

Our Journeys: Paths toward Social Education

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Abstract: *For educators and students to have the chance to become more critically aware, we believe educators need opportunities to experience different realities about teaching and learning, and to critique their own views of education and their role within it. Thus social education emerges as a lifelong journey for us – to question, to challenge, to do, and to create. It is our hope that our common shared experiences, designed around a basic belief in the rightness of social education to transform individuals and communities, may help inform views of learning and reflective knowledge construction, and open the way for emancipatory critical dialogue and action among multiple voices.*

Keywords: *social education, critical pedagogy, social construction*

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Introduction

The social education journey comes from within. The great poet Rilke (1945) said it most beautifully: The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens (p. 36). And yes, friends, it really is all about the journey and not the destination. Our personal journeys began for each of us years ago with school, life, family, and friends. Shamelessly glamoured by history, politics, and current events ever since we can remember, we question the status quo and the traditional, especially with respect to issues of social justice. We do not just teach social studies, we teach social education, and delight when students leave our classes smiling and shaking their heads, trying to make it all make sense. What in this lesson connects with **you** we will ask at every opportunity. Students tell us, too. They want to **do** history and geography, economics and popular culture. They do not want to sit and have it “done to them.” So, that is what we do. We debate, we question, we make movies and plan programs, we make mistakes, we march the streets and halls, and we investigate the community. Our students teach us more than we could ever teach them. Life experience leads us along our social education

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journey. Learning to play the school game, learning to tell what matters, vacations to state capitals and Civil War battle sites, reading, volunteering, trips abroad . . . all contribute to our travels. We planted the seeds early on . . . but the freedom of the academy is necessary to allow the forging of a new path.

Beginning with teaching traditional social studies education, and bridging from that point to collaborations with future teachers, graduate students, other professors, schools, teachers, and the community, allows additional critical investigation. The traditional social studies program area at our university eventually morphed into “social education”, with courses focusing on critical pedagogy, popular culture, and social issues. Projects and research took hold, focusing on the community, global education, international experiences, and rethinking American history. Students graduate carrying a torch for something called social education – something that has no “true” definition, that is always evolving and always questioning, but is comprised of common personal themes. Given the ongoing debate and struggle with “defining” social education, our bulletin board outside our lab provides one definition to encourage dialog: "We believe that social education emphasizes three areas of study: critical pedagogy, cultural/media studies, and social studies education. We also stress that education, interpreted broadly, has the potential to advance social justice."

Thus social education emerges as a lifelong journey for us – to question, to challenge, to do, and to create. And through the years, especially as professors, new pathways emerge ripe with possibilities: social justice, community activism, cultural studies, popular culture, experiential learning, critical pedagogy. And yes, the foundation – social studies. We invite others to share our journey: teachers, administrators, and professors out there struggling along the social education path. Connecting present and past, merging current issues with traditional curriculum, integrating alternative texts and perspectives, empowering and emancipating kids and educators, and transforming schools and society – the transgressions of teaching without a social education scream out. Dewey, Freire, Kincheloe, Zinn, Greene, Giroux, Apple, hooks, McLaren, Kozol, Loewen, Said, Chomsky, Marx, even such diverse characters as Bob Dylan and the Coen Brothers provide the maps. Our friendships and personal stories supply the compass.

Beginning the Journey

The journey between social studies and social education leads travelers down a mysterious path with "white spaces" on a map that continuously needs to be examined. Our exploration into the heart of social education is fraught with twists and turns requiring us to realign our internal compass and hold tight to our traveling partners. Navigating this social education journey we discover that each traveler's itinerary is an individualized process allowing for divergent teaching and learning opportunities. In this context, the "white spaces" are rough hewn educational landscapes that create exhilarating learning experiences - well worth the effort in the end in spite of the difficulties one encounters when exploring the road that is "wanting wear" (Frost, 1920). Following are shared moments from our travel log, which highlight our attempt to choose the "less traveled" (Frost, 1920) pathway toward social education.

