

Journeys in Social Education

Journeys in Social Education

A Primer

Edited by

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DEDICATION

For Dylan and Lori

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A JOURNEY

Social education is quite a journey. Yes, it really is about the journey and not the destination. It began for me many years ago; sure, school and all that, but perhaps more so with the presidential election of 1964 and church during my “formative” years. I fondly remember my third grade teacher, Mrs. Barnes, who allowed me to explore and question, even at the age of 9. But it was the experience of handing out LBJ literature that sticks with me to this day. That, and standing up in church at age 12 and asking “why?” and “are you sure?” of the preacher.

I have loved history, politics, and current events since I can remember. I knew from an early age I wanted to do something in the “social sciences.” I generally had cool history teachers in high school and excellent history and political science professors in college. I was pushed toward law school but education won out – thank goodness.

I think I have pretty much always been one to question the status quo, especially with respect to school and politics. Fortunately, it hasn’t gotten me into too much trouble. I did my share of protesting in high school and college – but I always kept it safe. I did the same as a teacher – never really one for rules that kept kids from being kids or from allowing anyone to ask questions. Again, as a teacher I seemed blessed by administrators who allowed me to do my own thing. I didn’t have management problems and my kids did well on tests, despite my always resisting teaching to those tests.

I taught social studies for 15 years, proud that often students left my class smiling. I tried always to make it all about them. What in geography or American history connects with you I would ask at every opportunity. They told me, too. They wanted to **do** history and geography. They didn’t want to sit and have it “done to them.” So, that’s what we did. We debated, we questioned, we made movies, we marched the halls, and we learned the neighborhood. They taught me more than I could ever teach them!

Life experience leads us in our social education journey. Learning to play the school game, vacations to state capitals and civil war battle sites, reading, volunteering, then trips abroad... all contributed to my social education story. But perhaps as important formatively as any other was the 1972 presidential campaign. I was 16 and seven of my friends and I spent hours campaigning in Houston for George McGovern. When he lost I remember driving the endless freeways of Houston until the early hours of the morning screaming out the window that all was lost. I really think that pushed my cynicism to the edge. It has been a constant struggle ever since – and the social education journey has provided the balance. I often tip over the edge and shout out about injustice, fascism, or the like – but I do come back.

The seeds were sown... but it took the freedom of the academy to allow for further development. Beginning with traditional social studies education and bridging from there with collaborations with prospective teachers, graduate students, other professors, schools, teachers, and the community, allowed additional critical investigation. The social studies program area morphed into social education with courses

focused on critical pedagogy, popular culture, and social issues. Projects took hold focusing on global education, international experiences, and rethinking American history. Students graduated carrying a torch for something called social education – something that has no “true” definition, that is always evolving and always questioning, but nevertheless is comprised of some general themes.

Given the ongoing debate and struggle with “defining” social education a graduate student provided a working definition to encourage dialog... The following was placed on our bulletin board outside the social education lab and can now be founding program syllabi, on our brochures and web site: “While we resist “defining” social education, we believe that social education emphasizes three areas of study: critical pedagogy, cultural/media studies, and social studies education. We also stress that education, interpreted broadly, has the potential to advance social justice.”

Thus emerged social education... a lifelong journey for all of us – to question, to challenge, to do, and to create. And through the years, especially as a professor, the dominoes started to fall... at least regarding the possibilities... social justice, activism, cultural studies, popular culture, critical pedagogy... and yes, the foundation – social studies... Now there are teachers, administrators, and professors out there struggling in the social education journey.

Through a lifetime along the journey, many have come along for the ride. Connecting present and past, merging current issues with traditional curriculum, integrating alternative texts and perspectives, empowering and emancipating kids and educators, transforming schools and society – the transgressions of social education scream out. Dewey, Freire, Kincheloe, Zinn, Greene, Giroux, Apple, hooks, McLaren, Kozol, Loewen, Said, Chomsky and many others have provided the impetus. May we make them proud!

The essays within this text demonstrate various journeys in social education. They are meant as stories, not maps or scripts. They are intended to serve as a primer of sorts, for those interested in a similar journey. Hopefully, this can be a meaningful experience for many – students, educators, parents, and society as a whole, of course. Well... the journey and struggle continues... Have fun!

Cameron White, PhD