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TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE:  
CREATING A CONTEXT FOR TRANSFORMATION

As a teacher, I am deeply interested in the kinds of people my students turn out to be.<sup>1</sup> I desire to not only teach students how to think ethically, but to also see themselves and their personal behaviors and lifestyle choices as intimately connected to the social crises related to such issues as globalization, violence, and the environment. My long-term goal as an educator is for my students to recognize themselves as agents of change, as citizens who live in a system of participatory democracy that requires not only involvement but informed, reasoned, and thoughtful action in the world. While my classes are oriented toward teaching students about social problems, my pedagogical commitment is to teach them to think critically about the social problems they encounter and to help them imagine how to participate in changing the world for the better. In the language of ethics, I am interested in the moral formation of the college students that I teach. I approach this moral formation with three primary student-learning goals in mind. I want students to: 1) learn how to critically analyze and evaluate ethical problems and situations; 2) recognize their connections and responsibilities as human agents in a complex world; and 3) know how to engage in social action that seeks to transform injustice.

The pedagogical theory that I most readily employ grows out of my training as a liberation theologian and ethicist where my methodological commitments lie in the epistemological power of situated knowledge. The methodological commitment of liberation theologians and ethicists is the development and practice of theology and ethics connected to the material life and well-being of lived communities. Our use of the “spiral of praxis” as a methodological tool for theological inquiry offers solid foundations for the development of pedagogical models of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Wapner and John Willoughby, “The Irony of Environmentalism: The Ecological Futility but Political Necessity of Lifestyle Change,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 19.3 (2005), 88.

undergraduate education that are focused on transformative teaching and what Paulo Freire called “education as the practice of freedom.”<sup>2</sup> This essay will explore the epistemological importance of situated knowledge and the practical implications of a theoretical commitment to dialogical learning and transformative pedagogy as represented in the work of Paulo Freire.

### SITUATED KNOWLEDGE AS THE FRAMEWORK FOR DIALOGIC LEARNING

My research, which is both analytic and normative, informs my pedagogical approach to teaching ethics. While I am interested in teaching students the analytical skills necessary to understand and negotiate complex moral situations, I also eschew moral relativity and believe that the issues of poverty, inequality, and the ecological crises of our day require responses rooted in justice. In short, not all responses to these problems are morally equivalent and I want my students to develop the moral resources to be able to make normative judgments.

My personal and intellectual commitments to social justice explain why I am a social ethicist rather than a historian or biblical scholar. They also shape the courses I choose to teach as well as the way that my courses are structured and the pedagogies that I employ. My goal is to create a liberative classroom that fosters critical thinking and personal transformation. I am not interested in indoctrinating my students with particular social, political, or religious ideologies, but rather in encouraging and empowering students to become more actively engaged in participating in and promoting the well-being of the communities in which they live. In sociologist Robert Putnam’s terms, I am interested in developing their potential for civic engagement and increased social capital.<sup>3</sup> Freire expresses a similar commitment when he reflects on the role of educators:

It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world [emphasis in the original].<sup>4</sup>

While the theoretical concept of “situated knowledge” was developed after Freire,<sup>5</sup> the seeds of this idea are clearly present in his work and are traceable to Marx’s development of standpoint

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<sup>2</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30<sup>th</sup> ed. (1970; repr., New York: Continuum, 2003), chap. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970; 2003, 96.

<sup>5</sup> The discourse on “situated knowledge” was initiated by Donna Haraway’s 1988 essay “Situated Knowledges,” in which she discussed feminist critiques of the idea of “objectivity” in scientific inquiry and proposed the idea of embodied or feminist objectivity which she defined as “situated knowledges” (581). Haraway, along with Sandra Harding and Nancy Hartsock continued to theorize the significance of social location, situated knowledge, and standpoint as fundamental aspects of feminist epistemology. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (Autumn, 1988); Sandra Harding, “What

theory with respect to the perspective of the proletariat.<sup>6</sup> Situated knowledge is the idea that knowledge is partial and particular and grows out of lived experience. Donna Haraway challenges the traditional scholastic desire for objectivity by arguing that *all* knowledge is situated. There is no such thing as objective knowledge or positions that exist outside of historical circumstances, intellectual communities, or lived, bodily realities. Haraway pushes the academy (and academicians) to recognize that all knowledge is partial, subjective, and *situated*. Namely, our capacity to *know* is shaped by the world that we know, the realities that we inhabit. As she states, “[s]ituated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.”<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, knowledge is not synonymous with experience, but how one sees, understands, and interprets the world is shaped by experience. Experiences are not simply relative (your reality is equally as valid as my reality), instead they highlight the ways different epistemologies can shape accounts of the world.

