

Laying the Foundations for Educational Foundations: Working Backward from Evaluation to Preparation

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Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, was also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there was no communication, and without communication there can be no true education.
(Freire, 1971, 81)

In the Beginning

This paper began as a reflective practice project. Having worked and learned together over the course of five years, and having shared many conversations about the common goals and assumptions that guide our teaching and learning, we — the two authors of this piece and a colleague — sought to construct a collaborative research project that investigated how we were acting on, and building on, our shared pedagogical and political beliefs.

We share an interest in learner-centered curricu-

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lum, in critical-reflective practice, and in qualitative inquiry. We share concerns with diversity and inclusivity — an eagerness to address issues of racism, sexism, classism and homophobia — and a desire to create a culture of critical inquiry in our classrooms, an atmosphere in which these issues might be explored and confronted.¹ We had, over the course of our professional relationship, spent a great deal of time discussing the promises and frustrations of asking the students in our classes to “become political.”

Politics was the effort to find ways of humanely dealing with each other as groups or as individuals — politics being simply process, the breaking down of oppression, tradition, culture, ignorance, fear, self-protectiveness. (Rich, 1993, 24)

We understood that in order for students to become political in this way, foundations courses must provide critical perspectives and tools with which to examine school and all of its manifestations. In this paper we address the challenge of asking our students to become political within the context of educational foundations courses as we explore the assumptions, beliefs and categories that inform our work and theirs — both pedagogical, both classroom-based, and we hope, both transformative. In this inquiry into our own practice, we uncovered the assumptions, beliefs and categories that at least one group of students brought to the foundations, and exposed expected and unexpected discrepancies between the students’ perspectives and our perspectives as instructors. In the first section of this paper we describe the structure and purpose of our foundations courses. We follow this with an overview of our action research and discuss our goal for this project: to engage students in liberatory, democratic practice, particularly in the collaborative construction of knowledge. Next, we share with our reader a glimpse of our students’ assumptions, experiences and understandings of their foundations courses by sharing excerpts of conversations we had with them. Finally, we share our reactions and reflections on the interactions and contradictions, on what we find to be the inherent messiness of the educational foundations classroom, and on what we see as critical implications emerging from this area of inquiry.

The Setting

We were all teaching graduate foundations courses in the College of Education at a mid-size, state-sponsored urban university. Located in the heart of a racially and ethnically rich city, the population of the university at large was not homogenous, but our graduate students tended to be predominantly White, middle-class teachers, working in predominantly suburban settings. Cindy and our colleague, Carolyne, were teaching two sections of a course in *Human Relations*; Mark was teaching *Introduction to Curriculum Theory*. While varied in specific content, each of the courses were designed to integrate aspects of each of the disciplines commonly associated with educational foundations. As Sadovnik, Cookson, and Semel (2001) contend, we also believe that these disciplines

are by no means separate and distinct perspectives. On one hand, they represent the unique vantage points of the separate disciplines of history, philosophy, political science, and sociology. On the other hand, historians, philosophers, political scientists, and sociologists rarely write from their own disciplines alone; more often than not, they tend to view the world from interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary perspectives. (13)

Reflecting the definition of the Foundations of Education put forth by the Council of Learned Societies in Education (CLSE, 1996), we understood the purpose of our courses to be the bringing of “these disciplinary resources to bear in developing interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives in education, both inside and outside of schools” (Standard I, paragraph 1). We were particularly focused on the critical perspective, with the aim of enhancing our students’ abilities to “question educational assumptions and arrangements, and to identify contradictions and inconsistencies among social and educational values, policies, and practices” (CLSE, 1996, Standard I, paragraph 4). We further hoped to demonstrate to our students our commitment to open dialogue and to focus attention on themes of oppression. We deliberately designed our syllabi, selected our course readings, and chose our methods of teaching to make these evident. It was our hope that after this foundational experience, this exposure to a critical perspective, they would, in reflective ways, utilize that perspective to understand their practice and to act accordingly — demonstrating a critical perspective in their own classrooms, offering an opportunity for growth and reflective practice for their own students.

In Mark’s curriculum course, students explored the philosophical, social, political, and historical foundations of school curriculum through an examination of theories, stories, and assumptions about teaching, teachers, students, and the curriculum material that passes between them. In this course, Mark sought to provide an arena for teachers and administrators to critically reflect on their active roles in curriculum development and school reform by providing the opportunity to develop a philosophical habit of asking questions (Sadovnik, Cookson, & Semel, 2001).

