur. Society is a dynamic space in which power is continually being negotiated by unequal actors, usually to the detriment of those with fewer economic, political, and social resources. This notion of praxis as a vehicle for the development of a critical consciousness, for transformative learning, and for making real change in the world is closest to the conception of praxis that shaped the social change series discussed here.

Through my community work I have an outlet to practice and reassess the knowledge attained in classroom discussion. As an experiential learner, my community work allows me to fully integrate my intellectual understanding into my actions of change. This experience assures my capability and presents an environment in which my internal leader is able to emerge. Without praxis and community work this personal metamorphosis may not have taken place this early in my life. (Randelle SE 310c)

It is exhilarating to learn and experience social change through action/reflection, or praxis. I learned so much by taking the readings about group facilitation and shared leadership and then using them as a lens to understand experiences in the social activism I pursue in my community work. It has been so interesting learning about the theory of what makes a leader, makes groups work and what works in different contexts of social activism....The praxis notebooks we have been keeping, have really helped me reflect on the volunteering I have been doing. For me the praxis notebook is like having an ongoing conversation with myself, and a record of what has and hasn't worked in my social activism. (Lex SE 310b)

Praxis and Community-engaged Learning

Praxis as a concept offers several insights for community-engaged learning. The theory-practice-ethics matrix that frames praxis provides a way of addressing the need for thoughtful reflection throughout the volunteer experience as well as highlighting the practical usefulness of theoretical knowledge. Becoming reflective practitioners asks that we value both the theory that guides our practices, and the personal experiences that help us develop fresh appreciation for tensions between these theories and our work. Praxis is a tool that may help us rethink the assumptions that form our initial understandings of any problem.

It helped to have matrices to apply to the varied situations. Sometimes they didn't perfectly apply but the framework but gave some sort of additional external criteria as opposed to my own lens. They gave me an extra touch on those things that I could be thinking about - how are the tactics and

strategies organized? How do we think about communication? What do the race, class, gender, sexuality, body and all those other identities look like within this organization? The framework gave me a moment to step back and it provides an extra lens, that extra consciousness, to make me a much more reflective practitioner. In the end the whole point of the class was to explore how effective social change is done. From my point of view the reflective framework was how it is done. (Erin – interview)

I'm kind of ready to get all this stuff that's in my mind and that I talked about, that I've only done on a small scale... get the real community experience instead of just the theory of it. And so I thought this was kind of like a ground for me to do the praxis education I think that's so important, because I kind of get worried that there's people that just learn it and sit around and just talk about how social change can happen, in that really academic way....(Mary-Jayne – interview)

I think that the critical thinking skills I learned in class were then translated into my work. I witnessed a conversation about "real activists" in which a hierarchy was being constructed for who could make change and what change actually is. I saw this as [being] very counteractive to community building and because I had developed a critical language in class and from readings, I was able to create an argument against the hierarchy clearly. (Emily SE 310c)

To many people who embrace community-engaged learning as an important pedagogical strategy, the common term "service learning" is somewhat problematic. In our culture, "service" often designates a one-dimensional activity. It connotes a kind of drudge-like powerlessness. We refer to the service industry and service jobs. Paid domestics were said to be "in service". We refer to employment in the armed forces as service. Sharing its Latin root with both "slave" and "servant", it is no surprise that "service" carries connotations of menial labour, mindless obedience, selfless devotion to duty, impotence, and intellectual disengagement from task.

However, what we intend for our students is that they will enter into a fully-engaged, authentically reciprocal relationship in their placements. The concept of praxis, with its blend of theory and action, insists on a thoughtful relationship to the community work. Throughout their education, students learn theories in their various courses: social, economic, psychological, anthropological, political, cultural, etc. In the social change series students also learned theories relevant to grassroots social activism. Engaging in praxis means thinking about these theories in a new way, owning them, inhabiting them. Theories, unlike models, are dynamic. Their dynamism is motivated through attempts to actualize them in the material world. Praxis invites students to ask questions about the relationship of what they learn in the classroom, its practical application, and how theories might be improved. It provides them with a language with which they may analyze, discuss, argue, and advocate.

I was surprised to not only find the content [of the course] helpful and contributing to my studies, but that the class process was very intellectually engaging....The model of social change presented in this class takes into account concepts like structural oppression, privilege, and activism and contributed a pattern for me to see how my ideas...fit together with other activist concepts. (Outcomes 310a)¹¹

I entered this class not knowing what to expect, I leave with the ability to critically analyze social activist movements. One of the important things I will take away from our class is the concept of praxis, identifying a problem, doing something and then critically analyzing what has been done, in a continuous cycle. This knowledge in action is imperative to having a successful change

¹¹ At the end of each term, students were asked to provide feedback to the instructor on the outcomes achieved. These quotes are drawn from those narratives.

organization....I feel as though I have gained a lot of confidence throughout the quarter, and many new skills to apply to social activism in my life. (Outcomes 310a)

The development of good reflective practice is an essential element of praxis in order that students may examine the ways they interact with their community partners, their experiences in the field setting and use theoretical frameworks to analyze these experiences and ideas. Assumptions in the literature on reflection and the meaning of 'reflection' itself indicate that it happens *after* an experience. However, if we want to develop independent critical thinkers, we cannot wait until stereotype, that invisible wallpaper of our minds, has a chance to paper over any cracks in an easy interpretation of the student's experience. Students who volunteer in communities that are radically unlike their own may be disturbed by what they see and experience. While it is important to acknowledge the uncomfortable feelings the student experiences, if the student is unable to use their feelings as a bridge to a deeper understanding of society, then this experience cannot lead them beyond personal trauma to intellectual growth.

Consequently, it is important to develop the habit of deep reflection immediately, before they go into the community, to expand their vision and range of possible interpretations, to give them permission to explore any feelings of disjunction. In this way we may hope to foil easy cliched responses to what they see and experience, but we must empower students with appropriate languages, concepts, and theories if we expect them to achieve this depth of thought. So prepared, it is necessary for students immediately and repeatedly to exercise the habit of deep reflection, to integrate theory as a routine of thought, not as a schoolbookish set of critical thinking questions on a clipboard. In the social change series the students developed their own set of analytical questions that they used as a kind of intellectual wedge to help them pop open new (or old) experiences and achieve their own personal knowledge that moved them continually beyond their present understandings.

For awhile it seemed that instead of getting answers to the questions, we were generating more questions. It felt like we were interacting with them the entire quarter because one day out of the week we talked about things that had occurred at our work places that we had included in our journals. Everyone's situation addressed a number of the questions that we had generated in that framework. They helped me critique the work place a little bit more - to look at the dynamics that were going on and to not just take what I saw at face value. I'd think about those questions as I was writing in my journal and I'd drop down deeper and deeper and every time I found out something about me, something about the lenses that I look through, something about my prejudices and my values, so it was kind of like how to get myself out of the way, in these places to get the most out of it. (Regina Wallenberg – interview)

[The list of student-generated questions was] ...very useful in writing my praxis notebook entries. It really forced me to not just be a casual volunteer, but one who understood all aspects of working for change and could look at organizations and write about them through an analytical framework. (Randelle Fr. p1)

There are multiple layers of understanding and I now look at every event and group I work with as a learning experience and a next step to becoming a better activist. (Lex Sr p4)

This transformation of consciousness helps students see multiple interpretations of any event or experience. For students to be able to think in an independent and plastic way about new and unfamiliar situations without falling into the comfortable tropes of prevailing ideologies, they must be offered the opportunities and tools with which to develop alternative and more complicated interpretations. For example, will they just see a line of people waiting for the soup kitchen to open, or will they see the fact that someone has organized a soup kitchen. One interpretation sees the community as a place of disempowerment and lack; the other sees the community as a place with agency and resources.

