Fall 1998

Fostering Gumption: Helping Community Service Learning Interns Integrate Their Personal, Professional and Political Selves

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Gumption is the psychic gasoline that keeps the whole thing going. If you haven't got it there's no way the motorcycle can possibly be fixed. But if you have got it and know how to keep it there's absolutely no way in this whole world the motorcycle can keep from getting fixed...Therefore the thing that must be monitored at all times and preserved before anything else is the gumption. (Pirsig, 1974, p. 273)

Introduction

Our experiences of working in the area of peace education with undergraduate college women has emphasized to us the differences in initial perspectives about this topic between us and the students with whom we are working. We enter the situation with the need to help students identify and balance the many competing forces in our society; students arrive expecting us to teach them a curriculum that will solve the problem of violence in our communities. And, thus, it became clear to us quite quickly that our primary goal would be to complicate students' thinking (see Diane Levin, l994). Complicate it too much, and they turn away - frustrated by being pushed beyond their ability to understand the expectations or the explanations. Complicate it too little, and students fail to incorporate the multiple perspectives that are so vital a part of peaceful communities. Community Service Learning (CSL) is a pedagogy based on an agreement to explore multiple perspectives and to value each participant as a resource, as well as a recipient. It is a result of changes in our professional and political lenses which now view "experts" as only one piece of the puzzle-both in terms of identifying the problems as well as solving them.

The purpose of this paper is to share our experiences (see Note 1) working with traditional-aged, undergraduate women who elected to do community service in the area of violence-prevention and peace-making. We tried to accomplish three tasks, which we describe in this paper: 1) We attempted to help the women to become skilled at identifying the complexities of engaging in community service learning. The roles across service provider and service recipient are blurred in a strong community service learning program. And the multiple levels of functioning that exist for the CSL intern are complex, often conflicting pieces of who we are. 2) We attempted to establish a

supportive environment and build in course tasks that helped the CSL interns process their experiences of these complexities in a broad range of ways, including activities that did not rely solely on a verbal account and analysis but relied on connected, non-verbal ways of knowing and learning. Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, et al., 1986) and Gardner's (1983/1993) Theory of Multiple Intelligence offered us a broad set of lenses for considering how students "think", and how they might process their experiences in this course. 3) We wanted to encourage and support the women in learning to live with the ambiguity of their reflections, to view complexity as a challenge and their need for greater integration of beliefs and behaviors as an achievable, long-term goal. All three of these tasks seem essential if students are to work with communities in ways that move beyond missionary-like service to reciprocal learning relationships that create action for social justice.

In our community service learning course on violence prevention and peace-making, we tried to accomplish these tasks by connecting three levels of thought and action: personal, professional, and political. We asked students to reflect upon themselves as individuals (the personal), as practitioners (the professional), as citizens (the political) in our society. We began with the assumption that to know and accept oneself is a prerequisite for knowing and accepting others. Then, we asked students to explore the interfaces of these three levels of functioning. We encouraged them to make connections among these three roles, emphasizing our belief that these levels are not concentric circles which radiate merely out from the individual; they are overlapping circles which intersect and interact together during any particular point in time.

Making connections among the personal, the professional, and the political is difficult work - for any of us, at any point in time. It is the central task of learning to "walk the talk"-to translate learning, whether theoretical or experiential, into action. In each of these domains, many of us in the current U.S. cultural context seek consistency among what we believe, what we espouse, and how we act. For example, we might espouse that all children deserve an effective education, though we believe that we must ensure excellence for our own children and, thereby, we act to maintain a system where some students get more resources than others. We can see here the conflict between the belief system and the espoused values. These tensions create the pain we feel with the acknowledgment that we can't work towards meeting the needs of society as a whole while still maintaining the status quo for most of us who benefit from the social injustices currently existing in society. And so, it is not surprising that our students often find these connections difficult to recognize, and very difficult to integrate.

Many of the young women with whom we work come to Lesley College because they know that they want to work with children. Most of these women have decided that they will become teachers long before they arrive at Lesley. Certainly, all of them choose Lesley College because it is a school that educates for "people professions." At the same

time, most of these young women do not see themselves as political activists. They prepare to move from the personal to the professional; they are not prepared to understand the power that their attitudes and behaviors have in influencing our political or societal values as a whole. Of course, they want to teach children to be caring, productive citizens. They do not see themselves as being politically active in their roles as teachers. However, this initial experience of relating personal experiences to political and social views seems to have expanded their process of gaining skill in hearing and understanding multiple voices and perspectives. Interpersonal perspective-taking and dialectical thought are "habits of mind" that seem to build a commitment to the common good (Daloz, et al, 1996, p. 108), and dealing with multiple voices and contradictions was inherent in our students' process of understanding.