Mark: *While this course is not always seen as a traditional foundations course, I envisioned its goals and content as an extension of foundational issues into the area of curriculum and curriculum development. I attempted to challenge my students to rethink not only what and how we teach, but also why we teach and omit particular content and why we use particular pedagogy. My intent was to help them realize that our daily curricular and instructional decisions are shaped by a myriad of cultural experiences. The course sought to address three guiding questions: (1) how can or should educational processes be organized around the needs and interests of the various learners; (2) what is worth knowing; and (3) how do the curricular choices teachers and administrators make reflect particular values, priorities, and criteria for success? To this end I invited students to engage the work of Jean Anyon, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, John Dewey, Carl Grant and Christine Sleeter, Peter McLaren, Sonya Nieto, and Joel Spring, among others,*

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in the construction of our critical dialogue on curriculum issues. I provided students the space to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to these scholars, and I encouraged them to assume the authority to challenge and question the “experts” by virtue of both the validity of their own experience and their dual position as students and professionals in their field. Students responded to the readings at a variety of levels. Some found them provocative, liberating and affirming. Others found the various authors not only challenging, but threatening to their positions, values, and beliefs. In some cases, a resultant level of resistance interfered with the students’ ability to engage them openly.

A case in point was Jean Anyon’s (1981) classic study of the impact of social class on school knowledge, curriculum and instruction. In earlier courses I’d taught, some students dismissed her findings based on what they cursorily decided was weak methodology, an approach that had the effect of freeing them from addressing the real issue in her study — that of the oppressive nature of social class on the school experiences of children from poor and working-class families. In an attempt circumvent this avoidance technique, prior to assigning the article I asked this group of students to conduct a case study involving the collection of data on the nature and distribution of school knowledge by interviewing their own students using Anyon’s questions.² By first analyzing their own data, and then reading the study, students began to see patterns in their own research, and subsequently engaged in more open dialogue around the Anyon piece.

I had entered the course assuming that I would find a willingness and a desire on the part of professionals to grapple with substantive and provocative issues. Upon reflection, it is clear that I needed only look at myself as a student a few years earlier to realize that more preparation for such a conversation was essential.

The course in Human Relations, Cindy believed, was an appropriate arena in which to address Rich’s definition of politics. Where better to address “ways of humanely dealing with each other as groups or as individuals?”

Cindy: In the syllabus, I tried to provide an explicit description of the course and the nature of the activities we would engage in — both large and small group activities (“human relations” in various forms) — studying, comparing and contrasting social and psychological perspectives on issues like the teacher-student relationship, teaching conflicts (Graff, 1992), teaching children in a diverse culture (Delpit, 1995), and race, politics, and gender.

This was my first time teaching this particular course, so I consulted the college catalog for the course description, which suggested that interpersonal communication skills would be one of the foci. Reviewing sample syllabi from previous semesters, I found that the book that had been used to this end was David Johnson’s Reaching Out: Interpersonal Effectiveness and Self-Actualization (1997). While my own interests tended more toward the sociological than the psychological, I hoped to construct a course in which several things occurred. I wanted to include the self-actualization work, if for no other reason than to meet the course requirements and/

*or students' expectations. It seemed to me that it might be a significant way in which this course might differ from the handful of other foundations courses offered by the department. (How do "social issues" differ from "human relations"?)³ I ordered the Johnson book, and found that when it was paired with the readings I planned to include, it consistently offered counterpoint to the sociological perspective. When the topic was "teaching the conflicts," we would read Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars* with Johnson's "Resolving Interpersonal Conflict." While Graff recommended bringing those conflicts that engage the teacher into the classroom to authentically engage the student, Johnson's suggestions included one-on-one negotiation in order to resolve conflict. When the topic was teaching children in a diverse culture, we would pair Lisa Delpit's book, *Other People's Children* (1995) with Johnson's chapter on "Developing and Maintaining Trust." For me, the juxtaposition of the sociological and the psychological provided a powerful lens with which to see the importance of developing the broader lens of the sociological perspective. I was, however, very eager to discover how the teachers would interpret the course material and the way in which it was presented. The possibilities for classroom discussion were rich.*