Using words and concepts to talk about ideas or thoughts I had, shifted from being a once in a while occurrence to everyday. (Outcomes 310a)

I can go into a room and locate power, form ideas about where the power is coming from. If I'm facilitating, I know what I'm working with. Also I know where I can find my own power base....I have more security in speaking up in a group of activists and calling them on their hypocrisy....I learned a language...and solidified much in my praxis notebooks. (Emily SE 310c)

As we have been discussing, when students come upon a new experience or idea that conflicts with their own ideas or ways of doing things, they often do not examine these tensions. Instead, they just assume, "I'm right and they're wrong," or "I must have been wrong", or "they're wrong" and move on. To help students explore the tensions between their own experiences and the field experience, and between the field experience and theories or models they may be studying, it is necessary to slow them down enough to think about how theory relates to their actions. This slowing down is counter-intuitive for them in their post-modern cultural context. Recent studies have suggested that the concentration period of the average student has deteriorated drastically. They are surrounded by fast-paced advertising, video games, rapidly shifting consumer trends, and rock videos. Many school systems, both high school and university now have very much shortened terms, so that even the pace of learning has been quickened. In these mini terms, as with other sites in the post-modern cultural landscape, fleeting images and fragments of information flicker across the retina in an accumulated dazzle of light and noise. Slowing down the thought processes of students is a challenge in these circumstances. Fairhaven College shares the same ten-week quarter system as the rest of Western Washington University. The social change series was developed as linked courses in an attempt to provide students with a breathing space, a thinking space in which they could reflect. In the university setting, thinking often takes more time than doing. When we reverse that, we subvert the intellectual development of our students. Praxis as pedagogy demanded students stop and think. The praxis notebook entries could not be completed quickly because any entry that lacked analysis was unacceptable and needed to be re-written. The case studies written by students over the quarter were due in fortnightly installments in order to slow down the process of writing and to draw out the analysis. This slowing down encouraged thoughtfulness and pride in the quality of their work.

[Writing in installments]...gave me deadlines/goals to meet that forced a greater degree of research and thinking. (Green sr. p2)

It was nice to be accountable every two weeks. I was then able to consider things more deeply and reflect upon comments. (Magenta sr. p2)

Praxis also helps students view their own experiences as important enough, as substantively and intellectually rich enough, not to be taken for granted. It encourages them to recognize that their examined experience is as important an instance of learning as text, and that not all learning happens in an abstract environment distant from their lives in the world.

[The praxis notebook] allowed for thoughtful analysis, understanding, sharing and evaluating[.It] provided thought generation for class discussion. [It] forced analysis and evaluation to happen all quarter, not just at the end. (Randelle Sr. p2)

During our praxis discussions in class I was able to dig deeper into evaluating the events that I was a part of sponsoring and I learned so much. (Ashley SE 310c)

Ethics

Part of the praxis reflection included an assessment of the ethical nature of community-based learning. Volunteering itself is not empty-headed doing. Many people believe that helping others is a social good and an important aspect of citizenship. Most of these particular students elected to take the social change series because they perceived this country to be insufficiently just--socially, politically, economically. They felt called to address this ethical and material failure. Indeed, most of the students had a strong social change component to their self-designed majors. For students not as this motivated, it may be possible to simply volunteer without addressing ethical aspects of one's activity. Because Praxis has an inherently ethical component it discourages this avoidance.

In our class we all knew how structures oppress based on race and gender...that's part of the theory informed by action. If you just know about it and learn about it, but when you get in your social change situation you don't bring it with you, then you're not benefiting fully from what praxis can give you. (Regina –interview)

I learned the importance of reflection in social change work. It is not enough to just do it. I must ask myself why I am doing it. I must stop and think about how my actions are affecting others. What is my role? (Emily SE 310b)

Consequently, in many courses involving a community-based learning component, it is possible to feel that one is simply getting easy credit or “service learning” without the learning.

Social change can be engaged purely through action and outcome, with little or no emphasis placed on process and contemplation. However, for conscious and positive social change to occur, I feel it is imperative to engage the process as an equally beneficial component to the outcome. (Randelle SE 310b)

One ought not to be able to avoid the ethical implications of intervening in the community, regardless of how marginally. But even a well-meaning volunteer may see her or his subjects as pathetic, weak, and pitiful. This alienation is easily perceived by the targets of one's altruism. The indigent, the abandoned elder, the structurally oppressed, the vulnerable are ethically abused when their condition does not shock. This failure to disrupt perpetuates that which one hopes to change because it fails to challenge sedimented social and cultural structures that underwrite political and economic inequality.

"Do-gooding" is not enough. For students to understand the full possible implications of their work in the community, they need to think about their presence and its impact on others. Praxis also encourages a broader ethical analysis of the grand narratives we live by in a western, democratic, capitalist society. The student's work is a positive, conscious act that reinforces notions of civic engagement and participation. These are fundamental values of a democratic society.

Ralph Nader [has spoken] of the importance for students to learn civil skills that help out the community. I consider all that I am learning in this class to be civil skills. Being made to reflect upon my actions has been such a profound thing. I would like to make it a habit so that I never stop to learn and analyze, in a healthy manner, what I am actually doing when it comes to working with others and working for change. (Rylin SE 310b)

For those students who work with the disadvantaged, praxis encourages them to analyze homelessness, partner or elder abuse, AIDS, poverty, etc. by asking questions regarding the why, who, where, when of these issues. In many courses that include an added-on “service learning” component, it is possible to complete the course with a high grade without ever having to ask even basic questions such as: who am I to intervene in this community; what is the impact of my intervention?

But on another level...what the reflection did for me was examining at first in me, 'well, why do I think we should be doing it a different way? Why do I think that?' ... and letting that process start with me first. because it's like you walk in and think 'Oh, I've got to straighten them out'. You know if you've checked yourself out through the questions first, then you know that taking it to someone else or taking it to the next level is more legitimate. (Regina - interview)

The ethical demand of praxis goes beyond the personal. It directs us to act in good faith for the common good. To do this we must understand that ethical assumptions are imbedded in all aspects of our society. We must be prepared to confront them if we are to ask questions such as: Where does poverty come from? Is there a relationship between poverty and age, race, or gender? What social, political, economic, and ideological factors contribute to a community's problems? What is more important, individual freedom or community security? What is more important, economic growth or the environment? It is this pro-active and ethical necessity of praxis that makes it the pedagogy of social justice.

As I reflect on my learning for this quarter in this class it doesn't appear that I have learned very much in the concrete sense of the word. I am learning about process. We discussed many things but the answers or responses just seemed to yield more questions, for instance, power, who has it? How did they get it?...How do we empower others? Ethics was another question. Who defines what they are? Can we always afford to operate ethically? Do the lenses we see through enlarge or limit vision? ...These questions don't have ready-made solutions...This class didn't provide specific answers to these and other questions...Now I realize why the bolt of lightning couldn't hit me with the answer. It's too complex. There are no simple answers, except get involved, participate. (Regina SE 310b)

Evaluation

Praxis is also a useful framework for evaluating student learning. Because it encourages students to evaluate critically all aspects of their community work, from philosophy to action, students deepen their ability to think abstractly and conceptually. This way of thinking transfers to other learning venues, to their jobs, and to ordinary life. As well, students not only have the opportunity to think about their theoretical learning and how it applies to specific concrete instances; with praxis they are specifically required to do so. Furthermore, as students are asked to evaluate the ethical aspects of working in the community, they begin to understand that our actions, our language, our choices, our opinions, and our thoughts are all ethically loaded. Praxis is a concept that can help students understand how our thoughts, actions and beliefs are interwoven and how they speak of who we are as individuals and who we are as a society.

