

Teaching Empowerment

Helen Fox
University of Michigan

National Information Center
for Service Learning
1030 Edward Ave., Room #290
St. Paul, MN 55105-0197
1-800-808-CERVE

The contradiction inherent in "teaching empowerment" is that students need to learn specific, empowering ways to understand and interact with community people while at the same time feeling empowered, themselves, by the way the service-learning course is designed and taught. This requires a delicate balance between "starting with students where they are" and insisting they confront issues that make them uncomfortable. The author describes her attempt to do this in a new community service learning seminar for freshmen focusing on empowerment education.

Peace Neighborhood Center

*it's mine she says
tossing her silver beaded plaits
with six-year-old authority
rolling it to me, her co-conspirator
instructing me to pound it smoother
without cracks
and work it to the rhythm of her hand
when I stop, you stop she says
when I go slow, you go slow
the others watch, eyes ravenous
t-shirts shoved inside worn, faded tights
gaudy running shoes, hair matted, wild
share!
whispers one
dancing towards her
eyeing me (what will I say?)
she rolls the clay against her cheek
rich and tender, crumbling red
a hand darts out
grabbing
snatching
its mine she shrieks
shielding it with hunched shoulders
sobbing now, as I sit watching
share! they chant in doubtful unison
still hesitant, waiting for a sign
my mouth opens
I draw a breath
shift in my seat as if to rise—
red clay is smeared in greedy, dirty hands*

—Helen Fox

"Like all new courses, this course is an experiment," I told my thirteen freshmen on the first day of a service-learning seminar I was calling "Building a Community of Change." I had gotten the phrase from *Tikkun* magazine, a progressive, Jewish monthly that had also coined the phrase "politics of meaning," which Hillary Clinton (1993) had used so effectively in her first speech about health care reform:

We need a new politics of meaning. We need a new ethos of individual responsibility and caring. We need a new definition of civil society which answers the unanswerable questions posed by both the market forces and the governmental ones, as to how we can have a society that fills us up again and makes us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. (p. 7)

But my students didn't know about this hopeful possibility. Most of them were new to all this—new to the idea of empowerment education, new even to the idea that the country was falling apart. Most were white and middle class, most were from small cities or suburbs where they had grown up with limited opportunities to get to know people who were different from themselves. All they knew was that they wanted to help “the other half,” as one put it, and that their efforts thus far hadn't been overwhelmingly successful.

“I spent some time one summer in Appalachia fixing up people's homes,” said Claire, “and sometimes it was really hard to try to help people who don't even care about the horrible conditions they are living in. I saw people who cared more about their pets than their children, people who wouldn't even gather their dirty laundry together to let us wash it for them.”

“It's hard to help people who don't want your help,” added Janine. “Or little kids who have an attitude just because you're white, or who make some rude remark when you ask what they're coloring or what their names are.”

But even as they questioned the idea of their usefulness, these students had committed themselves to doing more than what is expected in the usual freshman introductory course. For four credits they would spend three hours each week in class, discussing, reading and writing about ideas that would be new and difficult for them, as well as spending a minimum of two hours a week in a community service placement, for which they might have to rely on an indifferent bus system during the bitterest winter in recent memory.

I'd had vague doubts about working with freshmen when I proposed this course. I had visions of seventeen and eighteen-year-olds working in homeless shelters or de-tox centers trying to “empower” people twice their age and with vastly more life experience than they had. Nevertheless, I was committed to the idea of teaching empowerment. I had done my graduate work at the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where I had met both Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, and I had been touched by Freire's tenderness and by Myles' unshakable faith in the ability of ordinary people to work collectively to solve their own problems. I had taken their ideas with me to West Africa and the South Pacific where I had trained Peace Corps Volunteers in community development — experiences which had informed my work writing

training curricula for Volunteers world-wide. At the University of Michigan, I had taught a Junior/Senior seminar in international development where we had worked with the ideas of Freire and Horton as well as those of other grassroots educators: Lyra Srinivasan, whose participatory training model is used by the United Nations Development Program to empower third world women, and Augusto Boal, whose “theater of the oppressed” provokes creative questioning of the social order.