The opportunity to engage multiple perspectives actively and critically — those of students, instructors, and authors in the field — can provide one of the most powerful analytic tools available to a teacher — tools necessary for becoming political in the ways we had hoped our students might become political. However, all too often, our experience has told us, returning to the student's desk does not necessarily promote the consideration of multiple perspectives for many teacher-students, but rather elicits former passive behaviors conditioned by years of "intellectual dependency" (Gatto, 1992). As Gatto suggests, schools too often destroy students' curiosity in favor of conformity, socializing them to believe they "must wait for other people, better trained than themselves, to make the meanings for our lives" (1992, 8). This holds true every bit as much (if not more, perhaps thanks to additional years of conditioning) for adult learners as for children, as true for graduate students as for undergraduates. Consequently, for many of our students, in fact many more than we anticipated, both the content and the format of these courses were difficult. Comments from several of the students indicated that they wanted clean, clear — direct — instruction. Our plan was to put our ideas into practice in our classrooms, to model what we envisioned as a radical approach to teaching and learning,⁴ if it worked, given that we were deliberately strategizing to engage in Friere's liberatory, transformative educational practice, it would change our students, change the way they viewed themselves, change the way they teach, and thus change the nature of the classrooms in which they teach.

The Plan

As we began to discuss and design the action research project that we planned

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to engage over the course of the semester, we initially anticipated sitting in the back of each other's classrooms to observe, to act as fresh eyes, to provide feedback to each other in terms of being critical educators implementing liberatory pedagogical practices (Friere, 1971; Giroux, 2000; Shor, 1992, Shor & Pari, 2000). That initial vision lasted but a few moments. As part of our ongoing interest in qualitative inquiry, we had consistently professed to have doubts about the ability of a researcher to be a neutral observer, to observe and be unobserved (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, 10), but more importantly, we saw here an opportunity to engage, not only with each other, but with our students in knowledge-making (Friere, 1971). Here, in collaboration with two other instructors, was what seemed to be an ideal opportunity to put our ideas about liberatory, democratic practice into action. In conversation with our students, with each other's students, and with each other together in front of all of our students (see Graff, 1992), we might make overt in our classrooms the ways in which we saw our practice as political. We would ask our students to join us in this project. While we are both constructivists and make it a habit to invite students to actively participate in the creation of new understandings, in this project we were additionally inviting them to join us in critical reflection of our methods and goals. As we sought to put our beliefs into action, to act in accordance with Rich's definition of "becoming political," we asked our students not only to observe our attempts, but to join us in viewing them critically.

As we prepared ourselves and our students to engage in this inquiry, we shared with all three classes our enthusiasm for action research as an important mechanism for enacting reflective scholarly practice. We hoped to use the notion of action research to model/teach reflective practice, making it possible for all of us, teachers and students, to envision ourselves as scholars who use research to understand and act in the world. At the beginning of the term, the three of us met with each other's classes to introduce ourselves and the project, define what we understood by action research, and provide some questions for students to consider throughout the course that would be discussed at the end of the term.

In defining action research, we explained to our students that we, like Reason (1994) believe that (1) persons can — with help — choose how they live their lives, free from the distress of early conditioning and restrictive social customs; (2) working together in a group with norms of open, authentic communication will facilitate this; and (3) action research rests on a collaborative encounter within a community of scholars where all members engage in critical reflection about their practice.

An evaluative component emerged as we developed this project, not only as part of a healthy, ongoing analytic process, but also as a response to our frustration with the traditional university-led course evaluation process, which not surprisingly seems to be best suited for traditional, content-driven courses (see also Hamilton, Pritchard, Welsh, Potter, & Saccucas, 2002; Schmelkin, Spencer, & Gellman, 1997; Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002; Timpson & Andrew, 1997). We saw an opportunity to address this issue here as we asked students to be critical about

foundational work in ways that we found more appropriate to the nature of the work than the bubble-form evaluation the university distributed on the last day of class. In related research projects, Sheppard, Leifer and Carryer (1996) found that student interviews provided “more depth than was possible using traditional survey instruments” (272) and Morehead and Shedd (1996) found that faculty-peer interviews with each other’s students were a powerful evaluative tool:

[While] exchange of syllabi and reflective memoranda on our courses, classroom visitation and videotaping, implementation of teaching colloquia in the recruitment of new faculty . . . were interesting and constructive measures of teaching effectiveness and student learning, the most useful tool in our study was utilizing a peer to conduct interviews with students. (263)

We wanted to institute the level of comfort and honesty that Morehead and Shedd elicited with peer interviews of each other’s students, and we wanted to take that a level further, engaging them in a conversation about this project we wished to share with them, Freire’s (1971) idea of

Co-intentional education [in which] teachers and students, co-intent on reality, were both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling . . . reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle of their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. (56)

We hoped that this collaborative, evaluative dialogue further demonstrated our commitment to democratic education, and modeled for the students the possibilities of a democratic classroom. In its initial planning stages, this project seemed densely inter-connected between us, our students, and the complex critical work of liberatory pedagogy and critical reflection.