As we had studied the dynamics of social change organizations, I had learned a lot to watch for in daily life. Because I feel so strongly that change is not just a process of activism and structural change, but can develop in the daily interactions we have with others [I] began to apply these lessons to the process of feedback for [other people]. (Erin SE 310c)

Praxis requires the learner to continually move back and forth between the theoretical knowledge they study and an analytical evaluation of the application of these theories and ideas in the community or in their lives. Theory was introduced in the forms of readings, mini lectures, guest speakers, and case studies. For example some readings described various types of leadership. At the same time students would observe leadership styles in their community organizations, write about this in their praxis notebooks, and discuss their findings in class. Guest speakers would be asked about the type of leadership style favoured by their organization. Viewing videos or reading case studies would provide additional examples of leadership to evaluate.

We were also reading articles about leadership and group dynamics...so every week being able to hear some of the other stories that were going on. That meant that I was able to address more questions that had been generated from the analytical framework than I would have been if I only had my own experiences. (Regina – interview)

This symbiotic practice approaches knowledge as emergent and transactional, with the learner engaged in a continual reframing, recasting, and reconstruction of past understanding. This kind of pedagogy values personal experiences in applied settings as avenues to develop fresh appreciation for tensions between ideas and theories and as a tool to help rethink the assumptions on which our initial understandings of a problem are based.

Like... was saying, her friend went to the meetings, someone was dominating consistently, and so she just stopped going. If you don't have some theory then you don't know that these are real problems that come up in every group that you are going to be in and these are some solutions that you can implement to change it... It empowered us in that way. We were informed in theory and in practice, and so that gave us more courage to speak up when we felt there was a need to. (Regina - interview)

Jack Mezirow (Mezirow & Associates, 2000) reminds us that successful reflective discourse involves both critical assessment of our assumptions and an examination of collective or common experiences to either affirm or shift and transform our previously held judgments. According to service learning leaders Janet Elyer and Dwight Giles, “It is not enough to think abstractly; adults also need to be able to draw well-reasoned inferences from complex material, and this depends to some extent on their understanding of the nature of knowledge and authority” (109)¹². Praxis as reflective practice leads toward this complexity of understanding, and is essential for synthesis and integration. Praxis is more than telling a personal story, or recounting feelings about experiences in community settings. It is also distinctly different from the acquisition of the substantive content of a course or the observations made in a field setting. Praxis builds bridges between personal experience and theory and helps learners become more skilled at assessing their own work and understanding the dynamics at work in their community agencies. This is the development of a critical consciousness. Students transform themselves permanently through their own work and thought, making the lens through which they interpret the world more complex, thereby improving their effectiveness as democratic actors.

My few examples of content only touch the surface of the depth that we penetrated through class discussions and praxis notebooks. Each class session seemed to fly past as we discussed our processes and experiences in social change. The knowledge I attained in this course goes far beyond a theoretical inquiry into social change. The knowledge of praxis has become a constant tool that runs through me at all levels of my social change work. (Randelle SE 310b)

¹² Elyer, Janet & Dwight Giles. *Where's the learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1999.

My praxis notebook entries were indeed vital to my successful learning but it was in the sharing and brainstorming that I felt supported and encouraged to continue to take risks in the community. The classroom critical thinking formed the basis of my community critical thinking. Often, it was only in retrospect that I could see clearly the lessons learned. I learned about consensus when our class had difficulty planning a party. I was then able to take that lesson and immediately apply it to a disagreement at a ... meeting. Studying obstacles and discussing non-violent communication helped me when I had rough spots in developing a community service group.... (Karol SE 310c)

Praxis Notebook and Discussions

Most successful reflective activities ask students to view their own work or experience as 'text' and to bring to this 'text' the same critical analysis skills that they have developed in order to understand other people's work. Students rarely are invited to use their own work as text, or lay their own work against some other template or theory or mode of practice and ask these questions. When the students went back to their praxis notebooks in preparation for writing their self evaluations at the end of each quarter, and re-visited these writings and experiences using their developing analytical skills on their own work, they began to recognize that their ideas can develop and change.

Faculty often ask students to keep observational logs or journal descriptions of actual events as the base to build toward deeper reflection about community-based experiences. However, writing in a journal is not necessarily a reflective activity. Entries are often organized around logistical obstacles (finding daycare, supervisor not there, transportation, community partner not prepared for them, couldn't find the place, clients didn't come) or feelings. Without careful structure, journals or logs often fail to enhance the desired reflection and shifts in learning. With community-based learning this is all the more important, because a failure to fully engage with an alternative community can have the detrimental outcome of reinforcing stereotypes and existing prejudices.

To overcome this challenge and to promote deeper reflection in the series, the students kept 'praxis notebooks' that required them to move beyond descriptions of logistical challenges or emotional responses to their experiences in community agencies (see Praxis Notebook instructions attached). The instructor chose the word 'notebook' because of its connotations with academic learning, to reinforce with the students that this book was a working document, one that would track the development of their on-going intellectual syntheses. The term 'journal' was rejected because of its associations with emotions and the private world. The term 'log' was rejected because it denotes the mere recording of data. Students were asked to reflect on the intersection among their community settings, the readings, theories and conceptual frameworks discussed in class, and their experiences. The conceptual frameworks developed by each student guided her to deeper reflection, and transformed the community work, providing students with an aid to bring their skills of critical analysis to their field experience.

I observed and then I reflected on those observations; I think that...the greatest part about the praxis notebooks was that it forced not only observation, but also reflection. Observing so many different people facilitate, (...in and out of class) in combination with reading about differing facilitation styles has made me much more confident in my facilitating abilities, I can take little things from several different people and combine them to make my own style. (Ashley SE 310b)

Before I took this class I would do activism and I would walk away feeling good or bad, but I would never evaluate the experience critically. The praxis notebook helped me to really notice how I acted in my community project. I tried to use the notebook to increase my awareness of power relationships in...(my community work), including gender differences. (Shoshana SE 310c)

The praxis notebook allowed me the forum to discuss my work within that organization and prompted me to think through theory and practice. I feel that through listening to the experiences of others in

our class, I was able to have more reflective notebooks that I might have otherwise. (Rebecca SE 310b)

Emergent Curriculum

The dynamic nature of praxis is also compatible with the concept of emergent curriculum. In an emerging curriculum, reflection shapes the questions that need to be explored and raises new issues to be addressed. Students began the seminar series by developing their own analytical frameworks. As they analyzed case studies of social change situations from their readings, reviewed videos, listened to guest speakers and reflected on their community experiences, they added to this framework. This practice approached knowledge as emergent and transactional; the students were engaged in a continual reframing, recasting, and reconstruction of past understandings. At the end of winter term, the students used their frameworks to assess their learning in the first two terms and develop a syllabus and determine their pedagogies for the final quarter. The faculty role shifted from directing the learning and posing problems to facilitating the students' self-learning.