One of the core assumptions of my work, as an educator and an intellectual, is recognition of the ways in which knowledge is formed, shaped, transmitted, and received. What counts for “knowledge” is culturally specific and dependent upon historical and social factors that reflect the lived reality of communities. More specifically, what we know and what we can know is shaped (and limited) by our knowledge and experience of the world. What people “know” is necessarily informed and limited by their experience. While it is certainly possible to learn about things that we have not experienced first-hand, our “knowledge” of those things will be read through a particular hermeneutical lens, a lens that has been shaped by any number of factors that reflect and represent one’s social location (race, class, gender, education, geography, history, etc.) and one’s experience of the world.

Knowledge and knowledge acquisition is neither abstract nor disconnected from the social realities in which it is generated and consumed. The epistemological value of theoretical constructs is only evident to the extent that a given theory is an effective tool for making sense of, understanding, illuminating, or embodying the concrete social reality of whatever the theory seeks to “explain.” More concretely, the “value” of any theoretical knowledge is limited by its practicality, or the extent to which it meaningfully explains that which it purports to know. Working from a perspective that recognizes the situated nature of knowledge has particular implications for teaching and learning and the pedagogical approaches that one employs in

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is Feminist Epistemology?” in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1001); Nancy C. M. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,” in *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*, ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> Marx argued that the structures of material life shape what and how one knows the world. The disadvantaged social position of the proletariat gave them a different vantage point from the bourgeoisie that, he argued, actually provided a more accurate vision of class society because the proletariat were able to see the inherent problems and flaws of capitalism that the bourgeoisie were unable to see from their class vantage point.

<sup>7</sup> Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 590.

those processes. Freire's interest in dialogue as a pedagogical tool recognizes that both the teacher and the student are partners in the educational process and that learning happens in the midst of dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

## DEFINING TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

Paulo Freire is often cited as the founder of the radical or critical pedagogy movement. This movement views education as "empowering,"<sup>9</sup> "democratizing,"<sup>10</sup> and part of what Bell Hooks develops as "the practice of freedom."<sup>11</sup> Freire argued that education is not a neutral endeavor, but is either oriented toward the cause of liberation or in support of domination.<sup>12</sup> His work among Brazilian peasants focused on promoting literacy and helping to organize and empower the poor as they challenged oppressive social conditions and struggled for liberation from economic injustice. Freire referred to his work in critical pedagogy as the "pedagogy of the oppressed." He emphasized the importance of personal experience as the starting point for education and intellectual inquiry as well as the importance of thinking, which he argued occurs "only in and among people together seeking out reality."<sup>13</sup> For Freire, it was in thinking critically about one's personal experience of the world that one could come to either understand or change the world. This was a process that required people to produce and act upon their own ideas (a radical or critical approach to education) rather than uncritically consume the ideas of others (a banking model of education).

This is a revolutionary shift for someone working with poor and marginalized people who are often demeaned and treated as disposable in societies where success is measured by wealth, possessions, and other material objects. Freire's intention was not to replace theory with experience but to use experience as a starting point and to put people's experience into conversation with theories that might enable them to develop more critical forms of self-reflection. From this perspective, people's lives became a resource for engaging broader forms of knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It is certainly worth noting that dialogical learning is similar in many ways to the Socratic method, which involves dialogue and debate among opposing sides of an argument in order to prompt critical thinking.

<sup>9</sup> Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Berenice Malka Fisher, *No Angel in the Classroom: Teaching Through Feminist Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Bell Hooks builds on Freire's use of the phrase "education as the practice of freedom" in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Freire, 2003, chap. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Freire, 1970; 2003, (108).

