

# Discussion, Critical Reflection, and Collaborative Knowledge Construction in Experiential Education

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## **Abstract**

This response offers cross-disciplinary pedagogical insights and conceptual considerations as a supplement to the democratic experiential history project described by Lempert. The intent of the project is ambitious and worthwhile; however, without emphasis on the critical process of sense-making through discussion, reflection, and collaborative knowledge construction, the project falls short of its potential impact. I offer suggestions and recommendations for practitioners who might consider enacting such a project.

## **This article is a response to:**

Lempert, D. 2013. Taking People's History Back to the People: An Approach to Making History Popular, Relevant, and Intellectual. *Democracy & Education* 21(2). Article 1. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol21/iss2/1>

## **Erratum**

At the request of the author, the original version of this essay has been removed and a revised essay published on September 2, 2014.

**R**ESPONDING TO LEMPERT'S (2013) model is my opportunity to engage in deliberative dialogue with and collaboration among democratic educators.

The challenge is to address considerations that warrant significant attention in an economy of space. My response is intended for practitioners who might implement Lempert's design for experiential education and is offered from the perspective of a social studies educator who believes strongly in disrupting bereft or dormant educational practices by creating a climate of possibilities.

In brief, Lempert's (2013) process of studying a people's history through democratic experiential education focuses attention on the inquiry process and tools for data collection and provides pragmatic steps for historical research. Lempert's article assists practitioners (and students) to achieve the first two goals of any such educational project: (a) to examine or inventory the landscape and (b) to weave what is visible into stories of human progress through interaction with nature. Lempert also provides students opportunities to (c) "raise questions for interpretation and discussion" and (d) to "open up dialogue among peoples and across borders" (p. 2). Taken at face value, this process is ripe with possibilities. Unfortunately, Lempert misses opportunities to elucidate the critical process of sense and meaning making through

discussion, reflection, and collaborative knowledge construction. For teachers in experiential education settings, those components are crucial: that is, what matters is not only what is taught but also how it is taught.

My overarching concern with the process as described is that without greater emphasis on the final two goals, any project that follows it runs the risk of being student-directed learning devoid of the social critique that Lempert (2013) desires. While I believe in the merit of Lempert's model, I am skeptical of its practical strength and will explain further by discussing my pedagogical concerns, the conceptual omissions I've noted, and an additional dilemma that deserves consideration in order for a project's successful

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enactment. I offer suggestions and recommendations for practitioners who might consider enacting Lempert's process.

In the following critique, I first provide a summary of Lempert's (2013) approaches and goals in "Taking People's History Back to the People: An Approach to Making History Popular, Relevant, and Intellectual." Following the summary, I offer an overview of conceptual frameworks that inform the critique of this project: Dewey's democratic (1924) and experiential education (1938) and Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973, 1978, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Next, I discuss pedagogical additions that would improve the enactment of the project—specifically, the critical process of sense and meaning making through discussion and reflection. In the ensuing section, I examine several conceptual elements that may serve as challenges for practitioners. Last, I offer suggestions for addressing an additional dilemma: how to ensure the collective construction of knowledge in experiential education settings.

## Overview of "Taking People's History Back to the People"

### APPROACH AND GOALS

According to Lempert (2013), the process "came out of a long tradition in both democratic and educational theory" (p. 2). Lempert's principles of democratic education include the following:

*"Democratization of the hidden curriculum" to empower students and meet their needs; "democratization of the educational structure and processes as well as the environment (the extra-curricular)"; and "experiential learning meeting community needs and student needs for democratic participation and empowerment" while assuring the teaching of measureable skills and perspectives as the basis for fundamental advance of human knowledge in the disciplines. (p. 3)*

Lempert's approach to teaching and experiencing people's history through democratic experiential education will soon be tested in a global context—in a cross-border project along the Mekong River in Laos and Thailand. The goal of the project is to document "historic sites with the help of communities, putting them onto heritage trails and thematic tours, offering children's books and individually paced tour 'curricula' and seeking to protect sites of all kinds with signs describing their importance to different communities" (p. 2). Specifically, the project provides opportunities for students to

- inventory the landscape of the different peoples who have interacted with nature and each other through history;
- weave what is visible into heritage and theme trails that tell stories of how people lived sustainably (or unsustainably) with nature and each other and look at their contributions to different aspects of human "progress";
- raise questions for interpretation and discussion based on the interaction with history on the landscape; and
- open a dialogue among peoples and across borders to make this past history relevant.