I think we owned the questions - that's how it felt to me. We set the agenda; we determined what was important for us and what we thought we needed to know. If [the teacher] had just given us the questions it seems that it would have remained more in theory; it would have been someone else's ideas about what we needed to do for effective social change. So that's what I think, that by us generating the questions and the curriculum for the last quarter, we owned it. (Regina- interview)

Focused Strategic Questioning

In many community-based learning courses the instructor provides questions to direct and shape student reflections. This practice has the hope of encouraging a deeper analysis, but it also reproduces the traditional teacher-centered pedagogies of the classroom. In the first quarter of the Social Change series the students drafted their own analytical framework. On the first day of class, the instructor asked the students, "What do we need to know in order to be more effective agents of social change?" In the first two-hour class a list of 23 questions was generated, most of which had to do with tactics and the practicalities of activism. Critical feedback was essential to help students move students beyond their focus on 'acting'.

One method of doing this is 'focused strategic questioning'. Skilled practitioners use focused questions to build reflective thinking, questions that foster deeper connections between the text, the experiences, and their lives. Naïve students may begin a community-based experience with the idea that a particular truth exists and their job is to know it. Strategic questioning at 'that moment' can push students to think beyond their first reactions to community-based experiences and introduce them to the idea that we construct 'truth'. In this course, the role of the teacher was to ask strategic questions aimed at surfacing other issues relevant to social change beyond the obvious one of tactics. This was difficult because if the students were to have ownership of the list, the questions had to come from them. Yet even the most experienced activist students had difficulty thinking beyond the category of tactics. Basic questions about even the very conceptualization of an issue in a community needed to be asked: "What is the problem? How do you know it is a problem? Who is it a problem for? Who is it not a problem for? Eventually students begin to ask these same questions of themselves and each other. This slow, Socratic technique was crucial in the development of the students' list of analytical questions.

By the end of the three quarter series, the list included well over a hundred questions divided into eleven wide-ranging categories (see appendix). It was supplemented in the final quarter by other lists of specific questions generated for the purpose of holding panel discussions with invited guests from the community. This included thirty-four questions regarding women and empowerment and nineteen questions about legal issues of concern to the social activist. Throughout the series of courses students used their list as an analytical framework, gradually making it more complex as their knowledge increased. In the first quarter they applied it to written, video, and oral case studies, the latter in the form of activists from local groups and organizations visiting the class to tell their stories of making change in the community.

*I thought it was very useful to begin this series of classes by generating that list. By starting with my own list [in a small group], I was able to understand my own lens and interests, and then by moving into the large group to expand...the list I opened up to other peoples lenses and was able to begin to understand making social change on a much larger level. (Randelle Sr, p.1**)*

In the second and third quarters students engaged in community-based learning. This praxis provided them the opportunity to take their analytical framework into the community. The students' questions provided them with a conceptual framework and vocabulary that they owned. It informed their vision and gave them the reflective tools with which to make sense of, critique, and problem solve in their volunteer work. At the beginning, students were hesitant to, or uncertain of how to concretely use this analytical list as a framework for conducting case studies of social change. However, by half way into the first quarter visiting activists from community groups were commenting to the instructor that in all the presentations to the community and classrooms the visitor had made, they had never been asked such intelligent and perceptive questions. The students also used their list of questions to critically analyse examples of social change in the form of video and written case studies. Every time the instructions to the students were the same: use the list to unpack even the apparently most minor aspects of making social change. The purpose of this was twofold: to develop an analytical habit of mind; and, to make constantly more complex one's understanding of what is involved at every level in making social change.

The list felt like a brainstorm that brought to the forefront aspects of analysis in social change that are often forgotten in the plight for transformation. (Magenta Sr p1)

I think that the best thing about making the list of questions was that it got me thinking in an analytical way about social change work. (Shoshana sr p1)

[Generating the list] also...helped [in] that all members of the class were starting from the same framework. It made understanding much easier and also provided a common language. (Rebecca Sr. p.1)

The social change series was, conceptually, one course broken into three, quarter-long, linked individual courses only because Western Washington University operates on the quarter system and it was not administratively possible to have one full year course. In the first quarter students studied theories and case studies of social change. In the second and third quarters the students went out into the community, volunteering at least three hours per week, although some students volunteered at more than one place and put in more hours than required. The purpose of having a year-long course was to inculcate a habit of analytical thought in the students, that is, to develop a critical consciousness. The list of questions generated on the first day of class served as the analytical framework for examining all case studies and volunteer experience. This was a repetitive aspect of the class. Every week the same questions were asked, again and again, of every new experience, event, or reading or case study. The list revealed its limitations and expanded over time, but the routine was always the same – look for the complications and complexity in all instances of people trying to make social change. (“Social” change was a collective noun that included political, cultural, economic, environmental, etc. change.) Over time this repetition did have the effect of internalizing the list for most students. They not only would think in its categories and use its language when analyzing social change situations, but it also came to permeate their vision and way of thinking in unrelated classes and in their lives.

I think that the thing I got most about this class was...applying this to any situation you are [in]. What we worked on in our classes was that you can apply [what we are learning] to the work situation not only activism situations but...home and...everything. It gets you to ask questions...now that we are aware we can't go back...That is exactly what this class did...it made us more aware so

that...now we cant go back from that because we're constantly knowing there's always got to be something, even if you are not catching on...there's something...and that constant questioning: I know there's got to be something, what is it?...always looking for something. (Rylin – interview)

Student Designed Quarter

At the end of the second quarter, using their list of analytical questions, students reviewed what they had learned and identified areas they felt had been missed or questions they wished to explore further in order to select themes and readings and design activities for the final quarter's class. They also decided their own pedagogies, which included a continuation of the praxis notebook and discussions, a panel discussion by activist women from the community, a field trip, a workshop on setting up a web page, and several presentations on various topics by the students themselves. Both the syllabus and the pedagogical strategies were well thought-out and well planned. The development of the third quarter involved everyone's input and everyone's participation. The students used the lessons they learned from their reading and experience in the first two quarters to run this planning meeting effectively, draw in all voices, discuss options, maintain order and direction, argue for the inclusion of their favourite topic, and make decisions. In its engagement and depth of discuss, this planning meeting was very different from the first class of the year when the original list of analytical questions was developed. Although many of the students were hesitant and uncertain about their ability to design a university course, at this point in the year they had gained enough confidence and organizational skill to take the risk of trying.

Students had a sense of ownership about the direction of the class. I believe we all felt more respected in this approach. (Orange sr. p1)

[Constructing our own course content] further imprinted the importance of a collective sense of equality and responsibility—the process of planning and then trying to work with or plan all the way through—we built community in our class—that's social change! (Beige sr. p.2)

A sense of control leads to investment in the outcome. (Shoshana sr. p1)

Learning Community

A year –long curricular structure created a learning community that supported intellectual collaboration and social engagement among students. Continuity across the three quarters built trust among participants, allowing them to honestly evaluate their community experiences and achieve greater depth in understanding and a more complex analysis of social change.

In the second term the instructor invited students to share particular experiences explored in their praxis notebooks for discussion in class.

