

TEACHING FOR THE COMMONWEALTH: LINKING SCHOOLS WITH COMMUNITIES

Dates: June 16-20, 2003 and three seminar dates yet to be determined (Oct., Feb., May)

Faculty:

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Introduction: The Commonwealth Tradition

The American commonwealth history and cluster of associated concepts will be woven into the framework of this course. The commonwealth tradition offers a lens that can help us to understand education from a slightly different angle. The term *commonwealth* can sound abstract, but it once conveyed quite the reverse. It was grounded in practical, cooperative work and local self-interests. It suggested that ordinary people were “civic producers” who built the nation – the social and material culture -- through their labors. People gained authority by creating and sustaining the “commons” -- public schools, libraries, parks, public art projects, voluntary fire departments. Education saw its broad purpose as preparing young people for a productive, engaged citizenship. Schools, integral to community life, were often understood as “civic spaces” where parents, educators, and other citizens could solve problems and influence the education of their children. The commonwealth tradition that created a link between people’s productive work and ownership in democracy lent public dimensions to occupations. One could be a citizen teacher, a citizen business owner or citizen nurse.

Today, civic themes once again resonate in K-12 and higher education. Parents seek greater access to schools and many teachers welcome the support of parents. Neighborhoods too, want an ownership in local schools. Yet a serious gap exists. Schools are often isolated from the communities in which they live. Teachers struggle with multiple constraints and a system of accountability based on students’ test scores. Parents, especially new immigrants, express frustration in learning the system and finding meaningful ways to engage in shared problem solving. In a time of widespread cynicism about public education and growing frustration on the part of educators, students and parents alike, the commonwealth tradition provides a resource to think differently about education in a democratic society.¹

Course Summary

This intensive, field-based course will examine broad strategies to link schools with communities to improve access, expand the learning resources, and strengthen or create structures that make formal and informal learning contiguous. An attentiveness to neighborhood as “place” will include the history of the West Side, discussion of the public work initiatives underway, and interaction with neighborhood resource people. Participants in the course will have opportunity to reflect on their teaching as vocation and the civic dimensions of teacher. Learners will apply

¹ For discussion of this as a coherent political tradition, see for instance, *Commonwealth: a Return to Citizen Politics* (Free Press, 1990) and *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Temple Press, 1996).

best practices in experiential education in the design, implementation, and assessment of their community based learning projects. They will learn to use the West Side data-base to help identify community learning opportunities and resource people. Community leaders, high school age and younger students, and parents will serve as teaching resources for the seminar. And participants will engage in and critique interactive pedagogies drawn, in part, from popular education philosophy and methodologies.

Format

The course will include a five-day intensive seminar in June, followed by three full day seminars throughout the academic year. It will conclude with a public presentation of the learning projects and shared critical reflection on outcomes.

The short-term experience will incorporate a pedagogy that emphasizes structural analysis and critical reflection. Students also will examine the lenses through which they understand the world and will be encouraged to recognize the legitimacy of other worldviews and sources of knowledge. Critical reflection requires that students identify the limits of their own perspectives and helps to facilitate thinking from other points of view.

Course Objectives

General

The course will:

1. Provide an opportunity to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience in the design of community-based learning that teaches the skills of engaged citizenship.
2. Support and facilitate cross-cultural learning and create new opportunities for exchange among students, faculty, parents, and community partners.
3. Provide a conceptual framework that facilitates analysis of school – community collaboration and supports the development of strategies to link West Side schools and the neighborhood.
4. Provide space for participants to create a learning community that fosters cross-fertilization of knowledge, shared inquiry, and exploration of teaching as vocation.

Specific

Learners will:

5. Identify community learning resources using the West Side data-base.
6. Discuss learner-centered approaches to education i.e. storytelling, interviewing, learning circles, artistic expression, project-based learning and use of portfolios.
7. Identify tools for students' critical reflection of learning outside the classroom.
8. Create a community learning project integral to the curriculum that reflects best practices in experiential education.
9. Design an appropriate assessment plan for evaluation of the project.
10. Create a plan for public presentation of learning projects
11. Identify barriers to and openings for parental involvement in education.
12. Identify strategies to access resources for cross-cultural learning.
13. Define basic principles of and create a "learning community."

Course Outcomes:

- 1) Design, implement and assess a community-based learning project learning project.

- 2) Develop concrete strategies that strengthen ties between school, families, and the neighborhood.
- 3) Develop a strategy for public presentation/discussion of the learning project at the completion of the course.

Context and Location:

The course is located in St. Paul’s West Side neighborhood and uses local neighborhood organizations as classroom space. Field speakers will include students, parents, community leaders of representing the ethnic diversity of the West Side. Learners will interact with public artists whose work is represented on the West Side, local historians, and storytellers to learn about the “place” in which they teach.

Required Readings:

- The Power of Their Ideas, Deborah Meier (Beacon Press)
- Reading packet included in source book

Course Requirements, Evaluation and Grading Guidelines

Two assumptions form the core of the course philosophy: the student is a partner in the learning process; and knowledge is not passed from instructor to student, but is advanced through the students’ shared contributions and engagement in the social process of learning. Therefore, students are evaluated for participation and their contribution to the group.

Student participation is valued as a key aspect of this pedagogical project. It is a way to see the student’s involvement in the learning experience, their evolution, and their desire to contribute to the learning of the group. Student engagement in and contribution to the learning community are especially important given the program themes including citizenship and democracy building. The community-based projects reflect the students’ capacity to integrate theoretical understanding with practice. Students will be evaluated on the following: active participation in the seminars; design and assessment of the curriculum project; and final reflective paper. Grades will be assigned upon successful completion of the final paper.

Curriculum project	50%
Final reflective paper	30%
Participation	20%