

Creative Disruptions: Critical Opportunities in Community Engaged Learning.

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Good morning everyone. I want to start by thanking New College for the invitation to speak here today. It is special for me because this will be my last official act as a teacher at New College, with the exception of marking and submitting grades. I have taught here for four years, it has been an incredible experience. I deeply value the intellectual and activist community of students, staff, and faculty that finds its home here. So for that reason, my comments today might be a bit sentimental, but I don't mind that.

I have been asked today to provide a bit of thinking about critical questions and issues within community engaged learning and given the research I have done, there are a number of ways I could start that conversation. It seems to me, however, impossible to do that without thinking about the deep rupture this campus has experienced, and continues to experience, related to the recent, month-long Teaching Assistant strike and the questions of value and learning that have emerged in this crisis. The experience of the last month has been turning over in my head as I think about what community engaged learning has to offer us.

When the strike began, I wrote to my students and explained my choices regarding our courses. I also told them that from the standpoint of my research and scholarship, and my philosophical anchoring in critical education, that the experience of disruption is profoundly important to any kind of learning that has the possibility of cracking through the ideologies and distortions that organize our daily experience of a profoundly inequitable and violent world.

It seems to me that 'community engaged learning' has been positioned for many years as a pedagogy that can contribute to that disruption and today I want to reflect critically on that assertion and what it might mean.

In order to do that, however, I have to state my terms and identify a few of my own assumptions. I ask my students to do this all the time when I ask them to 'think critically' so it is only fair.

First off, 'community engaged learning' means any number of things, as can the term 'community' to begin with. It is deployed by different people to refer to different practices and spaces. There are debates, but I'm not going to review them. However, this diversity of meanings is not politically neutral. The conceptual slippage between various iterations has

profound implications for how we conceptualize what is meaningful about this pedagogical approach.

I am going to discuss what comes to mind when I think of community engaged learning and that is a kind of pedagogical practice that 1) moves students beyond the formal boundaries of the universities and involves sustained participation or engagement with community (service learning, internships); 2) is influenced by one of several models of experiential learning; 3) acknowledges some of the ethical considerations involved in engaging 'the community' as a site of undergraduate teaching and learning; and 4) it also has an institutional form. By that I mean that it is not just our everyday life in communities spaces; it is accredited by our institutions and its meaning is always forged in relation to what constitutes 'higher education' in a given context and historical moment.

I also recognize that it has the potential for profound, transformative effects, especially for students. When we take up 'community engaged learning,' we ask quite a bit of communities. We ask them to teach our students, to take over the labour of the university. We ask them to offer up their experience to our gaze. We ask them to become our text. Without proper facilitation and reflection, this transformative learning that students experience can remain perhaps personally significant but lacking in an attenuating social dimension. It is the social dimension, the movement forward towards something larger than oneself, that is important to communities. And so we set up a dynamic of giving and taking that cannot be easily resolved.

In thinking about the possibilities and realities of community engaged learning, I can only begin with my own experience. Over and over, in contexts from First Nations reservations to women's shelters to afterschool programs, I had the kind of experiences that community engaged learning should provoke.

I experienced conflict and contradiction. I was at a loss more often than I knew what to do. I was forced out of my own way of knowing the world and apart from the limited way in which I experienced the world. In order to make sense of what I experienced, I had to recognize the limitations of my own way of knowing. I often think of all those people who so generously invested in the process of divesting me of my ignorance and arrogance.

My teachers, both in the university and in the community, pushed me to read and theorize about my experience. They pushed me into harder places, places where I didn't just provide services to people, but where I had to confront the relations that organize our lives; the relations that decide who goes to the food bank and who goes to the grocery store. I had to think about the conditions I saw in the community and what that had to do with my own life.

When I went out into a community space, I had to struggle to understand how these conditions had come to be and what they meant in people's daily lives. I had to muddle through the contradictions and complexities and frustrations of a world that is not as easily comprehensible as glossy academic books would have us believe. People are hard to work with and hard to understand.

When I would physically ride the bus from my university campus, across town to the neighborhood where I did my 'service,' I had to think about the distance traveled between how I lived and how others lived, what I had access to and what others did not. I learned to pay attention to not just where I was going to, but what I was going through. I went through spaces of deep disinvestment and deprivation. I went through a process of taking apart the myths I had learned about who and what was in the world.

