

FORUM



Student demonstration against fees and cuts, Aberdeen. Credits: <http://anticuts.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Aberdeen-student-left-banner.jpg>

Anthropologists witnessing and reshaping the neoliberal academy

Edited by

Tracey HEATHERINGTON & Filippo M. ZERILLI

Contributions of

Virginia R. DOMINGUEZ, Sam BECK, Carl A. MAIDA, Martin A. MILLS, Berardino PALUMBO, Alan SMART, Ger DUIJZINGS, Alexis M. JORDAN & Shaheen M. CHRISTIE, Boone W. SHEAR, Alex KOENSLER & Cristina PAPA, THE RECLAIMING OUR UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT.

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Engaged learning

Sam BECK

Cornell University

ABSTRACT: Engaged learning commits itself to community development and an active pedagogy as the state continues to withdraw funding from communities. Community engagement is a teaching, research and change mechanism for students who use ethnographic methods and experiential learning to practice citizenship and rehearse their roles in professional settings. Engaged learning provides the opportunity to explore “alternative moral frames for academic work”, for pedagogical innovation and for resistance against neoliberalism.

Cornell University is one of the land-grant universities created in the 1860s that marked the beginnings of university-community engagement. It was a response to the modernization of industry and agriculture with each state in the U. S. developing its own campus. Cornell University is one of a small number of campuses (MIT is another) that incorporates both public professional and private liberal arts colleges. While Cornell’s public colleges encouraged off-campus engagement, Cornell’s private liberal arts college until recently resisted this sort of engagement.

The Campus Compact, a national coalition of colleges committed to the civic mission of higher education, was formed in 1985 to respond to the criticism higher education received from business and government sectors for being unresponsive to society needs (Beck and Maida 2013: 1-2). The non-academic Cornell Ithaca Volunteers in Training and Service was established in 1988, made up of a small number of activist professors and administrators. Following the establishment of G.H.W. Bush’s National Community Service Act of 1990, Cornell established its Public Service Center in 1991 «to champion the conviction that the Cornell University experience confirms service as essential to active citizenship» (<http://vivo.cornell.edu/display/individual26488>) using a service-learning methodology. In 2001 Cornell helped found the New York Campus Compact.

University engagement is a double-edged sword, a teaching tool for civic engagement and labor market oriented professional development and the further articulation of higher education with neoliberalism. University engagement incorporates professionals in community non-profit and the private sectors as unofficial non-university instructors and simultaneously provides free labor (Perlin 2012) in exchange. For corporations, internships are an inexpensive recruitment strategy. For the non-profit sector, engagement adds university labor, problem solving and research capacity that replaces government support.

The concept of community engagement is also implemented to reduce inequalities and disparities in our society. According to the Committee on Educating Health Professionals to Address the Social Determinants of Health,

Community-Engaged learning is an educational process by which people are enabled to become actively and genuinely involved in defining the issues of concern to them; in making decisions about factors that affect their lives; in formulating and implementing policies; in planning, developing and delivering services; and in taking action to active change” (A Framework for Educating Health Professionals 2016: xiii).

Community engagement emphasizes change and agency (Freire 1970), people improving their own lives, while concurrently improving teaching, learning, scholarship, professional practice and the self.

I have directed the Cornell University experiential learning Urban Semester Program in New York City for the last 25 years and shaped it into its engaged form as students involve themselves in internships, community action projects, text analysis and active learning seminars. Engagement here reshapes the students’ experiences in knowledge production from siloed out-of-context and abstract learning to lived practice and the multidisciplinary problems of the real world. Coursework that encompasses an interdisciplinary approach is shaped into an integrated curriculum with permeable interdisciplinary boundaries. By providing this kind of knowledge and holistic experiences students in internships rehearse the adjustments they must make to adapt to professional work environments and the civic contributions for which they are being prepared.

Social welfare programs and funding grew between 1965–1981, spanning the presidencies of LBJ, Nixon, Ford and Carter, this growth ended with reductions introduced in the Reagan, Bush and Clinton years. Funding for social welfare was withdrawn, impacting working class urban America as deindustrialization, deregulation, the decline of trade unions, racial discrimination by banks, real estate agents and landlords was occurring. Urban white

flight occurred simultaneously with the repopulation of cities by immigrants and low income people of color.

Government and business sectors reproached institutions of higher learning for not adequately preparing undergraduates for the national and more generally the global labor force as citizens of this nation and the world, potential future leaders, and for being campuses disengaged from real world dilemmas. Universities were criticized for maintaining their Ivy Tower existence, isolating themselves from the real world at a time when the real world was facing problems for which they should take responsibility of resolving.