This project offers a framework for practitioners and students to shift from a traditional study of history to one that is participatory, experiential, and action-oriented. Traditional study refers to tight focus on facts, events, and people—content as "matter of fact representations" (Chiodo & Byford, 2004, p. 22)—without emphasis on heuristics employed by accomplished historians that integrate and interpret meaning from evidence (Wineburg, 1991). Through the experience, students will encounter less certainty when grappling with diverse perspectives on and interpretations of local history. The final product, in whatever form (e.g., curricula or tour), has the possibility of offering myriad ideological lenses through which to view and discuss the historical and geographic interaction of people, events, locations, and space. Overall, the approach and goals of the project are a laudable effort toward achieving "democratic experiential education."

## Conceptual Framework: Dewey and Freire—Pedagogy for an Engaged and Literate Citizenry

To form the conceptual foundation of my critique, I turn to the contributions of Dewey and Freire, whose ideas form the spine of democratic and experiential education and critical pedagogy, respectively. Dewey argued for democratic education to fashion an engaged citizenry, while Freire's pedagogy focused on literacy as the primary vehicle to make sense out of the lived experience—a process of "coming to know" (Freire, 1970, p. 56) that was open to all individuals. For both, education is the key mechanism for developing critical and active citizens, and it works through experience, inquiry, problem solving, consciousness raising, and communication. Dewey focused on civic participation and Freire on socioeconomic structural critique through critical consciousness and praxis.

Dewey (1924) argued that in order to realize its potential, democracy requires an engaged citizenry. Toward this aim, Dewey's three key elements in the democratic learning process are (a) engaging students beyond schools and in their communities, (b) focusing on problem solving, and (c) learning collaboratively between students and faculty. According to Dewey (1938), learning is experiential and consists of social interactions between teacher and student in a structured environment where democratic principles are integrated with learning activities. Dewey did not provide concrete examples of how best to promote education for civic responsibility; this was left to others to conceptualize and enact.

Experiential education, a pedagogy that involves students in communities and requires practitioners to find meaningful and productive learning opportunities outside of the classroom, is one pedagogical manifestation of Dewey's vision. Researchers have discussed the benefits of this type of pedagogy in higher education (Kaye, 2004) and as a process to enhance student learning and development (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Linn, Howard, & Miller, 2004). Educational opportunities that are concerned with problem solving, understanding the social-historical-political context, and developing students to make contributions to society are manifestations of democratic education.

Freire's corpus of work focuses on issues of social and political change (Freire, 1970, 1973, 1978, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987). To

achieve social and political change, Freire privileged sense making through dialogue and the dialectical interplay of lived experiences. This process of interplay, also known as praxis, occurs through action and reflection when meaning circulates, is acted upon, and is revised resulting in political interpretation and sense making. As individuals' thinking reorients to consider relationships to others in the world, a reflective awareness of differences in power, privilege, and inequalities fosters the development of critical consciousness. These acts of "reading the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35) are powerful and important vehicles to engaged discourse and collaborative problem solving. For Freire, the collective construction of knowledge was achieved by linking history, politics, and economics to concepts of culture and power. Thus, educators are called to implicate the pedagogical (student-teacher interaction) with the political (social relations with economics). Like Dewey, Freire was not prescriptive in how to enact his vision of critical pedagogy and called on educators to reinvent "what it means to be democratic in his or her own specific cultural and historical context (Freire, 1997, p. 308).