<sup>14</sup> Henry Giroux, "Lessons to Be Learned From Paulo Freire as Education Is Being Taken Over by the Mega Rich," *Truthout*, *Op-Ed*. (Tuesday, 23 November, 2010).

My initial exposure to Freire and to forms of critical pedagogy came in two forms. As a twenty-something college graduate working for the Presbyterian Church (USA), I had the opportunity to participate in a number of World Council of Churches (WCC) workshops and training events in the 1990s. These events were usually two to three weeks in length and always included a component of “immersion” in the local culture. These immersion experiences helped conference participants from all over the world learn a little bit about contemporary social, cultural, economic, and environmental problems by examining them in the microcosm of the local culture. The incorporation of these immersion experiences in the work of the WCC is a result of Freire’s time as Assistant Secretary of Education for the WCC from 1970 – 1980. During this time, he shaped the model of experiential learning that is frequently used in ecumenical work. His emphasis on radical pedagogy continues to guide the World Council’s approach to community-oriented educational programs.

Over a ten-year period, I visited and encountered street-children in India, teen moms in Jamaica, and an advocacy organization for favela dwellers in Brazil. As a white, educated, middle-class woman from the United States, I found my life and worldview transformed by these encounters as they opened up the problems of social and economic policy in ways that enabled me to see them with different eyes. “The poor” were no longer statistics on a page, but living, breathing people with stories, families, hopes, and dreams. My life (and my work) has never been the same since. My second and more formal exposure to Freire came in my theological training at Union Theological Seminary in NY where I studied with Will Kennedy who was a close colleague of Freire’s at the World Council of Churches in the 1970s. The curriculum and pedagogy at Union was infused with a liberation emphasis that promoted the creation of transformative social change rooted in the biblical call for justice. Freire’s emphasis on developing people’s sense of agency so that they both felt empowered to act and possessed the requisite analytical, conceptual, and practical tools to imagine and enact social change is the core insight that informs my identity as an educator. Freire also believed that pedagogy had to be meaningful in order for it to be critical and transformative.<sup>15</sup>

While radical or critical pedagogy encompasses a wide range of theories and practitioners, my interest is in helping students bridge the gap between their personal lifestyle and experience and the ethical problems that we study. This challenge is part of what feminist educator Berenice Malka Fisher describes as the project of democratizing education as a means towards developing a more just society.<sup>16</sup> Like Freire, Fisher focuses on consciousness-raising as the starting point of transformative learning. She describes the importance of using consciousness-raising as a tool to encourage students to draw connections between their personal experience, their social and political world, and their analysis and evaluation of alternative possibilities.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the point of consciousness-raising in the classroom goes beyond simply increasing

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<sup>15</sup> Giroux, “Lessons to Be Learned,” 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Fisher, *No Angel in the Classroom*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 2-3.

awareness and is oriented toward motivating and empowering students to engage in a collective response to injustice.

While transformation is what I hope for my students, it is not something that I can either teach or require in a college classroom. Transformation is an internal experience; it can come in the form of an “aha” moment that allows for new or deeper insight into a familiar topic or idea that radically changes one’s worldview. Likewise, transformation can develop over a longer period of time as students slowly unpack prejudices and personal experience in combination with new ideas and opportunities that allow for real change. I suspect that many professors hope that students’ lives will be transformed by our teaching. In discussing his vocation as a religious studies professor, Jeffrey Soleau, describes teaching as “an opportunity to raise with students essential questions about what is really real, what matters ultimately, what is or should be the purpose of one’s life, and how one should live in relation to oneself, one’s family, one’s community, and the larger world.”<sup>18</sup>

While we cannot teach transformation, per se, we can construct courses and learning environments that facilitate and encourage transformation. Following Freire, in approaching the teaching of social problems, I know that my primary challenge in facilitating transformation is to raise students’ consciousness about their personal connection to the various crises we study. They need to learn more than the facts about global warming, poverty, genetically modified organisms, and the energy crisis. They also need to develop an understanding of their connection, relationship, and responsibility to these issues. I know that experiential models of education can foster personal transformation. I’ve experienced the transformative power of experiential education through my work with the WCC and in my experience as a teacher using immersion exercises and other experiential tools in my work with young women in the Presbyterian Church. Consequently, as I design ethics courses that I hope will function in a transformative way, I seek to incorporate experiential exercises that facilitate transformation in a way that a purely cognitive approach to the subject often do not.