It was my international development students who had suggested linking a course about empowerment with community service placements where the ideas of these and other educators could be applied in practice. As we imagined it, I would need to create a U.S.-based community development course where empowerment was taught on several levels. First, students would learn *about* empowerment—how it was envisioned by Freire, Horton and others. Next, they would learn some specific techniques that fostered empowerment, and practice them both in class and in their community service placements. And at the same time they were doing this, they would need to become empowered themselves—both by their experience in their placements and their reflections on these experiences, and also by the way the course itself was organized—by the tone I would set, by the reading list, by the writing assignments; even the method of assessment would need to give students the experience of what we were proposing to do for others.

In order to keep empowerment in mind at the level of the students' experience, I needed to know what kinds of challenges they would face in their placements and assure myself that their presence there would be, if not empowering, at least helpful to the programs concerned. So I worked with Project SERVE, the campus organization that matches students with community service agencies, to narrow down the hundred or so organizations in the area to four which had the particular characteristics I was looking for.

First, I thought, because my students were so young and so new to the idea of community empowerment, it would be better for them to work primarily in programs that served people younger than themselves: teens and elementary school kids in after-school programs, preschoolers and toddlers in homeless shelters. My second criterion was that students should have opportunity for extensive interactions with these children and teens at the placement sites. Understandably,

volunteers are often used by community agencies to do what is most pressing: filing a nightmarish backlog of papers, sweeping floors, cleaning out closets, all in relative isolation from the people the agency serves. While these activities have an intrinsic value, both for the community and for the volunteers themselves, it seemed to me that students who were so unfamiliar with people in difficult circumstances would learn more from total immersion. And so I was looking for placements where the sheer number of children was so overwhelming that the students would have to plunge in, rather than just observe from the sidelines.

Third, it was essential for my students to be confronted by cultural and class differences. Though the idea of empowerment education can be applied in a middle class kindergarten, or among people with AIDS, or with a suburban community concerned about the environmental crisis, I felt that my students would become more aware of the interlocking nature of social problems if they worked with people who are oppressed by both culture and class. And finally, the staff of these organizations would need to be role models; they would need to demonstrate to my young, impressionable students that change was possible—through their empowering interactions with the neighborhood people, through their passion for community service, through their positive, hopeful attitudes in the face of massive difficulties.

The only way to be sure these criteria would be met was to visit the sites myself, meet the staff, watch how they interacted with the community, and listen to their needs as they expressed them to each other and to me. And so I spent some afternoons and evenings at the programs that had been recommended to me, watching how children were greeted when they got off the bus, pounding playdough with raucous six-year-olds, and listening to the overworked staff voice their frustrations after the children had gone home. And as I listened to the community needs I found a way to participate in service learning myself, by offering to facilitate a writing group for adults who were temporarily homeless and looking for housing and employment.

The more I got involved in the activities and needs of the community the more I began to realize that the touchiest and most difficult issue that my students would need to understand was the persistence of racism and how it affects all our interactions as a civil society. As I played with

African American children in the neighborhood centers, I remembered living and working in the black community when I was my students' age and realized how much I had learned in the interim. I had lived abroad for most of my adult life and had noticed the prevalence of misunderstandings about basic assumptions wherever cultures come into contact with each other. I had become aware of how difficult it is to understand the logic behind different ways of thinking and communicating and how cultural differences are so often neglected when groups try to work together to solve social and economic problems. And then of course there are the dynamics of power. Anyone who is able to listen with openness and empathy to the experience of African Americans today can gain some understanding of how profoundly discouraging it is to be stigmatized by a society that believes that racism is a thing of the past. But so many of us lack the skill to listen well.

I was determined, then, to begin the course with readings, discussions and writing assignments that would address my students' vision of themselves as missionaries from the middle class, white world, and teach them how to work in more nurturing ways with children from the black community. To do this, we would need to focus at the outset on cultural styles of communication and conflict, the origins and linguistic respectability of black English, and issues of black nationalism and Afrocentrism.

