

Education and Public Life: An Inquiry

Rita Pougiales
The Evergreen State College

Can the educational experience students have in colleges and universities contribute to a more just society and the development of more just citizens? If higher education sets itself on that course, what changes would we have to make in our assumptions and classroom practices? There is good reason to say *yes* to the first question, such change is possible. To consider such a profound change, though, we must think carefully about what we mean by *learning*, especially the way in which educational experiences in our colleges and universities can promote learning that influences participation in public life.

I consider these questions as a teacher educated as an anthropologist. My first impulse, then, before diving in, is to consider the broader cultural and political context of higher education in our country today. While many useful and compelling observations can be made about modern society, I want to emphasize four conditions that shape the current relationship between higher education and the rest of modern society. In particular, these four conditions significantly shape the relationship of power between higher education as a system and the people actually involved in, or affected by it. First, it matters that our students and we are members of an unjust and highly stratified society *and* that our society must remain as it is in order to sustain our current lives. In other words, to educate for a more just society requires personal changes in lifestyle and privilege by the very people trying to promote such change. Second, we have become an increasingly apolitical, individualized and commodified society. With that change has come a loss of public space and the rise of fortress and isolated communities.¹ Thus any attempt by those in higher education to promote a more just society would also involve promoting a revitalized public life. Third, building on this observation, higher education, as a system, is part of a network of power that sustains an unjust, stratified society. C. Wright Mills argues in *The Power Elite* that there has been an integration of centers of power (e.g., military, governmental, industrial, educational), the creation of a *web* of power, that has had the affect of shifting people from members of a public society to members of a mass

society. Finally, as members of modern society we have adjusted to, and normalized, deeply contradictory knowledge. While most peoples of the world live with contradiction, what distinguishes us, and what therefore must influence any discussion of learning, is that we have adjusted to the contradictions to such an extent that we have become numb or cynical or apathetic. For example, while students learn the history of civil rights in this country and the current legal protections for equal rights, every day they also witness inequality. The contradiction bears little cognitive fruit, though. Who is asking, why does injustice persist?

This is an especially poignant question for those in higher education. Given all that we know of inequality and oppression, given all the intellectual documentation and analysis of it, why does it persist? And that it does persist, is the clearest evidence of a gap or limitation in the educational experiences offered in higher education. While many faculty recognize that academic texts and other materials can foster deeper understanding on the nature and sources of inequality and injustice, there is little in the tradition of higher education to guide our teaching from *exposure* to ideas to *comprehension* of ideas to the *practice and implementation* of ideas. Getting clear on this progression is at the heart of the question I want to pose for this meeting, **“What can we do to help students move beyond comprehension of ideas of equity and justice to the ability to implement and act on such ideas?”** Many may be reminded by this question of previous inquiries by John Dewey, Alexander Meiklejohn, Paulo Freire and others who recognized that education is a *political* activity. By political they didn’t mean ideological but rather education as preparation for an active public life, education conducted in the public interest. As all of these thinkers have concluded, education conducted in the public interest requires close engagement between ideas and public, communal practice.

I want to argue that in order to understand something as complex as discrimination or the modern exercise of power, students must (1) engage with intellectual ideas and texts (available in all disciplines in the liberal arts) that help unmask the relationship between power and knowledge and the social dynamics underlying the persistence of

¹ Mike Davis develops this idea nicely in *City of Quartz*.

discrimination, and (2) learn how to interpret and act on those ideas as a member of a public, intellectual community.²

The first assertion leads to these questions: What kind of academic material fosters an understanding of social justice? And what role should students be in, in relation to that material to understand the exercise of power on knowledge? C. Wright Mills has helped me think about both of these questions. In *The Sociological Imagination*, he argues that the well-educated person can “bridge personal troubles and public issues.” By this he means that students will think well when they make an informed and compelling connection, or bridge, between what they know from their own lives and what they learn about the political world around them. There is no *text* to provide the bridge he speaks about; the bridge is constructed through the process of intellectual reflection nurtured through reading, writing and discussion in an ongoing community. In psychological terms, the bridge is a fundamental cognitive restructuring that allows for deeper analysis and understanding. He wants students to move from recipients of knowledge to participants in a conversation with authors and with one another. I believe he is calling for a very fundamental shift in what we think of as learning, one that pushes students toward being more active interrogators and interpreters of knowledge.

Mills is not making an argument for overvaluing personal or private experience, but rather, as Freire argued, rigorous reflection on the relationship between personal experience, knowledge and political practice (as a relationship of power.) It is the connection between a student’s lived experience and knowledge of the world that he finds so critical. Therefore, the choice of text matters.³ As important as the text is the possibility of an *interactive relationship* which faculty can choose foster between the students and the authors they are reading. In such a relationship, students read to understand the content and argument in a text, and they also “talk back” to the author, uncovering biases, assumptions and judgment. To be engaged in such a relationship to

² For example, Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* called such groups “communities of competence.”

knowledge is to uncover the cultural and political basis of power reflected in knowledge, eventually making clear to students that all knowledge – especially that related to power, privilege, and rights – is humanly constructed. Viewing learning as *comprehension*, in this sense, is to know the source of knowledge and our relationship to it; it is this comprehension that we must deepen, bringing with it a fundamental change for faculty. How would this kind of teaching change our teaching practices? Our authority? What do we already know about this in our practice, and how can we be more intentional?

My second assertion, that students need practice as members of public, intellectual communities, is the basis for a related line of inquiry. As Dewey and Piaget assert, authentic learning, as comprehension *and* ability to apply ideas, comes through the dynamic of thought/action. While students can become *familiar* with ideas through exposure to them, that is not the same as *learning*, which is a dynamic process, one that alters, deepens or enlarges their cognitive framework. Consequently, exposure to ideas that explain the causes of social injustice does not naturally lead to action to oppose those causes. The task set out by a call for education for a just society requires that students *comprehend* and *learn* about the history and dynamics of injustice in order that they can *act* in the world.

In classrooms and field settings faculty have the opportunity to create situations where students can practice egalitarian, long-term relationships around a whole range of complex, community issues. As students work together to solve everyday problems, design projects, etc. they can construct—step-by-step, brick by brick—the skills and insights to apply ideas in relevant settings. Too often, these experiences are limited to specific courses or programs. The question we must ask is, how can regular classroom activities and learning communities be designed so that students experience the ordinary and complex issues inherent in communities and acquire the practices that allow them to cooperatively apply knowledge of justice within a real social setting? How would this

³ Some texts are better than others are. Here the faculty exercises judgment and knowledge about an author's competence, background and point of view.

intention change our ordinary classroom practice? What justification can we make for doing this in higher education?

The enormous challenge for educators today is to create classroom settings where students can participate in long-term, consistent engagement with ideas, with one another, and with the critical political issues surrounding them. Beyond that, once educators see the wisdom of such teaching and regularly practice it, a new set of questions will emerge: What additional changes would we or they call for in the administrative structures (e.g., departments), requirements (e.g., general education) and practices (e.g., faculty rank, promotion) of higher education? What changes would we discuss in terms of access and equity? What work would we need to do in our larger society to address social injustices?

Works Cited

Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979.

Mills, C. Wright. *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Mills, C. Wright. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.