## CREATING TRANSFORMATIVE CLASSROOMS

Educational theorist David A. Kolb describes learning as a process in which we create knowledge through the transformation of our experience. We learn (and create knowledge) by making meaning of our experiences.<sup>19</sup> Kolb argues that learning is not limited to a “single specialized realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception.”<sup>20</sup> He suggests that teachers think about students in a holistic way that focuses on the “integrated functioning of the

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<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey K Soleau, “Moments for Transformation: The Process of Teaching and Learning,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65. no. 4, special issue, on “Teaching and Learning in Religion and Theology” (Winter, 1997), 811.

<sup>19</sup> David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as The Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 38.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

total organism—thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving.”<sup>21</sup> Building on Kolb, my focus is on creating experiential learning environments that engage students on all of these levels. My desire is for students to move beyond simply understanding the social problems that we study in order to become informed citizens capable of assessing problems and thinking about creative and realistic solutions. In order to focus on student learning in a holistic way that draws on their personal history and experience, I design educational components that not only address students’ intellectual capacities but the lived realities of their physical bodies. In turn, I hope to model a unity of mind and body that can facilitate students’ learning processes while also using their situated knowledge as the starting point for engaging course material. I intentionally structure the learning environment in ways that I hope will not only help my students understand the origins of various social crises, and the multiple players and perspectives involved, but that will also influence the habits, character, and behavior of students to become responsible and engaged citizens who are able to recognize and work toward a common good.

What follows are three concrete pedagogical goals and one methodological strategy that I believe characterize the development of transformative classrooms, embodying Freire’s emphasis on teaching for social change and Kolb’s desire to teach to the “whole student.” For the purpose of this essay, I examine how I pursue these goals in one of my courses—Environmental Ethics. In this class, I intentionally structure the learning environment in order to help students understand the origins of the environmental crisis and the theoretical approaches to addressing it. Likewise, my class attempts to influence the habits, character, and behavior of students in order that they might become more responsible environmental actors.

#### *Creating an open learning environment*

Engaging in experiential learning is risky. It is risky for the professor because it is an attempt to reach students in non-traditional ways that can make them uncomfortable. It is also risky for students because they are being asked to learn from the heart as well as their head. In my experience, most students are willing to take this risk, but only if they trust the professor and understand why they are being asked to engage in this different sort of learning project. Educational theorists, Janet Eyler and Dwight Giles, write that students need emotional support when they are engaged in pedagogical situations that are new and unfamiliar; they need a “safe space” where they know their thoughts, ideas, and feelings can be expressed in an environment of support.<sup>22</sup> One of my first goals in the classroom is to get to know the students individually and to work on building a community. This is pedagogically significant in classrooms where I employ experiential learning because these “experiences” often involve collaborative work, dialogue, or self-disclosure that requires a trusting classroom environment. In this kind of learning environment, students often need to know one another more fully than students in traditional college classrooms.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Janet Eyler and Dwight E. Giles, Jr., *Where’s the Learning in Service-Learning?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 185.

As we begin to work on building a respectful community, there are a number of questions that are important for me to raise and discuss with students: What are their backgrounds and life experiences? How do they understand their worldview and orientation toward the natural world? Or wealth? Or poverty? Understanding who my students are helps me to determine how I can draw on their knowledge and experience in class discussions and in organizing group work. A recent National Academy of Sciences report, *How People Learn*, highlights the ways in which pre-existing knowledge shapes learners and how they incorporate new knowledge into pre-existing frameworks. The Report states, "There is a good deal of evidence that learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to a learning task, use this knowledge as a starting point for new instruction, and monitor students' changing conceptions as instruction proceeds."<sup>23</sup> Having a basic knowledge of students' backgrounds and experiences helps me anticipate how students might react or respond to the issues and ideas being raised in class. Getting to know the history, background, and worldview of my students enables me to teach them in more effective ways. It allows me to frame problems, questions, and challenges in ways that invite the students into a conversation rather than putting them on the defensive or allowing them to simply dismiss the issues as unrelated to their lives and well-being. Learning how to talk to and engage my students also enables me to challenge them constructively by framing issues and dilemmas in ways that resonate with their own life experience.

