ACADEMY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## Civic Engagement Student Artifact

*Human Rights Education*

In my exploration of the causes and subsequent interventions to human rights abuses and identity-based social inequities, I am finding value in immediate measures such as policy and the work of international justice institutions, yet am realizing that true transformation resides in the education realm, with our youth.

Through my own children's experiences in the American public school system, I have gained a familiarity of how these inequities are developed and how the schools are unwilling or ill-equipped to facilitate learning around identity and conflict issues.

Ironically, I stumbled upon a position posting for Amnesty International's Human Rights Education Service Corp program, seeking facilitators for the human rights education curriculum in the District of Columbia public high schools. Upon selection for the role, I was excited to optimize the experience and decided to make it a project of inquiry and analysis.

***My Growth as Content Designer & Facilitator***

To date, I have 83 hours invested in the program, with one class left. The time has been well worth the benefits I have experienced.

This has been my first experience formally facilitating with youth. My ten plus years facilitating with adults has been in settings where the individual has elected to attend or is being paid to attend. There have been plenty of people-management challenges within that context, but not comparable to the unique dynamic that exists with young folks who haven't elected to participate in the content. The first two classes were rough; the students were more engaged in insulting each other than in the class content, and

no one could get a full sentence out. Because of this, only a few students engaged (monopolizing the class) while others literally fell asleep. A real transformation has taken place, and as of the last class, we were able to explore a highly controversial topic quite successfully. All the students are engaged and speak up now, those that used to monopolize conversation have pulled back, there are NO insults, and interrupting is the exception rather than the rule. The students are excited when we come, and a few in particular are affectionate ("I missed you {when we didn't have class} last week!" I am so impressed and amazed at the change – and over the course of such a short period of time.

I attribute the changes to a few things. The first is facilitation methods. Setting ground rules became more of an intensive topic than it has been for any other program I've facilitated. We had some honest dialogue around them owning the tone of the class, and they had great ideas and choices about how they wanted it to be. Through consistency in applying what they chose, they are displaying more respect for each other.

Although they are a small class (8-11 students any given day), large group discussion didn't work at first. We had to switch to small group discussions for several weeks until we could successfully go back to large group dialogue.
Captivate and engage! Keeping them occupied with interesting activities has been crucial. The pace of the class is insane (we almost always run short on time at the end), but it serves to keep them on task and interested.

Measured responses; I have learned that with teenagers, you have to walk the fine line of setting the right tone but choosing your battles carefully. This includes knowing when to thoughtfully probe an inappropriate remark versus when to gently redirect. The secret is a calm response to whatever and not objectifying the students (as a barrier to a better class). I can honestly say that I have grown to appreciate every student.

I have learned tremendous lessons about engaging this age group specifically, and about agility in gauging what works and quickly dumping what doesn't. I most definitely have emerged from this experience a stronger facilitator.

I have also been impressed with the knowledge and maturity that has emerged once we got past the first few weeks. The students have really stepped up to the plate and shown their potential; it has been their choice to do so.

Another factor has been enlisting powerful images; I have learned a great deal about how this group responds to provocative images (still images or video clips). The most meaningful discussions have been triggered by pictures or videos. This knowledge has compelled me to make careful selections to ensure that every lesson has this component.

I have been delighted to have a group with which to experiment. Some of my activities have been modestly effective while others have been more so, but no dismal failures.

Having a co-facilitator that is less experienced has been a good experience for me as well. She tends to be soft-spoken and ask (rhetorical) questions that don't lead to meaningful discussion. Over the course of the program, I have learned to let go. In the beginning, I had this overpowering urge to intervene, but have learned to pull back more. Now, I typically keep my mouth shut until she gives me a "help" look.

The importance of being in tune with the participants, the content and my own baggage (keeping ego down) have all been reinforced to me through this process.