When we first began to teach this course, we found that some students actually resented being asked to talk about themselves personally when their reason for taking a course such as this one was, ostensibly, to learn about specific violence prevention curricula and various pedagogical strategies in peace-making. With experience, however, we learned to be clearer in communicating, through the course description, that self-reflection is part of this experience.

Students who really are not ready for this work generally opt out. Others are prepared to deal with their own apprehensions and understand the expectations of the course. Recognizing these anxieties, we attempted to create a safe "holding environment," allowing them to grieve the loss of old beliefs in the process of constructing new sociopolitical perspectives (Kegan, 1982). Taking new perspectives requires acknowledging complexities that may have gone unnoticed in the past and promotes movement to a transition away from the "received knowing" (Belenky, et al, 1986) implicit in the "just teach me the skills" attitude that many students expressed.

The Course

The course, Changing the Culture of Violence: A Course in Community Service Learning, is an undergraduate course which can serve as professional pre-practica hours for students in education or human services. This course exemplifies community service learning for several reasons: 1) students are in community internships to work on issues connected to social justice;

2) they are trained for the work they do there; and 3) they spend regular reflection time, individually and as a group, integrating their classroom work and readings with their understandings of what they are learning through their internship experience. Students are asked to write a weekly reflection paper in which they try to make connections among the personal, the professional, and the political.

When these three levels of functioning are presented as concentric circles, students are able to understand and relate to them quite well. They understand the need to start with

oneself and to move outward.

[Appendix A]

We start with a study of our selves-who we are in terms of our 5 Cs (Johnson, 1996): color, culture, class, character, context. We move from ourselves to others, from the personal to the professional (understanding and accepting those with whom we work), to the political (understanding and relating humanistically to society as a whole). Certainly, all of us understand how our communities move outward from our immediate families to our neighborhoods, then our cities, or other associational communities. The real tensions are created when we start to push students to understand how the actions at one level of functioning do, in fact, affect the other levels of functioning.

[Appendix B]

Examples of Negotiating Personal, Professional, and Political Roles: Am I the teacher or do I align myself with the students?

Professional Role: Identification/Responsibilities of an Adult Personal Experience: Identification/Empathy with the Children/Youth

Tension between our personal and professional selves has been addressed by practicum supervisors for years, both in education and human services. On a personal level, CSL interns, as inexperienced group leaders, may feel an anxiety concerning their ability to really carry out the activity. This anxiety often leads to a need for control as they try to identify with the mentor teacher's ability to be responsible for a group of children. On a more theoretical level, what we might label as "professional" functioning, the young practitioner is, however, committed to giving the children a voice. The identification that young practitioners have with their students forces them into the tensions created by competing needs-the need to be in control of the group, and the need to allow the individuals in the group to have some power themselves. This time of transition in teacher training, from student to teacher, is a difficult time-when one can empathize with both positions, both sets of needs, and still find it very difficult to integrate these needs into a win-win solution. As a student told Robert Coles (1993): "I talk myself blue in the face, but in the middle I can see them tuning out on me." (p. 42) This situation generalizes to most community service roles in which adolescents or young adults find themselves torn between taking the adult role in an authoritarian manner versus putting themselves in the peer role as a "friend" to the students with whom they are working.

Professional Goals: Teaching Conflict Resolution Strategies Can I practice what I preach?

Personal Needs: Difficulty Using Conflict Resolution Strategies in One's Own Life

In this particular CSL experience, students worked in teams when they went to their placements. Here again, we saw students in dilemmas as they attempted to facilitate negotiation strategies among elementary school-aged children at the CSL sites, while often having major difficulties negotiating among themselves as they planned their lessons. Students compartmentalized by planning together the ground rules for their sites while not operating with clear ground rules themselves. Like any group, CSL interns need training and practice in working in cooperative or collaborative learning groups. Most students attempted to set up ground rules among themselves when they first began planning how to present their CSL peace-making activities. Those groups that had difficulty tended to take this ostensible group planning session and make it a series of individual activities. Each group member would choose specific activities to present and the rest of the group would agree to let her lead that activity on her own. This solution, though it allowed for continued group cohesiveness on a minimal level, did not move the CSL interns into the type of successful negotiation they were simultaneously trying to facilitate among the children at their CSL sites. However, it should also be recognized that re-entry adult women also experience similar difficulties in moving to more collaborative modes of learning (Taylor & Marieneau, 1995, p. 11).

Political Position: The Politics of Social Justice Personal Position: Based on the Competitive Value System of our Culture

Is it win-win or winner-take-all?