A variety of approaches exist for enacting Dewey's vision of democratic education and Freire's critical pedagogy. Neither Dewey nor Freire were prescriptive, and they left it to others to enact approaches in learning environments where democratic principles are integrated with learning activities. Several insights from educational literature help practitioners to conceptualize Dewey's notion of democratic education and Freire's notion of critical pedagogy and offer ideas to purposefully design instruction to achieve democratic and civic outcomes for students.

For example, some argue that experiential education is an applied manifestation of a Deweyan or Freirean approach to education. Scholars suggest "experiential education is rooted in the educational ideal of social change" (Breunig, 2008, p. 78) and should foster opportunities for democratic participation and opportunities to facilitate student development of agency, belonging, and competence (Carver, 1996). In experiential education, inclusive democratic practices should be modeled and experienced by teachers, students, and community members to affect change. Substantively, the interplay among relationships' social, political, and economic aspects should inform practitioners of experiential education. In other words, the context matters for a community of learners as essential democratic practices are experienced through work in cooperative learning environments (Itin, 1999). As an outcome of experiential education, individuals should be expected to reflect critically and participate as empowered agents of change in order to become efficacious civic actors with the ability to challenge and reshape notions of power, privilege, authority, and other forms of oppression.

### **Pedagogical Omission: The Critical Process of Sense and Meaning Making Through Discussion and Reflection**

Together, Dewey's and Freire's conceptual frameworks in experiential learning environments inspired this critique's questions for and responses to Lempert's model. Ambitious processes, such as Lempert's, require teachers to have discussions with informed

individuals from members of all participating groups. In this particular experiential learning environment, participants learn about different points of view, perspectives, and interpretations of history and the landscape to determine if there is interest in the project generally (e.g., which specific histories and events to pursue for inquiry). Practitioners' goal should be to maximize the benefit for students as learners and members of the communities. To accomplish this, students need to unearth particular local histories, including those that were and remain volatile or contested. When dealing with controversial issues within and across cultures, teachers need to be mindful and informed of these issues, know how to facilitate discussions, and provide opportunities for students to develop the capacities for critical reflection. A pedagogical oversight in Lempert's process is the lack of emphasis on the need to explore issues deeply and fully and to identify and grapple with uncertainty and controversy with students. Because projects employing his model consist of experiential education enacted outside of traditional classroom settings and in diverse communities, the omission warrants further discussion or the projects run the risk of falling short of the intended outcomes.

What is gleaned from the review of literature on experiential education is the emphasis on purposefully designing instructional opportunities for discussion and critical reflection. Moreover, due to the participatory and experiential nature of learning through this pedagogy, practitioners must integrate democratic principles with learning activities. For example, those considering enacting Lempert's framework would benefit by thoughtfully designing experiential learning opportunities that explicitly emphasize outcomes and goals for civic and democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students should experience and learn through the process.

In the following section, I address some pedagogical implications for teaching discussion and critical reflection as a means to assist practitioners for addressing the third and fourth goals of the project: raise questions for interpretation and discussion based on the interaction with history on the landscape and open a dialogue among peoples and across borders to make this past history relevant.

#### **HOW SHOULD A TEACHER PREPARE STUDENTS TO RAISE QUESTIONS?**

One of the activities mentioned above deserves special attention due to its value in democratic education generally and Lempert's vision specifically: that is, discussion. Discussion is a vital skill and medium for communication as well as a tool for reflection. This is a working definition for *discussion*:

*A particular form of group interaction where members join together in addressing a question of common concern, exchanging and examining different views to form their answer, enhancing their knowledge or understanding, their appreciation or judgment, their decision, resolution, or action over the matter at issue. (Dillon, 1994, p. 8)*

Effective discussions occur in open climates, focus on interpretable topics or questions, allow students to thoroughly

prepare for participation, and require teachers to skillfully plan and facilitate discussion (Hess, 2010). Teachers must realize they are teaching both with and for discussion (Parker & Hess, 2001). Put differently, Hess (2004) recommends “using discussion as a form of interaction to promote disciplinary learning and democratic competence” and for “teaching students to become better discussants” (p. 155).