Because [the instructor] was reading a lot of people's things or talking with people, she would pull out something. If we had a theme that week of communication....she'd say 'well this person was talking about this' and she would invite a... couple people to talk about their stuff... and so then that became a grounds for either that person to talk and other people to kind of reflect on that experience... laying different kinds of experiences next to each other and saying okay here's this and here it is again and being able to make those analyses...I think is the important part of reflecting and doing concrete things.... (Cori – interview)

In the third term students posted their praxis notebook entries onto a Blackboard electronic discussion site before the regular discussion classes so that others could read their text and be prepared to discuss the various dilemmas or issues raised in the entries. Bringing these reflections back into the classroom and using them to evaluate the theories encouraged students to put these reflections into a real social context. Because the discussions of the issues raised in the praxis notebooks involved sharing

perspectives with other students and negotiating the differences between their experiences, theory and the frameworks they had developed, the reflection moved from an individual activity to collective meaning-making.

Because the students had worked all year from the same list of questions and concepts, they shared a language with which to have serious discussions. The students took turns facilitating these discussions in order to put into practice theories about managing meetings, group problem-solving, community building and other skills needed to develop effective group cohesion. During the third quarter students worked in small groups or pairs to make presentations to the rest of the class on topics in their self-designed syllabus, further enhancing their sense of communal learning.

[One of the most important features of this series was] we got to go in depth, making “praxis” come alive. This also facilitated community-building among the 12 of us...All this worked because we had a set of goals, a touch-stone. (Green sr. p2)

I think generating the list was important, especially because it was a group effort...Generating the list of questions helped me feel like an equal participant/actor in the class, it also gave me a sense of unity with the class while still seeing people’s different interests....(Grey sr. p1)

The praxis notebook...is the area in which most of the real reflection has taken place...Through the notebook I have move[d] from a bitter, burnt out activist to having a whole new lease on social change work. Through the process of reflection I feel that I have grown immensely. Also, the classroom discussion has been invaluable to me. I think that we have a very special group and a very special relationship that I have never experienced in the classroom before. The support I [feel] from the class has enabled me to reconsider my own cynicism...It provides a space where we can collectively reflect on the challenges we face in social change. (Shoshana SE 310b)

The supportive community...was the best part of the class. We were able to be there for each other offering support, advice and love...I think that we have all become surer of ourselves in the school setting and in our community work because of this class and the safety it provided. (Shoshana SE 310c)

Community Partners

Community partners were actively involved in the on-campus component of the course, as well in the field settings. During the first term community partners from varied groups (a farm worker’s housing Project, an AIDS agency, a battered women’s shelter, a community land trust) provided oral case studies. One or two knowledgeable representatives from each organization or project visited class and told the story of how the organization came to exist. The students, armed with their list of analytical questions, would use it to develop a full picture of the struggles of the community group to achieve its goals and maintain its coherency. This also provided students with an idea of what kinds of social change activities were going on in the community and give them some ideas of where they might want to volunteer in the second and third terms. By the third term, the students themselves invited community partners to lead workshops in essential skill and knowledge areas. For example, as students became more aware of the impact of gender on power relationships in their field settings, they invited three women from the community to hold a panel discussion on the relationship between gender, leadership and power. In preparation for this event students generated thirty-four questions on this topic and sent them to the panelists before the meeting. This illustrates the confidence, depth of thinking and the professionalism that had become a habit by the third term.

Last Thoughts

There is no formula for encouraging reflective practice in our students and of becoming reflective practitioners ourselves, only a stance of questioning. When we provide students with a language and conceptual tools, encourage students to question each other's assumptions, and work back and forth to

mediate all meanings against the collective experiences represented in the classroom, we open the door to the doubting, wondering, questioning space that John Dewey says is essential for reflection. Praxis, moving back and forth between theoretical knowledge and community-based experiences, invites students to review and reflect on their own work and experience and bring them into the classroom space. This practice asks them to give their experience and stories the same careful attention and the analytical review as they give to the texts and written case studies.

Students must be active participants in the process of reflection. When we, as teachers, assume the task of "reflecting" for students, we decide what their strengths and weaknesses are. As long as our own conceptions alone shape the course, through our lectures, exams, grades and black books, we hold the power, thereby fostering dependencies and inhibiting student self transformation.

I remember being so apprehensive to talk in a room so filled with people. I recall how hard it was to write my Case Study...and how it challenged me both academically and personally. I will never forget crying in [the instructor's] office because I lacked confidence in my strengths as a student and activist. Today I feel confident to get involved in any kind of activism and really make a difference in my community. I have been through a great deal of person[al] transformation over the past [year] as we have worked together for social justice. (Lex PN, 6/13/02)

Through our 'professorial' directiveness we also decide what is worthy of reflection and what is important in the community. The object of student learning then becomes finding out and giving us what we as teachers want. There is no democracy in that educational model and education ought to foster democracy.

Praxis is one key strategy for practicing and beginning to realize that vision. The reflective stance challenges us, both students and faculty members, to entertain and articulate multiple perspectives including our own, against the backdrop of experiences and ourselves as situated beings. Reflection calls us to engaged, active and persistent consideration and re-consideration of our experiences, beliefs and values through the lenses not only of experience, but also gender, race, ethnicity, heritage, sexual orientation and class structure. The reflective element of praxis can build bridges between personal perspective, community experience and theory, leading the way toward more critical analyses. The transactional nature of this practice, building a live circuit between the student, the text and the community experience, can be profound. In this model the student's role is active, bringing prior life and field experiences to the text, while the text offers new insights and ideas; both change in the transaction. The reader grows and the text is (re) written in the reader's mind.¹³

The intellectual transformation of the students in the social change series was evident in the growing complexity with which they analyzed their observations of, and interaction with, the world. For instance, half way through the second term, praxis notebooks were full of deep questioning such as:

Are there different leadership styles for different contexts? For example, how are campus groups different from off-campus groups? Is the group more likely to be diverse off campus or on? How does this affect group dynamics and leadership styles?

Or, Do we have a personal need to be in control? Do we like order and efficiency? How do we let go? How do we help others to learn the skills of shared leadership if we are not willing to risk their failure?

When we are responsible for outcomes, how can we foster leadership in others but still ensure good outcomes? How do we mediate between our need for control and our wish to foster shared

¹³ Rosenblatt, Louise (1978) The Reader, the Text, the Poem. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. 16 46-47.

leadership?

These questions are not often asked by the average student dutifully fulfilling their ‘service-learning’ obligations. Praxis then, must be a critical element of community-based learning. Deeper reflection requires students to explore their own pre-conceived ideas, assumptions, experiences and the relation of these to the theory or context of the course. In the Social Change series, praxis helped students move beyond emotive or descriptive responses to their community settings to an examination of the political, economic, social and cultural structures that operated there. Praxis helped the students move beyond “volunteerism” to unpack the connections between theories, their lived experiences and their constructed ideas about reality.

