

Teaching Issues of Inequality Through a Critical Pedagogy of Place

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Abstract: This paper examines the conceptualization and implementation of teaching inequality through placed-based and experiential learning while focusing on issues that impact the sustainability of communities through the effects of the social and historical constructs of race, class, and gender. The goal is to push students to rethink issues of sustainability in a more holistic way including social, economic, and political aspects to sustainability. In turn, students are empowered through a Freirian pedagogy to become “student-teachers” for the society in which they live in partnership with a local community organization to create public interactive history exhibits that create educational opportunities to both identify and document historical and current inequalities and their effects on the present moment and to encourage the community to engage with and analyze their own history in a manner to create meaningful dialogue and public discussion for the creation of a more equitable and sustainable society.

Keywords: sustainability education, place-based learning, experiential learning, inequality, public sociology, public history, Freirian pedagogy

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Sustainability, engagement, place-based and experiential learning are buzz-words in public discourse from classrooms to community organizations, but what do these words mean and how do we as educators create meaningful learning experiences where learners, whether traditional students or community members, can learn and practice the sociological imagination? This paper provides an example of how educators from academia and the larger community of which they are a part can build partnerships where both students and community members can benefit as they work to build a future where social responsibility becomes practice and not just theory.

Today, both students and faculty engage in discourse and the study of ideas of sustainability in relation to society and the environment. However, it is less common for these same ideas of sustainability to apply to critiques and analyses of a larger sustainable culture. In terms of thinking about sustainability, students and faculty must push themselves to also consider aspects of social, political, and economic sustainability. How to conceptualize these ideas, and what they might and could mean especially in terms of addressing issues of inequality provides many areas for new research and theorizing. This is the logical next step in addressing sustainability and several environmental sociologists suggest that environmental issues cannot be dealt with until inequality is addressed (see Barbosa 2015).

This paper challenges educators to consider how teaching issues of social, political, and economic inequality can be addressed in the classroom and how students can participate in the work of a sustainable community by becoming “student-teachers” (Freire 1989). A course on *Inequalities in the U.S.* at a small liberal arts college has been redesigned to incorporate ideas and concepts related to social, political, and economic sustainability. The purpose was for students to address and understand inequalities within the context of the U.S. at both the macro and the micro level in terms of how inequality can be seen and understood as a social issue that should be examined at multiple levels. By partnering with The Cumberland County Historical Society, course objectives and assignments have been rethought so that students can come to understand inequalities as they exist in the shared social environments around them through local spaces, not just in the abstract macro spaces that they are used to considering in the academic classroom. Through place-based and experiential learning activities, students are able to come to a better understanding of the study of inequalities both theoretically and as applied to specific local, state, regional, and national contexts.

Issues related to the effects of the system of stratification based on race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. within the U.S. need to be rethought in how they must be addressed in holistic and sustainable ways to achieve real and lasting solutions through social change. By addressing the teaching of inequalities in this way service-learning, experiential, and place-based learning opportunities have been incorporated where students can spend time at local community organizations and use both qualitative and quantitative methods and reasoning. The objective is to enable students to see inequality within local, regional, and national contexts and to link these experiences to global forces. At the same time students need to learn to see the social worlds that we inhabit and for them to become active participants in the local community where they become teachers on issues of inequality.

One of the main pedagogical goals was to take this course and to teach it with an integrated service-learning component, which would allow students to examine areas of American society

related to inequalities of race, class, and gender. Experiential based learning was incorporated through service learning projects where students would be required to spend time at a local community organization. This was done as a means to use C. Wright Mills' "sociological imagination" (2013) whereby students could link personal troubles to larger social issues, enabling them to see inequality within local, regional, national, and global contexts, and encourage them to make connections to the larger social worlds that they inhabit.

The project stretches the traditional study of inequality to make use of place-based learning and to facilitate the identification of various forms of inequality in the social world around us by providing a framework through which students are able to exit the campus bubble and to meaningfully engage in the local community. The study of inequality often examines the distribution of power and resources within a society but often fails to put a personal face to these issues, which are often treated at the macro level through examining the distribution of power and resources. The goal of this project was to rethink the course *Inequalities in the U.S* so that it challenges students to not only think about inequality abstractly and theoretically, but concretely and experientially.