Our "enlightenment" came gradually in her teaching career. After years of working happily in elite high schools and private middle schools, the envy of her peers because she "got to teach in good schools," she slowly began to question her complicity in the process. The students were delightful and sophisticated but entitled, even from an early age. The administrations clung to a fanatical bordering on fascist educational belief regarding the role of teacher and student and principal, indeed the very purpose of education. Parents did not expect their children to receive a great education as much as they expected them to receive the right kind of education to get ahead. The status quo was firmly in place, no questions asked please.

Although not yet aware of the concept, we knew the vibe we each were getting in her teaching - deskilling. Innovative teaching techniques were not appreciated; treating students as equals with something important to say was frowned upon. However, we knew we were passionate teachers with a great love of learning who cared about students, and knew that something about traditional education was just not right. It made people uncaring of others, focused on the bottom line, and dismissed the individual.

So we each went in search of a different path. We started masters, then doctoral degrees and we taught additional years. We traveled, became more involved in our communities, and tried to come to terms with what was going on in our schools. Fortunately, we ultimately came together under the banner of social education.

Although Kincheloe (2001) argued a radical overhaul of the entire educational system is required for true reform, we needed to forge a trail toward transformative practice through the

social studies discipline, because it served as the umbrella and anchor over all other disciplines. Along the way we explored numerous theories for transformative teaching and learning in our individual classroom spaces. In the social studies, theories aimed at reform bombard teachers with so many pedagogical choices that we become wrought by confusion or indecision (Ross, 2001; Stanley, 2001; Evans, 2004; Kincheloe, 2001; Dewey, 1908). Our first road block revealed we expect “experts” to define the teaching and learning environment by allowing them to choose what we teach and how we teach it without questioning the viability of their choices in our own courses. The substance of curricula most often mirroring traditional values that do not usually align to our own thought and those of our students is woven throughout the traditional social studies curricula (Meuwissen, 2006).

Belief in one’s potential transformative ability might empower us as educators to seek the path as change agents and promote decisions that could affect our future practice, but it is not possible without critical reflection regarding the status quo; moving forward begins with the empowerment felt by the simple act of choosing curriculum. Is it possible for educators to choose what we teach and how it should be taught? Kincheloe, Slattery and Steinberg (2000) believe profit seeking corporations drive this decision with insidious goals to promote a dominant national agenda, thereby effectively eroding away teachers' public status and power. Thus, the heavy reliance by teachers on curriculum designed by perceived experts becomes a major roadblock for most reform efforts. Most recently, national and state efforts with reconceptualizing and reforming curriculum standards have illustrated this. In lieu of transformative, culturally responsive curricula, proponents for the continued traditional treatment of social studies defy classroom teachers serving on restructuring committees. Many proponents for the traditional treatment of social studies education have no experience in the field leaving one to question the nature of the "expert."

Who should be the perceived social studies experts? Adler, Dougan and Garcia (2005) define the role of experts in social studies teacher preparation:

[It] involves colleges of education and the liberal arts, K-12 schools, state departments of education, social studies/social science professional organizations, and these major players are influenced by societal trends; by interest groups; by research in social studies, in the social sciences, and in education; and by society’s proclivity for developing programs that are cost-effective, well grounded in research, sufficiently flexible to be

implemented in a variety of settings, and capable of satisfying the ever-changing demand for teachers. Moreover, the preparation of social studies teachers is influenced by the ideologies espoused by the various groups involved in this complex enterprise (p. 396).

And the various groups involved in this endeavor introduce their expert interpretations through profit driven programs and to a lesser degree, when referring to public school educators, professional journals. Tread carefully though, because even though interest groups and their ilk are listed as experts, they must also align their philosophical stance with tradition. Often, educators conform to a structure that is predetermined by corporate programs, if one believes that the “[e]xperts are best positioned to determine what ought to be taught and how in schools” (Mathison, Ross & Vinson, 2001). This common practice promotes lack of attention that does not ensure that students will actually learn (Fordham, Wellman & Sandmann, 2002).

It is Giroux's critique of technocratic policy which follows the assumption that teachers' behaviors are controlled and the experts continue to do the thinking (Marker, 2000). Paulo Freire (1998) strongly opposed curricula of this nature and argued that it served as the antithesis for professional development of educators, essentially teacher proofing curricula. The assumption was that by packaging the course with expert created materials, or by distributing goals endorsed by the State Board of Education, there would be no way that teachers could mess it up, a process of deskilling teachers (Kincheloe, Slattery & Steinberg, 2000). This further advanced the ideas that teachers are incapable of creating their own teaching materials, and may serve to demoralize transformative educators who might construct valuable curriculum in their classes.

