All Together in One Place: Theory and Practice, Student and Community

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Before the quarantine caused seismic interruptions, a cloistered education was deemed by many as the better education. This longstanding approach to education meant that the student would sequester from the world, study undisturbed from the goings-on of the world, to then emerge and return to the world as a learned person. The time away from society, family, and many kinds of communal obligations was meant to provide time for intellectual maturation, contemplation, and some say, an extended adolescence. The students would be free to read, write, and think while under the watchful eye of a teacher. In the cloistered model of education, the degree taken (wrestled and snatched) afforded the recipient a select spot in the ranks of the higher echelons of society.

The focus of education as secluded and separate from society is evident in the language of students. Students talk about the classroom as being "in here" while their lives are "out there." Students, in rebuffing some ideas, comment "that won't work in the real world" or "that's nice to discuss, but in the real-world people will not go for that." The classroom, for these students, is not the real, while life in society, in community, with family obligations and responsibilities is the real. Students also signal that what is taught in many classrooms has little relevance to the problems and pain of their people. Or what they learn requires a great deal of translation,

interpretation, and adaptation to be relevant to the suffering of their people. The primary aim of cloistered teaching is to insulate student and teacher until which time that the student has met the disconnected standards of the faculty.

In this time of shifting models of education, these kinds of new questions abound:

> Suppose the aim of education is not to hide from the world in order to emerge as an educated person, but instead the better aim is to prepare to meet the needs of the world as education?

> Could this moment be forcing us to a collective realization that the better aim of education is to engage in the world as education and thus change the world?

> What is the relationship between communities of learning and social change?

> What is the influence of the world upon classroom teaching?

> Moving forward, what will be the relationship between communities of learning and the world?

> What will be the relationship between schools and the very neighborhoods, towns, and cities they occupy?

> What if the world is the classroom?

> What practices of communities of learning are needed for social innovation?

> What meaning-making practices, understandings and joys of the world are needed to facilitate vibrant learning in schools?

Yes, many schools have forms of internships, field education, supervised vocational experiences, elaborate field trips, or study abroad while in a degree program. Most of these programs are auxiliary to the degree program and if not auxiliary the experiences which keep students in the world or send students into new worlds are not the spine of the curriculum. The primary presumption of current models of higher education is that student's first learn theory in a classroom (cloistered), then are sent out into the workplace to practice. There is still a separation and privileging of theory over practice. Howard Thurman informed us years ago that theory and practice are each sides of the same coin. What would it mean to create approaches to education which do not separate theory from practice or student from community?

A small start to answering this critical question has to do with the mindset of the students while in a degree program. The identities and social locations of my students has always been a significant factor in my teaching. I wanted my students to come to class and bring with them into the course conversation the joys, suffering, trouble, practices, learnings and know-hows of

their people, their communities. I believed that students, to have agency in their own learning, must not leave their families nor society for education, but they must reflect critically and imaginatively on the struggles of their community looking for new and needed solutions. To facilitate this approach, I designed this learning exercise for my introductory course:

> **During the second session of the course, I asked students to reflect upon these questions: (a) Who are your people? (b) What sacrifices did your people make for you to be in this educational experience? (c) What problems plague your people? What problems have their backs against the wall? Once these questions were engaged, I would instruct them to draw a metaphor or simile to depict your people and their current social situation. I chided them not to reduce the complexity of the situation, but to use a metaphor which depicted the complexity. I gave them time to think and draw. Finally, I asked these questions for further reflection and preparation for our semester long conversation: (a) What kind of leader will you need to become to assist your people and relieve their suffering? (b) What leaders will you join for the thriving of your people?**

Using their drawings and prose we created a gallery wall in the classroom. I encouraged them to, for the entirety of the semester, keep their families, churches, neighborhoods at the center of their experience in this degree program. Throughout the course I insisted that they not think generically nor individualistically as if they were at school alone or disconnected from the world. Throughout the semester I led them in other learning activities and assignments where they had to continue to consider the specific problems, troubles, challenges, and attributes of their people and ways our study informed those troubles and fostered their leadership formation in their own context.

We do not have the luxury of disconnecting our best minds from the troubles and support of their families and neighborhoods while undertaking higher education. We need models of education which nurture interconnection, understands community and promotes a sense of belonging as a necessity to healthy society.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/07/all-together-in-one-place-theory-and-practice-student-and-community/