Gutmann and Thompson (1996) suggest that educating in and for democratic environments requires students to develop “capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate understandings to other people, and engage in the give and take of moral arguments with a view of making mutually acceptable decisions” (p. 339). An increased capacity for teachers to employ effective discussion techniques and for students to actively participate in discussions lead to a democratic environment for education. As suggested, the development of student capacity is essential for educating in and for democratic environments, and therefore the role of the teacher is essential in preparing discussions in democratic and experiential education environments. Thus, teachers are implicated pedagogically on the principle that for learning to be worthwhile, the experiences must serve a social and socializing function between individuals and the community.

Lempert (1995) may offer pedagogical suggestions for practitioners to engage students in discussion in other work, and I encourage readers to investigate his previous work further. To support practitioners who may consider employing his current project (2013), I offer some guidance for effectively including discussion in experiential education settings. Students will benefit from discussions to help make sense of their experience, to critically evaluate their choices and interpretations, and to construct knowledge with peers and members of the community. These aims for discussion are vital to the success of enacting Lempert’s process.

#### HOW SHOULD A TEACHER PREPARE STUDENTS FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION?

Experiential education is a process of purposefully designed instructional opportunities focused on “increasing the capacity of the student to understand, utilize, and affect his or her experience in the world . . . ; ultimately this is for participation in a democratic process” (Itin, 1999, p.94). To develop student “capacity,” reflection is a crucial pedagogical component of experiential education (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Weil & McGill, 1989). In a Freirean tradition, critical reflection requires the capacity to analyze issues of power, privilege, and inequalities. Critical reflection is a learned skill that requires practice in safe and structured discussion-based environments and, of course, rich understanding of the topic being examined. In employing a framework for critical reflection, students are able to: identify feelings in different situations, explore how feelings are translated into action, think deeply during experiences, and analyze and consider tacit assumptions and beliefs. Put simply, in experiential education, critical reflection is a crucial component for democratic participation.

Engaging students in the study of history and culture requires training in the practice and skills of the discipline, such as

requiring students to marshal and corroborate evidence, assess periods of significance and causation, and recognize the limits of one’s own knowledge and understanding. Smith (1999) cautions that history consists of discourses on indigenous people and societies that result from ill-informed and recorded perspectives, that represent or relate viewpoints, and that are framed by ideological motivations. Thus, students must be prepared to interrogate the historical and social construction of knowledge and the discourses that are accessible.

To interrogate discourses, teachers must purposefully structure learning opportunities for students to: evaluate and discuss the attitudes, ideas, and priorities of the research; critique how authors shape the milieu of ideas that construct knowledge in nonindigenous frames; and interrogate the naming and claiming ways of viewing the world that count as legitimate (Freire and Macedo, 1987). As an example, Smith (1999) describes the historical construction of knowledge, the naming and claiming by British explorers through interactions with what is now New Zealand: “Other names, however, recalled the geography and people of Britain. These names and landscapes associated with them were inscribed on maps and charts and thus entered into the West’s archives as the spoils of discover” (p. 81).

Exploring the historical and social construction of knowledge also requires students to address how knowledge and power work to sustain and legitimate discourses—in other words, to engage students in critical literacy (Giroux, 2005). Robust and critical deconstruction of discourses can be achieved through engaging in critical literacy practices and purposefully designed instructional processes in which students, teachers, and community members have opportunities to engage in critical reflection and discussion with ongoing support.

Critical literacy is crucial in the historical work required of students in Lempert’s (2013) project. The work of historians emphasizes the importance of contextualization and sourcing. The processes of contextualization and sourcing involves extracting useful information from diverse sources, making supportable inferences, drawing appropriate conclusions while understanding the context of the evidence, recognizing limitations, and assessing points of view. When knowledge is organized and redistributed in documents, artifacts, museums, and other industrial forms of historical “progress,” oral history traditions, anecdotes, unrecorded stories, and other forms of local knowledge are rendered invisible with profound absence. Smith offers a critique of the knowledge organization and redistribution process by arguing: “The significance on these societies for indigenous peoples, however, is defined, produced, and reproduced ‘culture’: not just scientific culture, but the culture of knowledge, the culture of elitism, the culture of patriarchy” (1999, p. 86).