I have engaged the regional director and program coordinator in my thoughts and experiences, and they have asked me to stay another semester to facilitate as well as assist with program administration ideas. I am glad that my schedule will allow me to do so; I hope that I will learn as much this coming semester as I have this past one.

***Comparing Other Programs/Approaches***

With the objective of understanding the approaches of other human rights and social justice programs, I reviewed two books and one handbook.

The first book, Teaching for Social Justice, is an interesting compilation of historical perspectives in social justice education, a review of a middle school that has integrated

social justice as its core curriculum, and essays from various educators on their classroom methods or experiences.

Most of the material wasn't portable to the inquiry at hand, but there was some content that proved useful.

I was interested to read that there was a popular movement towards incorporating social justice into public school education in the 1920's and 1930's. Textbooks that examined "problems of the 'market' and its historical development, how the press developed its influence at various times in our growth, and the history of labor problems; movements for the increase of cooperation between capital and labor; problems of wages, hours, living conditions". More generally, these textbooks engaged students in "the analysis of major institutions and social issues so that social problems, causes and ways to respond could be identified". Such an approach was popular until the start of WWII, when nationalist sentiments made critique of American society unpopular.

Since that time, there has been more division and controversy amongst educators on the appropriateness and approach of such programs; the belief that "the school is not an agency of social reform" and that such curriculum is political and "leftist" in nature has deadlocked any national movement towards such. The schools that administer social justice curriculum today do so only because they have the support of the communities that they are in.

As I wondered why there was never a return to the movement post WWII, content from a Globalization class I took came to mind; Bretton Woods was a product of WWII and marked the inception of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (I MF) and World Trade Organization (WTO). Although the policies that have made these institutions infamous didn't begin until a few decades later, the paramount interest of international trade and finance was established. Those interests coupled with the technological and scientific booms of the twentieth century produced the increasing power of transnational corporations, the privatization of public enterprises and the deregulation of markets, trade and industry. The global wealth gap has progressively increased since, and there has been no turning back. Our children discussing

cooperation of capital and labor, problems of wages, hours and living conditions? What?!

Another notable topic was the review of C. Wright Mills Academic Middle School, which bases all of its curriculum on transdisciplinary social studies. For example, the unit "Addressing Violence In Our Everyday Lives" challenged students to think critically about violence in their communities and media. All subjects designed curriculum around this topic. So math would be lessons in statistics and probability and P.E. would be lessons examining violence in sports.

The review did a thorough job of presenting both the advantages and challenges that the school experienced. Although there were bouts of objection from parents or community members when certain controversial topics emerged, and despite challenges that many teachers faced in accommodating these units while still covering academic essentials, it was gratifying to see the end result of academic outperformance in comparison to its more traditional counterparts.

Another useful section was that of a curriculum unit and activities that a teacher employed at a high school in Portland, Oregon. The unit was on global labor and examined the relationship between poverty and foreign investment/capital. There was one particular exercise, the Transnational Capital Auction, that I will incorporate next semester into the Poverty lesson plan. He set the exercise up with seven groups of students, each representing a different country, and he (the teacher) played the role of "Capital". Each of five rounds, there was a silent auction in which each country would submit a bid of capital-conducive conditions to try to attract capital to their country (bids of minimum wage, child labor laws, environmental regulations, conditions for worker organizing and corporate tax rates). There were penalties for racing to the bottom too quickly (such as organized rebellions that would repel capital due to perceived "instability"). At the end of the last round, with bids rock-bottom, he asked each group to reflect on what the impact might be to their society if capital selected their bid and established operations in their country. After de-briefing the auction, he suggests regrouping the students so they have the opportunity to practice organizing for ideas on how to attract capital while not sacrificing too much.

Although the remainder of the book proved less relevant, there is a resource guide at the end that compiles resources for teaching, for the classroom, and key organizations.