Illuminating the Pathways

With tentative steps off the beaten path, we began our journeys toward social education by rejecting the prescribed "teacher-proof" curriculum and co-designing replacements. In spite of the fact that students enrolled in our classes were likely to participate in rigorous activities not common to textbook material and use methods for learning in collaborative groups, we took solace in the fact that *we* still chose the curriculum. Nevertheless, Freire (1971) would describe the teacher/student relationship in the above educational setting as “*narrative*” (p. 71); the teacher is the narrator or the Subject and the students are listeners or the Objects. The treatment of the material was still a superficial treatment in many ways. Our preferred "surface" treatment of curricular themes and topics and often our reliance on single interpretation answers continued

to follow Freire's (1971) banking concept. Initially we imagined that we could pass on our supreme "knowing" of the state and national curricula to students who would act as passive receptacles waiting to be filled with information that was static and quantifiable (Kutz & Roskelly, 1991; hooks, 1994; Marker, 2000). Clearly, we had more miles to travel.

The above, well-worn path for learning is often unquestioned and even expected in the classroom (Brooks, 2004). Staying on that narrow traditional pathway to learning was our reward; many of our teacher preparation classes and formal teaching evaluations reinforced this concept. We found few reasons to change the status quo and step off the path (DeWitt & Freie, 2005). This trend is very prevalent in the social studies genre and social studies methods courses only serve to perpetuate it (Kincheloe, 2001). Depending on the educator, a social studies methods course may follow several routes, but the most common path is one in which students experience "simplistic, rote-based exercises" which are "marked by an absence of analytical questions about and critical examination of the nature of the social studies curriculum" (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 19).

Moving into higher education coincided with our pursuit of social education. As we became involved in teaching social studies methods to pre-service teachers, the role of the educator with regard to their interest in developing curriculum became our concern. We wanted to model thinking and refused to adopt textbooks for the course that would define the course. Constructing curricula was important and would empower beginning teachers to seek information beyond anything that they would learn in the short time they would be in the methods courses. Their journeys could not be neatly mapped out for them, but would have to be forged out of the experience. It became important to reconcile the practice of teaching with the "where" and with the "why." We strongly reconsidered the long held views and traditions associated with the social studies, how might this expected route for learning be rejected to forge a new path? How might we encourage prospective and in-service teachers to see through the white spaces? The most important step is to contextualize teaching and learning (Kincheloe, 2001; Kincheloe, Slattery & Steinberg, 2000).

Much of social studies teaching and learning is what Kincheloe (2001) calls the "nonconceptual, technical view of social studies teaching" (p. 19). A lack of concern for the nature of social studies curriculum and a disregard for the connections between the social studies discipline and larger socio-political issues characterizes this type of teaching. We began to

question: how is it possible to teach social studies without contextualizing it? Is it possible to teach US History without educating students on both civic competence or responsibility and constitutional history? If civic education is the hallmark of social studies, should social studies education be removed from the elementary curriculum? More importantly, what is actually meant by civic responsibility? The answer to these questions has long placed social studies in the middle of a seemingly unsolvable quandary (Stanley, 2005; Ross & Marker, 2005; Singer, 2005; Leming, Ellington & Porter-Magee, 2003; Adler, Dougan & Garcia, 2006).

Critically considering this debate signifies our awakening transition between social studies and social education. The National Council for the Social Studies (1994) explains that “democratic societies are characterized by hard choices” which “involve personal behavior” (p. 9). The choices become problematic when they involve issues that pit values against one another. In the case of social studies education, questioning fundamental values is everything. Social studies scholars charge teachers with the pedagogical decision – “transmission or transformation” (Stanley, 2005). White (2003) argues that “reforming, reacting, improving, acquiescing, and adapting are not approaches or methods we should be using. Educators need to be thinking in terms of transformation” (p.2).