The reflective stance will help our students to deepen their learning from the complex experiences in the field, and enable them, and us as faculty, to imagine both the possibilities and the challenges of what could be. Helping students develop these perspectives is harder to accomplish than simply transmitting information, but ultimately far more empowering. The point of praxis is to act for social justice. If students feel empowered through their growing insight and their improved ability to act effectively, they are more likely to graduate as engaged democratic citizens. Or as one student put it,

The thing is, there is not really an ending here, only a beginning to my commitment to social justice.
(Lex SE 310c)

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE: Description of Fairhaven College

Fairhaven College at Western Washington University is an interdisciplinary undergraduate college of about 450 students within a larger comprehensive regional university that serves over 14,000 students. Fairhaven, begun in 1967 as an experimental college within Western Washington University, exists today as an undergraduate learning community defined by five attributes: (1) interdisciplinary study, (2) student designed studies and evaluation of learning, (3) examination of issues arising from a diverse society, (4) development of leadership and a sense of social responsibility, and (5) curricular, instructional and evaluative innovation. Fairhaven has a national reputation for student involvement in learning, and was featured as an exemplary learning environment in the 1994 edition of Art Chickering and Linda Reisser's Education and Identity. Fairhaven College maintains an emphasis on student self-assessment and narrative evaluations from faculty, the student-designed major, small classes with close contact between faculty and other students, and possibilities for students to take responsibility for the direction of their learning. For more information visit Fairhaven College's website at <http://www.wwu.edu/depts/fairhaven/>

APPENDIX TWO: Social Change Reading List

Exploring Leadership: College Students Who Want to Make a Difference, by S.R. Komives, N. Lucas, T.R. McMahon, Jossey-Bass 1989

Reclaiming America: Nike, Clean Air, and the New National Activism by Randy Shaw
(U of Calif. Press 1999)

A Primer: The Activist's Handbook by Randy Shaw (U of Calif. Press 2nd ed. 2001)

Community Service and Higher Learning: Explorations of the Caring Self by R.Rhoads
(SUNY 1997)

Insight and Action by T. Green

Bridging the Class Divide by L. Stout

Organizing: A Guide for Grassroots Leaders by Si Kahn

Motivating Volunteers by Vicki Schram

Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making by Sam Kaner (New Society 1996)

Common Fire by L. Daloz, C. Keen, J. Keen, S. Parks

A Citizen's Guide to the World Trade Organization by S. Shrybman (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives & James Lorimer and Co. Ltd., 1999)

Street-Level Democracy: Political Settings at the Margins of Global Power by J. Baker (Between the Lines, 1999)

Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America 1921-1964 Edited by E. Wigginton (Highlander Center 1991)

Resource Manual for a Living Revolution by V. Coover, E. Deacon, C. Esser, C Moore (New Society, 1985)

Social Movements/Social Change: The Politics and Practice of Organizing Edited by F. Cunningham, S. Findlay, M. Kadar, A. Lennon, E Silva (Society for Socialist Studies/Between the Lines, 1988)

"Language and Silence: Making Systems of Privilege Visible" by S. Wildman with A. Davis

"What We Want to be Called" by M. Yellow Bird

"The Achievements of 'General Ludd'" by K. Sale

"Connection in Action: The International Hotel" by Fran Peavey. Heartpolitics.

"The Second American Revolution" by K. Lasn

"The Blues Artist As Cultural Rebel" by S.T. Asma

APPENDIX THREE: Praxis Notebook Assignments & Themes

The Assignment: Praxis Notebook

Introduction

"**Praxis**" as a concept has a long history. It now usually refers to a symbiotic relationship between doing and thinking. In this sense, praxis can be defined as: 'action informed by theory'. I remind you that this is the organizing concept for our three linked courses on social change this year. Last quarter you wrote a case study in four installments. You examined the actions of social change organizations by using the analytical framework we developed in September and refined over the quarter.

Your case studies were thoughtful, thorough, and well written. They had depth of analysis, breadth of scope, and were interesting to read. In the course evaluations most students commented on the value of writing the case study, and there is clear indication that the installment process is the most conducive to developing critical thinking, in spite of the intellectual disadvantages of the quarter system. So again, you will write one sustained project as a way of achieving deeper levels of reflection. This is the **Praxis Notebook**.

The Praxis Notebook will be continued over the next two quarters, as will your community-based learning. Think of this as preparation for your next case study, only this time you are researching the organization or community group from the inside instead of the outside. Those of you who did your case study on the group with whom you will now be working have an advantage. This means you will have to slightly adjust your analytical framework so that you are achieving more complexity in your reflections, rather than repeating what you already know from last quarter's research.

Continue to use the list of 'Questions for Analysis of Grassroots Social Change' as your framework. Remember, the goal is to internalize this framework so that you become self-directed, creative, and complex in your ability to reflect upon circumstances in general, and social change in particular.

Requirements of Entries:

- The Praxis Notebook will be handed in three times. The notebook is to be an on-going activity. Asking for an extension will only reveal that you are neglecting your work. The Notebook is to be in a full-page, typed format.
- Have your installments in on time. Late work will receive no comments.
- Date your entries and number the pages.
- The exact number will be decided by you but you must have at least one per week.
- Each required entry should be 2 - 4 pages, although you may go over this on occasion if you are on a roll and need to think out an issue.

Content of Entries:

Your required entry each week should concern an issue or theme from the class readings in relation to your community work. For example, when we are reading about group dynamics, observe the interactions around you in relation to points in the reading. Does the group you are involved in communicate effectively? Have they developed a supportive, cooperative way of relating to each other? etc. When we are reading about leadership, look for how leadership is manifested, fostered, shared, hoarded, or abused.

Always keep in touch with the analytical framework we developed last quarter. Although you are required to focus on our topic for the week, these issues are not unrelated to your list of 'Questions'. This is not behind us, but is it a continually relevant guide to help us investigate and analyze social change. I repeat, the purpose is to work through the year to internalize this framework and make it your own, constantly readjusting it as circumstances demand. This is the theory and experience of Praxis. Listening to speakers from local organizations, examining many case studies, and writing your own has given you insights into organizations that act for change. Compound this knowledge by building on it, reinforcing it, and continually challenging it.

APPENDIX FOUR: Some Questions for Analysis of Grassroots Social Change

Problem Identification

- What exactly is the problem that these people came together to address?
- Who says it is a problem? Who is it a problem for? Do others think it is not a problem?
- What is the history of the problem - how did it come to exist?
- What is the history of previous attempts to address the problem?
- What facilitates the problem and allows it to continue?
- Who or what has actual decision-making power to affect the problem?

Stakeholder issues

- Who all are involved in the issue? Who has a "stake" in it, an interest?
- Have all voices been heard?
- Clarify the "problem" to be addressed? Who says it is a problem? Do all stakeholders perceive it as a problem? Do they define it the same way? Do any disagree? Why?
- Who are the power-holders? This depends on the situation being examined and its context. Is power located in numbers of people or in a small group of controlling interests?
- What are the assumptions of each of the stakeholders?

General Group Questions

- How did this group get started?
- At what point did the group gain support?
- Does the group have a mission statement? Guiding principles?
- Does the group use theory in a conscious way?

Does the group engage in a systematic reflective and evaluative process of their activities, goals, actions, etc.?

What is the scope of the group's activities?

What blocks social/political change?

What problems did the group face?

Who or what is the focus of the group's efforts?

Whose voices does the group represent?

Who do they speak for?

Where does inspiration come from?

What are the meanings of big fuzzy words like "awareness", "people", "community", etc.?

Resources

What resources did the group have to aid them?

Do they see their subject group as a resource?

How is the group funded? Where did they get their start-up funds?

Do they feel they have had to make compromises to get or keep funding?

Has the group done research on grants, applied for any, or taken grant-writing workshops?

Ethical issues

What ethical issues arose for this group?

Did you ever feel elitist? Did you ever know or perceive that your group was being elitist?

Did you have a hierarchy?

Who decides ends and means?

Has the group considered the long term implications of their plans and activities?

Has the group considered how racial, gender, sexual, or class issues affect their perception of the issues, their conceptualization of what the problem being addressed is, how members relate to each other, the community they work in or are trying to help, what actions they decide to undertake, etc?

What is the nature of the group's relationship to its target community (e.g. helpers, leaders, agents, liaison, facilitators, organizers, etc.)