Opportunities for critical reflection of status, privilege, and blind spots where ideologies and prejudices perpetuate are required. Active participation in critical reflection that is regular and structured helps students foster awareness of assumptions, facilitate reframing of perspectives, and increase intercultural sensitivity (Eyler, 2001; Kiely, 2005).

As one considers enacting this project, I strongly encourage practitioners to consider including explicitly planned opportunities for students to reflect. In experiential education, students are involved in forms of democratic participation such as working with a team, developing interpersonal relationships, communicating effectively, exploring creativity, decision making, and problem solving. The projects and activities of Lempert's process have the potential to critically engage students with the community to help solve issues and problems and also support the development of methodological skills and interpretation of field evidence from multiple perspectives. However, an optimal learning environment provides time for action and critical reflection—it's an opportunity for "reading the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 35) and sense making when students are engaged in authentic speech in which they are allowed to share viewpoints about particular activities. Learners are constantly constructing, revising, and reconstructing knowledge and beliefs to form new frameworks for understanding; thus, discussion and reflection is crucial to the process. Our actions are not random or haphazard but informed and deliberate. Thus, for teachers who may consider enacting this project, special attention must be given to creating thoughtfully designed social interactions that promote discussion and critical reflection in a structured learning environment where democratic principles direct learning activities.

#### HOW SHOULD TEACHERS HANDLE AND RESPOND TO CONTROVERSIES?

Lempert (2013) seeks to make "history an holistic experience" (p. 7) and offers a framework to democratize "history on the landscape so that all voices are protected and exercised, so that exciting questions of identity and choice are continually raised, and so that meaningful history is rooted in everyday life" (p. 8). Inevitably in an ambitious project such as this, there will be controversies and contested points of view. In experiential education environments, students and faculty/leaders should know how others frame and respond to value-laden dilemmas and those that have political implications. Donahue (2011) provides a perspective to engage teachers and students in a form of democratic participation to interrogate different perspectives:

*They should learn the most accepted framings as well as those considered unpopular; impractical; or too much, too soon. After all, in addition to addressing current realities, democratic participation requires envisioning beyond the status quo. Looking at historical examples of reframing in politics can help students understand that compromise is not always about splitting the differences in responses but proposing a different dilemma to be addressed in the first place . . . Students should not only understand how others frame and reframe political issues, they should gain practice in the framing and reframing process themselves. This requires seeing issues from multiple perspectives, envisioning responses beyond what has been tried, and unveiling the varying—and perhaps competing—values inherent in those responses. (p. 24)*

Facilitating students in discussions of issues and dilemmas from multiple perspectives—including those not reflected in the immediate group—deserves the attention of teachers when designing instructional opportunities. In any location where experiential education is enacted, students and teachers require knowledge of language, culture, norms, and values of municipalities (large and small) representing multiple indigenous areas of a state. Whether in domestic or international settings, the value of local knowledge is paramount for understanding issues and perspectives.

What is garnered from the literature is the emphasis on the role of the teacher and the social interactions provided in a structured learning environment where democratic principles are integrated with learning activities. To facilitate discussion of issues and dilemmas from multiple perspectives teachers must be transparent in values and perspectives. Practitioners must develop rich understanding of the issues and skillfully plan instructional opportunities for students when considering Lempert's model of historical inquiry.