This should both enable and empower students to think about inequality not only at the national and regional levels but also at the state and local community levels. This course redesign advances learning because it directs students to examine how inequality is an unsustainable social practice and how a more sustainable society might be better designed to ameliorate issues of inequality. By participating in service-learning projects students are able to connect the problems and solutions to inequality from the classroom to the actual lived experience of individuals and communities. A key component of this redesign is an attempt to get students to engage in ideas outside of the classroom and to get their hands dirty through taking ideas and concepts related to inequality and to apply them through research and service learning.

This project, it is hoped, will contribute to the relationship building between 'town and gown' so that both the communities of a small liberal arts college, a local historical society, and the surrounding municipality will be able to see themselves not as separate, but as parts of the same community. A large part of this project is for students to not only learn about inequality through the local community as a living laboratory, but also flip their roles as students and become what Freire refers to as "student-teachers" (1989). Thus they will not only learn, but in turn teach what they learn to both each other and the larger community. One of the key ways of dealing with sustainability and with issues of inequality is first and foremost educating publics about issues as a means to instigate social change.

Learning for the sake of learning is good, but learning for the sake of praxis lends itself to more active and engaged learning and social action. When learning can be applied and shared, it amplifies itself and moves beyond an individual act and becomes an act of community building. Learning of this type is necessarily situated within a particular place and at a particular time with particular actors. In order to implement a pedagogy of place specific social change towards sustainability, this paper now turns to a discussion of Freirian pedagogy, which lends itself to praxis as a form of social change through consciousness building or awakening.

Praxis is the reflective act of transforming the world through the application of theory. In Freire's life and work, it took the form of helping individuals learn to understand their world through the process of *conscientização*, "by making it possible for [women and] men to enter the historical process as responsible Subjects" (Freire 1989: 20). For Freire, pedagogy is a means for teaching-learning and inspiring the process of learning-teaching in others, subsequently effecting action through developing a critical consciousness or *conscientização*.

The ideas of Freire, were integral to exploring how the educational process of learning about inequality could be both a means for student-learning and student-teaching. Freire saw education as suffering from "narration sickness" (1989: 57) and to a large extent we can make the same claim about society as a whole. People are often told what is wrong, what they need, and how to fix it without ever becoming active knowing subjects. Instead, they remain submissive objects throughout this entire process of citizenship. For Freire, knowledge is only possible through the dialectic process of constant engagement and recreation (1989: 58). To address this, Freire recreated and restructured the student-teacher relationship. This relationship must be recreated and rethought to become one of collaboration and mutual participation in the process of knowledge creation and analysis of material conditions. Through the process of dialogue the two parties must work together to create a holistic form of pedagogy that allows students and teachers to become autonomous, conscious, active decision makers in the process of their own participation in their communities and the larger world. Integral to this restructured relationship is the process of dialogue "whose goal is social as much as individual change" (Aronowitz 2001: 8). But this change can only take place in an educational process that is engaged in by "two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue" (Aronowitz 2001: 8). The idea of an ongoing dialogue is essential to the idea of people as uncompleted beings who are always seeking to grow and become better beings. It is also through the creation of an educational dialogue that we can begin to investigate "the possibilities for invigorating public spaces as sites of community solidarity and democratic action" (Blau & Moncada 2006).

This course was designed in a number of different stages so that students could build on new knowledge and apply it at various points during the semester. Initially students began with a series of readings addressing larger macro assessments of inequality in the U.S. regarding issues such as race, class, gender, and equality of opportunity or lack thereof in access to education, health care, wealth, income, etc. (i.e. Santiago 2015; Schiller 2008; Kerbo 2009; Wright & Rogers 2015; Williams 2003). These readings were then followed by a series of readings dealing with public sociology (Burawoy 2006; Blau & Iyall Smith 2006), public history blogs (i.e. Significant Objects 2015; Simon 2015) and pedagogy (i.e. Freire (1985, 1989). The idea was for students to not only learn, but take what they learned and share that knowledge with others through the creation of public interactive history exhibits at the local historical society.

In order for students to get a better understanding of how these exhibits would work, they were initially introduced to the Cumberland County Historical Society (CCHS) and led through a discussion on the importance of public history and its role in communities as well as issues the CCHS faces in terms of accessibility and overcoming its own history as a type of institution constrained by race, class, and gender. Students toured the exhibits and examined how the stories of race, class, and gender are or are not portrayed, and identified historic events that have affected the divisions of race and class within the physical space of Carlisle, PA. Students were

then given surveys for analyzing how the existing exhibit space addresses issues of education and representation of community groups in terms of easily recognizable identity markers such as race, class, and gender through discussion. They were then able to tease out the various readings and perspectives they themselves brought into the space as well. This was done to give students both an introduction to the space and a feel for the kind of work currently being done. It was also a means for the CCHS to obtain useful feedback in terms of evaluation of their portrayal of aspects of diversity and inequality.