I learned a lot about inequality and social justice through my participation in Community Engaged Learning because it forced me to confront difference and what the reality of difference means in this world, what power means in this world. But some of the most valuable things I learned through my experiences were about myself, about my own identity, about the social construction of the world I lived in, about the fact that there are many truths. It is not that these truths are multiple, variable, relevant. It is that they are all partial, they are made through human experience and human consciousness and constructed through a complex interplay of history and social forces.

For me, the most powerful aspect of my experience in the community as a student and now as a teacher, has been not only learning how to disrupt myself and the way I understand the world, but to welcome it.

Community engaged learning is a type of experiential learning, but it is quite different than the other forms of experiential learning in higher education, especially those now being foisted by policy makers.

We have a legacy of experiential learning associated with applied learning and the development of skills, for example in vocational education, in practicums or clinics, and in internships. There is an argument that the main purpose of experiential learning, of any kind, is the development of practical capacities in students. And increasingly, those practical capacities are articulated through logics of competition, commodification, credentialization.

I would argue, however, that community engaged learning comes from a different place and has a different purpose and if you look at its historical emergence, that purpose becomes clear. There were many experiments by audacious teachers and allies, inspired by radical education projects oriented towards human freedom.

My earliest professional experience in CEL was in a university consortium whose model began in 1968 when there were rebellions in African American communities across the US. In response to this, some university faculty members just up and took their classes off campus and into communities in order to understand what was happening.

The purpose was not to refine student skills and apply their learning. They did not go to impart their knowledge. They went to understand injustice, to try to learn from people whose lives and knowledge were not present in the university environment. They went to understand the limits

of their own experience in the world, how their perspectives were constructed by class and whiteness and gender. They learned the limits of the university itself.

That was the historical purpose behind community engaged learning, to upset, rupture, and reconstruct and it was very, very messy and quite imperfect. There were, and are, in community engaged learning major problems related to power, extraction, and appropriation. As I said earlier, the relationship between giving and taking is not easily resolved.

Nevertheless, in this way community engaged learning is a disruption to the traditional way in which we think about teaching and learning in higher education and the purpose of experiential learning specifically. It is a disruption because it takes up, explicitly, the politics of pedagogy.

Community engaged learning as we understand it borrows heavily from other traditions, models, experiments in pedagogy. It has cousins that stretch back in time, but they have a common, connective tissue and that is the question of what to do about an inequitable world. What to do about the question of justice? What to do about education: reproduction or revolution?

I often hear from folks in higher ed that it is better to approach community engaged learning as a way to learn an applied area, to test theory, to advance on the goals of the university, while at the same time perhaps meetings some goals of the folks outside the university. Community engaged learning is taken up in this way not because of its history or its intents, but because it is simply a more 'active' way to learn. And the more 'active' it is, the 'better' because people actually do learn better when they are solving problems. Educational philosopher John Dewey was right about that.

And that it is true; it is far less boring than sitting in a lecture and it offers another entry point into course material. There is a reason we have that old joke that a lecture is the best way to get information from the notepad of a professor into the notepad of a student without it passing through the brain of either person.

But this, I think, is a distortion and a de-radicalization of community engaged learning. The historical experiments to develop this pedagogy are important because they remind us that community engaged learning is meant to disrupt. It is an opportunity for a student to go into a space that we have previously delineated as a space of non-learning. In the regular life of the university as an old, elitist institution, the community is not where we go to learn. We go to classrooms with professors.

Community engaged learning posits a disruption in the notion of where one can learn and what value that learning has. One can learn not just in a classroom from a sanctified expert, but one can learn on the street, in an organization, in a housing complex, on a playground, in a food bank, from the people who live and work and struggle in those spaces on a daily basis.

Community engaged learning argues that doing something with other people, cooperatively, and reflecting on it, conceptualizing it, forms the basis of human experience in life. It forms praxis and learning that has the potential to greatly transform how we understand ourselves in the world. It interrupts the notion that we are empty buckets into which the knowledge of greater, more powerful, superior beings must be deposited.

This is also an epistemological disruption in higher education and that is part of the reason why there has been so much resistance to community engaged learning. It shifts knowledge away from centers of privilege and into the daily life of people whose experiences are fundamentally organized by social power, by relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, on and on under conditions of neoliberalism, imperialism, colonialism, and the 'zombie' capitalism we live in. In other words, community engaged learning has the potential to make visible many things that we often leave in the shadows and don't talk about. Everyone in the university environment participates in this shadowing, students as well.