This focus would require a great deal of thought. Students at Michigan, as well as at many other colleges around the nation are being required, nowadays, to take courses and undergo training that makes them aware of the unequal power relationships in U.S. society. The objectives of these courses are to change "mainstream" students' ways of thinking: to aggressively challenge their stereotypes, to teach them history that has been kept from them, to force them to re-examine their values. For example, students may be asked, in a roomful of a hundred strangers, to move to one side or the other depending on their opinion of affirmative action. Or they might be required to identify the categories by which they habitually classify themselves—race, gender, age, sexual preference, socioeconomic class—and then discuss why they chose those categories and not others. In literature classes, students who come from small towns or from isolated suburbs are suddenly confronted with texts by powerfully voiced, angry writers, whose passionate state-

ments of their marginalization may be radically different from anything the students have experienced or imagined.

Students sometimes come away from these courses shaken and angry, holding on even more tightly to their prejudices, resentful that they have been shamed by instructors and other students, or silenced into going along with the majority, regardless of their own ideas, observations or feelings. They are still teenagers, after all, still unsure of their identities, still chafing from battles with their parents over just these questions: what values they must hold, how they are to behave as they go out into the world. Even students who find anti-racism training interesting and largely compatible with their own views have not, it seems to me, been empowered by such a process.

But herein lies the contradiction. How do we trust students to come to their own conclusions about such complex topics as racism, power dynamics, and the motivations behind human behavior when they are caught up in a society that sees social stigmatization as normal and natural? And how was I to resolve the contradiction, inherent in empowerment education, between teaching in a way that would respect my students' analytical powers, their intellect, their sense of fairness and compassion, and expecting them to adopt a particular set of values or a particular analysis of how the world works? I know I have certain convictions about human nature and human institutions that I believe my students should adopt. I believe, for example, that children are born inherently good—not evil or uncivilized, not even neutral or blank slates—but empathetic, loving, lovable, curious, intelligent and capable. All of them. And that if they turn out differently, there are reasons for it, reasons that we should be looking for in their larger social environment rather than shaming them for their deficiencies. I want to teach my students to see the world and hope for the world as I do. I itch, sometimes, to move them more quickly toward greater maturity. But these convictions did not come to me in one semester. "What I sometimes feel is that professors are attempting to feed me what it took them twenty years to come to know," a student once told me. "It must be a difficult dilemma for you as well."

Teaching empowerment, then, would have to mean holding back, accepting students as they are, listening with interest and compassion to their experiences and points of view. "Start with people where they are." Myles said that. People

working for empowerment all over the world say that. I've heard that said in West Africa by a Togolese administrator of a Peace Corps training program, and on the island of Guadalcanal by a development worker who had never been out of the South Pacific. "Never tell people their perceptions and feelings are wrong." I heard that from a cross-cultural trainer of international business people who works in Thailand with executives in US multinationals, who hears from some of these executives the most foul, racist explanations of the behavior of their Thai counterparts. "I never contradict them," he says. "I just explain the reasons behind Thai behavior when it doesn't match American cultural values. I question the inconsistencies in their views, ask them to imagine how others experience the world differently."

All right, then, I would ask my class to imagine how others experience the world differently. I collected some readings about African American history and culture that would be provocative as well as informative: some rich, homey information about Kwanzaa from an African American cookbook (Copage, 1991); a handbook on cultural communication styles in black and white America (Kochman, 1981); the strong, defiant voice of Molefi Kete Asante (1981) telling the black community that they need to make Afrocentrism the guiding force in their lives; a couple of chapters from Geneva Smitherman's book, *Talkin and Testifyin* (1971), written in both black and standard English dialects, on the origins and grammar of African American English.