One of the first assignments in Environmental Ethics is a "family tree" assignment that asks students to reflect on the development of their environmental consciousness by tracing what they learned about the environment from their family members back through their great-grandparents. This assignment both prompts students to reflect on the development of their worldviews and it allows me a window into students' environmental consciousness. Some students write about how their home life and childhood were oriented around playing in the woods or simply spending time outside with neighborhood kids; others share stories of hiking and camping with their families and how these activities shaped their appreciation of nature; while still others share stories of vacation experiences to the ocean or the mountains or some of our country's natural wonders and how these experiences shape their attitudes towards nature. The most insightful students talk about how growing up in a particular part of the country shaped their thinking. For instance, a young man from Maine described growing up in a fishing town and watching the livelihood of his town disintegrate as the fishing industry collapsed. Knowledge of students' histories and life experiences not only allows me to help them use their personal experience as a point of engagement, but it can also serve as a way of allowing students to use their personal experience to help teach other students as well. In the case of the student from Maine, he became a helpful resource in a later class discussion regarding a case study on the fishing industry. I have students share these assignments in small groups as a way of facilitating community building. I ask them to look for points of similarities and differences

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<sup>23</sup> John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown, and Rodney R. Cocking, editors, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000), 11.

in their small groups and we use this as a basis for a larger group discussion about how our environmental attitudes and worldviews are formed.

*Challenging students where they live*

As a privileged, first-world educator, I am mindful of Henry Giroux's caution about the dangers of people in my positionality appropriating and potentially misusing the insights of Freire in ways that do damage to Freire's foundational commitment to the power of critical pedagogy for social transformation.<sup>24</sup> In thinking about how Freire might impact pedagogical strategies in the classroom, Giroux cautions against thinking in terms of pedagogical technique or method but reminds the reader of the intentional radicality of Freire's understanding of education as the practice of freedom.

Inviting student experience into the classroom can be transformative when it follows Freire's model of using the classroom as a starting point for critical reflection. In the case of privileged, first-world students, educators must be vigilant in ensuring that the use of student experience does not reinforce neoliberal/capitalist cultural tendencies to glorify the individual, but rather that students learn how their individual experiences fit into the broader frame of experiences of people who are both like and not-like themselves.

The task of helping students make connections between the social problems and crises we study and their own behavior is a continual struggle. In my experience, undergraduates have difficulty making the connections between their individual behavior and larger structural issues of injustice discussed in class. For this reason, I often use experiential exercises that prompt students to pay more critical attention to their personal history, assumptions, or daily practices.

In Environmental Ethics, I require students to engage in a personal environmental impact study that begins on the first day of class. For three weeks, students are required to keep a journal documenting their consumption (week one), waste production (week two), and energy usage (week three). In the fourth week, they are required to write a reflective essay that discusses what they learned about themselves and their personal impact on the environment. They are encouraged to identify a personal behavior that they will seek to change over the course of the semester and to submit a plan of action that would enable them to make this change. Below is an example of one student's reflection on the assignment:

In this past semester, I've cut my electric bill \$50. It was very simple to do this too. All I had to do was turn off my A/C, open some windows, turn off my lights and monitor when I leave the room, and within a month my electric bill drastically dropped. It has become so repetitious that I don't even think about doing these actions anymore. It's just my daily routine to make sure I have done these tasks.

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Giroux, "Paulo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism," *Journal of Advanced Composition: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture, and Politics*, 12, no.1 (1992).