If the group is dealing with a vulnerable population, what safeguards have been taken to ensure the physical and/or emotional security of these people.

What language is used to refer to the "target" people/community/group.

Why does the group think it has a right to intervene?

Is even bringing up ethical issues a luxury of white privilege?

Group management issues

What internal issues or conflicts did your group face? Did they work through these? How?

Is everyone in the group there for the same reason?

How to keep a group from imploding?

How did you determine the structure of the group itself?

How are decisions made?

How do the members communicate with one another?

How is work divided?

Is training provided?

How are volunteers recruited? Screened? Brought "inside" and made to feel welcome and appreciated, and evaluated?

How are conflicts resolved?

How is burn-out avoided?

Do the group members share a set of premises (e.g. spiritual, political, economic, cultural).

Do the members all share a common goal or is this assumed?

What "subterranean" factors influence individual behaviour in the group?

How do diversity issues affect the group?
 Are their factions within the group? What are they based on?
 How is this factionalization discouraged or managed?
 What form does compromise take?
 How do individuals cope with not getting their way?
 Do different members have different conceptions of democracy, efficiency, time?

Leadership

Do we need a leader?
 Who was your leader?
 How do we choose a leader?
 What does it mean "to lead"?
 Is leadership a personal quality or a learned skill?
 Are some people more effective than others at leadership? Why?
 From where does the authority to lead come?
 Where did you get your leadership model?
 How does a group achieve consent among its members and not be vanguardist or authoritarian?
 How do diversity issues affect leadership?

Community relations and outreach

How is the "community" defined?
 How did this group execute their community outreach and education?
 How has the community responded to the group
 What is the relationship between the group and the community?
 How does the group advertise itself?
 How do they communicate to the community?
 How does the group deal with community backlash?
 What connections to other community groups (networking) does this group have?
 How do we convince others they should be involved?
 Is it possible for groups with different motivations to act toward the same goal?
 How did you make yourself known?
 How does the group listen to the community?

Relations with "the system"

Did the group work with or against the system? Why? What were the outcomes?
 What was the government's impact or relationship to the group?
 Is it possible to work in systems that are already established systems (i.e. is it possible to work for change from within the system you want to change).
 To what extent will the government allow change?

Tactics and Strategies

What was this group's process of achieving change?
 Was it effective for them?
 What could have been improved upon?
 What was the plan of action?
 What was this group's time frame?
 Does direct action work effectively in spite of making people mad?
 What is the goal? What is the group working toward?
 Can change be incremental or does it have to be all at once?
 What are the steps to change?

What traditions of tactics does the group use, e.g. civil disobedience, non violence, etc?
 Do they choose their tactics on the basis of principles or effectiveness?
 Does one's race and/or class and/or gender affect one's choice of tactics?
 Is there a status hierarchy among activists?
 What are effective methods to affect political process?
 Is it possible for one group to make effective change?
 How far is the group willing to go?
 What special knowledge, skills, abilities, training, etc. does the group need?
 Did the group do a "needs assessment"? How does the group know there is a need?
 Did the group research what previous attempts had been made to address their issue?
 What are the bases for believing that the activity you plan is likely to have the consequences you intend?
 How has the group decided on the timing of their activities?
 Does the group include some form of non-compliance among their tactics.
 Has the group done civil disobedience training?
 What activist training occurs within the group or within the community?
 How does the group get people out to their events, or convince them to participate in an action?
 Did the group's outcomes match their original intentions?
 Are/were there any unintended consequences to this group's actions?
 Did/does the group's activity have a larger impact than just its local constituency?

Other resources available

contact Toby Smith (tobyMsmith@hotmail.com)

1. Syllabi from all three terms
2. Guidelines for analysis of case studies
3. Issues raised in Praxis notebooks, Term 2
4. Student developed questions for community partner workshops
5. Third term curriculum planning – notes from student planning sessions

APPENDIX FIVE: SELECTIONS FROM INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK – CONCEPTUAL QUESTIONS

Question asked: What question started the list, how did Toby start the list, how did Toby start that, what did she ask you?

What is it that we need to know to be more effective agents of social change?

Question asked: How did/does analytical framework change or shape the way you did the work later or what did it mean for you to develop that framework? How does that inform the work you do today?

“For awhile it seemed that instead of getting answers to the questions, we were generating more questions. It felt like we were interacting with them the entire quarter because one day out of the week we talked about things that had occurred at our work places that we had included in our journals. Everyone’s situation addressed a number of the questions that we had generated in that framework. They helped me critique the work place a little bit more - to look at the dynamics that were going on and to not just take what I saw at face value. I’d think about those questions as I was writing in my journal and I’d drop down deeper and deeper and every time I found out something about me, something about the lenses that I look through, something about my prejudices and my values, so it was kind of like how to get myself out of the way, in these places to get the most out of it.” (Regina)

“It helped to have matrices to apply to the varied situations. Sometimes they didn’t perfectly apply but the framework but gave some sort of additional external criteria as opposed to my own lens. They gave me an extra touch on those things that I could be thinking about - how are the tactics and strategies organized? How do we think about communication? What do the race, class, gender, sexuality, body and all those other identities look like within this organization? The framework gave me a moment to step back and it provides an extra lens, that extra consciousness, to make me a much more reflective practitioner. In the end the whole point of the class was to explore how effective social change is done. From my point of view the reflective framework was how it is done.” (Erin)

“Well, for me it was like I think I came into the class naively looking for answers to questions I had and then I just came up with more questions which gave me more answers to ask more questions and it just kept going and going and going. (Mary-Jayne)

I don’t think that I saw that I made a change externally (in my agency), but internally I felt that there was a change because I when I was doing my volunteerism with out reflecting, I just felt like I kind of had this attitude that I wasn’t conscious of that was Them and Me. And by the end of these quarters with my volunteer work I don’t see a Them and Me, I see an Us. And I think that’s really important. (Regina)

TOBY Question asked:

Do you think it would have made a difference if I had come in and given you a list of questions and said that these are really important questions to ask...rather than developing your own analytical framework?

I think we owned the questions - that’s how it felt to me. We set the agenda; we determined what was important for us and what we thought we needed to know. If you had just given us the questions it seems that it would have remained more in theory; it would have been someone else’s ideas about what we needed to do for effective social change. So that’s what I think, that by us generating the questions and the curriculum for the last quarter, we owned it. (Regina)

Case Studies

TOBY - We started with the case studies and we started using the questions immediately with the second week. So we did the conceptual questions the first week and then we started using them as a way to analyze the case studies.

“The case study was a lot easier to question as an organization that you are not a part of... it’s really a lot it’s a good introduction to you know that kind of thing, you know...you have to get your mind used to even questioning that kind of thing, to even analyze it... and so then once you had done that with one organization, you got in your mind kind of used to doing that kind of questioning and it’s like you didn’t have to look at the list anymore to think of a good question. It gets sort of engrained and it’s more like you learn how to do the process of it, and then you can reapply that, you know.” (Soshanna)

First Quarter

MARIE – You were all attracted to this class because you want to be social change agents and maybe you were all wanted to get right out there and act. What did it mean to have an quarter in which you weren’t out in the community acting, but instead studying these case studies? As you look back now what would you say about that first term where you weren’t actually in a community setting?

