Unalienated Recognition at the Core of Meaningful Exchange Between School and Community

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ABSTRACT

I apply the concept of unalienated recognition as a form of democratic exchange, introduced by Rheingold (2012), to a different educational setting. Through a case study of the School for Field Studies international environmental programs, that are, like Rheingold's study school, field based and community centered, I explore the hypothesis that today's undergraduate students' desire to serve and to solve can be usefully harnessed in formal coursework and research to address real problems at their foundation. I link the cases by building on Rheingold's use of the concept of boundary objects as an organizing principle behind the success in motivating student learning and performance.

This article is a response to:

Rheingold, A. (2012). Unalienated Recognition as a Feature of Democratic Schooling. *Democracy and Education*, 20 (2), Article 3. Available at: http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol20/iss2/3

In a recent issue of this journal, Rheingold (2012) shares a middle school curricular approach to connecting students to community, a form of democratic exchange that engages young learners in a topic and in the learning process that fosters interactions across boundaries. In her case study, Rheingold describes a situation where student work produced through a school-community collaborative project ultimately "constitutes a public space" (p. 2) where the work has a use value across social boundaries, which may serve as a motivational factor in student engagement in a middle school. Because of the boundary crossing, student performance and work output are dependent on interactions with multiple actors in multiple social spaces outside of the classroom and outside of the school. This is in contrast to the dominant paradigm in schooling in which students often pursue work that has no particular meaning in the school setting, let alone in the students' communities or families, but is produced to satisfy educational standards, suggesting that the main motivational factor may be simple adherence to those standards.

To define this type of democratic exchange in school curriculum that connects students and student learning to the community, Rheingold introduces a new concept of "unalienated recognition," a notion of education "in which students, teachers, and the school as a whole develop through exchanges in which mutual acknowledgement for work in and for the community is connected to participation in 'activities well tuned to the relations among people and the world' (Lave & McDermott, 2002, p. 38)" (Rheingold, 2012, p. 2). She concludes her paper: "When academic content is purposefully infused with social relationships and community practices, learning matters to students in substantially different ways than

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what more commonly occurs in a standards-based system" (p. 7). I couldn't agree more with her statement, and I use this response opportunity to test her new concept on a very different student population engaged in a curriculum that is also designed to bring student work into the public space.

I explore Rheingold's notion of unalienated recognition as both an outcome and a motivator for learning. I trace the links among the core elements of the learning experience she describes—boundary objects, unalienated recognition, and use value—to explore how this conceptualization of a democratic educational approach can provide a framework for understanding a college-level field study program. This response is an application of the concept of unalienated recognition to another educational model, particularly focusing on the conditions that make this notion possible. I hope also to highlight that a curriculum that connects students with place, issues, and people and that has unalienated recognition at its core stands to effect a transformation in student engagement in learning.

Rheingold (2012) builds on "Miettinen's (2005) concept of the 'desire for recognition' as an explanatory principle of what animates human activity and learning" (p. 3). My experience teaching college students in international field programs is that while recognition of their academic performance—through grades and accolades—may be a motivational factor for many, other factors may drive their best performance. Today's college student has likely heard the global call for achieving the world's sustainable development goals (UN Millennium Project, 2005): solve hunger, eradicate disease, promote maternal and infant health, achieve environmental sustainability, and alleviate poverty, among others. Once they arrive at college, some of them really want to solve the world's most intractable problems. "I plan to change the world; thanks for the jump start," wrote a student in response to a program evaluation about the influence of the School for Field Studies (SFS), the organization of environmental study abroad programs I discuss in this paper, on future choices.

Many high school and college students in this current generation likely will have engaged in some kind of community service linked to sustainable development. Volunteering for Habitat for Humanity or taking an alternative spring break service trip are examples of this. But today's students don't want just to serve; they also want to solve complex problems. Building latrines in Haiti is one kind of service, but conducting human behavioral research on how to motivate latrine use and environmental health research on the need for latrines is another category of service altogether; it is at the core of solving humanitarian problems. This kind of service requires a holistic understanding of the issue at hand—in the case of latrines, from the perspectives of history of development in a village, culture, biology, engineering, and health, among others. Being willing to gain that grounded understanding also requires of students a caring relationship between the server and the served (cf. Noddings, 2002) and the community's receptivity to the relationship. Based on my work in international education, and the popularity of sustainable development study programs, I posit that today's college students are also motivated to engage in learning by a desire to serve communities, especially not their own, and to solve problems. I further suggest that to serve and to solve are motivational factors for undergraduate students not unlike what unalienated recognition seems to be for King Middle School students. In fact, to serve and to solve are in essence corollaries to Rheingold's concept.

