

Teaching Statement

Various learning theories ground the practice of community engagement, and in particular, my approach to it as a teacher. The following statement demonstrates the theoretical framework that grounds my teaching and the critical pedagogists who influence my approach. Educational theorists John Dewey believed that you can't sever knowing and doing; one's greatest learning occurs in cycles of action and reflection. Dewey was interested in the learning that results from the mutual exchange between people and their environment. David Kolb's work expanded notions of experiential learning to concentrate on the skills that observation, reflection, and analysis play in enabling students to take charge of their learning and engage in cycles of continuous learning (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999). Paulo Freire furthered these concepts by exploring the power dynamic that exists in traditional roles of teacher as the knower and student as the empty receptacle into which the teacher deposits knowledge. He not only dismantled the inherent power dynamics in that relationship but also the idea that learning is something that is done to you, given to you, rather than something you co-create and exchange in a consciousness-raising process that involves literacy, reading, writing, action, reflection, self-awareness, relationship building, and reciprocity. According to critical pedagogy, by engaging in this dialectic, a critical reflection of one's own positionality within community, culture, and knowledge production becomes essential (Freire 1970; Shor 1992; hooks 2003).

A feminist twist on critical pedagogy is called "engaged pedagogy." It was introduced to the field by bell hooks to emphasize a pedagogy concerned with "radical openness" and a form of well-being or "care of the soul" that "involves a knowledge of oneself and an accountability for one's actions, as well as a deep self-care, for both students and professors" (hooks as qtd in Berilla 2016, p. 7). Similarly, Owen Barfield has introduced the notion of "participatory epistemology" in which "the learner is actively connected to what is being learned, and diverse forms of contemplative practice become conduits to elicit deep awareness, focus, compassion, social change, transformation, creativity, and inspiration, as well as intellectual understandings" (Rendon 2014, p. 134). Finally, an inclusive concept that weaves these pedagogies together is called "integrative learning" which "connects skills and knowledge from diverse sources and experiences, as well as crosses disciplinary boundaries, [...] recognizes connections among diverse ways of knowing but also emphasizes the relationship between mind, body, and spirit, and the connection between the outer life of vocation and professional responsibility and the inner life of personal development, meaning and purpose" (ibid).

I have developed the framework of "Critical, Contemplative Community Engagement" which promotes this critical and integrated approach to education grounded in the belief that knowledge is socially and culturally structured and influenced by those structures. As such, knowledge is neither value neutral nor objective (Lather 1986). To study knowledge construction is to recognize the factors impacting the situatedness of knowing (Butin 2010; hooks 2003; Steinberg & Kincheloe 1998). To this end, critical classroom settings, instruction, and content must be inclusive, multicultural, integrative, reflective, collaborative, democratic, dialogic, empowering, transdisciplinary, and experiential (Calderon 2007; Freire 1970; hooks 1994; Rendon 2009; Shor 1992). The second main principle of the Critical, Contemplative Community Engagement model is contemplation. To better link student and community wellbeing to community engagement programs, we need to pay more attention to the value of introspection and contemplation,

qualities of participation that have rarely been attended to in the field of community engagement. Contemplative or meditative practices not only improve personal and collective wellbeing, they can “involve stirring the soul, shaking the learner’s belief system, fostering a social justice consciousness, developing wisdom, and in the end transforming the self” (Rendon 2014, p. 141). Contemplation thus connects the cultivation of peace and wellbeing amongst students and communities to the social change aim of disrupting the roots of injustice. When community engagement is both *critical* and *contemplative*, it can “highlight an ‘embodied reflexivity’ in which participants learn to reflect on their own ideologies and experiences, question their ways of thinking, and imagine alternatives” (hooks qtd in Berilla 2016, p. 15). Threading together the critical with the contemplative will promote critical learning, radical healing, and social change on campuses and in partnerships with local communities.

The aim here is to support students in deepening their learning, critical consciousness and personal growth while also connecting the community engagement experience to relevant theoretical and political frameworks. Explicitly articulating student learning outcomes that include these aims along with the disciplinary focus of the course provides a roadmap to such learning. In addition, it’s necessary to create classroom discussions, lectures, reading and writing assignments that engage reflections and analysis around the structural, political, social, economic, and/or environmental conditions (and any other root causes) that have resulted in the need for the social change partnership while also exploring the benefits and potential pitfalls of community-campus collaborations. The Critical, Contemplative Community Engagement approach incorporates course readings and discussions intended to enable students to challenge the hegemonic structures and practices that further social injustice and oppression and develop strategies for disrupting or removing systemic barriers to equality and inclusiveness (see **Social Justice Theory/Social Responsibility Praxis Graduation Requirements**). It is also helpful to orient the students about the communities they will be working in (and correlating economic, racial, social, political, and historic contexts that have resulted in the existing problems, needs, and assets in that community). Such an orientation can drive home expectations that students will be respectful, accountable, professional, and self-reflective in their partnerships. Finally, building a classroom space that encourages a safe (enough) space for students to learn, grow, be challenged, get uncomfortable, gain new perspectives, and reflect critically is key.

Contemplative community engagement classrooms are also set up in a way that creates a conducive environment for processing the emotional cost of doing social justice-oriented community work. Including contemplative practices that invite emotions, intuition, and other ways of learning, knowing and being in the classroom may help ensure “the design of a relationship-centered classroom based on caring, trust, support and validation [and] a curriculum that is inclusive of multicultural perspectives and worldviews and that is focused on social justice” (Rendon 2014, 136-7). A critical reflection classroom fosters a place to reflect on experiences, the impact of involvement, and responsibility and accountability to community partners. This kind of setting enables students and faculty members alike to negotiate the emotions or tensions that may surface both in and out of the classroom as they engage in social change efforts.