During the first weeks of the course, we worked through these texts together, talking about what we found the most interesting, what sounded inspiring or insulting, reasonable or illogical. We talked about how we felt about the voices of the different authors and about why most of us had never heard the arguments and information before. We struggled through the dense, difficult, introduction to Martin Bernal's (1987) *Black Athena*, a scholarly claim that the history of ancient Greece taught in schools today was fabricated in the 1800s by writers with racist ideologies, and assumes the reader's knowledge of the history of ancient Mesopotamia, the early African kingdoms, the competing theories of the direction of human migrations after the last ice age. When students couldn't make heads or tails of the chapter, as I had expected, we tackled it as a group project. I asked them each to write down any five things that they got from the article, anything at all that they understood that was

interesting to them. They pooled their knowledge in small groups, explaining what they'd found to each other, and then brought it back into the large group again. The collective knowledge was surprisingly extensive. And even when the ideas gleaned individually were incorrect, or partial, or incidental to the author's argument, the larger point was not lost on them. "What I learned from this article," said one student later in her journal, "is that history can be challenged."

Soon after these discussions, I asked the students to write a reaction to the new ideas they had been exposed to so far. They seemed to appreciate this assignment; it gave them a chance to react emotionally to ideas that were new and sometimes disturbing to them. And while their writing was rich with examples of their own experience with African American friends or students in the dorms, their knowledge was still shallow. Undeterred, I asked them for a second draft, a longer, five page version, now called "What is Afrocentricity?" In it they should try to explain, as if to their roommate or their mom, as much information about the topic as they could, telling why the adoption of African values and a revision of history might be important, why these ideas are controversial, and what value they might have for the black community and for Americans of other ethnicities. I told them they didn't have to agree with Afrocentricity to write about it; all they had to do was to understand, from the point of view of the black community, what it was and why it might be important. So they tried again, and this time, they dug deeper. Christine wrote:

In order to better understand the ideology behind Afrocentrism, I began talking to various African American students at the University of Michigan to find out what it means to them. I remarked jokingly to one of my African American friends that I would give him fifty dollars to write a paper for me on Afrocentricity. Jamal looked at me and said evenly, "There is no monetary value you could ever place on the education you would receive and the satisfaction I would receive in seeing a white, middle class female try to understand and to define Afrocentricity."

Yes, Jamal! What powerful ideas these are for mainstream students to struggle with. I decided it would be important not to insist on a particular writing style, but let students write the way they could best engage in thinking about the material. Kelly writes:

Black English is a totally new concept to me. The articles really support the idea that it is a language stemming from Africa. But I was always taught it was wrong—flat out wrong. Uneducated black people spoke it and it meant they were stupid. It is hard to change something you've been taught—for me, my idea that it isn't a language, and for African Americans, to change the language they were raised with.

I really am unsure about how I feel. It is a new idea that I have hardly spent any time on. I guess it is a language but I wouldn't go as far as saying it is a totally separate language from "standard English"...Should everyone be able to speak/write in standard English? What is "standard English"—what North Americans (whites) speak, or what upper class Englishmen speak? Confusing.

And Christine writes:

I realize that at times I tend to contradict myself. This happens for a couple of reasons in particular. When I sat down to write this paper, I did it at different times. When I ran out of ideas or just became tired of writing about the subject of Afrocentricity, I set my draft aside and did something else. When I picked it up again, if my mood or something changed, my writing was affected. I think that is good, in a sense, because then I am trying to view the subject from different perspectives. Perhaps I really do not fully know just where I stand on this issue. It is not as easy as being for or against it, as it is with other controversial issues like abortion or doctor-assisted suicide...

I think Asante has some good ideas, but he is almost promoting blacks to be their own race. Maybe I am not understanding him. That would not be a new thing for me. I often misunderstand people, but I guess that really makes me think...Like most of the writing assignments in this class, I have certainly explored areas that I usually do not really think about.