In this paper I describe a case in which an undergraduate study abroad curriculum, SFS's, is one that, much like the King Middle School field-based, community-centered curriculum studied by Rheingold, provides the educational structure that allows students to serve and to solve. Of interest to me is how the integration of boundary objects in the curriculum, the attention to receptivity and reciprocity across social worlds, and the practice of unalienated recognition can help to develop students into engaged citizens not only in their local communities but also in the world. I link the cases by building on Rheingold's use of the concept of boundary objects as an organizing principle behind the democratic exchange that motivates student learning and performance, considering unalienated recognition as both a motivator for and an outcome of the experience.

Boundary Objects as an Organizing Principle

The multifaceted nature of the boundary object—object as artifact, object as goal, object as process—makes it a flexible concept to describe complex educational approaches that strive to engage students in meaningful and democratic exchange and thereby yield the potential for unalienated recognition to occur. The concept of boundary object is used in science and technology, organizational management, and education, among other disciplines. In science, Star and Griesemer (1989) describe their concrete object of interest (i.e., museum collections) to which different meanings are ascribed in different social worlds such as those of donors, scientists, and field collectors. While the object remains constant, the meanings ascribed to the object by diverse actors differ and serve as a point for negotiation. They consider the heterogeneity of perspectives and needs by different actors for a single object and the kinds of cooperation among groups necessary to yield a unified yet multifunctional product.

Tsurusaki, Calabrese Barton, Tan, Koch, and Contento (2012) animate the concept through the idea of "transformative boundary object" (p. 7), whereby a curriculum designed to foster critical consciousness in a middle school classroom actually can serve to "bridge but also break down and transform boundaries" (p. 7). These authors describe how a science curriculum, and the particular way one instructor taught it, provides meaning by connecting science to students' lives and to communities through an examination of cultural practices (in this instance, food systems). By uncovering these connections through exchange with family and other members of their communities on the class topic, through critical consciousness of their practices, students stand to change their and their families' behaviors and thereby gain the unalienated recognition that Rheingold describes. Indeed, as Tsurusaki et al. (2012) report, through the class activities "there were sustained effects beyond the classroom science lessons that rippled through the two communities of students' everyday lives and school science and transformed the nature of the boundaries between these

worlds" (p. 26). In this article I explore how the nature of the SFS curriculum not only demonstrates how science applies to students' own lives and to the lives of others (the local community) but also how through the process students can both be agents of change and experience their own transformation, much as Tsurusaki et al. (2012) and Rheingold (2012) have described.

To open the pathway for transformation through this form of democratic exchange between the school and the community, the parties must be receptive to the relationship and to the crossing of boundaries. The institution facilitates and maintains the relationship with the external parties in the exchange, and the teachers prepare students for their engagement outside the classroom, but all parties come to the exchange with different perspectives. Boundary objects can help to coordinate and align the differing perspectives of members of different groups (Ruey-Lin, Dun-Hou, & Ching-Fang, 2012) and are especially useful in promoting collaboration in solving complicated problems, as those authors describe regarding an engineering firm. Even if the perspectives of the different actors are diametrically opposed, as are those of the farmer whose crops are destroyed by elephants and the conservationist whose aim it is to protect the elephant from retaliatory killings, a boundary object, such as a research report describing the conditions of this human-wildlife conflict, may serve as a common ground from which the two parties may begin negotiations to solve the problem. The educational activity or research, then, has an important use value to the parties and serves as a platform and feedback loop for the relationship. If the parties find the research process or outcome useful, even in different ways, they may be receptive. This is key to ensuring meaning in the exchange, which allows for the school and, in turn, the student to connect to community, thereby unalienating the learning and motivating student engagement.

Connecting Curriculum to Community: The SFS Model

SFS is an educational, nonprofit institution whose dual mission is to provide transformative learning and life experiences to undergraduate students through international study and research as well as to address issues of environmental sustainability and social justice—specifically addressing the perceived and actual dichotomies of biodiversity conservation and economic development—through cooperation and research. The program model and curriculum is place based, field based, problem based, community centered, and interdisciplinary. Similar to the emerging interdisciplinary field of sustainability science, the SFS curriculum "transcends the concerns of its foundational disciplines and focuses instead on understanding the complex dynamics that arise from interactions between human and environmental systems" (Clark, 2007, p. 1737).