The tension between the personal and the political roles were the most difficult for the students to recognize and address. They seemed much more difficult to deal with than the personal- professional conflicts. We believe that this interface is the most difficult for all of us who work within the peace movement. How do we really "walk the talk?" For example, students were able to understand the danger of revenge as a catalyst for much violence in our world-locally as well as nationally and internationally. At the same time, we-as humans-are often unable to successfully find an alternative for revenge when dealing with our own anger. Similarly, most of the students came from rather traditional homes where competition is seen as a necessary and advantageous aspect of our society, though in this course students also agreed with much of what they read about the role of competition in the politics of social injustice in our society (Kohn, 1992). In our society, the tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group is one which we do not easily resolve. Usually, we seem to have resolved this tension by denying the interface between our personal and political selves and prioritizing the needs of the individual.

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that many young women have not received the kinds of social (Gilligan, 1982) or educational (Belenky, et al, 1986; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hammer, 1990) support they need to feel they have either the strength

of voice or the power of agency necessary to achieve social change. Yet, there is little doubt that they frequently have a strong sense of caring about the well-being of others. Daloz, et al (1996) have observed the importance of "finding work in the world" as a means of strengthening compassion for others by understanding and valuing difference. This underscores the importance of the kind of experience students were introduced to in our CSL course. Although epistemological development is a slow process, and students struggled to articulate personal reflections on their experiences, they still marshaled the courage to go into new and different settings to teach skills that they were just learning themselves. Therefore, even if we did not succeed in helping students achieve dramatic developmental transitions, we did succeed in providing sufficient support for them to have the gumption to take new risks. As Pirsig (1974) has observed: "The gumption-filling process occurs when one is quiet long enough to see and hear and feel the real universe, not just one's stale opinions about it. But it's nothing exotic. That's why I like the word." (p. 273) Our students may not have achieved anything exotic, but they did foster gumption. They attempted to act on a sense of caring, even if personal reflection to achieve a sense of agency was difficult.

Learning to Live with Ambiguity

One of the identifying features of a good CSL experience is its ability to offer the opportunity for reflection on and integration of the CSL experience. Typically, this reflection is accomplished in a process seminar. This seminar is designed to offer students the opportunity to understand and speak about the contradictory messages among their personal, professional, and political levels of functioning-to work to better integrate their beliefs with their behaviors, their personal goals with the needs of the others at their service site. However, we found that our students began feeling increasingly stressed by this part of their weekly course. Students seemed to relax more during the theoretical part of the course where readings were discussed and sometimes information was presented didactically than they did during that part of the course where they dealt with their own behavior and concerns.

Constructivists (Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks, 1996; Duckworth, 1996; Kegan 1982) often recognize the need for creating an "optimal mismatch" in supporting new thinking in students. Challenging students with a situation which causes them to question their current thinking can promote understanding of the world in increasingly more complex ways. Yet, facilitators must avoid confronting students with teacher-centered analyses that are far beyond their level of experience and theoretical grasp.. This only causes students to shut down and embed themselves in the safety of their current thinking.

Finding the "optimal mismatch", the "optimal challenge" for students is based on both their developmental position and the number of variables we ask students to balance at once. For example, a CSL intern who is in personal-professional tension between the personal need to lesson one's anxiety about succeeding-leading to a tendency to act in a

punitive manner so that things don't get "out of control"-and the professional commitment to win-win situations and group problem-solving. If we were to raise this issue of "letting go" before the intern felt self- assured enough to consider this option, the student might likely decide that student-centered approaches are too high risk or "peaceable classrooms" are not long for the real world. Instead, we offer the intern the challenge to engage the students in determining group expectations and rules when the student feels comfortable with the content and procedure of the activity and ready to accept this challenge concerned with behavior management.

When we asked students to identify the tasks they wished to accomplish during the seminar part of the course, they came up with several purposes-only one of which was better self-awareness, or what we would have considered reflective practice. In addition, students felt that this open- ended time was very important in terms of : 1) offering support (without an in depth look at the problems), 2) offering an opportunity to problem-solve through peer suggestions (rather than working on problem-solving strategies oneself), and 3) offering an opportunity to let off steam, a place to express one's feelings (without generating solutions).

In an attempt to better tolerate the level of intensity created by examining the contradictory and/or conflicting roles identified in the course, we looked to Gardner's (1983/1993) Theory of Multiple Intelligence to help us offer students new ways to think about their experiences without necessarily processing the material in a typical linguistic fashion which identifies the problem and seeks immediately to determine a solution. We tried to move away from painful soul- searching for resolution of what we recognized as conflicts across the three levels of functioning. Instead, we tried to help students feel more comfortable living with these ambiguities by offering them a variety of ways to express the tension they experienced.