The questions we constructed were designed to provide students with a tool for critical reflection on the course and a springboard for discussion throughout the term. The initial questions included the following:

- ◆ *What are your professor’s goals for your learning in this course?*
- ◆ *Has this course stimulated you to think in new ways?*
- ◆ *Does your professor practice what s/he preaches about social justice?⁵*
- ◆ *How could this course be improved?*
- ◆ *What factors do you use as “frames” or “standards” for your evaluation of your university courses?*
- ◆ *Do you have suggestions for how student evaluation of courses could be improved?*

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Throughout the term, in our individual classes we continued this conversation with our students. We hoped to provide an opportunity for on-going dialogue around issues associated with the foundations courses, and with regard to our personal/professional agendas as instructors, including our pedagogical practices, and our desire to enhance our own teaching. We sought to establish a scholarly community where all members collaboratively engaged in critical, reflective inquiry and evaluated educational practice.

At the final session of the term, we created a number of “focus groups” within our classes in which students responded to the questions we provided at the beginning of the term. A student in each group was designated the facilitator and asked to lead the two-hour session. Students gave us permission to record the dialogue.⁶ The three of us moved from group to group listening, responding, and intervening in ways we hoped enhanced the conversation. We envisioned the conversations as reflective for both our students and ourselves, and we saw the research as collaborative among not only colleagues, but also between teachers and students (Maguire, 1987). We imagined these roles — as student, teacher, colleague — as constantly negotiable, transitory, flexible.

We agreed that, like all critical reflective work, the entire process was analytic:

Analysis . . . does not refer to a stage in the research process. To the contrary, it [is] a continuing process. . . a time to consider relationships, salience, meanings, and explanations. . . (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, 81)

And we agreed that the process was evaluative - that we were investigating in order that our students and we might make qualitative judgments about the nature of our work and their learning. We were engaged in a value-laden process, and we wanted to do it well. This was not a neutral project on any level. There would be no objective data-gathering here, and we would have no impartial findings.

What we found after participating in these focus groups was that foundational coursework and learner-centered instructional practice provide an arena for important dialogue around essential issues in education, along with a possibility for re-examining and re-envisioning our values and beliefs. The work also clarified some of the questions we had and reinforced our notion that this is important work. For some students this clearly provides a rare opportunity to find their voices and have their personal experiences honored in the classroom. Mark felt a keen rapport with a number of engaged learners. Some of his students indicated that they were looking at their practice in new ways, concerned with some of the things they were uncovering about themselves as teachers in particular, and the schools in general. Cindy was excited to see students taking over the class as discussion leaders, to the point that one night they engaged the discussion for nearly two hours, and when finished, felt such a natural and powerful sense of closure that they left without waiting for her wrap-up and directives for the following meeting. She was pleased at the prospect of this active and exciting “teacherless” classroom that she was

fostering. But perhaps most striking was the way that our conversations highlighted discrepancies between our assumptions, understandings, needs, and desires as teachers of critical pedagogy, and the assumptions, understandings, needs, and desires of our students. While we wanted our students (and ourselves) to seriously engage in critical reflection, our students consistently expressed a desire for answers from “experts.”

The Conversations

As we reviewed the transcripts, it became evident that a couple of patterns were emerging. Consistent across the groups was a sense of what we had hoped for — for many students, the course experience provided an opportunity to become critical, to reflect on our practice and their own. However, a pattern of negativity emerged also. What was particularly striking about this, leaving us both dismayed and intrigued was the consistency at the heart of their complaints. Students clearly wanted us to act from an authoritative position and give them clear-cut responses to the issues raised in the courses.

We began each of the focus groups with this central question: *Has this course stimulated you to think in new ways?* Following are some of the responses we found to be most problematic:⁷

Question: Has this course stimulated you to think in new ways?