Through research, the school serves diverse stakeholders and actors with data, information, and recommendations for addressing problems through the framework of sustainability education (Farrell & Ollervides, 2005). These stakeholders and actors include individuals and institutions that affect or are affected by environmental issues. They may be residents of a degraded area, farmers, neighborhood associations, school nature clubs, government offices (such as a parks department, wildlife service office, or natural resource monitoring authority), nongovernmental organizations, or businesses. Having an environmental problem that is affecting the well-being of one or more of these groups is the common thread among the parties in the exchange. The credit-bearing semester and summer programs give students experience in environmental problem solving by studying and addressing real stakeholder problems through coursework and field research.

The students (alien visitors and temporary actors on the scene) and the local stakeholders (residents, natural resource users, and environmental authorities, among others) are the two main constituents of the SFS program. The resident, full-time faculty and staff provide the bridge between these two constituent groups. Most of the SFS lecturers are boundary individuals. They are usually host-country nationals and have not studied in the U.S. educational system. Yet to succeed in teaching at SFS, with U.S. college students, lecturers must learn and employ elements of a distinctly American pedagogical approach: active teaching and inquiry-based learning. Faculty also provide the bridge across the classroom threshold to the field, since the field is usually quite foreign to visiting students. Using universal concepts in their disciplines (e.g., the succession theory in ecology, the principle of sustainable yield in resource management, or the modernization theory), to which students may have been exposed in previous coursework, the local faculty help students to understand the local systems (natural and social) and problems. Those universal principles, theories, and concepts, which can be applied to any system, are the boundary objects in the curriculum.

An SFS central pillar is student and community engagement with local stakeholders in problem definition. Through a consultative process among stakeholders—in the exchange of ideas and expression of needs—the school develops successive five-year research plans that define and prioritize topics to be pursued by faculty and students in service to and in collaboration with the local stakeholders and science. Each group of semester students contributes to the research projects, and the projects may be ongoing for several years. This is the element of exchange that Rheingold highlights from Soder's (2001) work on democracy in education. This reciprocal relationship rests on mutual cooperation in prioritizing of issues, setting the research agenda, and discussing and disseminating of research results. The research plan is an example of use-inspired science research that serves two purposes: fundamental understanding of the natural world and consideration of use of the knowledge generated (Clark, 2007; Kovac, 2007; Stokes, 1997). The boundary crossing in this case is in the collaborative development of the school's five-year research plan.

At the Boundary and Beyond: Relationships as Motivator

At both SFS and King Middle School, the curriculum is designed to facilitate students' crossing of boundaries through coursework. The curriculum is always outward looking but also designed for students to develop core competencies of scientific inquiry and field research. The community-based project provides a bridge for students to cross from classroom to field, from learner to expert, from knowledge receiver to knowledge producer. It also gives students membership to

different social worlds: from student of a particular school to member and citizen in a community connected to the school.

Critical to maintaining SFS's standing in the community and its ability to operate is the students' engagement in the community, their conduct in the field, and their research deliverables. From the students' side, motivation to actively engage in the program depends on their receptivity to the need for the research. If they are convinced the work has a high utility value, and they care about the beneficiaries of the research, they may engage at a high level, which is in line with what Shechter, Durik, Miyamoto, and Harackiewicz (2011) report for Western students. It would be quite enlightening to apply Noddings's concepts of caring and reciprocity to the relationships in international development and also in relationships between rural development and environmental conservation.

The institution and its partners' commitments to local change should signal to students the value of their work not to themselves but to the local communities and ecosystems. Through their research SFS students "create tangible artifacts exchanged across social worlds" through which "a *public space* is produced" (Rheingold, 2012, p. 2), and this public space, for SFS as an institution, is the crux for carrying out the three pillars of its mission: education, research, reciprocity.