Another integral part to this project was the incorporation of service-learning. This sought to serve two mutually beneficial ends. The first was to create a more reciprocal relationship with the CCHS by providing (wo)man power for the interactive history workshop space. The second was so students would be able to understand how the public interacts with exhibits and to have practical experience and knowledge necessary for designing their own interactive history exhibits dealing with inequality in the local community.

Students were able to apply information from the class materials to experiences, and thus think critically about the parallels between the theory and experiences of forms of inequality. Gruenewald identifies that one of the reasons a critical pedagogy of place is so important is that the “education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit” (2003: 3)

The service-learning component also provided students with the opportunity to contribute to and participate in the local community. This was when they began to take on the role of “student-teacher” (Freire 1989). Their service work provided them with opportunities to gain new skills and ~~also~~ apply skills acquired through their formal education, learn more about themselves, and compare and contrast what they were learning in the classroom to the larger world. Additionally, these experiences added perspective to the course readings and discussions. Through their service work, they were also able to develop a deeper understanding of how nonprofit organizations try to address the needs of local populations. These experiences gave students a more complex understanding about how *they* can make a difference in their communities through taking on the role of the “student-teacher” and “teacher-student” (Freire 1989).

Education, or lifelong learning, becomes the activity of conscious individuals within society. Specifically, human praxis entails the insoluble unity between action in and reflection on the world (Freire 2006: 30). This interaction is the positioning and engagement of the individual in society. What is important to note is that *conscientização* cannot exist without praxis or as Freire wrote “action-reflection” (INODEP 2006: 30). When you teach a person to read and write you are teaching them to name the world (Freire 2006: 87). This dialogical process is essential because in traditional “banking” systems of education “the fragmentation of skills and bodies of knowledge . . . creates the inability to make linkages, and . . . it deadens the senses. This process leads to a de facto social construction of not seeing” (Macedo 1994: 17; Freire 1989). An important part of the service-learning was to ensure that students had adequate time for reflection of their experiences not only in terms of processing their work within public spaces, but also by making the connections between the theory of the classroom and their lived experience and practice; in short to make sure that they were seeing. Students were periodically expected to write reflective essays linking the two worlds of the classroom and the local community through

their service-learning work. Reflection served to allow students to grapple with the world and to see how they fit into the overall social structure.

To make this process as smooth as possible and to also extract higher levels of meaning, discussions were held and readings were given to conduct participant observation and take field notes (i.e. Warren & Karner 2015) to provide the necessary tools for students to make use of the academic knowledge within a particular setting. Theory is important but only in so much as it is connected to a practice and results in affecting praxis. Pedagogy is a process that consists of the unity of the theory and practice of education. Freire explains the interrelation of theory and practice and the significance of this dialectical relationship. He wrote that in order “to practice better” he had “to look for the help of theories” (Freire 1993: 99). Through this process, Freire states that one must learn “to not dichotomize theory and practice, and to never perceive them as being isolated from each other, but in permanent contradictory and dialectical relationship” (1993: 99). Pedagogy identifies the what, why, and how of a process of education, theoretically and methodologically.

Integrating a certain amount of research methods training was necessary to ensure that students had the parameters and skills to actively understand and acquire the knowledge necessary to identify markers of inequality within social spaces. To this end, students were assigned more directed readings on race, class, and gender in urban settings (i.e. Kleniewski & Thomas 2011) and on qualitative methods involving place and analyzing material objects (i.e. Sustain & Chiseri-Strater 2002). Readings were followed with discussion and students were given tasks to complete that required them to practice these methods. For example, after readings on objects as material culture and how to read objects as social artifacts (Sustain & Chiseri-Strater 2002), students were taken to a local art museum. Previously, an assignment had been created where students would analyze a series of works of art around street scenes in various cities. Together with the art curator, an educational experience was created where students, upon entering the gallery, were asked to walk around and identify a work that they felt compelling. This was followed by a discussion of why they had been drawn to the particular work and what had caught their attention. Context of the works was provided in a brief lecture and students were asked to explain issues of inequality, such as representations of race, class, and gender within the works. The discussion then addressed why certain aspects of individuals were portrayed in particular ways and how they could be analyzed both now and at the time they were produced. By focusing students on the two time specific moments of meaning creation, students were required to apply the sociological imagination of C. Wright Mills (1959). This particular educational experience was carried out towards the beginning of the semester after having laid groundwork of main themes and concepts within the study of social stratification and inequality. This was done so that students could then apply their acquired knowledge and so that they could practice the skills of looking and observing before using the same skills within the local neighborhoods to which they were assigned.