It also raises issue with the idea that knowledge only comes into being through the processes of objectification and abstraction that we engage when we make theory. It has the potential to directly confront the problem of whose knowledge counts and has value in describing and explaining the world we live in.

These pedagogical and epistemological dimensions are potentially creative and radical disruptions that community engaged learning offers students, if they are aware of it. That is, if they are provoked into being aware of it. That provocation can come from inside the student, from the community, or from a teacher. But it needs to come to the surface.

The early theorists and practitioners of community engaged learning were not afraid to talk about the politics of pedagogy. Today we are. Today, I think, we are afraid to talk about and to disrupt, fundamentally and institutionally, a way of teaching and learning that does not work.

Some might argue that it works for a very privileged few, but I don't think it really works for them either. At the centre of the way in which we have structured the university is a kind of alienation and all of us experience it. There is a hollow distance constructed between our selves and daily realities and what constitutes 'knowledge.' The value we place on people's experiences and the meanings they hold is evident everywhere. We seem to be stuck on the conveyer belt of a factory, going forward towards the point of sale without much control or reflection on what, why, where, or how.

To me, the last month has been a constant reminder of this reality. The strategy to devalue the labour of our graduate students and to normalize life on campus utilized a profoundly vulgar aspect of this alienation—a lack of empathy for conditions in which others live and an unwillingness to listen to the realities of other peoples' lives.

Some of us have other experiences in life, conditioned by identities, situations of powerlessness and oppression, by marginalization and violence, that make that alienation ever harder to bare

and navigate. For some people that alienation blooms through every part of their life in this place and for some it remains a tight, undigested kernel in their stomachs. My fear is that they will go on to reproduce that alienation for someone else. Without a hard discussion about the politics of pedagogy, that process of alienation remains continuous and it is not disrupted. Community engaged learning, for me, should force the question.

I would argue that the central learning goal of all community engaged learning should be disruption and de-normalization of the world as you know it. I am reminded of an old Southernism, which my students are used to hearing me roll out. The known world is not the whole world. It is only the parts made available to you through your ability to listen and engage with others, to take in history and piece together stories. But this involves taking a world that you think you understand and setting it on its edge and letting it collapse if need be. This is not an easy process; it often involves crying. This, for me, would be the purpose and value of community engaged learning.

I want to end this 'being critical' with something equally as important, being creative. For me, it is impossible to be creative without passion. Passion is something that community engaged learning can help to create. Some of you may be experiencing that now at the end of this semester. What is this thing I feel that wants to go forward, wants to be followed? Maybe you found a problem or a place or a question that you feel connected to and maybe you haven't, but hopefully you have learned something about learning through this work and something about what you can do to take up hard questions and doggedly pursue them. That pursuit is how I know passion when I see it.

Passion is not just an intellectual act and it is not something you acquire, like a skill or a capacity. It is something that everyone wants to see in a cover letter for a job, but having it and expressing it requires you to surrender yourself to the hardest process one can take up and that is the process of change, changing yourself and working with other to change the world around you.

One of my favorite writers is Paula Allman, one of the most important theorists of critical education in the last fifty years, and she writes quite a bit about the importance of passion. Here's what she has to say about it:

Passion, like mutual respect, humility, openness, trust and cooperation, normally does not exist— at least not to the degree I am suggesting— prior to our engagement in the process of transformation...All of these of these principles, which unite our thoughts or beliefs and feelings...are, it is to be hoped, expressed in the very fibre of our being and develop within our struggle to transform existing social relations.

Therefore, the struggle to transform these relations is a struggle to establish coherence in our thinking and also between our thinking, feeling, and the way we express our lives—in the way

*we act toward and relate to others. It is through this critical praxis that justice becomes educated and internalized as passion.*¹

You may already be on this road and community engaged learning is another turn for you along the way. Or, at the end of this year, you may now be standing at the edge the road, trying to decide if this is the step forward you want to take. You may only have made it onto the front porch and are looking at that road and wondering if you have any right to be there and could really do anything to begin with. What matters now is that you know another path exists, another way of learning and being and knowing is possible, and, hopefully, to be sentimental about it, even another world.

Thank you.

¹ Allman, Paula. (1999). *Revolutionary Social Transformation: Democratic Hopes, Political Possibilities and Critical Education*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, p. 168.