"The true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence, he inspires self-distrust. He guides their eyes from himself to the spirit that quickens him. He will have no disciples." (Amos Bronson Alcott)

We borrow this quote as it perfectly illustrates our circuitous paths toward social education. We are both educators and learners. Becoming a life-long learner is revolutionary and became our next step toward teaching social education through a democratic education. To embrace social education, we need to understand critical pedagogy ideas where the classroom is a laboratory for the empowering pursuit of democratic goals (Kincheloe, 2005). To be truly democratic, would mapping out their educational path involve the students themselves? Kincheloe (2001) argued that the existing curriculum is disconnected from the realities of students' lived worlds. As critical pedagogues, we understand that teaching and learning are not isolated to the traditional space of the classroom, but that they emerge through experience (Dewey, 1938). Society, culture, and media all serve as strong bodies of knowledge for teachers and learners alike (Kincheloe, 2005). And everything that we experience outside schools influences or even interferes with the learning environment within the formal classroom

(Hinchey, 1998). Should we allow children to sprinkle the path to learning with their own stories? Will students of immigrant families finally have a forum to discuss their experiences? Will this allow them to unpack critical moments in their lives when they have been treated in undemocratic ways?

Critically examining the intersection of personal knowledge and academic knowledge is a theoretical playground for us and becomes the nexus for our scholarly research pursuits (Kincheloe, 2005) in social education. For us, it is impossible to disregard the issue of race, class, and privilege in a social studies education situated in social justice (Wade, 2007), because it has been ignored by traditional social studies for far too long. The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 1994) suggests that content must include examination and understanding of multiple points of views and values to ensure that we are committed to the goals of a democratic society. This is the only way that we can promote a citizenry devoted to others' rights - a goal aligned to the foundations of our educational philosophy - social justice (Wade, 2007).

The aim of this layer of our journey is to promote transformative learning environments where one avoids the crippling practice of the educational banking system (Freire, 1971) in exchange for one that engages students in the production of knowledge through a critical dialogic process. We present this with the understanding that this type of critical instruction involves tremendous rigor that rankles many students (Kincheloe, 2005). In spite of this discomfort, our pre-service teachers must examine multiple perspectives so they may better serve students' needs in communities undergoing rapid demographic changes. Unfortunately, barely disguised objections from students who strongly reject the philosophy and rigor of the course during the semester occur through subtle online discussions and outright discussions in class. They voice their discomfort in the end through course evaluations, which further encourages us to teach critically in spite of the objections. Our travels are bumpy as we realize that not all students share the same road nor have they traveled down the same path as we. This leads to great tension as we continue on our social education journeys. Forever travelers searching the white spaces on the globe, but now interested in the context of those spaces for humanity, the journey is an ongoing process that reveals hidden paths at every turn.

Experiencing the Journey

As social educators, we have a moral obligation to do more than read and discuss and endlessly debate with like-minded individuals in a safe classroom. We need the experience of community outside ourselves to ground us and make us aware that social injustices are not something that is merely happening to “someone else over there,” that critical awareness is not just a catch phrase for academics but rather the defining reason for our existence as social educators. It is vitally important to us, as educators and as members of a larger world, to conceptualize a curriculum centered upon social experiences, and to visualize social education as part of an educational philosophy that “embodies forms of experience in which teachers and students display a sense of critical agency and empowerment” (Giroux, 1988, p.87). This type of curriculum, by necessity, must explore the concepts of teachers as intellectuals who are capable of establishing classrooms where they and their students are free to discover, debate and embrace an experiential language of knowledge and skills.

We believe social education serves to consolidate two essential elements of critical pedagogy: a thoughtful criticism of traditional truths and a celebration of a socially just community. If what we learn experientially, and indeed teach in schools, could be represented as a mere ideology, if it were presented as just the practices of the dominant culture it would be easier to shake off its influence in our minds and critically examine it for what it is. But our lessons are presented as socially legitimate knowledge that is made available to students. At no time are students encouraged to critically question and actively explore: Who determines this knowledge is important? Who does it serve and why is it presented in the way it is presented? Why is it taught this way to this particular group? All these questions center on the issue of social justice, of course. And addressing these questions requires more than just a new way of thinking consciously, for it demands a need for a complete restructuring of schools and society, as well as a rethinking of the social contract that binds us together.