The next book, Teaching for Diversity & Social Justice (Second Edition) is tied with the final publication for the "most useful". The book examines theoretical framework and principles and has comprehensive lesson plans for ten 3-4 hour sessions. Additionally, there is thoughtful guidance for facilitating and classroom/student awareness. The lesson plan topics include:

- Racism & White Privilege
- Racism, Immigration & Globalization
- Sexism
- Heterosexism
- Transgender Oppression
- Religious Oppression
- Antisemitism & Anti-Jewish Oppression
- Classism
- Ableism
- Ageism & Adultism

Although the lesson plans are designed for adult students, many of the exercises are straightforward and engaging enough to be modified for use with youth. All of the lesson plans have provocative and effective elements, but the Racism, Immigration & Globalization, Classisim, Ableism and Ageism & Adultism topics resonated with me the most. This is likely because they take a more progressive and less hegemonic examination of the identity group challenges than many historical approaches have. For example, the Ableism plan cautions against the damage of traditional "disability/diversity" exercises that further compound dangerous stereotypes, and the Adultism topic is fairly new to the scene; identifying ways in which we systemically disenfranchise and disempower youth in the name of protection. I am most excited to use material from these lesson plans.

The final publication reviewed is The Human Rights Education Handbook, produced by the University of Minnesota Human Rights Resource Center. It was interesting to see that the handbook was a collaboration of multiple agencies, including Amnesty

International. Despite the synthesis of perspectives, this handbook takes a broader definition of human rights (more in line with social justice) than does the Amnesty curriculum, and is both academic and practical.

The handbook introduces the global history of human rights and human rights education; Amnesty USA was one of the first organizations to produce human rights education materials domestically (in 1985), although we trailed most other developed countries by decades. American societal and institutional resistance is cited for the delay.
The handbook presents conceptual models used in Peru and Europe and summarizes all known models to share these common practices:

- Developing critical analysis of their life situation;
- Changing attitudes;
- Changing behaviors;
- Clarifying values;
- Developing solidarity;
- Analyzing situations in human rights terms;
- Strategizing and implementing appropriate responses to injustice.

Of great interest to me was a section that reported research findings on an experiment in which three elementary school classes were studied; one class which had no human rights education, one which had three lessons a week, and a third in which human rights program was fully integrated into the curriculum and culture of the classroom. One notable test group outcome was the increase in feelings of concern when others were disparaged because they looked or behaved differently, but the most significant were the behavior outcomes. When observations of inappropriate physical activity, inappropriate verbal activity and uncooperative behavior were recorded, the control group experienced 11, 25 and 14 instances of each, respectively. The three-times weekly group recorded 4, 6 and 3 and the fully integrated group recorded zero for all three categories.

The handbook makes the case for early education (research shows conclusively that attitudes about equality and human dignity are largely set before the age of 10), and examines some of the educator challenges to implementing such programs. Strategies to

integrate programs across discipline and community lines are presented, and a content framework of key human rights documents, corresponding issues, values and skills is particularly useful.

Finally, workshop learning plans present many activity ideas that are useful (although designed for young adult audiences, can easily be modified for youth) along with 27 "method" categories (such as debates, dramatizations, games, storytelling, journaling, media, etc.); there are literally a hundred activity ideas that are really interesting.

Among some are asylum/refugee exercises that illuminate the difficulty in applying for and gaining asylum, another is a project in which the student is given a (good)"human rights temperature" survey and instructions on how to administer to their peers and tabulate the results to see how their school scores in responses to questions such as "When conflicts arise, we try to resolve them through non-violent ways" and "Diverse voices and perspectives (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race/ ethnicity, ideological) are represented in courses, textbooks, assemblies, libraries, and classroom instruction".

In summary, these three publications (especially the last two) provide an abundance of strategies and tactics for developing and refining social justice and human rights curriculum. The only missing piece is that of resources for the youngest student population (grades k-5). Although the Human Rights Handbook touches on themes for that age group, most of the activities provided are designed for older students, so more resources would need to be employed.

This concludes my findings for now; I am looking forward to opportunities for further development.

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