Community engagement should not be confused with volunteerism or other forms of charity work. The United States has a well-developed history and mythology built around volunteerism and the notion of “charity,” a practice of benevolence. It is an ethical and moral stance. Engagement is inherently based on the notions of empowerment, autonomy and self-determination, the principle of autonomy and protecting those who lack autonomy, beneficence by doing no harm, and maximizing benefits while limiting harm and the just distribution of burdens and benefits.

Universities, of course, were not constructed to engage communities or the world in this manner, but rather to intellectually prepare the young to do so once they left institutions of higher learning. The community engagement movement followed the silencing and punishing McCarthy Era resulting in academic isolationism. Engagement was a response invigorated by the involvement of campus-based anti-Viet Nam war and Civil Rights social movements.

The changes in immigration laws of the 1960s and the 1970s brought about a visible demographic shift as more immigrants of color settled into life in the United States. The social and cultural transformations that took place as a result of the Civil Rights and Human Rights movements reverberated in the education system from pre-school to universities. By the 1970s, institutions of higher learning were challenged by the increasing number of students of color in their classrooms and the race and ethnicity based societal tensions that this demographic shift created. Multiculturalism, the culture wars, and affirmative action all resulted from these population shifts.

Richard Nixon (1969-1974) started the withdrawal of social service funding, the shrinking of entitlements, and dismantling Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. This helped create the context in which students were harnessed to carry out community service in community based organizations reinforced by JFK’s and LBJ’s ideology of service (Peace Corp and VISTA).

Community service programs targeted relatively affluent and racially identified “white” students who not only wished to learn about the underprivileged but were also looking to “help” them. Educators sought to bring about critical consciousness (Freire 1970) in their students opening them up to experience the barriers of change, the lives of the working poor and people of color and how these barriers limit life chances.

The other issues in which universities were engaged were related to the withdrawal of government support for underserved and vulnerable communities. Faculty created community service-learning projects and courses to support or help these communities resolve local problems through research in which students generated the data, analyzed these, proposed remedies and provided the labor to implement projects. This is where experiential learning and service-learning courses emerged as an important academic transition, previously perceived as not academically viable or a scholarly endeavor (Stanton, *et al.* 1999, Butin 2010).

Funding incentives, political pressure, and academic associations advocated for greater scholarship relevance that brought universities and disciplines to embrace “community engagement” (Burawoy 2004, Beck and Maida 2015). Efforts to involving students in off-campus activities coincide with a focus on more effective teaching methods rooted in John Dewey’s hands-on, experiential and problem-based learning educational philosophy (1938/1997); Lev Vygotsky’s view that reasoning grows out of practical activities in social environments (1978); Kurt Lewin’s founding action research (1946); and Paolo Freire’s concerns with liberatory education that uses daily life as a means for transforming themselves and their world (1970). David Kolb’s widely used theory represented by a four stage learning cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation remains influential (2009). Donald Schoen (1983) and Chris Argyris (1974) explored the notion of reflective practice central to organizational learning, the nature of in-context, in-process learning and theorizing-in-practice.

In the past, college student outreach and service programs and activities were administered by untenured and part-time staff and were classified either as forms of volunteerism or co-curricular endeavors. They were not worthy of academic credit. In the 21st century these activities have taken on a greater importance in pre-professional education, increasingly recognized as academic where contingent staff still predominate, but where tenured and tenure line faculty participate due to the increasing administrative encouragement for “active learning.” Yet, it is also a time when universities are op-

erated as businesses and part-time and an untenured contingent labor dominates higher education teaching, of which supervisors in private sector internships and non-profit organizations serve as mentors.

The Urban Semester Program's experiential learning and ethnographic approach pushes against the predominant use of pedagogies that emphasize aggregate statistical hegemony, didactic and pacifying ("banking") forms of teaching, out of context learning, MOOCs and what Shore and Wright (2016: 47) identify as the emerging

institutional framework that promotes competition, entrepreneurship, commercialization, profit making and "private good" research and the prevalence of a metanarrative about the importance of markets for promoting the virtues of freedom, choice and prosperity.

While university engagement is not an accepted standard in higher education, it is receiving increasing legitimacy. Oddly, as universities are increasingly being integrated into the market economy, restructured to serve the labor market, becoming yet another business form, the movement for engagement is both part of this integration and a movement of resistance against the neoliberal political economy.

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