#### Conceptual Omissions: Challenges and Dilemmas to Enacting Lempert's Model

For Lempert (2013), his cross-border Mekong River project in Laos and Thailand is designed to document "historic sites with the help of communities, putting them onto heritage trails and thematic tours, offering children's books and individually paced tour curricula, and seeking to protect sites of all kinds with signs describing their importance to different communities" (p. 2). What is critically important for instructors is their role designing instructional opportunities that support students' cross-cultural understanding, critical reflections, and democratic participation. While challenges to democratic education can manifest in many forms, there are several dilemmas a practitioner might face when enacting Lempert's framework.

The following section of questions and responses offers considerations of readings, perspectives, and frameworks for enacting Lempert's model. Providing thoughtfully designed structure to learning environments can be consistent with Deweyan principles for democratic (1924) and experiential (1938) education and Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1973, 1978, 1985; Freire & Macedo, 1987) when democratic principles are integrated with learning activities. In the following section, I cover some potential problems/dilemmas and offer suggestions.

#### HOW ARE STUDENTS PREPARED FOR THE COMMUNITIES IN WHICH THE PROJECT WILL TAKE PLACE?

It seems knowledge about and sensitivity to the community are prerequisites for students doing research in communities. This can be accomplished in many different ways; what is important is that instruction and opportunities are explicit and thoughtfully planned. For example, instructors could plan for students to

- take a course or have required coursework to complete in advance;

- spend time in communities observing, volunteering, talking with community members, and becoming familiar with language, culture, perspectives, and worldviews; and
- complete a training workshop to learn the history of the community, its strengths and problems, through interactions with members of the community.

To be sure, other options, based on needs of the students and access to the members of communities, certainly warrant consideration. Ultimately, these or other experiences contribute to student readiness for learning about new cultures and communities.

#### ARE THERE WAYS TO INCORPORATE READINGS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION THROUGHOUT THE PROJECT?

In the example provided by Lempert (2013), readings should align with his views on measures of human progress. For example, readings could be framed around

*promoting diversity of cultural groups and creating systems that protect that diversity of human cultures and of individual choices within those cultures; confronting hierarchies that are not essential to the survival of individual human cultures and promoting equality; allowing for conflict that promotes diversity and ideas but that minimizes violence, suffering, and hierarchies; promoting not just technological change or conversion of resources into paper value but the intellectual and institutional advance; and moving toward sustainable systems. (p. 13)*

In addition to text-based readings, practitioners might consider selecting multimodal representations (documentaries, images, oral histories, etc.) of the complex critical issues described above. Exploration of content through multimodal learning involves students in literacy practices that facilitate the construction of meaning through identity and beliefs about the world.

For example, instructors could develop sets of questions designed for ongoing critical reflection: What are your assumptions, preconceptions, and experiences that have been challenged during the project? What assumptions or preconceptions present the greatest challenge moving forward with your research? Who benefits and who is potentially harmed by the research questions and findings? Including purposefully designed opportunities for reflection and discussion is an explicit and deliberate way to collaboratively share in the knowledge construction process.

#### WHAT RESEARCH SKILLS AND REQUISITE KNOWLEDGE IS REQUIRED OF STUDENTS?

Learning about the community through training, readings, critical reflection, and discussion is helpful educational scaffolding for students. Lempert (2013) breaks his method into five steps. In the enactment of step one, he provides a sample graphic organizer to catalogue historic public sites during an exploratory phase although mentions some cataloguing may take “more legwork, including interviewing and research skills” (p. 9). It seems reasonable that a practitioner would need to thoughtfully design opportunities to model requisite research skills and methods for

interviewing in addition to providing guided practice for students learning the skills and methods. Adding opportunities for critical reflection and discussion during the cataloguing process is also an appropriate activity to facilitate.

In step two students and adults are required to work with historical and contemporary maps to evaluate changes in the landscape. In addition to basic understanding of map scale, projection, and other geographic terms used in the historical mapping process, will students need to be familiar with contemporary tools such as GIS and computer mapping programs like Google Maps and Bing Maps? A technique offered by Navteq and Tele Atlas called “ground truthing” requires teams of field researchers to drive around building a database by feeding information into a notebook (Rubenstein, 2009, p. 15). Knowledge of computer and other technology applications or the process of ground truthing might be helpful for students as they prepare for step three: list findings of historical remains and geographic locations.