This is just me doing my part and if one out of every five households did the same, this country would be well on their way to becoming a more energy efficient place. That's 20% of the homes in America; 20 million households are all it takes. This country strives to be the best at everything so why can't we strive to be the most efficient country in the world as well?

This student demonstrates not only his personal capacity to change his habits, but his awareness of how the collective behavior of his fellow citizens would begin to make a significant impact on environmental consumption and waste. His actions empowered him to think intentionally about potential real solutions to real problems in our world.

One of the values of focusing on individual or household habits is that it can lead to broader worldview change. By raising students' consciousness about their personal lifestyles and habits and challenging them to make changes in their lives, it forces them to think about the course materials on a daily basis. This is the point of consciousness-raising; the issue should become a part of their daily lives. Though this might only last for a semester—the hope is that it will be longer lasting. While the environmental impact study helps students see their complicity and responsibility in perpetuating the environmental crisis, it is also an important way to empower them with the understanding that they can be agents of change. Requiring them to think through the kinds of changes they are interested in making in their lives and challenging them to try it out for a semester, gives them practice at being agents of change.

#### *Fostering civic responsibility*

My ethics classes are focused not only on teaching students about the problems that we face as a human community but also in helping them to foster a sense of personal and civic responsibility. Incorporating concrete assignments that require student engagement in social change or community organizing is an effective antidote to the potentially depressing atmosphere of studying issues like poverty, environmental degradation, and violence against women. Structuring assignments that require students to imagine and implement projects that engage in the work of social change not only helps them see how change happens, but it allows them to experience the social, emotional, and psychological benefits of civic engagement. If one of the goals of transformative teaching is to help students see how they can become part of the solution to social problems then it is important for students to gain an understanding of how larger scale change takes place. As they begin to develop their projects, I urge them to think about the difference between procedural change which is incremental; structural change which is transformative; and ideological or worldview change which is revolutionary. In class we talk about how these three types of change connect, which is harder and why, and what these different kinds of change might look like.

When I teach Environmental Ethics I build the class around a semester-long class project that represents fifty percent of the students' grade. The purpose of the project is to prompt students to examine their environmental location, identify a problem, and create a community response

to that problem. My vision for the class project is that it will be something that is challenging for the students, that it will teach them how to do community organizing, and allow them to see themselves as moral agents active in a larger community of accountability.

One class established a community garden that has become a vibrant aspect of the Elon community, as well as the Environmental Studies program. The students identified food insecurity as a serious problem in the surrounding county and developed a community garden on campus that seeks to bring town and gown together in a collective project that both builds community across traditional barriers and provides healthy and nutritious food for students and community members alike. Conceiving and executing a community based project that addresses a specific aspect of environmental injustice in their own community functions to prepare students to be more responsible and engaged global citizens.

*Employing a spiral of praxis*

In addition to these pedagogical goals, I employ the spiral of praxis as my methodology for structuring learning in transformative classrooms. The spiral of praxis methodology puts theory in conversation with action. Theory is important because it helps students frame and understand the ideas behind those problems and ideas that enable solutions. Action is important because theory in and of itself does not alter social injustice. However, these are not two separate and complementary aspects of my course. Rather I put theory and action together because my goal is to initiate a change in consciousness among the students that will lead to a change in their habits and behavior. The idea of transformative praxis is that theory and action are encountered by students in a spiral of learning. The theory informs their action and their action helps them to better understand the theory. Throughout the semester the learning process spirals from intellectual engagement to activist engagement; the two continually inform one another and help students gain deeper insight into the meaning and contributions of each form of engagement. One student reflected on this process with the following observations:

I think the only reason why I got so involved with the class project is because we had at that point spent so much time on learning different theories and outlooks on environmental ethics that I had formed opinions and was finding my self wanting to do something to help. My point is that I would have never felt this way if it had not been for the prompting that the reading provided me in thinking about the environment. This process of learning first, then applying what has been learned to the real world only worked because it was in that order. . . Most classes have a plan for learning the material but this is the first class that I could actually reflect like this and see the progression working.