Class is still in session. I don't know yet how it will all come out. The students are deeply involved with the children in their service placements, trying to puzzle out how the behavior they are seeing might relate to the discussions of culture and class, what might be individual differences, what might be coming from the environment of the short-staffed after-school programs. Many are frustrated by the high levels of energy and the alarming acting-out behavior of some of the children—the defiance of authority, the glori-

fying of guns and violence, the hostile put-downs the children sometimes hurl at my students and each other. Some are hurt by the children's rejection of them, baffled by the six-year-old who one week will cuddle up to them and ask if they will be their big sister, and the next week, pointedly ignore them or pelt them with snowballs. We are talking in class now about what it's like to experience neglect and abuse, and about the role that internalized oppression might play in the children's vicious put-downs of each other's intelligence and capabilities. We talk about the cycle of emotional and physical abuse, and the reasons that parents facing homelessness, or caught in the welfare system or in abusive relationships might take out their frustrations on their children.

I am asking students to help each other with these questions and to collectively come up with explanations for the children's sometimes baffling behavior. I often have to hold them back from offering solutions too quickly, before they have understood what the problem is, before they have explored all the possible reasons there might be for it. And I can see them trying to tie in ideas they have gotten from the reading with their experiences in their placements. Jenny writes in her journal:

In the past, if I was to influence children, I unknowingly used myself as the model, trying to change their behavior to be like mine. I can no longer do this—we are too different. I now realize that this difference is the reason that African Americans choose to remain with other African Americans, even if it means living in a dangerous, impoverished area (I realize I am stereotyping). I felt just as baffled and out of place when I was the only white person in the room as they must feel when surrounded by whites. As of now, I believe that they feel as if they are willing to sacrifice a "better" life for the feeling of belonging and acceptance.

The students' final paper will be an analysis of a social problem. In one sense it is a typical freshman assignment: come up with a problem, research some of its possible causes, look at some objections that others might have to your analysis, and offer some solutions. But this paper will be different, for I am insisting that the problem must be identified and defined by people in the community—not by the social workers or community activists, all of whom have quite detailed knowledge and sophisticated analyses of the problems as they see them, but as the problem is seen

by the people themselves, even if "the people," in this case, are young children. Now that the students are comfortable in their placements, or at least over the initial shock of entering such a different world, I want them to begin listening for the ways that the children talk about community problems as well as for the differences between "outsider" and "insider" views of what those problems might be.

Some have already recorded these discrepancies in their journal entries—even though they are not necessarily aware they have done so. Christine, for example, writes about a conversation with a taxi company the first time she went to the neighborhood center at a local cooperative housing unit:

"What are you going down there for?" the dispatcher asked me when I told him the address. "Well, at least it will still be light out. You carrying mace with you?"

I told him I was a volunteer. He said he had figured that.

A few weeks later, she writes:

I spent the majority of my time assisting a young boy named Charles cut out letters from a foam sheet to send to his father who is in jail. We also spent a good portion of the afternoon watching five policemen search a car outside of the window. The children referred to the policeman as "the enemy."

I don't expect it will be easy for my students to separate their own views from the ways the problems are viewed by the people themselves. I expect it will be confusing if the views of the children contradict the analysis of the radical authors in the coursepack or the understanding we have come to as a class. But I expect them to live with the complexity of the thing so they can begin to understand why we as a nation find it so difficult to solve our own problems, despite our intellectual and material riches, despite our basically compassionate nature, despite our desire to all get along.

And even though they have just begun to understand these things, already they have learned—first hand—the difficult lesson that initiated all of us into our work for social change:

The one thing that I'm really coming to understand is that life, and each day, is entirely too short...I think I entered this class with the

notion that it was going to teach me step by step "how to change the world." One hundred simple steps to fix everything. It would be nice to believe that your two hours a week would really make everything all right. Everyone would like to think that's all they need to do to pay their debt...But in two hours, how do you change reality? There's just never enough time...

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Author

HELEN FOX is a Lecturer at the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan. Her Ph.D. is from the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts. She works with writers at the Prospect Place Family Shelter, and is on the Board of Directors at Guild House, a campus ministry involved with peace and justice concerns. She also serves as a volunteer organizer and facilitator for the American Friends Service Committee.