Student: *Not much. It's the same thing in all these [foundations] classes. And I think that there's just a kill on this cooperative learning.*

Student: *Sometimes I feel like I'm just sitting around listening to people talk about their teaching experiences. What am I going to do with all of this? I can't use this.*

Student: *Group activity should be in some of it. But it's getting to the point now where I'm going to classes where the whole thing is group work. I have one on Thursday night and that's half group work, and all we're doing is just meeting and a lot of times the group work is, well, they get off on conversations that have nothing to do with what we're there for.*

Student: *I get aggravated in this class. It seems like we're always teaching each other. We're assigned all this group work and that's good for some of the time, but bring in speakers . . . show videos.*

Student: *We just don't want to be leading the class. We want to learn from each other, but we want to have somebody in front that's going to tell us what's working in the classroom and what isn't.*

Student: *I don't think there is enough implementation of what we're going to do with this. I think we're getting lots of information from lots of different places*

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but what I want to do is learn something that I can take back to my classroom and do something with kids. I want to find something I can use. That's my main goal for being here.

Student: *I think that [finding something I can use] is important in any kind of "Social Issues" type of class because if you just talk about feelings and symptoms with no answers, then what's the point? We don't want to hear a sob story for eleven weeks. Hear it, get over it, and move on to figure out answers.*

Student: *I agree. I prefer classes where I can actually use the material in my own classroom. I want ideas. I want practical hands-on things. The discussions have made me think differently, but it's been mostly stuff I've done before. Not to sound like this class was a waste of time, but I was waiting for the professor to give me some ideas.*

Student: *I guess when I evaluate a class, I look at how I'm going to use it in my career. How am I going to be able to take this back to my classroom or back to the school? If I can't find anything worthwhile to take back, then what was it doing for me? But the question is — how will I be able to use it?*

As noted earlier, one of our purposes in this project was to engage our students in an evaluative process that was both more authentic than the typical last-day-of-the-semester evaluation and more appropriate to the nature of the course. So a student who explicitly spoke about evaluating the course intrigued us. We pursued this line of inquiry.

Question: Are there other standards you use when you evaluate courses?

Student: *I evaluate them according to how much busy work I have as compared to what was of use to me. Not just in the reading but what I have to put my time into, like writing. If it's something that's not going to be useable to me it's like telling fairy tales. If it's not useful, I don't care about it, and I just do it to get it done.*

Question: So what are those kinds of assignments?

Student: *I think journal writing is a good example. I really struggle to write something down in the journal. I was never excited to write in a journal three times a week. I think it's busy work. On top of that, we then had to do a five-page paper synthesizing the journal. That was really busy work.*

Student: *I usually try to find something I can bring back to my classroom and that's what my journal came down to. I didn't have a big opinion about a lot of the readings. A lot of them just didn't matter. But if one little thing stuck out to me, I would go off on how to use it. But you're right, it was a lot of busy work.*

Student: *I don't know how you guys felt, but I don't have a lot of time for busy work.*

Question: What kinds of assignments would be better?

Student: *Implementing — and learning something that we could implement. I would like to get something out of each course that I can take back to my classroom.*

Response from facilitator: It sounds to me as though you are saying that one of your frames for evaluation is the degree to which you can apply what you learn in the course to your classroom. One of the concerns that raises for me is the difference between a foundations course and a methods course. In foundations courses you are supposed to be challenged to look at your assumptions. They are more philosophically oriented. In methods courses you get more concrete, more tangible material for your classroom. So I'm wondering if that distinction is clear.

Student: *I think there are too many foundations courses. We're not getting enough practical information.*

Student: *And so many of them touch on the same thing. It's like we're rehashing the same thing over and over again in many of the classes.*

As we suggested in our introduction, central to our pedagogy is a concern with issues of diversity and inclusivity. Perhaps one of our most distressing findings is that many of our students do not share the same level of concern. Given that these issues are often taboo (Tatum, 1997) in many university classrooms, we believe that when the opportunity to revisit them, whether by design or by chance, arises, that is when students will make connections, build on prior knowledge, and be moved to claim an activist stance. In short, these are the moments when critical reflection can lead to deep understanding. Clearly our students saw it differently.

Student: *And it's not like you're getting in-depth with the material or getting more in-depth knowledge. It's the same issues, culture and racism, and gender bias is usually touched on somewhat.*

Student: *I think this course on Human Relations is exactly like Social Issues. It basically dealt with the same types of foundations where it was racial things, it was an identity crisis, all of that.*

Student: *I think it's so repetitious of Social Issues, even some of the same books. I just find it, you know for the money we pay for a course, that we have the same books and we're doing the same thing.*

Facilitator: How many of the books are the same?