By design, in step four, Lempert suggests students “try to link the sites in a way that tells the story and maps it onto the geography based on geographic concepts of social and political (human) geographies” (p. 10) and provides another example for practitioners based on actual tours from previous work. In the final step, step five, Lempert provides a basic template to consider for packaging curricular or developing a tour. Lempert models a tool to scaffold the process of cultural system codification to describe social change over time, an exercise he completed visiting and mapping hundreds of sites in Vietnam. Steps four and five require more sophisticated knowledge and skills on the part of students. Thus, a practitioner would require an understanding of student readiness and needs and provide appropriate scaffolding for student success.

When considering educational scaffolding for students, it should be acknowledged that Lempert’s (2013) description of his project implies a required sophisticated level of expertise. Therefore, it is important to recognize that novices lack requisite background knowledge of historical and social phenomena, knowledge of procedures and strategies for historical inquiry, and conceptual knowledge of experts to place evidence in historical contexts (Wineburg, 1991). Through the project and investigative process, novice students would benefit from thoughtfully designed instruction in metacognitive strategies to guide higher-order thinking and dialectical reasoning.

#### WHAT CAN PRACTITIONERS DO TO FACILITATE AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE THAT IS TRANSFORMATIVE?

Opportunities that are structured to facilitate cultural self-awareness open possibilities for learning that is transformative. Transformative learning is defined as a “process of learning within awareness as a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired frame of reference—a mind-set or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts—by assessing its epistemic assumptions” (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006, p. 124). In other words, transformative education occurs during a personal experience that

teaches learners to think critically and participate in a democratic society (Hanley, 2006). By employing tenants of critical literacy, teachers, students, and community members can cofacilitate and democratically participate in an ongoing inquiry of questions of knowledge and power. Readings, research, and discussions about the histories, religions, and ethical contexts of the community provide important core knowledge along with reflective activities for students to critically investigate their own cultural backgrounds and experiences of privilege and power and to identify connections with the community they are researching.

### **Additional Dilemmas: Emphasis on the Collective Construction of Knowledge**

Discussion and reflection are critical skills for students, and collaboration is essential. Student participants need to get to know one another and learn about the particular skills, knowledge, and resources that each brings to the endeavor. Among teachers, students, and community members, the interpersonal connection, trust, and respect among participants are crucial attributes for optimum experiential education. Sharing power leads to increased trust and shared understandings. Collaboration in this manner can also strengthen the validity of the data collected for the project outlined by Lempert.

The different life experiences and backgrounds of members of communities and students will play a role in how the data collected are interpreted or how meanings of narratives are decoded and interpreted. Students, from various disciplines of study, may bring specialized knowledge of poverty-related issues, childhood education, environmental racism, public policies affecting community development and planning, urban or rural policies and initiatives, pollution and natural resource depletion, or issues related to medicine and public health. It takes teachers' careful and thoughtful planning to facilitate the training of students through learning opportunities that promote sharing in the knowledge construction process across diverse people and perspectives. To create a democratic experiential environment for learning that is inclusive, equitable, and participatory, three concerns must be addressed: power in students' role as researcher, incorporation of inclusive research methods, and crucial role of the teacher.

#### **HOW SHOULD TEACHERS PREPARE STUDENTS TO CONSIDER THE POWER AFFORDED IN THEIR ROLE AS RESEARCHER?**

The steps described by Lempert put students in the role of researcher and in a position of power to develop heritage trails and thematic tours without explicit inclusion of how international community members are engaged in the process of study. It is important to recognize that the role of researcher is vested in a structure of colonialism; therefore, inclusive methodologies deserve attention when enacting educational experiences that are democratic. Opening opportunities for inclusion will work to assure curricula and tours that result from this project focus attention "on the people whose bodies, territories, beliefs and values have been travelled *through*" (Smith, 1999, p. 86).