The next stage in this educational project was focused on understanding the specific intersections of race, class, and gender within the particular space of the community. In order to achieve this, students were asked to read excerpts on these topics in relation to urban settings (i.e. Kleniewski & Thomas 2011). Then students were given a map of the borough and assigned to a group. Each group was then responsible for exploring a section of the city. Students were asked to identify

the racial mix of various neighborhoods and seek to identify racial segregation in the form of racial and ethnic enclaves. Students then compared their own empirical results to the Census data provided on the racial make-up of the town. Students then identified the class background of various neighborhoods and sought to categorize which residential neighborhoods belonged to which socio-economic classes. Care was taken to identify material markers of social class. Students compared their findings to the Census data provided on income and wealth. Finally, students were asked to consider where gendered spaces could be located and the impacts these divisions had on the community. These mapping projects were presented to the class in order to create a holistic view of the entire community and to encourage across group collaboration among students.

At this point the groundwork was in place for students to complete the final class project (the design of interactive history exhibits for the CCHS). Students were assigned groups by choosing one student from each of the previous groups so that all members of the new group had seen a different perspective of the community through different neighborhoods. Students were then directed to individually write a one-page concept proposal of how they would create a teachable interactive exhibit about the historical and current inequalities in the community. Students were guided to focus on themes concerning issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc. Each group would then decide which of the five proposals they thought met the objectives for a public interactive history exhibit on inequality. As a group they would then prepare multi-media exhibits examining inequality through time in the local community. Students were expected to make the presentation an interactive learning experience that could then be built and implemented at the CCHS.

Freire understands that pedagogy as a project of *conscientização* or “educational practice is a necessary dimension of social practice” (1999: 83). As such, he emphasizes that the educational practice of *conscientização* must include “popular participation” and the ability to engage “the dialectic unity between theory and practice” (Freire 1999: 89). Giroux points out that “pedagogy works to produce, circulate, and confirm particular forms of knowledge” (1999: 110). This reminds us that no educational project or pedagogy is neutral. The act of learning and the act of teaching to publics became the educational practice of the students by creating spaces to question the historical and current forms of inequalities of a place. This manifest itself through students who made comments about never having realized the differences in race and class in the city of Carlisle and who did not realize that poverty presented itself clearly to a conscious observer.

One of the main goals of this project has been to bridge the gap between the college classroom and the local community. Hattery and Smith speak to “the importance of involving students in the communities in which they are living” as one of the key perspectives offered when utilizing a framework of public sociology (2006: 266). This became most visible amongst those students marked by race, class, and gender. One thanked me for having provided space for said student to actually address issues of inequality in students home community. This was productive for the class as a whole as students were able to make links not only between the global, national, and local, but also between localities. This project has also sought to help students realize that they interact with and are part of a community and social world beyond the ivory tower. Through the process of engaging in place-based education, through service-learning activities, and through experiential learning, students are able to engage with knowledge in new and creative ways.

They also begin to break down the dichotomy of teacher/student and they become student-teachers (Freire 1989) and realize that beyond just absorbing and regurgitating information they can actually take that information and apply it to the world around them. By working in partnership with local community organizations and immersing themselves in local social institutions, they begin to understand the power they have to engage in a pedagogy of place that can lead to positive social changes in the place specific locations in which they find themselves.

This paper has sought to illustrate how educators from both academia and other social institutions (such as local historical societies) can partner in ways that are mutually beneficial to both institutions and participants as well as the publics that they serve. By creating meaningful learning experiences education becomes not just a passive act, but a means for learning subjects to understand and engage with the world around them. In this particular case study, historical and ongoing issues of inequality were learned about, documented, and taught as a means of creating dialogue between groups that normally do not interact. By performing this work within institutions it co-opted traditional spaces with specific histories of race, class, and gender to use them in innovative ways to both create knowledge for and deliver knowledge to local communities. By highlighting issues we may be more comfortable avoiding, an educational space has been created that can encourage dialogues for finding solutions to inequality within and between our neighborhoods and thus lead us to developing more holistic practices for building sustainable communities.

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