Student: *Just the "Deculturalization" book by Joel Spring is the same. I think somebody said they had one of the other books too.*

Student: *I've had parts of the same books in Introduction to Curriculum, different chapters but the same material.*

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Student: Going back to talking about solutions — that's why I didn't like one of our texts. If it had been one of our first readings it might have been better, but as the last book, it was just more of the symptoms. And I'm not saying that those weren't important for us to hear too, but we've been doing that all along, and in a course like this, I wanted answers. I wanted to know how these problems can be changed.

Discussion

Obviously, we were making some assumptions about these students enrolled in our graduate level courses in Human Relations and Introduction to Curriculum Theory. We were aware that many of our students were practicing teachers, some with years of experience behind them. As such, we thought they should have at least a passing familiarity with contemporary thinking on the teaching and learning process. But still, our findings — about our students, about the material, and about ourselves — surprised us.

We took pains to construct courses that were student-centered and student-driven. As constructivists, we believed strongly that students must be active participants in their learning. We assumed that practicing teachers would view our practice with a critical eye, noticing the methods and strategies we employed as the course unfolded. We assumed that the content of the readings would reinforce the message conveyed by the way the courses were structured. When it came right down to it, we assumed that the students trust us, and that they would be able to see the message(s) embedded in what we were doing, in our actions. We did some explaining, but we did not think that we needed to be overly didactic. In fact, that would go against what we believed about the nature of good teaching.

We assumed that experienced teacher-students would understand the value of reflection and what we were asking of them when we assigned reflective essays, journals, and small group dialogue rather than standing in front of them delivering material. In introducing these types of assignments and activities, we (merely) stated our purposes and assumed students might appreciate this forum for having their personal and professional experience honored in an educational setting. What we learned was that there was a mismatch between our expectations and understandings and those of our students. In some cases, it may have been that our students viewed critical reflection as an abstract intellectual process that has no bearing on their work, since much of the focus of the reflections was on issues they considered to be outside of their experience (i.e., race, gender, class) and therefore irrelevant to their immediate concerns. For many of the students there was a willingness to reflect on a more technical level (Van Manen, 1977) — reflection that might look at why a particular teaching method or behavior management plan was effective or not. However, when we invited students to be more critical about the moral and ethical dimensions of schooling, there was often reluctance, and even resistance on their part.

In problematizing the context of education in our foundations courses, we were

asking that students reflect at a more complex level; a level at which many of them have little experience and a level that is complicated by the cultural baggage we all bring to educational settings. Consistent with the Standards for Academic and Instruction in Foundations of Education, Educational Studies, and Educational Policy Studies (CLSE, 1996), we believe this level of reflection is essential if we truly want our students to develop a critical perspective and join us in becoming political. Such reflection provides the opportunity for all of us to work together to identify and critique power structures, to examine the unexamined, to critically reflect on ourselves and the world around us. We asked our students to take a more critical and transformative role and to view themselves as “public intellectuals who combine conception and implementation, thinking and practice, with a political project grounded in the struggle for a culture of liberation and justice” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1990, 109).

We assumed that in order to become political, individuals need a clear understanding of, and a personal commitment to the interruption of those realities that serve to block a just and equitable society. Addressing issues of race, class, gender, homophobia, and the other forms of oppression that plague us, requires a sustained conversation and critical reflection. We understand that this summons to dialogue, encouraging self-reflection and public discourse around the issues, while essential to foundational studies, is risky business. And we understand that inquiry into these issues is complicated and complex, partially because many of us, especially those of us who are part of the dominant culture, are socialized to see our lives as normative (McIntosh, 1988; Murrell, 2002; Schofield, 2001; Tatum, 1997). Consequently, either little relevance is seen in having such discussions, or these conversations are perceived as threatening. Asking students to engage these issues assumes a level of trust among the participants that may or may not have been established in our classrooms, and we know that the creation of such a sacred space (Richardson, 1994) is vital, yet difficult if not impossible. It is also the case that the discourse for conducting meaningful dialogue around issues of oppression is often unavailable to us, further inhibiting such conversation. Here, we were clearly trying to make it available. In light of these realities, our students’ resistance to an on-going dialogue on the issues is understandable (Gallavan, 2000; Lindquist, 1993; Orr, 1993; Shor, 1997; Titus, 2000); however, it highlights the importance of continuing to work toward creating opportunities for sustained and meaningful dialogue around issues of oppression.