Much like the King Middle School students Rheingold describes, who live in the school community and may be motivated by potential recognition for their work and connected to the community, SFS students must get to know their neighbors. They do this through nonacademic community engagement activities (e.g., trail maintenance, stream cleanup, English lessons). These relationships may provide a motivation for the students to serve through their research performance, measured both in the way they conduct themselves in the field and in the integrity of their research. Knowing that their deliverable has an authentic audience (e.g., the stakeholders and decisionmakers on the issue), that their research will become part of the public space (e.g., research reports and community presentation), and that it has a high use value (i.e., can lead to solution of environmental problems and inequities), not only drives their performance in the program but may inspire their application to the program in the first place.

There is a social consequence to their work, as at King Middle School, but since the SFS students leave at the end of the program, the social consequence rests on the institution and not so much on the student. The students return home with the experience of engaging in cross-boundary work and with the satisfaction of contributing in a meaningful way—to serve and to solve—to their temporary adopted local community. But they do, or should, understand that the social consequence of their own work has implications for their faculty mentors and for the school, to which they now may have allegiance. The awareness is a key condition for fostering the receptivity to exchange between the school and the community, and it also should motivate and guide future endeavors by students in community engagement, whether that be service, research, or the implementation of solutions.

Relationships matter, and SFS as an institution can afford neither students conducting themselves poorly in the community, thereby losing social capital in the community, nor students producing work that has little value, thereby compromising the trust in SFS as a serious partner in solving environmental problems. Those student papers and presentations that have little value, because they are either inaccurate (because of sloppy data collection or poor data analysis) or inconsiderate of the complexity of the problems and solutions, are not encouraged to cross the threshold from the classroom to the community at large. It happens, though. One student concluded her talk to the members of a rural fishing village with a statement to the effect of "So, to preserve the biodiversity in the bay, people should stop fishing." This student obviously did not fully grasp the connection between environment and livelihood, or the need to balance conservation and rural economic development.

Unalienated Recognition as Core to Engaged Learning

The question Star and Griesemer (1989) pose in their analysis of the establishment of a natural history museum is "how do heterogeneity and cooperation exist" (p. 414) to result in a unified product. Regarding an educational institution, we first must ask whether these principles exist and then how. The King Middle School expeditionary curriculum and SFS's university-level field programs both foster and rely on heterogeneity and cooperation within the program (e.g., between faculty and students, students and students) and across social worlds (e.g., between the institution and the diverse stakeholders and actors) to achieve the learning outcomes and to produce the high-value program deliverables. The curriculum, the research, the institution itself by nature cross boundaries and require cooperation, through both receptivity and participation, between social worlds.

The SFS program model and the King Middle School project seem to stimulate student engagement and learning through the integration of social relationships and community practices into the curriculum, in turn providing meaning to learning activities and learning relationships. For both, the concept of boundary objects is useful for understanding the mechanisms for engagement and the drivers of student transformation (cf. Tsurasaki et al., 2012). The success of student engagement in learning—that is, in fulfilling the learning relationship between student and school and between student and community—depends on all parties' receptivity to the engagement. The receptivity, in turn, depends on relationships. At SFS, the relationships between school and community depend to some degree on the community's perception of use value of the boundary object. The relationships also depend on SFS faculty and current and past students' behaviors, performances, and communication skills. And, finally, student performance and behavior—engagement in the research—in turn depends on motivation.

Student motivation at SFS can come from the desire to serve and to solve, a form of unalienated recognition, which requires that

the research be rooted in real problems and that there is a possibility for students to help solve those problems. If my hypothesis holds, it is it perhaps an indication that today's Western college students have broken through the mantel of self-interest as a motivation in their educational pursuits. The SFS program model is another example in which unalienated recognition for student work may be not only a motivator for participation but also a model for democratic exchange by an educational institution with the broader community.

Students who participate in curricular projects that result in shared outcomes, such as those at King Middle School and SFS, just may be hooked on this democratic kind of engagement in education. And, as this curricular model is employed elsewhere, communities and other stakeholders may grow to expect this kind of exchange, which should serve to enhance civic engagement in education. Through boundary crossing, receptivity and reciprocity, and unalienated recognition, students gain a head start on "shared-fate individualism" (cf. Care, 1987), what Kovac (2007) suggests is the essential moral ideal for scientists today: scientists choosing a professional pathway in which they dedicate at least some of their effort to working for the social good. Kovac asserts, "As they work in use-inspired basic research or applied research, scientists should put service to humanity and the amelioration of the serious problems of today's world above self-realization whenever and wherever possible as they plan and develop their careers" (p. 168).

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