We see the greatest hope of a truly transformative and emancipatory vision of education in social education. Social education is not a universal pedagogy that transcends all situations and offers a solution to what is wrong with education today. But we do envision it as a link between critical social theory, critical pedagogy and actual educational practices. Social education has the power to function as both a political mechanism and a pedagogic tool. The very act of students, teachers and communities engaging one another and theorizing around the

languages of resistance and possibility can become the framework, and in many cases the tentative beginnings, of transformative practice.

Michael Apple (2003) called this rejection of neutrality within our thinking, while simultaneously becoming aware of our own complicity within the community and the classroom, “repositioning.” Grounded in critical theory, repositioning says that “the best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies and practices does is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power” (p. 99). By active explorations of communities and individuals, by examining the reality of those who have the least power, social educators begin to understand the implications of a curriculum based on accepted standards and traditional knowledge. Tellingly, by creating a “one size fits all” curriculum that advances a sham of equality for all, we render ourselves and our students helpless in the face of differences. The current state of education, which supposes that students are of a cookie cutter like sameness and respond in the same way to the same curriculum, suppresses our ability to recognize diversity within others in the community, and makes critical thinking impossible. Freire (1971) said “those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (p. 47). Throughout our studies in social education we struggle with how to define just what social education might look like through our eyes and as seen by others. Constructing boundaries serves to keep things out, but those same boundaries also limit how far we can travel and experience.

Dewey (1916, 1938) continuously stressed that people develop intellectual and moral growth in and through the world around them from democratic involvement within the community. Dewey was highly critical of curriculum-centered education apart from the genuine experience of community. In fact, Dewey’s (1902) appraisal of traditional forms of education was that teachers and their administrators tend to view students as somehow disconnected from the community that surrounds them. Students are viewed as identical interchangeable parts, capable of producing the same answers at the same time with the same stimulation, all while remaining on the same page.

Dewey’s observations of community within education revolved more around liberation of the human communal spirit through experiential means. Indeed, in the entire second chapter of *Experience and Nature*, Dewey (1925) addressed the hard work involved in self-realization and the consummatory experience within a communal setting. Dewey (1916) defined community as “common history and objects of allegiance” (p. 4). Yet despite this rather traditional definition,

Dewey was conscious of the obligation of educators to create a social order that nourished all peoples' inner as well as outer lives. He saw community experiences as shared paths to self-actualization and discovery. This logic of discovery refers to future experiences, and expects received truths to be regarded critically as something that should be tested by new experiences rather than something that is dogmatically disseminated and learned within a classroom setting. Even the most carefully constructed truths then become open to further inquiry. We believe this questioning of the truths speaks directly to social education.

Dewey (1920) saw our existing body of knowledge within a classroom setting as something made up of two parts: one is an examination of the mistakes and prejudices of our ancestors organized around accident, class interest, and bias; and the second is the construction of accepted beliefs that come from an instinctive and dangerously biased human mind. These two bodies of knowledge revolve around mental inertia and sluggishness and, Dewey (1920) believed, could only be counteracted by an "actual adventure of travel and exploration [which] purged the mind of fear of the strange and the unknown" (p. 40) and that allowed the mind to be opened up to critical examination of existing knowledge.

Maxine Greene (1992) spoke admiringly of community as "different voices conditioned by different perspectives" (p. 251). This is a very different conception of the notion of community from Hirsch (1987) and D'Souza (1991), who claim the idea of "variousness" distracts from the commonality to be desired in all communal experiences and serves to disunite. Evers (1997) said different voices and outlooks would "defeat the most important ends of education in democracy," which is achieving "as high a level of common culture as possible" (p. 11). Yet community for many of us speaks of a place not of conformity but rather a place that is attuned to diversity through the multi-layered voices we hold in common. Indeed, for Maxine Greene (1992) "the many who ended up 'lying outside history' diminished the community, left an empty space on the common ground, and left undefined an aspect of reality" (p. 253). That reality becomes a sum of all the experiences by all the people.

In the words of Fenwick (2000), "adults don't learn *from* experience, they learn *in* it" (para. 35) through a process of cognitively analyzing and reflecting upon a problem they have encountered and through further reflecting during and after the experience in ways that serve to reconstruct existing beliefs. Students and educators must be willing to investigate and understand

the roots of their beliefs and to be able to courageously explore opposing perspectives within a community that allow for connections between individuals, education, and the social order.