#### **HOW MIGHT TEACHERS INCORPORATE MORE INCLUSIVE RESEARCH METHODS?**

Lempert provides five steps and graphic organizers to highlight the process of historical inquiry. As described, the procedures appear one directional, as students will be procuring information from multiple contexts. The transdisciplinary nature of Lempert's project provides space for consideration of methodologies that are inclusive and democratic—methods for teachers, students, and community members to more actively and equitably experience democratic participation. For example, consideration might be given to collaborative ethnographic methods in social sciences and humanities (Lassiter, 2005; Trotter & Schensul, 1998) or other methods that are more participatory and collaborative and that balance the power between researcher and researched. Another example for consideration is community-based research—a participatory process that includes community members to collaboratively engage in research to effect social change (Stoecker, 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003). Ultimately, an effort should be made to decolonize the research process from an indigenous perspective (Smith, 1999). In order to construct new histories that reveal and acknowledge competing interpretations, students must grapple with understanding and then presenting multiple representations/explanations of past events that will satisfy a diverse citizenry with different views of events. Thus, opportunities for discussion and reflection are crucial components of democratic participation and facilitate collaborative efforts among teachers, students, and community members. For teachers, their role in facilitating democratic processes requires movement from teacher to coach and mentor. However, it should be noted that in the role of teacher, coach, or mentor tension might exist between affording student autonomy in learning and teaching democratic processes.

#### **WHAT IS THE APPROPRIATE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION THAT PROMOTES DEMOCRATIC LEARNING?**

In democratic education settings, the role of coach or mentor is to consider student interest, as the starting point in learning experiences should be developed around the individual interests and needs of the students. The roles of teacher, student, and community members in democratic practices are equally important. Through democratic learning processes, teachers, students, and community members have a chance to develop a range of democratic skills: teamwork, interpersonal relations and self-management, effective communication, creativity, decision making, problem solving, field observation and other methodological skills, and collaboration to interpret field evidence.

In experiential education, the role of the educator is to provide the minimum necessary structure for students to succeed (Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 2008). However, the reflexive nature of education that is democratic may require structure through flexible methods in a thoughtfully designed, supportive learning experience with opportunities for reflection and analysis of the experience. Once again, this highlights the need for structured learning environments where democratic principles are

integrated with learning activities. For example, in the role of coach and mentor, teachers must critically attend to the development of civic skill and civic knowledge (Stokamer, 2011).

Unsuccessful experiential learning programs often fail to address the development of fundamental civic skills as part of their design (Kirlin, 2002). However, there is value in carefully and deliberately designing instruction in experiential learning that merges democratic knowledge and practices with civic action (Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, Donahue, & Weimholt, 2008). Teachers must be equipped to make informed pedagogical choices, to design and facilitate opportunities for empowerment through democratic participation and reflection. Stokamer (2011), for example, suggests civic skills are to be practiced early so that participation is the primary source of learning and that integrated activities promote reflection and critical analysis. She found that students report feeling more empowered and that democratic participation is a more tangible process due to awareness of contributions made. It is clear that for teachers in experiential education settings, their role is crucial: what matters is not only what is taught but also how it is taught.

## Conclusion

For Lempert (2013), democratization of education requires change “on the form in which content is presented” (p. 2) and the “cultural context in which research, modeling, teaching, and debate is conducted” (p. 2). By combining approaches of traditional history, people’s history, and experiential education, Lempert hopes to achieve a democratic and sustainable future. While there is much merit in the framework and endeavor described, not all educational experiences are equal. As Dewey (1938) warned:

*The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. Experience and education cannot be directly equated to each other. For some experiences are miseducative. Any experience is miseducative that has the effect of arresting or distorting growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness. (pg. 25)*

Thus, for practitioners who may consider enacting this project, special attention must be given to creating thoughtfully designed social interactions that promote discussion and critical reflection and instructional opportunities in a structured learning environment where democratic principles are integrated with learning activities.

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