“I think that I got probably the most out of that term because (it) was reinforcing of being a reflective person in your work... It was really super insightful to look at the way people were organizing...more

interrogative – like trying to learn about what’s going on here and all those thing, more like a problem solving kind of thing...it was really effective to do that case study. (Cori)

“When I started out the first day and we were building this analytical framework, I thought oh my god I didn’t realize that this is what it’s all about. I think that that’s important because I think that there were a lot of other people in my class that had been asking these questions and thinking about these things for maybe even a couple years and for me it was just like okay you know I’ve never thought about half these things and so I’d have to go through some major you know sorting out of all you know just to apply it to the case study. And by the time I got out into the community I felt like I was almost asking so many questions that I was afraid to talk and ask, you know I I just started analyzing the group dynamics and like and different ways and Toby was saying you know be one of them and I’d go you know I’m trying (group laughter)...it was good because then I could apply it you know for the rest of my Fairhaven career... One thing is developing a language with which to talk about it – I had no language and I had no support network, and the class sort of offered me, gave me a language to talk about it and gave me people to talk about it with and so its influence has sort of transformed me – so I would say I’m a totally different person on that level. (Mary-Jayne)

“It was our chance to huddle, talk about planning, creating a briefing, creating a basis that we were going to move forward from and I think with out that we would have just like it would have been a little bit too chaotic...It would have been a little less organized without the first quarter to know what we were going to move into...We had to build on the theory before we could act.” (Rylin)

Praxis –

“I had a conversation with Toby about this the other day – about taking this activism and this intellectual world and then claiming the grey area between it, and really kind of saying they don’t have to be diametrically opposed. You don’t have to be either really a smarty smarty pants or a really active, with-it activist. That gray area has always been there and it’s time to claim it and be intelligent activists. The smarty smarty pants and the really active with-it activists are roles that have been sold to us. This gray area is essential to claiming it and that’s what the process was (in this class).” (Erin)

In our class we all knew how structures oppress based on race and gender...that’s part of the theory informed by action. If you just know about it and learn about it, but when you get in your social change situation you don’t bring it with you, then you’re not benefiting fully from what praxis can give you. (Regina)

Learning skills – patience?

A lot of times with social change you’re like Okay I want to change this; I want to change X, right? And then you go in and X just isn’t changing, you know (group laughter)...man this sucks, and so if you can find value in the process of doing things then you get less frustrated with the fact that X doesn’t just change. You say, Well, you know maybe it doesn’t change, but you know I’ve come a long way in this and I know that all the people who have been involved in this have come a long way and just me knowing more about it is a positive thing. You can find things about it that are worthwhile to you that aren’t just in the goal. (Shoshana)

Learning skills – analysis?

I’m kind of ready to get all this stuff that’s in my mind and that I talked about, that I’ve only done on a small scale... get the real community experience instead of just the theory of it And so I thought this was kind of like a ground for me to do the praxis education I think that’s so important, because I

kind of get worried that there's people that just learn it and sit around and just talk about how social change can happen, in that really academic way.... (Mary-Jayne)

MARIE So it's the praxis piece?

REGINIA - Or people just go and volunteer and that's equally as incomplete...

MARIE - Because they don't have the tools to analyze it?

REGINIA - Right, because then when, like Randelle was saying, her friend went to the meetings, someone was dominating consistently, and so she just stopped going. If you don't have some theory then you don't know that these are real problems that come up in every group that you are going to be in and these are some solutions that you can implement to change it... It empowered us in that way. We were informed in theory and in practice, and so that gave us more courage to speak up when we felt there was a need to.

At the beginning of the second quarter, I was having a discussion with the leader of my organization, he was saying, 'I just kind of started relying on the fact that people aren't going to come to the meetings more than a couple times, and I'm just sort of running this by myself with the few people that are here.' And that's such a common problem. And so I said 'maybe at our next meeting we can talk about why people are here, what brought them to this meeting, what they want to get out of the organization, how they want to help the organization, and we'll just start there.' And I remember as we were going around the group, we ended up having a really good turnout for our meeting, eight people or something. And each person said what they wanted to get out of it and I don't think he (the leader) had ever thought about it in that way before. Never really thought to ask, 'why are you here right now? Why are you giving up 2 hours of your busy night?' And as we started to address what people needed from our group and what they wanted to accomplish, those same people kept coming back, coming back and feeling like their voices were heard. So, you know (it helps) just being able to ask those questions and not just see it as 'well that's just something that happens in social change, people don't show up more than a couple times and you just deal with it.' (Mary-Jayne)

Praxis notebooks. –Question asked: I want to ask a question about the praxis notebooks themselves. I know that you did these praxis notebooks and that they actually became text for the class. You looked at them once a week, you came back and discussed the entries. So, I'd like to hear about what it meant to have your own your own work take that kind of primacy in the class, becoming a major portion of what you actually looked at.

I wrote my praxis notebooks in ways that would talk about what happened, and then I would turn them in and Toby would take sentences out and say, 'dig deeper' or 'be more analytical,' and I would think 'How? I don't understand.' And so I found that as I kept turning them in and getting them back, trying to uncover what was there that I wasn't seeing, and just keep asking, that that slowly I started getting excited about writing my praxis notebook. It started to be the only way in which I could deal with the issues that kept coming up. And I was always hoping you know Toby would give me some feedback. But I sort of gave myself my own feedback. I thought it was a really good process, but it was a learned process for me. (Mary-Jayne)

Question asked - how did you end up working with each others' work in class on the days that you actually used the praxis notebooks in the class?

Because Toby was reading a lot of people's things or talking with people, she would pull out something. If we had a theme that week of communication...she'd say 'well this person was talking about this' and she would invite a kind of a couple people to talk about their stuff... and so then that became a grounds for either that person to talk and other people to kind of reflect on that experience... laying different kinds of experiences next to each other and saying okay here's this and here it is again and being able to make those analyses, which I think is the important part of reflecting and doing concrete things to make those... (Cori)

We were also reading articles about leadership and group dynamics...so every week being able to hear some of the other stories that were going on. That meant that I was able to address more questions that had been generated from the analytical framework than I would have been if I only had my own experiences. (Regina)

Side benefits – support

I think what the praxis notebooks did for me in being our text was give backing and some voice. It brought my experiences to the group, where I could then reflect and unload if I needed to unload and recollect and get different ideas. And then I had some tools where I could go back out into my situation and say this isn't right,... I don't know, just a support system to come at it. I think we came out of it thinking there was a need for activist support (group laughter). (Randelle)

I worked on the WTO at Seattle Center Community College through a class actually, a Marxist philosophy class. I got involved in organizing for that event. And I hadn't even heard of the WTO before this class. And then I mean, who had? You know? And so I started organizing for that (event) and I basically I gave my life to the WTO for months...By the time I got into this class, I was extremely burnt out on activism, I was so cynical --everybody here can vouch for the fact that I was the cynic of the class. And I just thought, 'what's it all worth?...you know?' ... I came in feeling like I needed like someplace to talk about that or some place to say because there was no support for the activists in that case (the WTO). (Shoshana)

Reflection

But on another level...what the reflection did for me was examining at first in me, 'well, why do I think we should be doing it a different way? Why do I think that?' you know, and letting that process start with me first. because it's like you walk in and think 'Oh, I've got to straighten them out/' (laughter) You know if you've checked yourself out through the questions first, then you know that taking it to someone else or taking it to the next level is more legitimate. (Regina)

Challenges

I think sometime with the praxis notebooks it was definitely easy to slide into how are you doing blah blah blah. I think that was an important part of the class; it became an very supportive network, but I also think that sometimes it got away from asking more questions and thinking about it....more on a theoretical level. (Cori)