As Coles (1993) has noted, new group leaders are often caught between the personal and professional issues of behavior management. It might be that an intern needs to learn to tolerate sitting with a set of conflicting goals-one to ensure an orderly classroom oneself and the other to engage the students in sharing the responsibility for determining "order". Sometimes resolution that is forced too quickly isn't really resolution at all, but a clever way to avoid the issue at hand. Therefore, at times we encouraged students to abstain from problem-solving and to focus only on an accurate description of the situation facing them. Students made drawings or designs, engaged in role plays, worked with metaphor, or tried movement as expression-all diverse routes to the seeing, hearing, and feeling that are part of the gumption-filling process.

More time needed to be spent honoring those experiences that students could clearly see as successful and helping them identify their own strengths.. More time needed to be allowed for students to analyze their experiences without the pressure of always understanding more. We needed to slow down and remember that integrating one's

various roles is a life-long process, not something that needs to be completed during one course or one CSL experience.

We looked for ways to help maintain a balance of a sense of competence with challenge, an "optimal mismatch" of ideas that keeps moving students forward in their thinking, while not exhausting them. While we continued to encourage students to acknowledge the internal conflicts they encountered, we tried to offer them the support and safety they required to have the courage to acknowledge what they experienced that they did not understand.

Identifying Models to Help Paint the Long-Range Paths to be Taken

One strategy we used to help with the challenge for self-reflection involved asking students to identify a peace-maker of their own choosing and to study the works written by that individual. We asked students to pick someone from their own field, someone whom they admired and wanted to emulate. Through study of that person, students can better understand some of the struggles that a peace-maker faces in integrating the personal, professional, and political aspects of their character. We wanted the students to consider the sources of their peace-makers' commitments, how their peace-makers sustained themselves in this work, how their peace- makers coped with the complexity of "walking the talk," not merely as a political figure or a professional figure, but across all three levels of functioning in their lives.

Most students left this course feeling that their work had just begun. Some really felt they needed a break from their own self-reflection. Others felt a new sense of balance at having considered some things they had not previously considered in terms of their own values and goals. As faculty, we, too, recognized the need to identify the gains made as well as the need to feel at peace with the work yet to be done. We emphasized the need to find self-esteem in one's willingness to recognize new issues without necessarily being able to immediately resolve conflicting ideas. We tried to help students find value in the process of the journey, rather than the security of "having arrived." A colleague reminded me of the importance of seeing this work as a life-long journey in which we progress by taking small steps. There is a lovely story by Loren Eisley that we heard only after our last class session, but which we plan to share with future groups of students:

A young person walked along the beach picking up starfish and throwing them back into the water. It was a warm, lovely day which followed a violent night, and the entire beach was covered with starfish who had been washed on shore the night before during the storm. A couple came along and saw the young person throwing the starfish back, one at a time. "Why are you doing that?" they asked of the young person. "You will never be able to throw all these starfish back into the water in time. There is no way you will be able to save all of them. What does it matter if you manage to throw back this one or that

one?"

"That is true. But," said the person as one particular starfish was lifted up and positioned to be tossed, "it matters to this starfish." And with that, the person threw the starfish back into the water.

Conclusions

As we reflect on what we have learned about ourselves and our students through the CSL course, it has been difficult to achieve an optimal balance among critical self-evaluation, high expectations for students, and recognition of positive accomplishments. There are many ways in which this experience illustrates the recent transposition in pedagogical jargon that is embodied in the phrase: learning and teaching. Just as we expect students to develop a sense of reciprocity in their placements, we need to promote and embrace the same sense of reciprocity in our teaching. We hold onto our aspirations for these students to strengthen their own voices through personal reflection and experiential learning; we have not abandoned our faith in their abilities to perceive social needs and political injustice; we still believe that we have planted the seeds that will grow into a stronger sense of self and foster the gumption it takes to be an agent for social change for the common good.

Where we succeeded the most was in fostering gumption, and we need to validate that in our practice as instructors. The students' struggles with personal reflection seem to be part of the process nurturing the emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) that will contribute to the transition to a new sense of self (Kegan, 1982; Belenky, et al, 1986). Yet, this is a slow process, and there is an enduring tension in balancing the demands for support and challenge (Daloz, 1986). While we see the need to continue to push for reflective practice, we recognize the need to embrace "how far we can help them learn," rather than how fast we can make them learn (Duckworth, 1986). No doubt, we need to continue to provide personal, professional, and political challenges. At the same time we need to embrace and nurture the gumption-filling process so that students become intrinsically compelled to work for social justice.

Notes

1. The course described in this essay was taught by Linda Brion-Meisels and Barrie Wheeler, and Luke Baldwin consulted with them in analyzing their reflections. Brion-Meisels and Baldwin are the primary authors of this article.

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