In this way, social studies education provides students and educators with a way of actively traveling in an authentic experience that has recognizable consequences. Kraft and Sakofs laid out the framework for social studies education in 1988 as:

Students make discoveries and experiment with knowledge themselves instead of hearing or reading about the experiences of others. Students also reflect on their experiences, thus developing new skills, new attitudes, and new theories or ways of thinking (as cited in Stevens & Richards, 1992, para. 2).

According to Kolb (1984), this type of questioning learning stands apart from cognitive theories of learning that tend to give heavy emphasis to acquisition, manipulation, and recall of abstract symbols, and from behavioral learning theories that deny any role for consciousness and subjective experience in the learning process. Experiential learning is a holistic integrative perspective that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior. In the case of experiential pedagogies, the learner is viewed as inextricably linked with his experiences, as being-in-the-world (Kolb, 1984).

Because of this viewpoint, current theories of pedagogy would seem to be straddling the line between the two extremes in education that Dewey (1916) identified – traditional and progressive education, between the stances of traditional education’s goal to further the transmission and transference of cultural knowledge and the more progressive outlook that the role of formal education is to allow for complete freedom and individual expressions of needs and interests within the context of a school setting or a community. True social studies education allows for formal education to support students in their efforts to make sense of their subjective experiences within a cultural and social framework.

Over the past one hundred years, education has involved “the purposeful manipulation of students toward predetermined ends and ignores the experience of the students themselves, viewing it as a contamination of the process” (Hopkins, 1994, p. 12). Traditionally, children learn in school at an early age that there are right and wrong answers to most questions. Their curriculum is prescribed in small doses that attempt to limit knowledge that might be controversial or upsetting, avoiding ideas that are difficult to quantify or define (Hansen, 2000).

We believe this ideology of passivity and non-critical absorption threatens to define many educators.

Experiential social education calls for a fundamental shift in the role of the teacher. It calls for students to experience an action or a communal event before they make an effort to synthesize knowledge (Stevens & Richard, 1992). Students' explorations frequently take them outside the classroom walls, placing the onus on teachers to become active learners along with their students. Traditionally, teachers at any level of instruction are not encouraged to collaborate with their students, and social education forces them to reevaluate their role and become more than the engines that disperse curriculum decisions and school policy as they experience with their students, reflect upon the learning opportunities they have designed, interact with differing communities and ideas, and respond to their students' reactions to these experiences.

If, as Walter and Marks (1981) suggested, fully half of an individual's reality resides in action, might not a social education curriculum provide the bridge for those students who are struggling to adjust to an educational world that holds no meaning to their sense of identity in the real world? Generalizing this educational model to life lessons, Dewey's program of experiential education becomes a radical agenda of educational reform and emancipatory participation that can serve as life-long learning. In the words of Dewey (1916), "we use our past experiences to construct new and better ones in the future" (p. 134). In this way, "the very fact of experience thus includes the process by which it directs itself in its own betterment" (Dewey, 1916, p. 134).

Writing shortly after the end of World War I, Dewey (1920) stated "when experience ceased to be empirical and became experimental, something of radical importance occurred" (p. 134). Experience explored outside the bounds of classroom and pragmatic concerns allows us to extend a sense of freedom into every part of our lives. We begin to critically investigate problems, to question and learn for ourselves, and to take the crucial step toward developing standards and values as we go along independent of external authorities. Experience becomes constructively self-regulating and emancipatory. Radical stuff indeed in the educational field.

Education is full of inequalities, and it is not a neutral process. Educators, whether they choose consciously to be or not, are involved in political acts of power and knowledge (Apple, 1996, Apple, 1999; Apple, 2003; Apple, 2004; Freire, 1971; Foucault, 1977; Giroux, 2003; Giroux, 2005; Gramsci, 1930/1971; Greene, 1992; Jardine, 2005; Kincheloe, 2004; Kincheloe, 2005; McLaren, 2003; Shor, 1992; Shor & Freire, 2003). When examining the role of a social

educator, social justice becomes the most cogent framework for organizing thoughts and actions in relationship to the reality of education and its role with the world. In the words of Paulo Freire (1971), it becomes imperative to realize that educator efforts “must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization”(p. 62).

