



Fall 2021 Newsletter

Some Thoughts About the Practices of Social Justice Education

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Last spring, when the BT2P staff decided on the focus of this Newsletter, it was clear that the theme of “higher education and social justice” was timely and urgent. The remarkable wave of protests to the murders of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and Ahmad Arbury, along with many others—building on years of organizing by the Movement for Black Lives—had centered questions of racial justice in American society and on American campuses. The pandemic and its searing effects on the material and emotional well-being of students and educators placed issues of economic precarity and class inequality on the agenda as well. BT2P has long viewed democratic citizenship, community engagement, and equity as essential elements of our commitment to academic change. It was an important moment to braid these values with an exploration of the roles of social justice in higher education.

I say “roles” because—at least for me personally—the linkage in our theme points in many possible directions. I was glad that our call for submissions was relatively open, inviting a plurality of stories and responses. I was eager to learn how members of the BT2P community envisioned the connections among racial and social justice, undergraduate education, and campus practice, and to learn from the ways they acted on their vision. I wasn’t disappointed: the authors in this issue offer powerful answers to the question of how attending to social justice and racial and class equity can catalyze creative and effective teaching, learning, and community care.

Their answers are varied, ranging from faculty communities of practice to the use of trauma-informed and culturally responsive pedagogies to the development of service-learning and writing courses to innovative community projects for pandemic family support and augmented-reality memorials. And the languages of social justice that inform their work seem to me equally varied. The inspiring piece by James Madison University educators, for instance—describing the pandemic learning pod they launched with and for low-income families—reflects a tradition of justice as fairness: it was plainly unfair that well-resourced families could self-organize more easily than those with lesser means in the face of Covid. The innovative revisions of the First-Year Experience at Guttman Community College (part of the City University of New York) have a different emphasis: they center the experience and cultural gifts of students themselves, especially Black students, as crucial to social justice education. A similar focus on racial equity animates the account of multicultural programs at Arizona State University, but here the emphasis is on faculty agency and collective curricular experimentation as a means of placing justice, civic engagement, and “servingness”—as the piece names it—at the heart of the educational experience.

I don't mean to imply that these articles embody alternative, either-or conceptions of social justice and its connections to higher education. Quite the opposite: they diverge and overlap in complex ways. Two describe outward-facing, community projects—the pandemic pod and the augmented-reality memorials—that respond to the emergency of 2020. Two are more campus-centered, centered on the development of courses that lift up issues of social justice and racial equity. Three involve the building of curricula with student-centered pedagogies, pedagogies that prioritize the experiences of power, precarity, and inequity that students bring to the learning process. Bringing these stories together in the Newsletter puts them in unexpected dialogue with one another.

Listening to that dialogue, I'm struck by new questions and even creative tensions that underlie the ideas about justice, learning, and care offered by these articles. Both the pandemic pod and augmented-reality articles, for instance, describe immediate, situational responses to a crisis of community suffering. Both pieces acknowledge—indeed, they underscore—the gap between such local and relational action and confronting underlying structures of racial, economic, and health inequity. How should an education committed to social justice balance the need for immediate care or repair and the imperative for systemic change? How do we integrate the faculty intellectual freedom emphasized in the Arizona State University programs with the curricular changes mandated in Guttman's First Year Experience? How do we shape institutions and curricula and professions with rules that 'bend toward justice,' while at the same time, nurturing communal relationships that sometimes bend those rules in the name of justice?

It's a testimony to the strength of these articles, and the work they describe, that they pose new and thorny questions, questions that cannot be immediately answered. I hope that they help to catalyze not only new work across higher education on behalf of social justice, but also shared reflection about the (diverse, inspiring, sometimes conflicting) assumptions that ground that work.