It seemed that many of our students came to us with the expectation that an education course of any sort should clearly and definitively provide practical applicability, and strictly in terms of the classroom settings in which they teach. We, on the other hand, assumed that our purpose was primarily to problematize, to challenge students to recognize their assumptions, to examine how they think, so that ultimately, they become better problem-solvers. We do not understand the nature of a foundations course to be about providing solutions to problems but

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rather to develop the concepts and skills necessary to develop the “interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives” required for informed and active professional educators. (CLSE, 1996). This mismatch of sorts between the expectations of the students and our understanding of teaching and learning, seems reflective of earlier work by Soltis (1990) in his reconceptualization of Foundations work. Here he distinguishes between knowledge-in-use from a technical perspective, where students are provided with clear direction for what and how to process in their work, and knowledge that is used “to create a hunger for understanding and improving education” and as a mechanism for “professional dialogue, discussion, and debate, and the location of resolutions of common issues and problems” (Soltis, 1990, 320). So while some of the students felt that we had abdicated our responsibilities as teachers, we interpreted the work to be that of problem posing in such a way as to provoke students to become more “pragmatic, strategic and self-reflective” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2). Here we turn to Paulo Friere’s model of “problem-posing dialogue” for our pedagogical strategy. By engaging students in a critical dialogue, and by providing an arena for exploring the social and personal dimensions of the issues and knowledge-base of the discipline, we hoped to engender within our students a habit⁸ of educating that leads to transformative action.

The major projects in both courses provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate their ability to see through a critical perspective, to make connections, to invent solutions to problems, to consider practical applicability. Certainly the notion of a foundations course does not *preclude* the possibility of discovering solutions. We designed assignments in light of our understanding that there are multiple ways of addressing critical problems in all their various manifestations. The final project in Cindy’s class was an “implementation paper.” Students were to choose something that interested them from the course readings, to draw from the literature provided, to extend it through self-directed research, and to plan and, if possible, to implement, their proposed solution. Cindy specifically asked them to think about change — about ways to change themselves and the world around them. Mark asked his students to complete a curriculum project designed to provide a framework for analyzing the curriculum of a particular classroom, school, or school district in light of what was taught, how it was taught, and for whom it was of most benefit. This analysis focused, in part, on the assumptions underlying the curriculum’s philosophy, goals and objectives, the conceptions of teaching and learning inherent in the document, and the extent to which the curriculum likely played a hegemonic role in its purpose and content.

In other words, in designing the coursework, we specifically offered opportunities for students to become political within the confines of the foundations course. We were asking our students to be problem-solvers in a complex world, and when we engaged them in collaborative, evaluative conversations about what we saw as rich and exciting work, we were disappointed to hear complaints from so many that we were not offering solutions.

Conclusions

We are suggesting that we must do more to help students understand the nature of foundational work and the difficult dimensions of their educational preparation. Our disappointment in the conversations we had with many of our students leads us to important realizations about the foundations that are not in place for us to do what we consider “foundational” work. As exciting as it may be to invite students to be critically reflective, it does not serve any purpose if they do not know what we mean when we use the word reflective in this highly specific way. How can a student be critical until we have explained, explored, and modeled critical thinking? Perhaps we needed to be more direct with these particular classes, in the very beginning, about the purpose and nature of foundational work. Perhaps that implicit method, assuming that what we *do* is the most powerful method of instruction, is the least effective way to communicate in a cultural context in which only the very most explicit ideas are typically addressed and considered. We have discovered that we, who claim to be reflective, must be more cognizant of the assumptions we carry into our teaching. At first we thought we needed to spend more time defining terms, modeling reflective practice, modeling critical thinking, modeling student-centered democratic strategies. And to some degree perhaps that is true. Could it be that where we needed to be didactic was in explaining who we are and what we do?

The concern though, repeated in group after group, was not that we were not clear, that they did not understand what we were asking of them (although that may be exactly the case). The complaint was that we were not providing answers. We were, however, providing specific opportunities for students to develop responses of their own. As we reviewed our syllabi and reflected together about what we had been asking of students, we concluded that both of us were giving them explicit opportunities to create and implement solutions.