With the emancipatory writings of Paolo Freire in the 1970s, a new wave of social education emerged, which many researchers describe as “post-experientialism” because of its attempt to move beyond traditional experiential thinking by deconstructing traditional views of experience. Proponents of post experientialism, driven by influences from post-modern theory, began by incorporating issues of power into what had heretofore been viewed as the rather neutral phenomenon of experience.

Giroux (2005) said that citizenship and community do not, in fact, have any transcendental significance “outside the lived experiences and social practices of individuals who make up diverse forms of public life” (p. 5). The ideal, an emancipatory form of community, would aim at eliminating oppressive social practices and building forms of moral reawakenings that strengthen the possibilities of human existence as individuals situated within their common realities (Giroux, 2005, p. 6). We argue for social education for five reasons: it directly acquaints the learner with realities referred to by words and ideas in theories, it evokes greater interest and more sustained motivation than words or ideas alone, it facilitates memory, it provides unmatched means for practice and skill development, and it provides a means for questioning the truth of concepts and for testing the adequacy of concepts for application to intended realities. Social education serves more than the individual sense of awareness. With its interest in acquainting learners with realities greater than themselves, social education allows us to question the truths we have been taking for granted. Greene (1992) assured us “to open up our experiences (and yes, our curricula) to existential possibilities of multiple kinds is to extend and deepen what we think of when we speak of a community” (p. 254).

Within the parameters of the culture of silence, concepts of “struggle, debate, community, and democracy have become subversive categories” (Giroux, 2005, p. 4). Henry Giroux (2005) wrote that America is quickly becoming what he called “a land without a memory” (p. 4) because only historical memories in the form of lived experiences allow us to “transform the seemingly fixed and internal in our lives into things that can be changed” (p. 3). He wrote that

this is in part because the people in power have worked toward developing a public philosophy that “distorts the desires and experiences of many people in this country” (Giroux, 2005, p. 4).

Many different things are said to be just or unjust; not only people and groups but also institutions and ideologies. Rawls (1999) defines social justice in the following way:

The intuitive notion here is that [...] various social positions and that men born into different positions have different expectations of life determined, in part, by the political system as well as by economic and social circumstances. In this way the institutions of society favor certain starting places over others. These are especially deep inequalities. Not only are they pervasive, but they affect men's initial chances in life; yet they cannot possibly be justified by an appeal of the notions of merit or desert. It is these inequalities, presumably inevitable in the basic structure of any society, to which the principles of social justice must apply (p.49).

Living the Experience

As we move along our journeys as social educators, we continue to believe absolutely that learning is a series of experiences, some formally within the classroom educational system but increasingly informally situated in the world. Education is still just the means to the ends of understanding our experiences. We do not believe experience has ever been valued in education, and certainly not the individual experiences that color the thoughts of both children and adults. Education, as it currently stands, does not contribute to learning in any real sense of the word because it does not allow for the individual experiences that come before and the communal experiences we bring to any discussion. Nor does it allow for critical transformative thinking that allows us to place ourselves in the world and identify the injustices we see all around us. After touching the surface of Freire's concepts of critical pedagogy and reading Dewey's insistence in his work that experience be the heart of the educational process, we have formed a philosophy of education that is increasingly based within a framework of experiential education within the community.

Ira Shor (1992), working closely with the ideas of Paulo Freire, attempted to define and conceptualize this idea of critical engagement through social education in broad experiential terms:

Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse (p. 129).

For educators and students to have the chance to become more critically aware, we believe opportunities need to be provided to experience different realities about teaching and learning in ways which allow students and educators to critique their own views of education and their role within it. They need to develop an awareness of the historical perspectives of their cultural and structural ideologies. Until we can do this, we cannot clearly understand or express our own attitudes, feelings, interests, or motives as positions which have a cultural history and a social context. It is our hope that common experiences designed around a basic belief in the rightness of social education to transform individuals and communities may help inform views of learning and reflective knowledge construction, and open the way for emancipatory critical dialogue and action among multiple voices.

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