## SO WHO AM I? QUESTIONS OF AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY FOR A RADICAL PEDAGOGUE

The fact that the radical pedagogy movement seeks to transform the classroom and create an empowered citizenry raises serious questions about the implications of these shifts for the identity of the professor. If education is collaborative and experiential, does this mean that anyone can do it? The answer is yes and no. Yes, anyone with a strong intellect and a desire to teach for transformation ought to have access to higher education in order to pursue the deeper forms of knowledge and intellectual engagement that the Academy represents. In this sense, anyone *can* do it. But, the educator still represents someone who has knowledge and training that others lack. It is this specialized knowledge that sets them apart and qualifies them as educators. Since education is contextual, it requires educators who are able to assess students and discern how they can best learn. The determination of which pedagogical tools one will use in any given classroom or with any given course are entirely determined by what the professor wants the students to learn and how that learning can best be facilitated. Furthermore, different forms of experiential learning need to be supported in different ways. Critical pedagogy is not a one-size fits all model with a playbook that can be published and disseminated among colleagues. Certainly, exercises and modules may be shared, but they would need to be tailored to meet the pedagogical goals of individual courses and professors. They would also need to be put into conversation with an appropriate set of theorists in order to generate the sort of transformative teaching experiences that I have described.

Expertise is still an essential aspect of the critical pedagogy classroom. Expertise can be communicated and taught in ways that support and encourage students or in ways that intimidate and distance students. When transformative pedagogy connects with students, it can create classrooms in which they experience learning as relevant to their daily lives and the development of their vocational identities. There remain projects to be completed, papers to research and write, and deadlines to meet – but when students are able to see the real-world application of the theoretical material they are required to read, they become engaged in the spiral of praxis. Their engagement with theory informs their understanding of experience and their experience generates a deeper understanding of the theoretical material. One Environmental Ethics student offered the following reflection in his final essay:

In just about every single one of my response papers I remember writing something along the lines that....*"Everyone just keeps pointing fingers at each other .....We keep telling other countries to do something that we won't even do ourselves.....they keep waiting for someone to make the first move and actually make a difference."* I feel like we as a class stopped pointing fingers. We actually started on a project ourselves before going around and telling other people to join in. I feel like that is exactly what is going to have to happen here in the United States.

Comments like these were echoed throughout the students' final reflection essays in which they synthesized their experience of working on the class project with various theories we had

discussed in the course. Students were asked to choose two themes or environmental principles addressed during the course of the semester and discuss either how working on our project helped them to understand these ideas on a deeper level or how our project was an illustration of these themes/principles (e.g. sustainability, biodiversity, subsidiarity, precautionary principle, intrinsic value).

Overall I found that while our readings and class discussions focused almost exclusively on macro environmental problems, the experiential assignments prompted students to connect their personal lives and their community lives with the larger problem of the environmental crises that we face as a human community. Students talked about their habits and responsibilities as consumers and a quarter of the students indicated that they were generally encouraged about the possibility for social change based on their experience of personal success, with respect to personal goals and the class project. When this kind of deep learning connects students' bodily knowledge of the world with their intellectual understanding and analysis of an issue, learning moves beyond the banking model of education and the memorization of information to a form of lived knowledge.

Teaching for social justice is both a process and a goal.<sup>25</sup> I have no expectation that my students' lives will be transformed in the course of one semester. Sometimes I push them, sometimes I pull them, and sometimes I walk side by side with them through the morass of ethical complexity that we face as members of the human community. Some of them like me for this, others think I ask too much of them in the course of one semester. My hope is that the seeds that I plant today will eventually take root and grow, even if I am not around to see it. My interest in who my students turn out to be goes far beyond how they do in my course to questions of what kind of people they will become when they leave the insular community of a private university. Will they one day run for office or serve on the PTA or join an environmental task force in their community? For most of my students, I will never know the answer to these questions. Nevertheless, I am committed to continuing to educate for social justice in the hopes that my courses might function to create a context for a transformation that I may never see. This is my calling as an educator and a feminist Christian ethicist—to work toward developing the social consciousness of my students so that they may become active participants in transforming social injustice in our world.

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<sup>25</sup> Lee Anne Bell, "Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education," *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1997).