Our concern is that the problem at the heart of this is may be too complex for easy answers. There is a level of resistance at work on the part of many students that keeps them from being eager to problem-solve. It may be the result of cultural conditioning, the way they’ve been schooled for years, the school system’s expectations for what and how they should teach, the current emphasis on testing and accountability, or a combination of all of these, but too many of them are not willing to get messy with us (Richardson, 1994), to be inventive and strategic as they engage with us in creating solutions. Many felt (and several came right out and said) that if they pay their tuition they have a right to expect solutions from us in return.—Are they just being lazy, as students are often wont to be — unmotivated after long days working in the conditions we want to critically analyze, but they want to merely survive? Or is the narrowing culture opening the door to a new critical perspective?—Could it be that, properly presented, foundations will be where teachers can access the tools and strategies necessary to respond — actively and practically — to their very real fears and concerns about an increasingly narrow political climate for schooling?

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Ironically, using the praxis approach to foundations scholarship — developing a critical perspective leading to transformative teaching; developing the ability to articulate shared insight — is a powerful tool to wield in any political battle, and has the potential to provide for these very teachers (who complain about a lack of practicality in our courses) a fundamentally practical set of tools to use in the battle against high stakes testing.

The challenge for foundations scholars is to provide, in the context of these courses, practical ways for teachers to respond in their workplaces, but also to transform ourselves into activist/practitioners, ready to respond in the literature and on the state and national levels.

The gridlock of NCLB and the testing movement is testing all of us. Powerful responses can and should be forthcoming from foundations scholars; if we manage to draw in our students, engage them in critical conversation, then move them beyond it, to action, we are fulfilling our role. To do anything less than that is to fall short, to be guilty of what we have been too often accused: of forgoing our authority, of not teaching our students.

The question we are left with is this: how do we interpret/interrupt this resistance and better bridge the gap between student expectations and our understandings of the nature of foundational work? According to Graff (2003), in order “to make critical discourse safe for school and college classrooms . . . teachers must be selective and must seriously gauge the level of discussion and vocabulary their students are ready for” (183). We must do just that — meet our students where they are as they walk in the door, and then take them someplace new. As Graff addresses undergraduates’ abilities to join in the critical discussions of the academy, he quotes his friend John Brereton from the University of Massachusetts at Boston: “[Students] know, and they care, too—the issues are live ones for them. When schools and colleges tap these sources of knowledge and passion, they encourage students to feel a real personal stake in their education, something you can’t fake” (qtd. in Graff, 2003, 231). Certainly, among the teachers in our classrooms, there is no shortage of passion, of engagement. It is our job, then, to illuminate for them the very real ways in which the foundations provide some of the most important tools for change that we have at our disposal.

Notes

¹ Although it is another issue, not directly related to this paper, it is worth noting here that the “atmosphere” to which we refer is difficult and risky to establish and maintain. It must be a highly charged, political space, developed so as to push students to acknowledge, address, and confront difficult subject matter, yet at the same time, safe and secure enough to invite students to feel that they might engage these problematic themes and issues openly, publicly and honestly and not feel threatened (see Henry, 1994; Richardson, 1993).

² The questions posed included the following: What is knowledge? Where does knowledge come from? Can you make knowledge?

³The university has since altered the scope and sequence of their foundations curriculum.

⁴We use the term “radical” to mean working for real, deep change. We envision students and teachers working together to develop and move toward a newly envisioned paradigm, rather than manipulating elements of the existing system.

⁵Hindsight being very keen, upon reflection we would, of course, ask some different questions and word some of these questions very differently — this one in particular. There is something inherently unfair in asking a student if his or her professor practices what s/he preaches. How on earth is a student to know what a teacher “preaches” in the general sense? Perhaps it would be more reasonable to ask whether, in the context of the course, the student can see evidence that the professor puts into practice what s/he is teaching in the course, i.e., ‘is the teacher teaching in the way s/he is telling you to teach?’.

⁶The audiotapes of the focus groups were transcribed, analyzed and coded by each of us individually and together in a manner consistent with that suggested by Glesne and Peshkin (1992).

⁷The dialogue is not untouched. We have sifted through the transcripts looking for specific content that we wish to elucidate. We have given special attention to students’ responses to the questions that appear most salient both for them and for us as we seek to better understand the nature of this work. We have chosen not to substantially edit the students’ words; however, we do rearrange the material to ensure readability. We have been careful to avoid taking students’ words out of context in any way that might change their initial meanings.

⁸We use “habit” in the sense that John Dewey (1938) understood it — ways of meeting and responding to all the conditions that we meet in living.

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